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The Soft Side of Branding: Leveraging Emotional Intelligence

Marketers and managers cannot directly control the environment, but they certainly can influence how stakeholders perceive company image, thereby influencing brand equity. Brand equity plays a key role in the success of a firm (Aaker, 1991; Ambler, 2003; Davis, 2000; Kotler, 1991), and often differentiates a company from its competitors (Hunt & Morgan, 1995; Capron & Hulland, 1999). Brand equity refers to additional value a company earns that is attributed to a variety of elements, most of which are intangible in nature. Among these elements are a recognizable name or symbol, superior quality and reliability compared to competitors or generic brands, and elements known as “behavioral assets” (Falkenberg, 1996).

Behavioral assets are not attributable to individuals, but instead they are the culmination of both hard and soft skills among all members of a company (Falkenberg, 1996). Hard skills include the knowledge and abilities used to develop processes and procedures, whereas soft skills include such things as empathy, motivation, listening ability, and relationship-building (Hunt, 1997). Few scholars or practitioners would dispute that building relationships among organizational buyers/sellers and stakeholders is important (Kadic-Maglajlic, *et al.*, 2016; Keillor, *et al.*, 2000). However, the role of soft skills among organizational relationships, as well as how to best demonstrate these skills, is not well understood in business-to-business (B2B) industries.

The level of one’s communication and interaction skills is referred to as emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EI) is “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer &

Salovay, 1997, p. 5). Not surprisingly, soft skills such as EI are crucial elements in building relationships, strong brands and, in turn, increasing brand equity.

In light of the interplay between important contributors to brand equity, including relationships and behavioral assets, we seek to examine EI in B2B marketing. From a branding perspective, even B2B companies must stand out among competitors, yet until recently branding was a function embraced mainly by business-to-consumer (B2C) companies. Since 2000, however, studies by Interbrand show that many of the largest companies in B2B industries are among the most well-known brands (e.g., IBM, Intel, Caterpillar, and FedEx). Even more surprising is the fact that despite business and industrial buyers and sellers relying heavily on building relationships throughout the buying and selling process (e.g., Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Hennig-Thurau, 2002; Ryssel *et al.*, 2004), there has been scant research on the concept of EI from B2B scholars and practitioners. Therefore, our research explores how B2Bs can enhance their brand through leveraging their behavioral assets, or EI, specifically through social media marketing. This question is highly relevant since B2B organizations are honing in on the importance of branding, as evidenced by the 2007 special issue on B2B branding in the *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* and the 2004 special issue also on branding in the *Journal of Marketing*.

We address the call for further research in the area of branding in B2B markets by linking branding to EI. First, we explore the concept of EI, its evolution as it relates to intelligence, or IQ, and how EI came to be recognized within organizations. Second, we consider branding from a B2B perspective and introduce the role of EI in branding. Third, we discuss how social media marketing not only fits into B2B branding, but we also discuss four dimensions of social media marketing that give meaning to how firms use the communication tool depending upon the firms'

communication style and overall orientation (e.g., traditional, rational approach to marketing versus an affective, engaging approach to marketing). Fourth, we propose a framework that marries intelligence (and the resulting hard skills) and emotional intelligence (and the resulting soft skills), to illustrate how B2B firms can further enhance their brand. Considering this framework, we then describe how B2B firms might use technology, specifically content marketing through social media, to leverage organizational EI. Fifth and finally, we follow up the development of our conceptual model by analyzing NewsCred's 50 Best Content Marketing Brands of 2017, of which 11 of the 50 best companies are B2B. This analysis exemplifies how using EI skills to connect with stakeholders in a way that is relevant and valuable can, in turn, add value to the firm.

The Role of Emotional Intelligence

A fact of life is that people are judged by their perceived or real level of intelligence in the workplace. In fact, one's intelligence has traditionally been a key factor that a recruiter considers when seeking prospective employees. Although this seems reasonable, research shows that there is more to consider when it comes to hiring *effective* leaders and employees. Specifically, Edward Thorndike (1920), argued that the ability to have social intelligence and get along with others is of great importance in both personal and professional relationships. Thorndike was a pioneer in promulgating the need for more consideration of and research surrounding human beings' emotional quotient (EQ), separate and distinct from intelligence quotient (IQ).

Scholars from various fields, most notably psychology, have reached similar conclusions. For example, David Wechsler studied adult intelligence and identified it as "the aggregate or global capacity of the individual to act purposefully, to think rationally, and to deal effectively

with his environment” (1958, p. 3). More recently, the work of John Salovey and Peter Mayer (1990), a social psychologist and a personality psychologist, respectively, has been highly lauded for establishing a comprehensive working definition of emotional intelligence (EI). Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) work led Reuven Bar-On (1997) to create a model of EI based upon their findings. Because overall well-being is closely tied to EI, Bar-On argues that employees’ EQ should be measured. To do so, Bar-On developed a tool, the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), to aid researchers. Building upon the results of the EQ-i, further research confirms that the assessment can inform how employees and employers not only improve working relationships within an organization, but also how they can improve relations outside of the dyadic employer/employee relationship.

The evolution of the concept since the 1990s has resulted in EI being viewed as a set of desirable skills, especially within business and organizational settings. In fact, since 1995 Daniel Goleman sought to reframe EI within a business organizational context. Goleman argues that these soft skills contribute to an organization’s success. Goleman’s early work focused on organizational leaders, but his work has since been refined to include both individual and organizational behaviors and outcomes. Furthermore, success is no longer based solely on job-related skills that people possess. Instead, the focus includes affective characteristics of company leaders and all employees (Stanko, *et al.*, 2007).

Goleman adopted Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) definition of EI and conceptualized it as five categories: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1995) (see Figure 1). Work by Wong and Law (2002) further investigated and conceptualized EI as four distinct dimensions: self-emotional appraisal, others’ emotional appraisal, regulation of emotion, and use of emotion. Law, Wong and Song (2004) further agree that EI is related to but

distinct from personality, and Dulewicz and Higgs (2003) provide further evidence of the value of EI in organizations. In 2014, Bitmiş and Ergeneli reassessed the validity of the four distinct dimensions to EI.

(Insert Figure 1 Here)

This evolving perspective on the importance of EI is somewhat antithetical to the fundamental practice of marketing. That is to say, since the field's inception, marketers focused on improving products and processes to enhance the brand. Over time, however, we have recognized the importance of solution-focused perspectives and building strong relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, marketing strategies often include going beyond rational, behavior-based aspects of marketing, tapping into more affective elements of behavior to cultivate and utilize EI.

B2B Branding and Brand Equity

A brand is made up of a name, term, symbol or design which identifies and distinguishes the products and services marketed by a firm from those of its competitors (e.g., Aaker, 1991). Keller (2003) expands upon this definition by including functional and image-related elements, such as ingredients, product reliability and durability, style and design, service effectiveness, efficiency, personality and values. However, despite these additional elements, Keller's (1991, 1993) definition and models, known as Dimensions of Brand Knowledge and Secondary Sources of Brand Knowledge, seem to overlook important characteristics of a brand. Specifically, Keller's definitions and models do not include affective elements and interpersonal skills that are necessary for building rapport between a firm and the buyer (Low & Blois, 2002) or stakeholder.

Thompson *et al.* (1997) further assert that while Keller's models are vital to understanding brands and branding; the fact that they do not incorporate elements like soft skills are problematic.

Branding research surrounding intangible elements—aspects of a brand that do not have physical, concrete characteristics—shows that soft skills are often used to differentiate the company from its competitors (Lynch & DeChernatony, 2004; Park *et al.*, 1986). Both the benefit to stakeholders and the potential for competitive advantage due to these intangible elements are, therefore, contributors to a firm's brand equity. Brand equity is defined by the Marketing Science Institute as “associations and behaviors... which allows a brand greater volume and margins than it could without the brand” (Marketing Science Institute, 1990). More detailed definitions emerge from scholars focusing on a myriad of contexts. Keller (1993) takes a consumer-based approach, whereas Winters (1991) focuses on value attributed to a product. Yet another perspective that is much broader is that of Leuthesser (1988) and includes customers, channel members, parent companies, and others who benefit from the brand. The common denominator in all of these perspectives is the potential for brands to contribute to company, consumer, and stakeholder well-being.

Unfortunately, branding efforts around intangible soft skills were traditionally viewed as unnecessary in B2B markets since they do not offer direct value to rationally-based decision processes. More recently, however, marketers recognize that brands can, and should, include emotional benefits as well as functional benefits. One example of this is Boeing, as told by Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007). When Judith Muhlberg joined Boeing as the head of Marketing and Public Relations, she suggested the company focus on its brand. Her observations were initially met with scrutiny, and Boeing executives expressed to Muhlberg that Boeing was not “a

consumer-goods company.” Fortunately for Boeing, Muhlberg persisted, and the Boeing brand has made its mark for being on the forefront of successful B2B branding. Among her many efforts, Muhlberg focused on the organization’s communication with employees, suppliers, and buyers by developing external online and print publications, otherwise known as “content marketing,” which deepened Boeing’s sense of empathy toward and responsiveness to its many stakeholders (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007). For example, Boeing reports on topics such as the history of the brand and what the future holds for aviation technology through interesting and engaging stories on their website’s “Features page”. This approach provides an inside perspective into the company in an engaging, non-selling, approach.

The example of Boeing is one where marketing efforts successfully leveraged intangible elements of the company and built an even stronger brand. Such examples are increasing at the micro, individual business, level. While these changes are manifesting themselves on one end of the spectrum, at the macro level B2B scholars and marketers are faced with a new opportunity for research. Specifically, highlighting organizational EI in B2B branding efforts may create stronger bonds with stakeholders and increase brand equity.

The Connection between Emotional Intelligence, Brand Equity, and B2Bs

Emotional intelligence is based not only on how people work together and perform business tasks (Coleman, 2001) but also on the ability to recognize one’s own emotions, distinguish and label others’ emotions, manage emotions as well as adapt and respond to the environment (Goleman, 1998, 2011). The ability to do so, according to Goleman (1998), has resulted in organizations outperforming their competitors. Goleman determined that one’s ability to understand and appropriately utilize EI accounts for over 85 percent of a top leader’s

performance. If this is true at the individual level, then organizations that cultivate and use EI stand to out-perform those organizations that do not (Goleman, 1998).

Cultivating EI within an organization, however, is just the beginning. Even the most developed teams—with members who are self-aware, sensitive to others' feelings, and skilled at adapting, directing, and managing the emotions involved in doing business—cannot take full advantage of the collective EI of the company without demonstrating these skills to its stakeholders. As a result, B2Bs that demonstrate EI are well-positioned to leverage those affective elements and soft skills to grow brand equity. If done well, EI can be an asset and provide a competitive advantage in B2B marketing.

Goleman's seminal research, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* (1995) and *Working with emotional intelligence* (1998), is credited with helping us understand the role and importance of EI for individuals, communities, and businesses. The research and findings of Goleman represent the start of a paradigm shift in business research among mainstream business theorists and scholars, and serves as a catalyst for fundamental changes in practitioners' approaches to doing business. Goleman (1995, 1998, 2000, 2011) argues that we should no longer stress only intelligence, expertise, and training. Rather, we also need to incorporate and demonstrate motivation, empathy, and how accurately we assess and handle our own emotions as well as others' emotions.

Emotional intelligence theory has become increasingly important to the study and practice of individual and organizational development. This is because EI theory provides a new way to identify, understand, and assess attitudes and behaviors, interpersonal skills, and management styles. Moreover, EI is the cornerstone of those competencies that allow one to deepen her or his keenness and perception of others' emotional needs, and apply these

competencies to improve performance (Gowing, 2001). Improved performance in communication, responsiveness, and empathy toward others, are the result of higher levels of EI. Improved performance, in turn, bolsters positive brand associations and a positive brand image. This momentum is a driver of B2B firms' brand equity (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007). In the current research, emotional drivers of brand equity are treated much like Aaker's (1996) conceptualization of brand equity in his model of integrated marketing communications.

Despite the value added by EI, limited research exists on this subject as it relates to B2Bs, in general and B2B marketing strategies, in particular. We find this surprising given the powerful role that emotions play and how emotions inform individual and organizational thoughts, behaviors, and actions (Brown, *et al.*, 1997). Recognizing that EI, unlike intelligence, can be developed and learned over time (Goleman, 1995, 1998), it would be useful to know how B2Bs market themselves differently from B2B firms that do not value and cultivate EI. For example, in what ways do emotionally intelligent B2B firms use social media?

Social Media Marketing

Marketers of B2C and B2B firms have many options available through which to communicate. However, the current technological and digital landscape offers new and exciting channels of communication. One such channel is broadly known as social media. More specifically, the use of existing Internet sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) or specialized sites (e.g., company blogs), which allow marketers to share content that may not necessarily be appropriate for a company's main website. For example, a company may share information about an upcoming charity fundraiser through Twitter, whereas that content might not be found on the company's website. Thus, social media provides an avenue through which

to communicate with shareholders and stakeholders beyond the standard practice of transacting business (Kho, 2008).

Business-to-consumer industries have embraced social media, and social media marketing (SMM) is now the industry standard (Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Therefore, considering that B2C firms have found value in this medium, it would stand to reason that B2B firms would as well. Because SMM provides a great degree of flexibility in message type, frequency, and content, SMM provides platforms upon which to increase user interaction and even motivate users to post and share content as well (Singaraju, 2016). This kind of motivation may be possible as a direct response to emotional cues generated as a result of firms' behavioral assets.

Although B2B organizations have traditionally focused on building personal relationships and having direct interactions with the customer to effectively communicate with them (Ford *et al.*, 1998), marketers are increasingly aware of the benefits of other communication tools that allow for greater engagement outside of direct contact with stakeholders. Social media marketing is another way in which B2Bs can enhance their relationships, level of interaction and engagement with stakeholders, and enhance overall communication strategy. Although the use of SMM is increasing in B2B organizations, the majority of companies do not have a set SMM strategy, and very few know how SMM impacts business (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015).

Felix *et al.* (2017) characterize SMM as a framework with four dimensions that define and conceptualize SMM. Each of the four dimensions is based on a continua that demonstrate various ways in which critical SMM decisions are made. First, SMM Scope identifies whether the firm uses SMM to communicate with few or many stakeholders, internally or externally, as a "genuine tool for collaboration" (Felix *et al.*, 2017, p. 120). Second, SMM Culture distinguishes between a conservative, traditional mass-advertising approach, versus a more modern, open and

flexible approach to SMM. Third, SMM Structure addresses how the organization assigns marketing tasks within the firm: hierarchically versus a network structure. Fourth, and finally, is SMM Governance. Governance addresses how the company makes rules and establishes procedures relating to SMM: autocratically versus anarchically. In light of how SMM is defined, Felix *et al.* (2017) provide a multi-layered and comprehensive framework whereby B2B firms can not only find their place on each of the four dimensions, but also improve and formalize SMM strategies accordingly.

The research by Felix *et al.*, (2017) outlines an important theoretical understanding of the trade-offs marketers face when positioning a firm along each of the four continua. Additionally, the strategic SMM framework goes beyond firm- or market-specific characteristics and it allows for general consideration of all firm situations with regard to each SMM dimension. Although all four dimensions merit investigation, we limit the scope of this manuscript to examining the role of SMM scope as it pertains to B2B communication, intelligence, EI, and branding.

Content Marketing and SMM

Content marketing is flipping conventional marketing on its head. Specifically, marketers are taking the opportunity to share rich information that is relevant to the audience with the goal of helping people be successful at whatever they do, whereas traditional marketing goals typically aimed to raise awareness of and sell more goods and services. Offering your audience valuable information, not about the product, but about whatever the audience is interested in, leads to more engaged and loyal customers (Walters, 2015).

According to David Aaker (Forbes, 2015), conventional marketing is not engaging enough, and it attempts to push products and product benefits to the customer. Instead, companies must offer something interesting and useful rather than what the company sells. For

example, Aaker states “people are not interested in diapers, they are interested in babies” (Forbes, 2015), which is why Proctor & Gamble created Pampers Village which is set up like a social networking website that allows expecting parents to connect with other new parents. Along with facilitating social connections between like-minded parents the site offers new parents content that is of interest when bringing a baby into the family. Articles appear in Pampers Village on topics such as calculating your due date or monitoring your baby’s eating and sleeping. The site is not without Pampers branding, but there are very few cues that even hint at selling a product.

The concept of offering content that the customer values without overtly selling a product allows for a deeper emotional connection and increased engagement with the audience (Content Marketing Institute, 2017). Additionally, the art of offering valuable content requires not only having a deep understanding of what will resonate with the audience, but it also requires putting oneself in the shoes of the audience, which typifies EI. Therefore, content marketing and EI make great bedfellows.

Content can be shared via numerous channels including many social media outlets. However, research on SMM is fragmented and largely focuses on specific tactics or issues (e.g., Chang *et al.*, 2015; Kumar *et al.*, 2016). The strategic framework developed by Felix, *et al.* (2017) that organizes SMM into four general dimensions establishes a range of approaches or perspectives based on actual company practices around SMM. The four dimensions flow from a company’s vision, mission, corporate goals, corporate culture, and corporate resources. The resulting SMM framework provides structure to the organization and allows for cross-functional collaboration in social media marketing strategies.

A Conceptual Model of Emotional Intelligence in B2B Brand Equity

We expand upon the Felix *et al.*, (2017) theory-building approach and develop a Model of Functional and Emotional Paths to B2B Brand Equity (FE Model) (see Figure 2). The FE Model juxtaposes functional, hard skills to emotional, soft skills, both of which contribute to the understanding of the SMM Scope continuum. The FE Model acts as a foundation to demonstrate the importance of finding the sweet spot on the SMM Scope continuum, and use this as a starting point from which to create SMM strategies within the B2B firm.

(Insert Figure 2 Here)

The scope of SMM allows organizations to create a strategic approach to internal and external communication based on whether the organization takes a defender or explorer perspective (see Figure 3). Defenders are firm-oriented and tend to have one-way communication styles, pushing products and product benefits on the audience. Explorers are stakeholder-oriented and tend to have dynamic communication styles, with a push/pull approach. We contend that defenders are synonymous with functionally-focused organizations that rely largely upon intelligence and hard skills, and explorers are synonymous with emotion/relationship-focused organizations that utilize EI and soft skills.

(Insert Figure 3 Here)

Traditionally, B2B marketers took a functional approach to communication, which focused on the firm rather than the audience, used a one-way approach to push products and product benefits to the customer, and emphasized technical skills of the firm. This mirrors the

defender approach to communication as described by Felix *et al.*, (2017). Functional communication typically targets only the customer since the goal of defender's communication is to promote and sell the product. Therefore, many other stakeholders are left out of the communication mix.

The FE Model does not suggest choosing one path or the other, but instead the model suggests that B2Bs expand their current path to building brand equity by utilizing emotional elements and soft skills in communication strategies with multiple stakeholders. This approach involves developing specific strategies for dynamic communications between the firm and specific stakeholder groups, customizing to the audience accordingly. Felix *et al.* (2017) label firms that maintain reciprocal relationships with stakeholders and involve stakeholders in the value creation process as explorers. Explorers “take advantage of the integrative, interactive, and collaborative potential of social media technology” (Felix *et al.*, 2017, p. 121), and as a result explorers do not simply push product information but promote a value shared by those who utilize the product, which is far more inclusive and conducive to improving relationships with many stakeholders.

Business-to-business firms with EI skills can utilize strategic SMM in a variety of ways. Emotional intelligence dimensions include motivation, empathy, self-awareness, social skills, and self-regulation (Goleman, 1995), and, with some thought and creativity, each of the dimensions can be expressed through social media content marketing. To illustrate, we offer the following: Goleman's research in EI elucidates self-regulation to include adaptability. An example of a B2B firm using social media content marketing to express adaptability and, in turn, self-regulation is the creation of Redshift.

In 2013 Autodesk, a corporation that develops software for industries ranging from architecture to entertainment, launched a blog targeted toward very small businesses. The blog drew loyal readers and won awards. However, the blog was not designed to fill the needs of such a variety of audiences. Consequently, Autodesk's content marketing team ended the blog and created Redshift, a new content marketing "hub" with personalization features including recommendations for articles based on the reader's preferences. Autodesk was awarded the technology award for NewsCred's 50 Best Content Marketing Brands of 2017. These awards exemplify social media marketing strategy formation. The company could have maintained the status quo, but instead showed adaptability by improving and personalizing the offering to stakeholders with a total shift toward creating an even better tool than before.

Application and Analysis of the FE Model

We follow up the development of our conceptual model by analyzing NewsCred's 50 Best Content Marketing Brands of 2017, of which 11 of the 50 best companies are B2B. This analysis exemplifies how using EI skills to connect with stakeholders through SMM in a way that is relevant and valuable can, in turn, add value to the firm. Through this examination, we illustrate where each of the 11 B2Bs are on the SMM scope continuum, whether they demonstrate an emotional approach and a heightened level of EI, indicative of the explorer mentality, or an intellectual, functional approach, telling of the defender mentality.

The 11 B2B firms included in our analysis are listed in Table 1. Awards were given in the following ten categories: Health, Fitness & Lifestyle, Fashion & Beauty, Food, Technology & Telecom (Fortune 500), Technology (Other), Financial Services, Travel & Hospitality, Retail, Healthcare & Pharma, and Insurance. The award winners were vetted through three rounds of voting, first by marketers, next by a committee of content marketing specialists, and finally by a

panel of 200 content marketers who voted on the top five brands in each category. NewsCred provides summaries outlining why each company was doing their best work in content marketing in each company's respective space according to the judges. Each of the summaries for the 11 B2B companies were analyzed according to Goleman's (1995) model of emotional intelligence to determine whether the reasons stated for winning the award reflected emotional intelligence skills.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

Two independent marketing experts were given background on Goleman's and other's research on EI. Specifically, Goleman's five dimensions of EI, and the more specific elements within each of the dimensions, were described (see Figure 1). Next, the experts independently coded each of the summaries for the B2B award winners as to whether s/he felt the statements contained in the summaries were indicative of one or more of the elements within the five dimensions. Each time the experts determined that an element from one of the five dimensions appeared, a score of one (1) was given for that element. For example, if a company demonstrated adaptability, the company earned a score of 1 for element "G" under self-regulation. The scores were tallied after all 11 summaries were coded by each of the experts.

Twenty-four elements exist under Goleman's five categories (see Table 1). The analysis of the summaries of award winning B2B companies revealed that fifty percent of the elements were demonstrated by the eleven B2Bs to a high degree (appearing between 13 and 24 times in the summaries), and fifty percent of the elements were demonstrated to a lower degree (appearing between 1 and 12 times in the summaries). It is important to note that the experts

determined that 22 of the 24 elements were present across the summaries examined. These findings suggest that B2B companies awarded for social media content marketing efforts exhibit explorer tendencies. Furthermore, the award winners appear to demonstrate emotional intelligence and may have clearer SMM strategies.

Discussion

Our study contributes to the understanding of the role that emotions and soft skills play in building brand image and brand equity. Business-to-business marketers now understand the importance of building strong brands, a concept that B2C marketers have embraced for decades. However, B2B marketers must now realize that reliable products, a recognizable logo, and a good website are necessary but insufficient components in building brand equity. Unfortunately, many B2B marketers are unsure of how to fill the gap between current practices and taking the brand to the next level. Because knowledge surrounding emotional intelligence in B2B organizational online communication is limited and fragmented, we took on a content analysis approach to gathering existing evidence of how companies use emotional intelligence to communicate and enhance brand image.

The findings from our analysis of 11 B2B companies that received an award for their content marketing show that those “best in class” organizations employ communication strategies that utilize emotional intelligence and soft skills. These findings are critical since B2Bs traditionally took a rational, transactional approach. Additionally, these findings are more in line with the notion that B2B marketers strive to build relationships as the foundation upon which to transact business. Until now, an important piece of the puzzle was missing.

Conclusions

We are on the forefront of an important paradigm shift for B2B marketers because the opportunity to expand relationship-building to every facet of communication with stakeholders has never been easier than it is now given social media marketing tools. Furthermore, to avoid myopic decision making, organizations must consider making decisions using both the head and the heart, and it is important to understand and manage one's own emotions as well as the emotions of our customers (Manna & Smith, 2004). This is at the crux of our model of functional and emotional paths to B2B equity.

Marketers of B2C and B2B firms have many options available through which to communicate. However, the current technological and digital landscape offers new and exciting channels of communication. Specifically, this research shows how B2B firms can use social media content marketing strategies to connect with stakeholders to demonstrate emotional intelligence, thereby enhancing brand image which may, in turn, increase brand equity.

Limitations and Future Research

This exploratory research considers how social media marketing not only fits into B2B branding, but it also examines whether B2B firms that are considered to be the best at content marketing exhibit emotional intelligence. Our analysis of the 50 Best Content Marketing Brands of 2017 offers enough evidence that B2B companies who won the award do, in fact, demonstrate emotional intelligence to warrant further investigation. This study is limited in that it is one case where a company (NewsCred) determined the best in class content marketing brands. Other organizations have created similar reviews and awards, and we would be well-served to investigate further.

Another limitation to our findings includes limited expert analysis. Further research should formalize the analysis process, perhaps utilizing content analysis software to more closely

assign meaning to the instances where emotional intelligence elements are observed.

Additionally, analysis should include investigation of the company sites in greater depth with a more robust protocol. Our analysis was limited to the summaries provided by NewsCred, the organization that initiates the annual award campaign.

Finally, future research should link our findings and recommendations more closely with brand equity. This might be accomplished through triangulating content marketing award winning B2B organizations with Interbrand's Best Global Brands and content analysis not only from award summaries, but also from actual content marketing examples from each of the companies.

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Figure 1: Model of Emotional Intelligence (adapted from Goleman 1995)

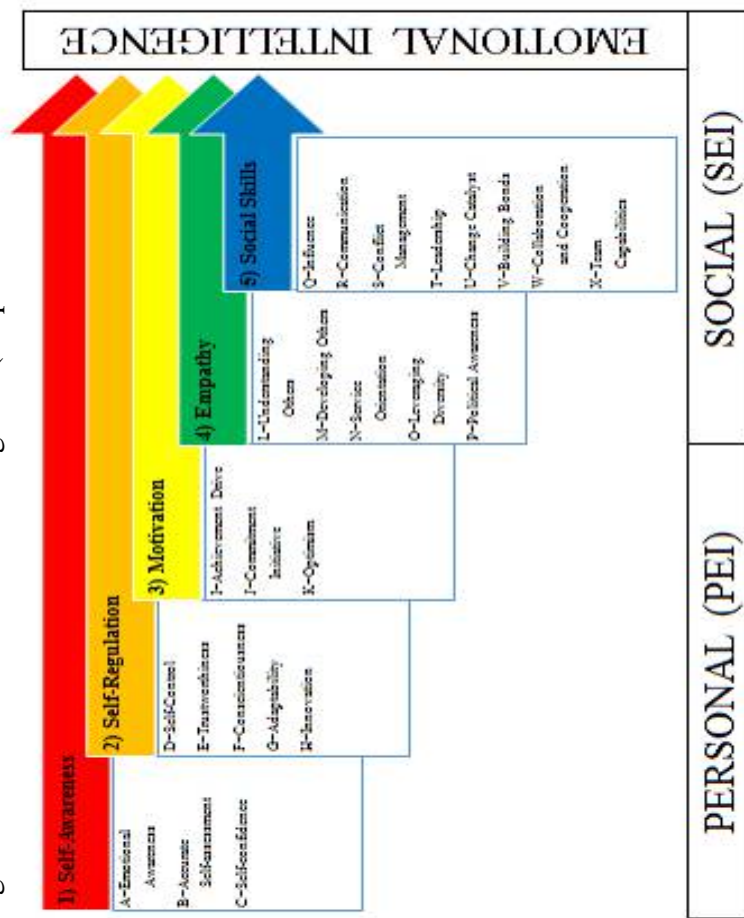


Figure 2: Model of Functional and Emotional Paths to B2B Brand Equity

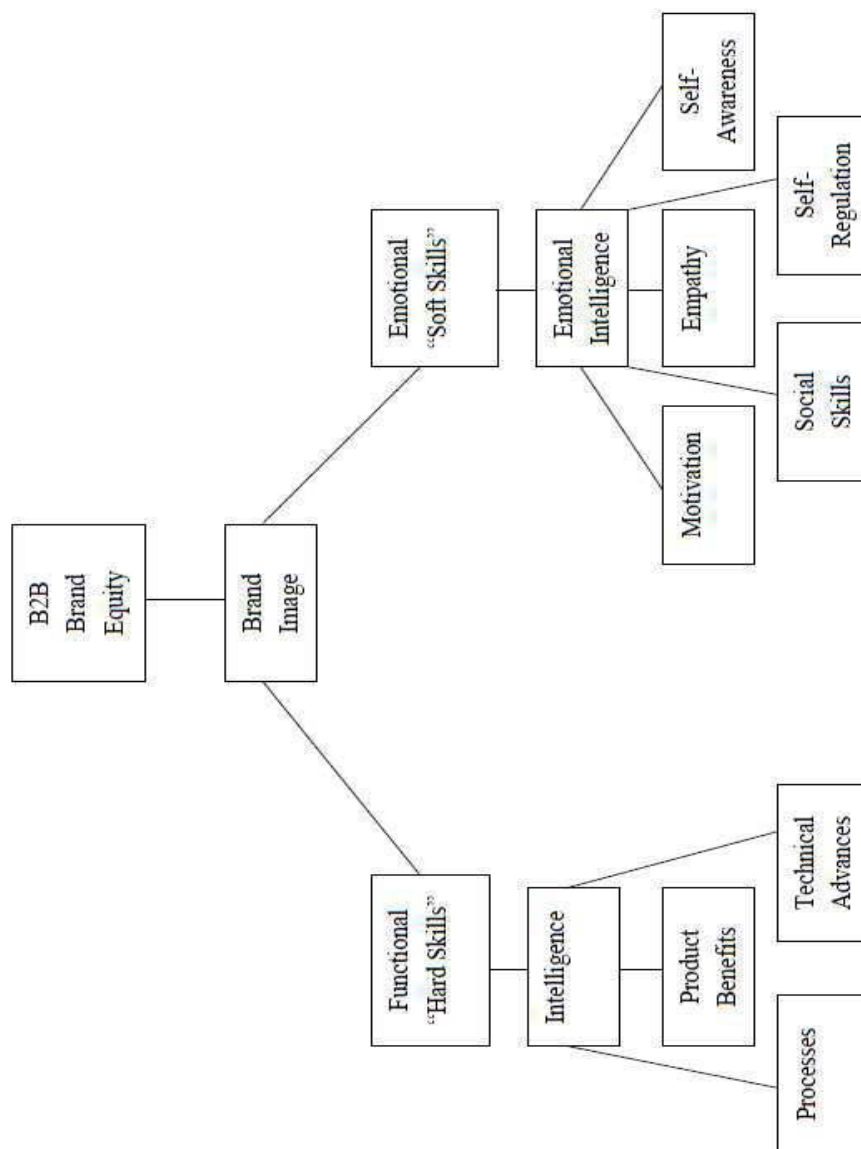


Figure 3: Social Media Marketing Scope (adapted from Felix, *et al.*, 2017)

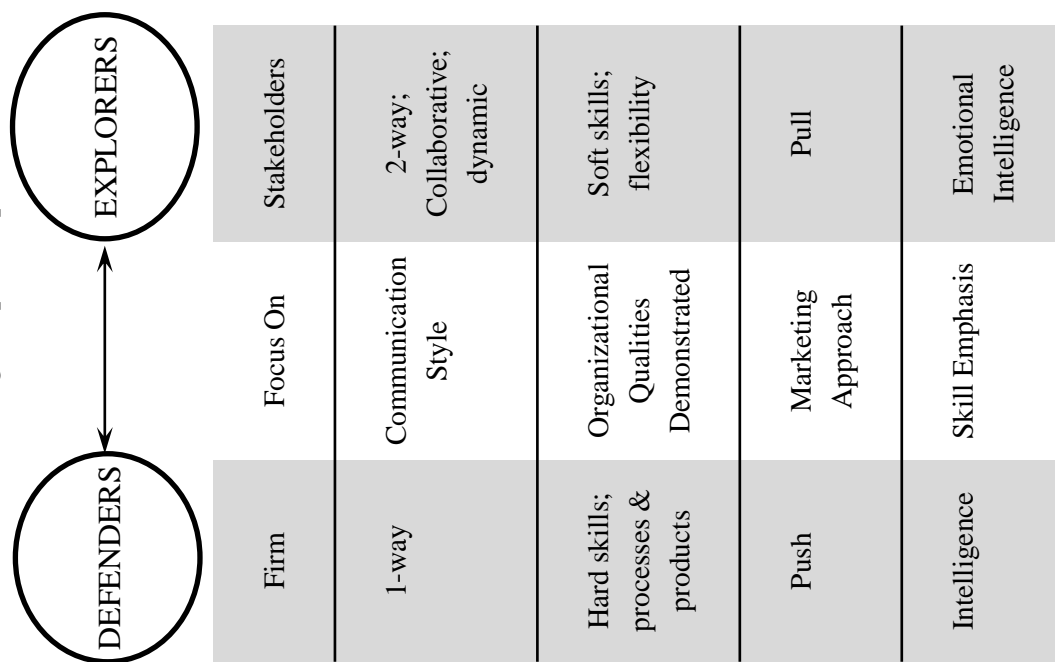


Table 1. NewsCred's 2017 ThinkContent B2B Award Winners and Emotional Intelligence

B2B Content Marketing Award Winners	Elements of Emotional Intelligence* Shown by each Winner	
	PEI	SEI
HPE Matter (HPE's Content Hub)	A, C, D, E, F,G, H	L, M, N, O, R, T, V, W
Google (ex. GSuite)	A, C, F, G, H, I	L, M, N, R, T, U, V, W, Q
IntellIQ (iQ)	A, B, C, F, G, H, J, K	L, M, N, O, Q, R, T, U, V, W, X
GE (GE Reports)	A, C, F, G, H, I, J	L, M, N, R, T, U, W
InVision	A, G, H, I	L, M, N, O, R, T, U, V, W, X
Autodesk (Redshift)	A, B, C, F, G, H	L, O, R, T, U, V, W
Adobe (CMO.com)	A, B, C, F, G, H, I	L, M, N, R, T, U V
Capgemini (Content Loop)	A, B, C, F, G, H, I, J	L, M, O, R, T, U, V, W, X
CATechnologies (Rewrite)	A, B, C, F, G, H	L, M, N, O, R, T, U, W
Grant Thornton UK (Strategies for Growth)	A, B, C, F, G, H	L, M, N, R, T, V, W
The Hartford (Small Biz Ahead)	A, B, C, F, G, H	L, M, N, R, T, V, W

*Refer to Goleman's Model of Emotional Intelligence (1995) – elements A-X