“Determinants of electronic branding: an exploratory study”

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ARTICLE INFO	Horst Treiblmaier (2011). Determinants of electronic branding: an exploratory study. *Innovative Marketing* , *7*(4)
RELEASED ON	Wednesday, 29 February 2012
JOURNAL	"Innovative Marketing "
FOUNDER	LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”

NUMBER OF REFERENCES
0

NUMBER OF FIGURES
0

NUMBER OF TABLES
0

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Determinants of electronic branding: an exploratory study

Abstract

The issue of how to build and successfully maintain brands on the Internet (electronic branding, e-branding, online branding) has gained significant attention from both researchers and practitioners. This paper analyzes how Austrian companies from different industry sectors manage their e-brands and identify determinants of e-branding. The author uses a framework, which was originally developed by A.T. Kearney (1999), to assess the impact of the online strategy on e-branding. The results of an empirical survey amongst managers from 13 Austrian companies, including dotcoms and multi-channel retailers, illustrate how companies integrate their online marketing strategies into their overall business concepts. Additionally, the managers assess the importance of communication, content and convenience for their company's e-branding success. Generally speaking, dotcoms see content as the most important success factor. By concentrating on a few cases, the article illustrates how the framework from A.T. Kearney (1999) can be applied for categorizing companies. The paper concludes with suggestions for future refinement.

Keywords: e-branding, electronic branding, online branding, branding, electronic marketing, brand management, online communication.

Introduction

During recent years e-branding has been intensely discussed in scholarly literature (Rowley, 2004). The so-called "Internet hype", which lasted until the first half of the year 2000, has fueled the efforts of enterprises to position them in a medium where it was considered to be most important to reach a critical mass of customers as fast as possible (Evans and Wurster, 1999). Several years later, after the dust has settled, many dotcoms (companies which operate exclusively or primarily online) have disappeared and well-established companies from the offline world have managed to successfully introduce their own online strategy, e.g., by introducing multi-channel retailing. Out of the top 100 brands of the year 2005, only four have started as pure e-brands, namely Google, eBay, Yahoo and Amazon (Interbrand, 2005). But even those few successful examples have taken years to get out of the red. In the beginning of the Internet's commercial use, many companies didn't fully realize the potentials and threats which come along with the establishment of an online brand. On the one hand, companies may benefit from differentiating between distribution channels and target special segments of the market (Strebinger et al., 2004). Additionally, brands may be used as search keys, especially when the domain name equals the brand (Rowley, 2004). On the other hand, the use of the Internet for communication, sales and distribution has led to a "cannibalization" of existing distribution facilities and to a good deal of severe resistance from sales and distribution personnel. Companies such as Dell, which didn't have to bother about existing organizational structures, managed to get a foothold in the market quite fast, and subsequently gained a considerable share of it. In many cases a great deal of money has been spent in the buildup of brand recognition, which is completely lost when a new brand is introduced. Furthermore, a new brand is not visible "by itself" in the online world. Only when ranked high in search engines, chances are that users will find it. Last but not least, in a world where no interpersonal contact between consumers and vendors exists, trust becomes a major issue (Bryant et al., 2002). As long as legal and security issues are not completely solved in the Internet, a strong brand name, which is ideally been transferred from the online to the offline world, remains a major component of the clients' buying decision.

1. The building of e-brands

According to Murphy (1993) "branding is concerned with assembling and maintaining a mixture of values, both tangible and intangible, which are relevant to consumers and which significantly and appropriately distinguish one supplier's brand from that of another". A number of such values which are blended together form a branded product or service, whose separate but interrelated constituents are hard to evaluate. The origins of brand management can be found in the beginning of the 20th century. Its primary goals include the creation and the development of distinguishable symbols, which could serve as a reference and influence a consumer's buying decision. Preference for the brand, trust and customer loyalty is needed to make a brand competitive. Even in a modern marketing environment, which is characterized by addressing customers individually with the help of customer relationship management, brands are necessary for "developing and communicating a differentiated value proposition in the market" (Dawar, 2004, p. 37).

E-brands (electronic brands, online brands) are brands which exist in the online (virtual) world and represent an offer (products, services or market places) or an organization. Depending on whether the company conducts business online, offline or both, three differ-

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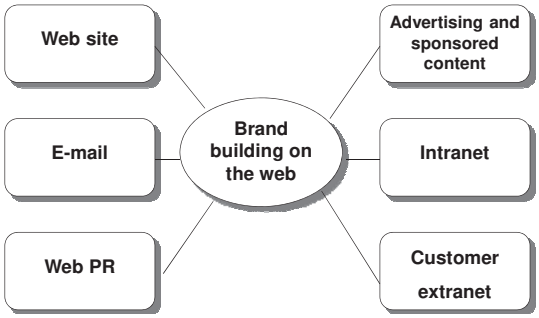
ent types can be differentiated, namely pure players, offline brands and mixed players. In order to overcome the problems associated with simply transferring offline branding strategies into the online world, Strebinger and Treiblmaier (2004), suggest the strategy of "e-adequate branding", which should not only take into account brand architecture and IT structure, but also structural and cultural aspects of the organization.



Source: Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000, p. 237)

Fig. 1. Brand building on the web

Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) specify six tools for building brands on the web (Figure 1). They regard the website as the most powerful brand-building tool, since it can be tailored to the actual needs of the customer. Advertising efforts and sponsored content on a third-party site help to get known in the online world. An intranet can be used to communicate the brand and its identity internally, while a customer extranet makes users feel like being part of a big community. Web-based public relations strategies intend to influence communication measures, which cannot be directly controlled by the company itself, such as private websites, public discussion rooms and chats. It is of vital importance for enterprises to know about their "online image", since information is spread easily on the Internet, and can have both positive and negative effects. E-mail, as an interactive medium, enables the organization to send and receive information, thereby simplifying contact with their stakeholders. In the view of Angehrn (1997), successful companies have to perceive the Internet as an Information, Communication, Distribution and Transaction (ICDT) channel simultaneously. In our research we primarily focus on its ability to create a virtual information space (VIS) and a virtual communication space (VCS). The Internet offers limited possibilities to stimulate emotions (Leong et al., 1998). Therefore, Stuart et al. (2004) point out that the web site may not be suited to communicate brand values and conclude that the web should be seen as being complementary to other media.

2. The role of the brand in the Internet

The importance of branding in the Internet is controversially debated among researchers. While Sinha (2000, p. 43) argues that "the Internet represents the biggest threat thus so far to a company's ability to brand its products", other authors highlight the importance of offering customers familiarity in an increasingly complex world (Carpenter, 2000). E-branding and traditional branding will merge in the near future, which will be accelerated by the integration of new media in modern communication strategies and will lead to new challenges for marketing management.

3. The survey

In order to empirically assess the importance of e-branding, we interviewed marketing representatives in 13 Austrian companies, which are partly pure e-brands (8) and partly click-and-mortar companies (5). With the exception of Cisco, all of them operate as B2C brands. As can be seen in Table 1, two of the companies have already ceased operations, which highlights the high volatility and the huge amount of risk which is associated with being a dotcom.

Table 1. The sample

Company name	Industry sector	URL	Pure player
Betandwin.com	Services	www.betandwin.com	Yes
Cisco	Information technology	www.cisco.com	No
derStandard.at	Media	www.derstandard.at	No
Geizhals	Services	www.geizhals.at	Yes
Jobpilot	Services	www.jobpilot.at	Yes
Lion.cc	Commerce	www.lion.cc	No
Lotterien	Services	www.lotterien.at	No
Markt.at	Commerce	www.markt.at	Yes
Motorline.cc	Services	www.motorline.cc	Yes
OE4.com	Services	www.oe4.com	Yes
One.at	Services commerce	www.one.at	No
S-NM.at	New media agency	www.s-nm.at*	Yes
Vinum.at	Commerce	www.vinum.at*	Yes

Note: * Offline on May 10, 2006.

We decided to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews in order to get some in-depth information on how companies perceive the importance of various determinants of e-branding. In the following sections we describe the method and the findings of our explorative study.

4. Method

By concentrating on a small number of cases, we show how companies from various industry sectors established their e-brands, and how they are communicating them to their customers. All of the companies are of Austrian origin, with some of them having an international parent company. Qualitative interviews have been chosen as a research method. For two reasons we consider a qualitative approach for this research as more appropriate than a quantitative one:

- Only a limited number of Austrian companies exists, which have successfully established an e-brand.
- Qualitative methods allow more flexibility during the process of data collection. We were able to adjust the interview process to each interviewee, and take into account his specific situation and experience. Furthermore, an explorative approach allows insights into the company's motives for shaping the e-branding strategies.

At first we developed a guideline in which the most important topics were listed. The course of the interview was controlled by the interviewer who had to find out what kind of information the interviewee was willing to give, and what his special field of expertise was. The interviewer had to guide the interview in such a manner that the experts' knowledge was fully exploited, and that all of the research questions were covered. In order to categorize our results, we used a scheme from A.T. Kearney, which they refer to as the 7 C's: content, convenience, communication, customer care, connectivity, community and customization (A.T. Kearney, 1999). This analytical framework was used to sort and group the data. At first we assigned the statements of the managers to our categories. Subsequently, we conducted a normative evaluation and constructed an image space, in which the determinants of the e-branding strategies were classified by using the categories of content, convenience and communication.

We interviewed managers from dotcoms, so-called pure players, as well as from companies, which conduct business online and offline. The managers from multi-channel retailers were asked how their e-branding strategies differ from traditional branding strategies, whether the two strategies overlap, and how the image transfer processes from bricks-and-mortar brands to e-brands are managed. The interview covered the most important aspects of brand building strategies, especially strategy development (with a focus on existing offline brands), strategy implementation (methods used to establish the e-brand), marketing mix considerations (position and value of the e-brand in a company's brand portfolio) and the role of the media. Special attention was paid to the communication strategies which have been used to enhance the customers' name recognition of the e-brand. We strived to find out if the companies used online tools exclusively (banners, pop-ups, etc.), or rather traditional instruments such as sponsoring or classic advertising. The interview was ended with questions pertaining to examples of e-branding campaigns which had failed, as well as for successful campaigns. The managers were encouraged to derive from these examples critical success factors for e-branding strategies.

5. Results

In this paper we conduct a descriptive analysis with the help of the 7 C's framework, using the data from 13 Austrian companies. Since we pursue a qualitative approach, we summarize what were the most important issues for the marketing managers of these companies.

5.1. Content. For all thirteen companies, content is of paramount importance for their e-branding strategy. Content was defined by all managers similarly as being the information provided on the company's web site, including product information as well as more general information which refers to the company. All managers classified the accuracy (i.e., being free of error) and the timeliness of the provided information as very important factors. The more recent the information on the website is, the better it is for the image of the brand. In many cases accuracy actually is seen as being more important than the overall quality of the content (i.e., the topics being covered). That does not mean that the managers consider the content to be unimportant, but they believe that "most accurate/medium quality content" is better for an e-brand than "less accurate/high quality content". The managers emphasize that for any online company, no matter if it is a dotcom or a multichannel retailer, content is a very important product by itself, even if it has nothing to do with the company's products or services in a narrower sense. Content which is directed at a particular target group is a major success factor and has a great influence on how customers perceive a company and rate the e-brand. This concurs with the results of Angehrn (1997) who highlights the importance of a new market space, the so-called Virtual Communication Space (VCS), in order to promote online commerce.

5.2. Convenience. Convenience is seen as being strongly connected with the usability of a company's web site. Generally speaking, the managers regard a web site as convenient, if the customers can use it easily. Furthermore, they stress the fact that the image of an e-brand is strongly influenced by the customers' subjective convenience rating of the web site.

5.3. Communication. Communication is seen as the central element of building and establishing an e-brand. It turned out to be of capital importance as to how the messages are communicated, i.e., what communication tools are used, and how the perception of products and services can be improved through Internet-based marketing and advertising (Angehrn, 1997). Three different forms can be distinguished: (a) cross-media communication; (b) pure online communication; and (c) pure offline communication.

5.4. Cross-media communication. Cross-media communication is regarded as the most important communication strategy, with eleven of thirteen companies using it. Offline and online media in combination are used in order to reach a maximum amount of publicity for the e-brand. Furthermore, it is important to clearly identify the brand as an e-brand (e.g., by using the prefix "www" or adding ".com"), so that even in offline communication potential buyers realize whether the company is a dotcom or a multi-channel retailer.

By comparing the answers from the respondents we were able to roughly identify two phases of the communication strategy. In the first phase, the majority of the communication activities is done in the form of traditional advertising, which means by using offline communication. In phase two the activities shift to online communication, and the remaining rest of offline communication was dominated by public relation activities, and not by advertising campaigns. Phase one always goes hand in hand with great range and high costs, but also enormous losses due to non-selective advertising. Phase two is regularly cheaper than phase one and more focused on the primary target group, but the range is much smaller than that of phase one. Before a company is able to enter into phase two, a sufficient customer base which can be reached online must exist.

5.5. Pure online communication. This strategy exclusively uses online communication tools, such as banners, virtual communities and e-mails. Two of the thirteen companies are pursuing this communication strategy. One switched from cross-media communication to pure online communication because of cost reasons, the other one has chosen this strategy right from the beginning of its existence. The latter company is Geizhals.at, a price comparison site, whereby "Geizhals" being the German expression for the English word "miser". The target group of Geizhals.at has always consisted of experienced and semi-experienced Internet users. Therefore, from the beginning of its commercial activities, pure online communication has been the best way for establishing its brand name.

5.6. Pure offline communication. Pure offline communication is generally not suitable for establishing an e-brand, even if the enterprise is a pure "bricks-and-mortar" company, which intends to launch its online activities. Even under these circumstances online communication is seen as an important part of the overall brand build-up strategy by all of our interviewees.

Actually, we identified a fourth communication strategy which can be labeled as "no communication". This strategy is generally regarded as not suitable, no matter if a traditional brand or an e-brand should be established. Interestingly, at some point in time Geizhals.at had pursued exactly this strategy. In the beginning, Geizhals.at had no sophisticated communication policy at all. None the less, the site became increasingly popular, since it was perceived as being useful and Internet users themselves promoted it. But in those early days it was not even clear that Geizhals.at would ever turn into a commercial organization.

5.7. Customer care. Customer care is seen as a very important, yet often underdeveloped, aspect of an e-branding strategy. Frequently services such as 24 hour telephone hotlines or e-mail customer service are established, but other activities, such as a sophisticated electronic customer relationship management system, are, according to the marketing managers, "planned but not yet realized".

5.8. Connectivity. Connectivity is "the ability to build online active connections among users sharing relative ideas or users with sites which are related to their needs and their ideas content" (Tsiames et al., 2003). The website should be easily found by users who might be interested in its content. Registering at popular search engines, using domain names which are easy to find (Murphy et al., 2003), including generic names which users might key in intuitively (e.g. market.com), and advertising on related web sites are crucial for a successful e-branding strategy. The marketing managers assess the following activities as absolutely necessary for implementing good connectivity: (a) establishing a generic name; (b) communication activities which ensure a high level of publicity; and (c) actively influencing the ranking of the website at search engines and popular link lists. Table 2 illustrates which of the companies pursue the respective strategies.

Table 2. Connectivity activities of the companies

	Generic name	Communication	Search engine
Betandwin.com	No	Yes	No
Cisco.at	Yes	Yes	Yes
derStandard.at	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geizhals.at	No	Yes	Yes
Jobpilot.at	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lion.cc	No	Yes	Yes
Lotterien.at	Yes	Yes	Yes
Markt.at	Yes	Yes	No
Motorline.cc	No	Yes	No
OE4.com	No	Yes	No
One.at	Yes	Yes	Yes
S-NM.at	No	Yes	No
Vinum.at	No	Yes	No

5.9. Communities and customization. Communities can be defined as "large organized groups" (Friesen, 2004, p. 21). In the Internet, so-called virtual communities play an important role for inducing customers to revisit websites. Koh and Kim (2003/4) identified the enthusiasm of the community's leaders, offline activities which are available to the members and the general enjoyability as important antecedents for the members' feeling of relationship to a community.

Customization activities allow visitors to specify their preferences while personalization automatically generates individualized content (Nunes et al., 2001). In the context of this paper, all strategies which present individualized content to a web site's visitor or e-mail recipient are subsumed under the notion of customization. Besides a lot of advantages individualized content possesses, such as target-oriented offers and time savings, the increased need for customers' personal data raises severe privacy concerns (Milberg et al., 1995; Graeff et al., 2002).

Table 3. Relevance of community and customization

	Relevance of "Community" for the e-branding strategy	Relevance of "Customization" for the e-branding strategy
Betandwin.com	High	High
Cisco.at	No	Low
derStandard.at	High	Low
Geizhals.at	Medium	No
Jobpilot.at	No	High
Lion.cc	High	High
Lotterien.at	No	High
Markt.at	No	No
Motorline.cc	No	No
OE4.com	No	No
One.at	High	Low
S-NM.at	Medium	High
Vinum.at	No comment	No

A customized website can increase perceived convenience for the customer (Albert et al., 2004). Additionally, by ensuring a good usability of the website and individualized content and layout, customer care will be a lot easier and positively affects the value of the e-brand. Table 3 shows how important the community and customization were seen by the marketing managers.

5.10. The normative evaluation and the construction of the image space. The data collected in the interviews was used for the creation of a two-dimensional visual representation of the companies. To ensure an objective and easy-to-read visualization, we had to choose a limited number of independent image dimensions. We decided to concentrate on content, communication, and convenience. Content was classified by the marketing managers as an independent variable for the success of an e-branding strategy, which makes it a suitable basis category for our image space. Communication was chosen because it includes three of the 7 C's, namely communication, community and connectivity. Convenience was selected as the third dimension, since the interviews had shown that the variables "customization" and "customer care" are closely connected to "convenience" and may be seen as sub-categories. To measure the image dimensions we used an ordinal scale ranging from 0 (irrelevant) to 3 (very important). The statements of the managers were classified by using content analysis, whereby we chose a positivist approach, assuming that we were objectively able to extract the meaning and the subjective importance of the text data (Lacity et al., 1994).

In order to develop an easy-to-read visualization which has the ability to assist managers in making strategic e-branding decisions, we separated the companies into two groups, namely pure players and mixed players (see Table 4).

Table 3. The creation of the image space: pure players (P) and mixed players (M)

	Content	Communication	Convenience
BetandWin.com (P)	3	3	3
Cisco.at (M)	1	2	2
derStandard.at (M)	3	2	3
Geizhals.at (P)	3	1	3
Jobpilot.at (P)	3	3	3
Lion.cc (M)	0	2	3
Lotterien.at (M)	3	2	2
Markt.at (P)	3	0	2
Motorline.cc (P)	3	1	1
OE4.com (P)	3	0	1
One.at (M)	3	3	2
S-NM.at (P)	1	2	3
Vinum.at (P)	3	2	3

Apart from one exception in each group, both pure players and mixed players regard content as the most important category. The importance of "communication" is evaluated inconsistently, which can be traced

back to the fact that the way how communication is conducted and evaluated, strongly depends on the history and the business philosophy of the companies.

In order to create a clear and easy to read map of our image space, we transformed the three dimensions into two axes with content representing the x-axis and communication the y-axis. The third dimension is represented by the size and the color of the circle marking the companies' positions in this two dimensional space. The larger and the darker the circle, the higher is the importance of "convenience" for establishing a successful e-brand.

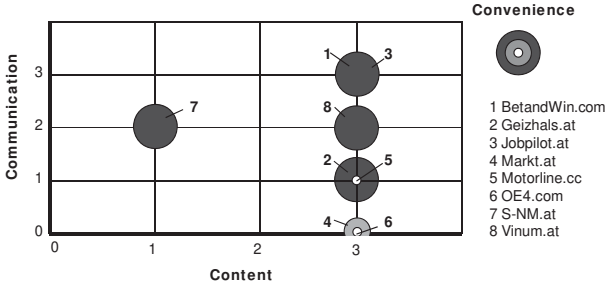


Fig. 2. The image space – self-assessment of pure e-brands

Figure 2 shows that pure e-brands tend to rate the importance of content quite high, while their assessment of the importance of communication is mixed. Not surprisingly, convenience also plays an important role for most of the companies.

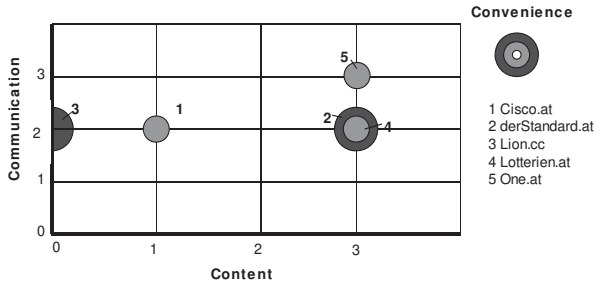


Fig. 3. The image space – self-assessment of mixed players

As Figure 3 shows, communication is an important factor for most of the mixed players, while content is seen quite heterogeneously. Convenience is regarded as being important for both groups, yet it seems to play a more important role for pure players.

Conclusions

E-branding does not redefine the basic rules of traditional branding, but rather changes the way vendors and buyers communicate with each other. The most important decisions concerning the number and type of the media have to be adapted to the media-specific strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, e-branding has consequences on the existing business, and cannot be seen independently from the overall marketing strategy.

For managers to create an efficient and effective branding strategy, they need to understand that the saying "content is king" is still valid for most companies. In spite of the fact that most companies in our survey pursue quite different communication strategies, all but three organizations regard content as a very important success factor. By taking a look at the remaining organizations, no uniform branding strategy can be found. One of them (Lion.cc) is a retailer with a focus on books, CDs and DVDs which experienced severe economic troubles recently. Cisco is known for its network solutions and distributes its goods and services exclusively via a kind of franchising system. Therefore, they see their website as a meeting platform rather than a source of information. Another website (s-nm.at) belongs to a new media agency which uses it as a kind of "virtual business card". The differentiation between pure e-brands and mixed players makes clear that content is regarded more important by pure players who depend heavily on electronic media. The importance of communication aspects is seen rather heterogeneously by the pure players while most of the mixed players regard it to be "important". Due to the fact that an organization can pursue a multitude of strategies (cross-media communication, pure online communication, pure offline communication) there seems to be nothing like a uniform strategy which fits best for all companies. The same is true for convenience, which possesses a different level of importance for the managers.

Most of the differences in the online strategies of the companies can be explained by the respective sector of the industry, rather than by the fact that they are pure e-brands or mixed players. Many of the dotcoms have adopted traditional marketing principles and adapted them to the online business. Contrariwise, bricks-and-mortar companies integrated the usage of the new media into their existing business processes. Our research has shown that e-branding still is a highly relevant topic for both marketers and researchers.

We recommend that managers make use of existing frameworks such as the 7 C's model, which we have used in our study or the ICDT model from Angehrn (1997) in order to get a multi-dimensional view of the company. In this day and age of increasing dependency on online channels for communications and transactions, it is of utmost importance for practitioners to evaluate potential market developments and organizational changes from various perspectives.

Limitations and further outlook

The intention of this study was to show how companies utilize the Internet for branding purposes. Interviews with the marketing managers from 13

companies and the application of a framework from A.T. Kearney (1999) were used to illustrate important antecedents of e-branding. Due to the small number and the deliberate selection of the companies we do not consider the sample to be representative. Furthermore, we used a positivist approach of content analysis to classify the importance of various categories. We suggest that further research, both qualitative and quantitative, is conducted in order to help organizations utilize their e-brand in doing business. Besides further refining the framework, we suggest developing instruments to measure the importance of e-branding antecedents.

Acknowledgements

The author would especially like to thank Marcus Weywoda for his support during the data collection. A previous version of this paper was published at the 4th International Working with e-Business Conference in Perth, Australia, 2003.

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