



Developing Insights on Branding in the B2B Context

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Chapter 6

Maintaining B2B Relationships through Branding

Pihla Ruohonen, Sara Vikström and Emma Saarela

Abstract

The chapter presents how business-to-business (B2B) actors may use branding as a tool for maintaining strong, long-term business relationships with their customers. Current knowledge on how to maintain business relationships is presented, related to branding as a tool contributing to long-term and strong business relationships. The phenomenon is studied in detail through a case company, Verso Globe, which operates in the consultancy area and is specialized in sustainability issues. The authors conclude that shared values and norms lead to beneficial business relationships and help maintain them. Also, the case company is closely collaborating and co-creating with its customers, which leads to technological adaptation and increases mutual commitment. A reputation of sharing values, having interest to develop, and co-creating with customers benefits the company and builds the corporate brand. The company culture must, however, support the efforts that make the brand. It is therefore important for B2B actors to understand the customer's values and use it as a basis for customer relationship management activities. Concurrently, the company's own values and how it directs employees are elements of its culture, which is the basis for the corporate brand. The perfect match of business relationships is therefore lies in aligning values and norms between the partners.

Keywords: Business relationship maintenance; branding; corporate brand; reputation; B2B

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6.1. Introduction

Technology and social media have changed the way we do business today and have also had an impact on how B2B relationships are constructed. For instance, strong competition and relationship network complexity are two challenges that businesses in the new millennium are facing (cf. [Ndubisi & Natarajan, 2016](#)). One way of dealing with these complexities is increasing branding efforts, as well as the awareness of branding within the B2B context. In this chapter, we discuss B2B relationships in relation to branding in more detail in order to explore how business relationships can be maintained in today's connected world. Branding and relationships are closely related; a strong brand reduces the perceived purchase risks and increases a company's attractiveness ([Backhaus, Steiner, & Lügger, 2011](#); [Cretu & Brodie, 2007](#)). Brand relevance does, however, differ across industries and companies. Depending on the stage the relationship is in, different factors related to branding affect the relationship ([Leek & Christodoulides, 2011](#); [Mudambi, 2002](#)).

This chapter presents how B2B companies can benefit from branding and use it in building strong, long-term relationships with their customers. We introduce existing theories and findings concerning B2B branding and its effect on business relationships. We also present a case study, in which we highlight how branding can strengthen business relationships. Managerial implications and suggestions for future research are presented in Section 6.5.2. The guiding research questions in this chapter are the following:

- How do companies maintain their B2B relationships?
- How can branding contribute to establishing and maintaining long-term relationships?

6.2. Relationship Marketing and B2B Branding

In this chapter, we discuss relationship marketing and maintaining customer relationships in a B2B environment from a theoretical point of view. We also consider the relevance of factors, such as commitment, trust, loyalty, and satisfaction, and how they affect long-term relationships.

6.2.1. *The Importance of Relationship Marketing*

Relationship marketing is concerned with developing, maintaining, and sustaining strong relationships with customers and stakeholders involved with the organization (Ndubisi & Natarajan, 2016). The aim of relationship marketing is to strengthen an already strong relationship, as well as increase and/or maintain the loyalty of customers (Sarin, 2015). According to Dorai and Varshney (2012), the purpose of a relationship, from a marketing perspective, is to provide value for both partners of the relationship. The value is enhanced mutually by providing new benefits in the constant interaction between the B2B actors. If both actors value the relationship and the benefits created through the relationship, the actors often achieve a status of mutual commitment to the relationship. Relational benefits include confidence, social, and special treatment benefits. Nevertheless, these benefits should be renewed continually in order to stay competitive and able to establish new relationships, especially with potential customers (Conze, Bieger, Laesser, & Riklin, 2010).

The aim of the process of relationship marketing is to explore which products and/or services should be included in the solution (for the customer), and who, how, and when to provide these to ensure that the required value is created. This is a very important part of the whole service; if the company solutions do not meet the customer's expectations, the customer might, in addition, integrate their own solutions with other firms. This is why managing relationships through communication and networking play a central role in increasing mutual trust and confidence among partners. The goal is to make both parties' transactions profitable.

Constantly changing market conditions have made it even more important to enhance closer links between actors in the value network. The value network must support faster and more flexible responses to the needs and desires of customers. This, on the other hand, raises the need for further strengthening of relationships, not only between suppliers and immediate customers but also between other producers and consumers, all the way to the final consumer in the value network. In addition, building strong, personified, and long-term relationships between the business partners also secures a competitive advantage for all partners involved in the value network. The aim of developing relationships and increasing mutual dependence among partners in a network can also be said to be a characteristic feature of the present world.

6.2.2. Maintaining B2B Relationships

Ford's (1980) research on how business relationships develop provides one of the core models in the literature on B2B marketing. Ford (1980) argues that the development consists of five stages (see Figure 6.1). We focus specifically on stage 3, the development stage, and stage 4, the long-term stage. Stages 1 and 2 are discussed more profoundly in Chapter 5, in relation to how branding facilitates relationship initiation.

Stage 3 relates to experience, distance, and commitment (Ford, 1980). *Experience* refers to the knowledge of values and norms that the two parties in the relationships have. They might have shared values or are prepared to adapt to each other's values. *Distance* includes both social and technological dimensions. As trust increases and personal relationships are created, distance diminishes. Technological adaptations refer to the way business is done and how technological solutions are created in order to make the communication and business better. As the distance becomes smaller in every way, the cultures become more similar and are adapted to each other. Knowledge about the other parties' values and norms and decreased distance lead to *commitment*.

Stage 4 considers the relationship as a long-term relationship already. It is characterized by *standard procedures and norms* as well as *increased trust* (experience about the business partner). The distance between the buyer and the seller is at a minimum level, and there are mutual adaptations at all levels. However, minimum level uncertainty means that there is no questioning of existing patterns, which may lead to ineffectiveness and a decrease in the overall relationship quality.

In the B2B environment, it is important for suppliers to understand their customers, as well as the environment and business ecosystem, in which the customer acts. As B2B customers usually purchase a large volume of goods, it is very important for a company to manage and maintain loyal B2B customers, as that can secure greater revenue for a supplier. The benefits and importance of attracting and maintaining loyal customers has received much attention, and, as a general rule,



Figure 6.1. Development of B2B Relationships. Adapted from Ford (1980).

profitability is predicted as a result of customer loyalty (Reichelt & Sasser, 1990). Consequently, customer loyalty should, from an economic point of view, always be pursued as a long-term investment. Many companies are therefore very engaged in their relationships to business customers. The companies also recognize the importance of strategic management of supplier and customer relationships.

Factors that contribute to brand loyalty in the B2B environment are company-specific attributes, such as reliability, performance, service, product availability, and sales relationships. These elements affect the reputation and image of a B2B brand, which business customers, in turn, often assess and value when making their purchasing decision (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008). For a company to maintain customer loyalty to the supplier, a supplier has to put every effort into all elements of relationship quality. To emphasize commitment, a supplier should aim to focus on building affective aspects of commitment rather than calculative aspects. Satisfaction is evidently a crucial factor in maintaining purchase intentions, whereas service quality will be strengthened by both purchase intention and attitudinal loyalty (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007).

6.2.2.1. Trust as a Cornerstone in Business Relationships

There is a consensus in the marketing literature concerning trust as the cornerstone of long-term relationships. For instance, Gil-Saura, Frasset-Deltoro, and Cervera-Taulet (2009) argue that in order to build and maintain trust between two parties, vulnerability is needed. In B2B relationships, the degree of interdependency between the buyer and the seller is high, which automatically leads to vulnerability. The development of loyalty and its potential application to the B2B context have to be considered through a higher construct of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and service quality (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007).

B2B customers are often willing to strengthen the transactional buyer–seller relationship and engage in a cooperative or a partnership relationship (Kotler & Armstrong, 2005). This eagerness to engage in a partnership depends on the level of trust and the perception of the other company's intentions (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008). In addition, trustworthiness is affected by the company's offerings, network position, and personnel (Seppänen, Blomqvist, & Sundqvist, 2007). The corporate brand influences how a B2B company's intentions to cooperate and develop partnerships are perceived by its business customers. Images and perceptions of a company are fairly important in the B2B environment, as business customers have a tendency to value and make decisions based on these images. Trust and loyalty are based on the same images and

perceptions (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008). According to Shamma and Hassan (2009), it is important to sustain and strive for long-term relationships, as it affects a company's reputation and survival in the marketplace.

Business customers easily create trust and commitment to the company brand, especially to its customer-facing employees. Customer loyalty and continued purchases may lean more toward the employees and the corporate brand than to the product or service brands. Thus, it is important to reinforce business customers trust in, commitment to, and liking of the company (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008).

6.2.2.2. Digitalization as a Changing Factor in Communication in B2B Relationships

The Internet, and its development during the past years, has affected the way people communicate and share opinions, as well as how trends are distributed and accepted. In particular, the speed in which opinions are exchanged has a great impact on both customers and companies. The Internet is primarily about exchanging information and interacting with other people. Even though social media functions best when consumers and individuals use it, Safko (2012) points out that social media needs to be a vital part of any B2B company's communication strategy. This is due to the fact that interaction between companies is also interaction between people and therefore social media also affects how B2B companies work to maintain their relationships (Safko, 2012). E-commerce is becoming increasingly common on the B2B market and it is also changing the characteristics of traditional business relationship. Digital solutions and the use of social media are topics to be acknowledged for future trends and research. Chapter 9 on online branding deals specifically with different social media channels available for B2B actors.

6.2.3. Branding That Enhances Long-term B2B Relationships

The idea of brand (and branding as a process) is not as straightforward within the B2B context as within consumer markets. Sarin (2015) argues that the nature of the product, the industry, and the end use situation will determine the importance as well as task when creating B2B brands. In the B2B setting, purchase is done based on product features and by professionals. The buying decision is influenced by the delivery of the promised performance and not on how marketers have banded their

products, which is often the case in the B2C context. In an industrial context, this means that technical and scientific features are more critical; hence, trust in suppliers is crucial (Sarin, 2015).

In addition, the increased competition in B2B markets has led to an increased need and demand for branding. Companies are trying to differentiate themselves in such a way that their strong brands contribute to strong relationships. In consumer markets, strong brands have, for a long time, been a requirement. It is only recently that the B2B market has started to focus on communicating service, reliability, and quality through branding efforts. However, previous research shows that emotional brand associations have also become more important among rational and problem-oriented B2B customers (cf. Herbst & Merz, 2011). Moreover, business customers' buying decisions are affected by the reputation and image of supplier companies (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008).

According to Cretu and Brodie (2007), strong brands have the ability to reduce perceived risks and increase the attractiveness to invest, which in turn helps B2B companies to create trust and reputation from a customer perspective. In addition, Backhaus et al. (2011) point out the effect of brands on risk reduction and argue that it is the most important brand function in B2B markets. Kotler and Keller (2006) state that at the heart of a good brand lies an excellent product and/or service, backed up by creative marketing. Building strong brands requires careful planning and significant long-term investments.

Furthermore, successful branding requires that the brand becomes a central guideline for the company as well as for all the employees and is reflected in their behavior. This enables the communication of intangible associations, such as trustworthiness and expertise. A strong brand can have many beneficial effects regarding a company's relationships: it contributes to mergers and acquisitions and might also strengthen the manufacturer–reseller relationship (Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011). From a relationship perspective, the benefit of a strong brand includes the fact that communications are accepted more easily, customers may be more loyal and satisfied, and strong brands are more likely to receive referrals. In addition, since a brand is a summary of all its associated values, it can contribute to the buyer's comfort, confidence, and feel good factor (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011).

The likelihood of preferring a strong brand depends on the buyer and the relationship. Buyers in small companies are more receptive to branding than buyers of large corporations. Branding might also be more important in the beginning of the relationship, when the uncertainty is greater, and a strong brand can provide confidence and reduce

the perceived risk (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). In B2B contexts, where products are complex and require after-sales support or maintenance, the importance of brands is enhanced. The greater the perceived purchase risk, the greater the importance of the brand. Therefore, one way to influence the customer's decision-making process is by stressing the brand's ability to reduce risk. Brands play an important role also in a business system setting, where the buyer's dependence on the seller is high, and commitment to the same vendor is long-term (Backhaus et al., 2011). The role of salespeople in branding is presented more profoundly in Chapter 7 on the role of branding in B2B sales.

We thus return to the fact that in long-term relationships factors such as reliability, trust, and willingness to adapt become more important (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). According to Mudambi (2002), it depends on the company's character whether it is receptive to branding. Mudambi (2002) has generated three clusters of companies: highly tangible, branding receptive, and low interest. Highly tangible companies focus on the product, meaning that intangible aspects do not affect decision-making. Branding-receptive companies pay attention and perceive intangible branding aspects of higher importance. Low-interest companies do not find intangible or tangible aspects to be either more or less important.

6.2.3.1. Respect in B2B Relationships as a Branding Effort

Respect in business relationships can have a great impact on the outcome of the relationship. Bourassa, Cunningham, Ashworth, and Handelman (2016) found that respect in B2B buyer–seller relationships involves valuing the other person in the business relationship and seeing the worth of the relationship. In addition, respect must be authentic. If the respect is authentic, there is an even greater chance that the desired outcomes of the relationship are produced. Respect can be built in business relationships by getting to know the person that you are working with and to understand and appreciate that person.

Mutual respect leads to positive word-of-mouth recommendations and increased commitment in buyer–seller relationships (Bourassa et al., 2016). Lack of respect in the business relationship may therefore lead to negative word-of-mouth opinions as well as negative emotions. Disrespectful business relationships can also be more time-consuming than respectful business relationships. If there is disrespect in a buyer–seller relationship, the disrespected part may make less of an effort. The risk of making mistakes is also higher in a disrespectful business relationship (Bourassa et al., 2016).

6.2.4. Summarizing Branding Enhancing Long-term Relationships

Nowadays, e-commerce and social media play a greater role in B2B marketing and establishing/maintaining business relationships. For example, Ford's (1980) model on B2B relationships, which was presented almost three decades ago, can be criticized for not being relevant in today's B2B markets, as it does not take into consideration the realities of how business is conducted today. Neither does the prevailing model on establishing long-term relationships (Ford, 1980) take into consideration the role of branding in B2B relationships. These factors, however, are important when analyzing B2B companies and designing strategies; branding and social media must be a part of the equation. Nevertheless, branding can be related to Ford's model, as it is a way to communicate both emotional and rational values. According to Ford's model, shared values and norms are important in order to create a long-term relationship. Branding thus relates to, and becomes visible through, the company culture, which depicts the norms and standard procedures.

In summary, we highlight the relevance of branding in maintaining long-term relationships, and that trust, commitment, and reputation are aspects that must be taken into account in branding efforts. Furthermore, personal connections between the individuals maintaining a business relationship are important. In Section 6.3, we explore our argument further by studying a case company and its perceptions and approaches to maintaining business relationships, and the role of branding within these relationships.

6.3. A Case Study on Maintaining B2B Relationships

Our case company is Verso Globe (<https://versoglobe.com/>), which focuses on sustainability and responsibility issues and defines its role as an online sustainability consultant. Verso's solutions help companies gain more from their internal sustainable choices and actions. The service encourages companies to communicate and engage with their customers and build competitive advantages through organizing and communicating information about sustainable matters in the company.

The company was founded in 2010 and has offices in Finland and Germany. One of the co-founders of Verso Globe, Mr. Mika Metsämäki, related that the founding idea of the company has remained the same since it was established, even though the actual business conducted in the company has evolved. When they started the company,

their approach was concerned more with consulting; the team tried to learn about its clients' sustainable actions and procedures through interviews and discussions. The team used the resulting collected data to build a platform for the clients. Eventually, as their clients' needs changed, the company's role developed more toward being a software company. Face-to-face consulting is still carried out, however, in a much smaller role compared to that of the beginning of the company's journey. Nowadays some consulting is done by Verso Globe's employees, and some is done by external partners. Nevertheless, Verso Globe plans to enter the South-American markets in the near future and is thus expanding its markets.

6.3.1. *The Verso Brand and Culture*

In summary, Verso Globe offers software for communicating and managing sustainability. Its service also includes consultancy, if needed. The company's brand promise is based on making sustainability management as easy as possible. Their aim is to bring a new approach into an area (sustainability), which is "slightly conservative," according to Mr. Metsämäki. The co-founder, Mr. Metsämäki, pointed out that compared to other solutions on the market, the user experience of their services must be exciting, fun, and easy to use. It is important to Verso Globe that their approach is fresh and new. The brand name of the company is the same regardless of market. The main markets are Finland and Germany; however, there are some differences in the service offered as consultancy is larger in Finland. There is a broader need for consultancy in Finland compared to Germany.

According to Mr. Metsämäki, the employees aim to do things in new ways and aim at maintaining a fresh and young mind-set in the company. The company is not built on complex hierarchies and inflexible structures. Having ideas is encouraged among employees. Due to the young age of the company, Verso Globe has no set of strict rules of conduct. There are, however, some differences in the company culture in the two different offices. In Germany, the way of doing business is more structured and slightly more conservative. We discuss cross-cultural factors more thoroughly later on in this chapter.

Transparency is the most important value at Verso Globe, which they also aim at making visible in all operations and communication with customers. Verso Globe also aims at encouraging their customers and partners to be as transparent as possible and to accept that even

less perfect aspects of the company should also be communicated openly, rather than hiding imperfection in company actions. According to Mr. Metsämäki, it depends on the company culture whether a company accepts transparency as a value and how easy it is to accept it.

6.3.2. *The Customer Relationships of Verso Globe*

Verso Globe states that its main idea is built on partnerships with different organizations and also with some customers. The foremost aim of the partnerships is to complement knowledge in software development and consultancy. Co-operation is an important part of the company's way of conducting business. For instance, Mr. Metsämäki explained that all software development is done, and has been done, intensively in co-operation with customers to make sure the results meet the customer needs. In Finland, partners and customers are mainly SMEs, while the German partners also include multinational companies.

At the moment, direct contact and personal relationships are the most important tools for Verso Globe to maintain its business relationships. It aims to meet customers face-to-face two or more times per year, with the aim of communicating and helping with issues related to the service and sustainability. Mr. Metsämäki also mentioned that the team at Verso Globe would like to be more in contact with its customers, stating that they will increase contact with customers in the future, for instance, by utilizing online channels. The SaaS solution offered by Verso Globe, helping customers utilize the information extracted from the software, supports the development of long-term relationships. Information on sustainability can be used, for example, as a competitive advantage, as a way to save costs or in marketing communication. Mr. Metsämäki's argument is that the longer a customer stays with Verso Globe, the more the customer benefits from the relationship.

The goal for Verso Globe, as with any B2B actor, is to have long-term customers. Currently, most of the customers and established relationships may be classified as long term. In addition to personal contact, the company also continuously arranges events that bring their customers together to share experiences. The events relate either to the software service or center around the topic of sustainability. The foremost tool to maintaining relationships, according to the Verso Globe team, is direct and personal contact.

The benefits Verso Globe receives from its long-term relationships relate to both rational and emotional benefits. Mr. Metsämäki claimed

that long-term relationships lead to fewer meetings, meaning that both time and money are saved. Furthermore, long-term relationships support the company reputation, and word-of-mouth is beneficial for attracting the attention of potential new partners and customers. Large partnering companies are in the position of recommending Verso Globe further to other companies, for instance, in their own networks. Verso Globe views the potential in such a way that it is easier to attract new customers by highlighting existing long-term relationships. Presently, the client base of Verso Globe consists of 50 customers. The relationships are rather personal, which is the company's strength. However, Mr. Metsämäki acknowledged that there are challenges in the future: for instance, what happens if the sales people change? Mr. Metsämäki also pointed out that maintaining personal relations with a large client base is tricky. Issues such as how to manage and nurse clients using other means than personal relationships must also be solved.

6.3.3. *International Relationships of Verso Globe*

Currently, Verso Globe does business in Finland and Germany. The company also has local representatives both in the Arab Emirates and in Brazil. Germany was chosen as a market due to the market size and the market being less competitive compared to, for instance, the UK and also due to the fact that one of the founders is German. Mr. Metsämäki pointed out that a local team in Germany is obligatory, if the company aims at understanding the local market conditions and how to establish and maintain business relationships in a culturally different setting. Mr. Metsämäki mentioned, as an example, that you cannot call people by their first names in Germany, unless you have agreed upon it. It is also easier to approach, for instance, the CEO of a company in Finland. In Finland, you can just call the CEO but in Germany you would not be able to do that. Nonetheless, the relationships are quite similar in both countries. In Germany, the clients are fewer but larger, which means that the relationships are even more personal and need more nurturing. With regard to the most important value, transparency, Mr. Metsämäki admitted that for German companies, it is harder to be transparent and open, due to the formality in the business culture. This is in spite of sustainability being popular and considered important in Germany and the fact that the country has generally emphasized transparency during recent years.

Mr. Metsämäki claimed that maintaining networks and relationships in different markets requires a considerable amount of work, as every

market is different, and an understanding of the local market conditions must be created. Furthermore, new partners and distributors bring challenges to the organization, communication, and transparency.

6.3.4. *Communicating in Business Relationships*

Verso Globe has two employees handling the communication with existing clients. As stated earlier, direct communication and direct relationships shape the way Verso Globe maintains its relationships. Mr. Metsämäki pointed out that it takes a few years for a personal relation between a salesperson and a customer to develop, which eventually facilitates communication. Communication generally increases with time.

In addition to communicating face-to-face, Verso Globe uses e-mail and the telephone as a means of staying in touch with customers and partners. In the near future, they will introduce online chats to provide support to existing communication activities. Increased presence in social media is also planned. Although Mr. Metsämäki was aware of the importance of Facebook as a communication channel, he stated that using social media had proven to be difficult in their case. However, he agreed that they should use it more, especially as regard attracting new customers. Personal contact is an important factor for how they maintain their customer relationships. If online sales became a reality for the company, then personal contact such as face-to-face communication would be lost, making it more difficult to build long-term relationships.

Direct sales have been the main channel for acquiring new customers. In practice, the company employees call their potential clients and meet them face-to-face, usually a few times until they establish a buyer–seller relationship. In the case of Verso Globe, the potential clients and partners are not perhaps used to buying the service that Verso Globe offers, as the sustainability issue is relatively new. Discussion and clarification of the service is necessary to help the customer understand the benefits of the service. Therefore, face-to-face meetings are necessary. In addition, the company's website is an important channel in acquiring new customers.

6.4. Branding as a Means of Maintaining Business Relationships

In this chapter, we set out to explore how B2B relationships are maintained, especially how branding can contribute to maintaining long-term relationships. In our endeavor to understand the phenomenon

more broadly, we identified, both in the current research and in relation to our case study, what additional efforts are needed in order to communicate the brand in current business relationships. The additional efforts we refer to here relate to social media, which is still an unexplored area for many B2B actors. Social media and digital communication can be seen as a current trend that will grow stronger. Personal relationships and direct contact provide the traditional way of creating trust and commitment in B2B markets. However, branding is one tool that can be used to enhance mutual values and norms between companies.

6.4.1. *How Do Companies Maintain B2B Relationships?*

According to Ford (1980), shared values and norms, a small psychological and technological distance, and commitment lead to long-term business relationships. Our case study confirms that *shared values, adaptations on both a technological and relational level, and commitment* lead to beneficial relationships and help maintain business relationships. For example, the Biogena Group, one of Verso Globe's long-term customers, explained that they can build a future together due to the *similar values* they share. Verso Globe has *transparency* as its primary value, and it is visible in all internal and external actions. Furthermore, the company's aim is to help its customers to be as transparent as possible. Verso Globe has developed its product in *close collaboration* with its customers, indicating that both *technological adaptation and mutual commitment* have been important in creating long-term relationships.

In long-term relationships reliability, trust, and willingness to adapt become important (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). Trust, together with commitment and satisfaction, also affect the customer's loyalty toward a company (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). As stated earlier, Verso Globe contributes to trust, commitment, and adaptations through co-operation with its customers and also through *personal relationships and direct contact*. Direct contact and personal relationship are currently the main means of maintaining relationships with its customers. It also aims to bring *added value* by arranging events together with its customers. This contributes to the customer's commitment to the product, and works as a site of sharing information, and providing Verso Globe with important information about the sustainability issues of the customers. *Commitment* is enhanced in many ways, since the service that Verso

Globe offers is more beneficial for long-term customers. This can be seen as a way to maintain relationships with the customer.

6.4.2. How Can Branding Contribute to Long-term B2B Relationships?

Branding and relationships go hand-in-hand, as a strong brand reduces the perceived purchase risks and increases a company's attractiveness (Backhaus et al., 2011; Cretu & Brodie, 2007). However, it should be acknowledged that the relevance of branding differs across industries and companies, and it also depends on what stage the relationship has reached (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Mudambi, 2002).

Mutual respect in buyer–seller relationships leads to, for instance, positive word-of-mouth and commitment to the relationship (Bourassa et al., 2016). Verso Globe considers *word-of-mouth* communication very important. Being transparent concerning the company's actions and collaborating closely with customers can be seen as a way of showing respect. A strong brand might, according to Vallaster and Lindgreen (2011), lead to a strong relationship between a buyer and a seller. A company with a strong brand is also more likely to obtain *referrals* and have their communication received and accepted by customers (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011).

A strong brand reduces the perceived risks and helps B2B companies create trust and reputation (Backhaus et al., 2011; Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Since the reputation and image of supplier companies affect the buying decisions in B2B market (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008), it also affects whether a relationship becomes long term. In this chapter, we confirm that *reputation* and *image* can affect a company's relationships. Verso Globe sees long-term relationships as a way to strengthen the corporate brand and a way to strengthen word-of-mouth recommendations and create references, which in turn contribute to both building and maintaining relationships. Verso Globe is an SME with 50 customers, thus it also has to rely on the strong brands of its larger customers. These strong brands function as a validation of trust and as references for Verso Globe. Taking into account that a company's reputation and survival on the market is affected by long-term relationships (Shamma & Hassan, 2009), Verso Globe has succeeded well in establishing long-term relationships with its customers. This is beneficial for its reputation and position on the market and facilitates acquiring new customers and partners.

However, successful branding requires that the brand guides the company's employees. A company can communicate intangible associations, such as trustworthiness and expertise to its customers (Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011) through its brand and actions. For Verso Globe, the company brand is also visible to a certain extent in the *company culture*. They aim to keep a light hierarchy, which strengthens their transparency and also makes the company more flexible and more adept at adjusting to changing market conditions. Cultural differences between target markets affect the company culture, but the differences remain quite small.

In the B2B context, sales personnel have an important role in maintaining relationships and communicating the company brand (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008). This is visible also at Verso Globe; they rely strongly on personal relationships and direct contact with their customers and state that it is the best way to maintain and bring value to the relationship.

6.5. Trends and Further Research on Branding as a Means of Maintaining Business Relationships

Based on the case study, we suggest trends for maintaining business relationships in the future. These trends are related to online communication, social media, and sustainability. For Verso Globe, the next step is to introduce social media into its communication and sales efforts. Social media enables companies to keep in contact with their customers, and if designed well, may aid in acquiring new customers. Only a small number of B2B companies utilize social media, which means that early adopters can attain an advantage. Personal relationships on the B2B market are traditionally one of the most popular ways to maintain relationships, but as the technology advances, a shift toward digital interaction may lie ahead.

Another issue that we focus on relates to the increase in good stories and examples of how to use sustainability in business. Storytelling is emerging as a means within the B2B sector, as a way to communicate emotional values and company culture. Storytelling helps in creating commitment and a sense of belonging, which may help companies solve the challenges of personal business relationships.

6.5.1. Managerial Implications

On the basis of this research, we suggest that companies focus on social media and digital strategies and engage in experimenting with different

kind of practices in order to find the most suitable ones. We also recommend to use the knowledge salespeople have about the company's customers, their preferences and needs and embed this knowledge in the digital strategy. Managers should consider how they can add value to their business relationships. Is it through events that both educate and amuse the customer? Or is it done by enhancing the customers' possibility to keep personal contact with the company through social media channels? Our suggestions for implementation include the following steps:

1. Map your customers' values. What adds to their satisfaction and contributes to their trust? Use the knowledge your salespeople have.
2. Use the map of customer values as a basis for customer relationship management (CRM) and your social media strategy.
3. Make sure your company culture is in line with your brand, and that everyone in the company follows it. Communicate your corporate brand through every action not only through sales people. Use storytelling.
4. If your own brand is less known, pursue larger customers who can act as a reference and contribute to positive word-of-mouth communication.
5. Do something new, something that others in your field or market are not doing yet. This can become your competitive advantage.

In addition, as Verso Globe's co-operation with its clients can be seen as successful, we would recommend every manager to reconsider their co-operation patterns with important customers. The co-operation can be about developing the company product, as in the case of Verso Global but can also be about arranging mutual events or contributing to some project together. This would increase both trust and commitment between the actors and lead to higher dependency. The effect of such actions will contribute to maintaining the business relationship, and the relationship would not then depend solely on personal relationships. Storytelling is a good tool for companies to use in order to tell others about their projects, customer relationships and references, and company culture. Storytelling adds transparency in business and allows customers to visualize the company culture and values better.

6.5.2. Future Research

There are some limitations to our research. We focused on and interviewed representatives from one company alone, which means that it is

not possible to generalize our thoughts to other companies and fields. However, the case contributes to the topic of how to maintain business relationships and which role the company's brand plays in the process; it also provides insights and examples of methods of conduct and areas in need of improvement. By conducting more interviews with companies from other fields within the B2B market, it would be possible to obtain a broader picture on the topic. It could also be useful to gather quantitative data in order to map the current state of specific industry areas and actors' approach to maintaining business relationships through branding efforts.

For future research, we recommend a focus on how social media impacts the maintenance of business relationships, as social media is a relatively new communication tool on the B2B market. We suggest exploring how social media can help maintain relationships and how personal relationships can be maintained through social media and digital solutions. More research is also needed concerning which practices on social media sites can enhance B2B customer loyalty and commitment.

In addition, as noted in the case study, co-operation between business actors and the effect the collaboration has on the business relationships is worth studying further. We pointed out earlier that Verso Globe conducts extensive co-operation with its clients, which contributes to long-term relationships and enhances trust, respect, and commitment. This aspect of co-operation and co-creation in relation to maintaining business relationships deserves attention by researchers as well as practitioners.

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