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The Service Brand as Relationships Builder[1]

Francesca Dall'Olmo Riley and Leslie de Chernatony*
Kingston University Business School, Kingston Hill, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT2 7LB and
*Open University Business School, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK

This article examines the appropriateness of the notion and application of relationship marketing in various contexts. Theoretical and conceptual similarities between the broad notions of 'the brand' and of relationship marketing as risk reducers, simplifiers of choice and guarantee of quality are uncovered. We put forward a notion of relationship marketing as a further step in the branding process, whereby whenever perceived risk and consumer involvement are high, relationship marketing acts as a supplementary tool enabling consumers to maintain cognitive consistency and psychological comfort. Experts' opinions regarding branding in a service context expanded on these concepts. Especially for more intangible offerings, such as financial services, the experts stressed the use of corporate brand identity as the basis of relationship building both inside and outside the organization and as a means to achieve differentiation and provide the focus for homogeneous and consistent service delivery. Finally, we suggest the concept of the service brand as a holistic process beginning with the relationship between the firm and its staff and coming alive during the interactions between staff and customers.

Introduction

Relationship marketing has recently received a lot of attention by researchers, both in business-to-business, and in consumer goods and services contexts. McKenna (1991) suggested that this increased interest in establishing relationships with consumers represents a fundamental shift in the role and purpose of marketing, from customer manipulation, to customer involvement, from telling and selling, to communicating and sharing knowledge, from last-in-line function to corporate-credibility champion, and from a short-term *transactional*, to a longer term *relational* approach to brand marketing (e.g. Grönroos, 1990a, 1990b, 1995; Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996).

In contrast, others have objected to the notion of relationship marketing as a 'paradigm shift' (e.g. Petrof, 1997), noting that satisfying and keeping customers has always been the core of the marketing concept. A slightly less reductionist view would, however, grant the notion of relationship marketing at least with the role of keeping managers focused on a long-term customer orientation. Moreover, Grönroos (1990b) makes a distinction between *how* to develop and execute good marketing performance, which is the focus of the *relational* definition of marketing, and *what* decisions to make to do marketing, which is the focus of the traditional marketing notion.

In practice, advances in IT and the consequent emergence of direct marketing and Internet shopping have prompted even mass marketing companies to seek the development of distinctive 'relationships' with individual consumers (e.g. Copulsky and Wolf, 1990; Peppers and Rogers, 1995). However, the extent to which real mutual relationship between organizations and their customers are created is questionable (e.g. Fournier, Dobscha and Mick, 1998).

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A further issue is the similarity in the terminology used in the literatures discussing the theoretical bases of relationship marketing and the brand. Consistent with Petrof (1997), one interpretation of this similarity would be the redundancy between the two concepts. In essence, relationship marketing would be equivalent to doing all the things expected of branding (e.g. reducing risk, simplifying decision making, etc.). However, we consider it more appropriate to think in terms of convergence, rather than redundancy, between the two literature streams. As we discuss below, the concept of the brand has evolved, with an increased emphasis on relational aspects. The developing literature on relationship marketing might have contributed to this renewed emphasis.

As a result of the recent 'rediscovery' of relationship marketing and the conceptual and practical issues just discussed, the first aim of this paper is to examine the appropriateness of the 'relationship marketing' notion and the main criteria for its applicability in various contexts. Next, we analyse similarities between the conceptual antecedents (motivations) and consequences (advantages) of relationship marketing and the essence of the brand as emerging from the general branding literature. Theoretical similarities between the concept of the brand and the notion of relationship marketing as risk reducers, simplifiers of choice and guarantees of quality emerge from this analysis.

We then focus on *services* and elaborate on potential synergies between branding and relationship marketing. However, we would like to stress that such synergies are not exclusive to services and may apply to both goods and services. As we discuss, the crucial point for the applicability of relationship marketing is not so much the distinction between goods and services. Our focus is on consumer services branding mainly as an area which many authors have identified as under-researched (e.g. Faust and Eilertson, 1994; Shostack, 1977; Turley and Moore, 1995). As we later discuss, a further motivation for focusing on services is that the opportunity for, and the benefits from engaging in relationship marketing might be more pertinent for some services, such as professional advisers.

Finally, with the aim of advancing the understanding of effective services branding, we expand the notions emerging from the literature by examining the perspectives of twenty leading-edge brand consultants. From these experts' opinions and the literature, we suggest that the service brand is a holistic process, starting with the relationship between the organization and the employee providing the service, and coming alive in the interaction between the customer and the service provider.

Future research will test these propositions from the perspectives of other stakeholders in the branding process, such as managers and consumers.

The notion of relationship marketing

Definition

The notion of 'relationship' is based on the concept of reciprocity (Bagozzi, 1995) and the reciprocal benefit to the parties involved (Barnes, 1994b). The definitions of 'relationship marketing' reflect this, for example Grönroos (1990a, p. 138) describes the purpose of relationship marketing as to '*maintain and enhance relationships with customers, and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties are met. This is achieved by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises.*' Similarly Gummesson (1996, p. 32) defines relationship marketing as '*marketing seen as relationships, networks and interaction*'. Noteworthy in both definitions is the reference not only to customers but also other possible partners in the relationship, a point we later address.

Recent literature has focused on the motivations (*antecedents*) for either marketers or consumers to establish a mutual relationship, and the advantages (*consequences*) for either party (e.g. Berry, 1995; Bitner, 1995; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

Antecedents

From the marketer's point of view, Berry (1983) and Grönroos (1990a, 1990b) stress the importance of maintaining and enhancing consumer relationships. According to Berry (1995) this can be achieved by establishing financial, social and structural bonds with consumers. By contrast, Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) believe that consumers' motivations for relational behaviour are to simplify buying and consuming tasks, facilitate information processing, reduce perceived risk, and maintain cognitive consistency and psychological comfort.

Consequences

According to Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995), relationship marketing has the potential positive consequence of improving marketing productivity. The consumer focus implicit in the idea of relationship marketing entails that marketing practices become more *effective* because different consumer values are recognized and individual consumers' needs are better addressed. At the same time, increased marketing *efficiency* is achieved through improved consumer retention and the resulting higher profits, since it is believed to be cheaper to keep existing customers, than seek new ones (Berry, 1995; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

From the consumer's perspective, Bitner (1995) remarks that having a long-term relationship with a supplier can reduce consumer stress as the nature of the relationship becomes predictable, initial problems are solved, special needs are accommodated, and the consumer learns what to expect. This ultimately simplifies consumer purchase decisions. Trust between the company and the consumer may be promoted by a relationship between both parties. Building a relationship based on trust is especially important in instances whereby consumers find it difficult to evaluate alternatives not only prior to, but also after, purchasing (Berry, 1995). A trust-based relationship in effect acts as a guarantee of quality, reduces perceived risk, and increases consumers' confidence in their expectations being met.

Applicability

As mentioned in the Introduction, there have been many practical attempts at a relational approach to marketing, e.g. the 'Casa Buitoni' and 'Heinz at Home' direct mail consumer 'clubs', and loyalty schemes such as Tesco's ClubCard. The rationale behind these schemes is the attempt to increase consumers' involvement and loyalty to the brands through personal 'relationships', rewarding consumers with customized offers and discounts, in exchange for loyal behaviour and purchasing information. However, these schemes' success has been variable, depending not only on the characteristics of the scheme itself, but also on the willingness of consumers to be involved in 'relationships' with an increasing number of products and services. Furthermore, the cost effectiveness of such schemes in promoting low margin fast moving consumer goods has been put in doubt after the sudden demise of the 'Heinz at Home' magazine (Rogers, 1998).

From the analysis of the antecedents and consequences of relationship marketing, it would appear that for consumers to be willing to engage in a 'relationship' (which, by definition, must be mutual), they must perceive some real benefit. Hence 'relationship marketing' would be appropriate only in those circumstances where consumers can easily identify the benefit arising from an active relationship. However, in most real-life examples, organizations appear to have decided unilaterally to build a 'relationship', hoping to increase retention. It is also debatable whether consumers who subscribe to such schemes, or rather *find* themselves involved in them, feel part of any 'relationship' with the brand. This seems to be especially doubtful for goods and services routinely acquired and whose purchase is low risk and low involving (e.g. a tin of soup, a burger, or a bus ride). In these circumstances, the premise for a real relationship, i.e. mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises and commitment from both parties, are missing and it seems inappropriate to talk about 'relationship' marketing (see also Barnes, 1994a; Fournier, Dobscha and Mick, 1998; Hogg, Long, Hartley and Angold, 1993).

In contrast, it is conceivable that consumers might be more willing to engage in relationships with goods or services providers when the degree of perceived risk and the resulting consumers' purchase involvement (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1995) are relatively high. The rationale is that the higher the perceived risk and involvement associated with purchase (e.g. a pension or a car), the higher the motivation to engage in a trust-based relationship which would simplify consumers' buying and consuming tasks, facilitate their information processing, reduce their perceived risk, and enable them to maintain cognitive consistency and psychological comfort (cf. Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). However, as we discuss in the next section, for low risk, low involvement, routinely bought goods and services, brands adequately act as risk reducers, simplifiers of choice and guarantees of quality, hence making 'relationship marketing' redundant.

Relationship marketing and 'the brand'

The notion of 'the brand'

In parallel, but independent from the developing relationship marketing literature, the concept of 'the brand' has evolved from a name given to differentiate a firm's products, to that of a relationship based on trust, as discussed in more detail in previous work (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Whilst maintaining their fundamental characteristics of guarantees of quality (Dawar and Parker, 1994) and simplifiers of choice (Jacoby, Szybillo and Bursata-Sehach, 1977), brands are increasingly defined as symbolic devices with personalities that users value beyond their functional utility (e.g. Alt and Griggs, 1988; Arnold, 1992; Blackston, 1992). When choosing between competing brands, consumers would assess the fit between the 'personality statements' communicated by the advertising (Plummer, 1985) and the personality they wish to project of themselves (Zinkhan, Haytko and Ward, 1996).

Blackston (1992, 1993) and Kapferer (1992) take the brand personality concept forward and talk about relationships between brands and consumers. For instance, Blackston (1993) suggests that, similar to human relationships, the perceived 'attitude' of a brand towards its audience may affect consumers' perceptions of that brand and their willingness to use it. This is mainly an artefact of advertising. For example, the way advertising portrays a brand (or the people behind it) might make some feel put down and intimidated to choose it, whereas it might make others feel valued and important. In summary, this perspective sees the brand as a person with whom consumers choose to have a relationship if they trust it to deliver specific promises, therefore reducing their purchase risk. From these concepts, Arnold (1992) concludes that the brand is the expression of a relationship between customer and product.

Whilst the metaphor of brand personality has been developed by qualitative researchers to aid respondents perceive differences between brands with increasingly similar functional characteristics, it is debatable whether brand personality acts as a discriminator among *all* brands or only among those for which consumer involvement is greater. Moreover, empirical evidence of widespread consumer split loyalty (e.g. Ehrenberg and Scriven, 1996) would suggest that brand personality may be rather less of a competitive discriminator than some brand managers might like to believe.

A further trend has been the increased emphasis on corporate branding (Balmer, 1995). For example, Milligan (1995) argues that whilst basic banking products have become so ubiquitous that it is hard to tell them apart, corporate branding may help differentiate a company along dimensions important for choice. Another advantage of corporate branding is the opportunity for achieving a coherent focus for all products and conveying consistent messages to all stakeholders. The culture, people and programmes of an organization provide a basis for differentiation through offering a clear value proposition and a particular type of consumer relationship (Aaker, 1996). Products become an extension of the corporate personality, and consumers form a single, unitary relationship with the corporate brand, a relationship which reaches into and influences every point of contact between the individual and the company (Blackston, 1992). In Blackston's configuration, trust in the brand is a major component of successful, positive relationships between consumers and corporate brands. In turn, trust is a function of the level of *credibility* and *reliability* the corporate brand possesses, and the brand's success in showing that the individual consumer is more than just a sales statistic or client code. '*Intimacy*' with the brand may follow, provided consumer involvement is high enough. Whenever the risk and involvement associated with the purchase of products is notable, or quality cannot be readily assessed, the credibility of the corporate brand will be pivotal in building trust and reducing consumers' perceived risk. Some therefore recommend building reputation, through stimulating word of mouth communication (e.g. George and Berry, 1981; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1985).

This shift from brands as firms' creations to brands as relationship builders, be they individual lines or corporate brands, is akin to the notion of reciprocity, mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises which is the basis of relationship marketing. Moreover, the antecedents and consequences of branding are analogous to those of relationship marketing. For example, from the marketer's perspective, the rationale for branding as a way of communicating consumer relevant added values that competitors find difficult to emulate (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1998), is consistent with the notion that creating structural bonding by means of relationship marketing can improve consumer retention and ensure higher profits. Additionally, the notion that, for consumers, brands speed purchase decisions, giving a dependable and risk-free choice, is akin to consumers' motivations for, and the advantages derived from, engaging in relationship marketing.

The convergence between the relationship marketing and branding literatures and the close links between the rationale for relationship marketing and the rationale for branding suggests that branding and relationship marketing are interdependent and could possibly be seen as two stages of the same process. For low risk, low involvement products and services, brands (or corporate brands) adequately fulfil their main roles of risk reducers and simplifiers of choice and consumers might not feel the need to engage in any relationship. On the other hand, whenever the risk associated with purchase and consumer involvement are greater, relationship marketing might play a part as a supplementary tool enabling the brand to fulfil its role of risk reducers and helping consumers obtain cognitive consistency and psychological comfort.

The service brand as relationship fulcrum

The existence of a continuum between goods and services emerges from the literature. For example, Levitt (1972, p. 41) believes that any distinction between goods and services is spurious, asserting: '*There are only industries whose service components are greater or less than those of other industries.*'

Similarly, the scant research on the nature of services brands refers to the same underlying concepts and definitions found in the literature concerned with the branding of goods. For instance, in bank marketing Faust and Eilertson (1994) remark that brand identity is much more than a logo: it is the name, personality, and defining attributes that represent the company and its products. Camp (1996) and Saunders and Watters (1993) also believe that, akin to the branding of goods, services branding is about identifying a target market and then developing a product and a brand personality that will be recognized and preferred. At the same time, there are great variations in the levels of perceived risk and associated consumer involvement both within different kinds of goods and within services. For example, there might be greater differences in branding implementation between brief one-off service encounters (e.g. buying a McDonald's hamburger) and extended service encounters (e.g. receiving hospital treatment), than between the former and routine product purchases.

As discussed earlier, two criteria – the degree of perceived risk and consumer involvement – are likely to be important factors for both the firm and the customer to be willing to engage and to profit from some kind of 'relationship marketing'. We believe this to be true for goods and services alike. However, we chose to focus on services since the implementation of relationship marketing might be more immediate and direct in those instances – such as professional services – which are also characterized by a high degree of interpersonal interaction (e.g. Berry, 1983; Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996), and where the brand can be the '*expression of a relationship*' (Arnold, 1992) not only in a metaphorical, but in an actual sense.

Additional reasons, discussed below, have led authors to consider the opportunity to engage in relationship marketing to be particularly notable in some services instances (Berry, 1983; Bitner, 1995; Grönroos, 1990a, 1990b, 1995).

As Parasuraman (1987) remarked, there are two facets to service transactions: the end result and the manner in which the service is performed. In some services such as life assurance and pension funds, the outcome is removed in time. This may make it difficult for consumers to evaluate the quality of the service and to differentiate amongst competing offerings (George, 1990) – hence the rather high degree of risk. The consumer evaluation of such services is strongly influenced by the initial stages of the *process* of delivery, in particular the nature of consumer–employee interactions and the extent to which the consumer feels the promises will be fulfilled (e.g. Bitner, 1995; Grönroos, 1990b; Parasuraman, 1987). Branding this kind of services entails a relationship not only between the marketer and the consumer, but also the employees delivering the service (or the service's promises) and the consumer.

Even for some more 'tangible' services such as flying, each encounter tests the organization's ability to keep its promises ('*the moment of truth*'). As such, the staff delivering a service are perceived by consumers as part of the product (Knisely, 1979), personifying the brand itself (Bateson, 1995). Employees must share the company's ideologies and beliefs, if they are to communicate and deliver the brand's values and its promises (Parasuraman, 1987). For this to happen, a further relationship must be established, through internal marketing (e.g. Berry, 1980; Greene, Walls and Schrest, 1994), between the firm and the employee, thus completing the triangle of service relationships (cf. Hoyt and Beverlyn, 1987).

The core of this relationship triangle is the brand, establishing a favourable consumer perception, building corporate culture and providing motivation and service delivery standards for staff, thus enabling promises to be kept (Bitner, 1995). To this end, some stress the importance of the *company* as the brand (e.g. Dobree and Page, 1990), since part of what is sold with a service is the overall stature and imaginary of the organization (Knisely, 1979), and consumers tend to perceive all services offered by a company as components of a single brand (Berry, Lefkowith and Clark, 1988). For this reason, Knisely (1979) and Berry, Lefkowith and Clark (1988) argue that some services do not lend themselves to individual product branding. Particularly in the case of financial and professional services, for which it may be more difficult to make a priori quality judgements, the corporate brand name, its reputation and the firm's size are used by customers as proxies for quality when selecting between brands (e.g. Boyd, Leonard and White, 1994; Kotler and Bloom, 1984; Weigelt and Camerer, 1988).

The corporate brand is the core of relationship building inside and outside the organization, reinforcing a corporate culture which enhances employees' understanding of the brand's values and ensures an appreciation for good service and customer orientation (Grönroos, 1990b). If employees understand the brand's values, they know how to respond to new situations and ultimately act as 'part-time marketers' (Gummesson, 1991). Tansuhaj, Randall and McCullogh (1988) believe that, in some service industries, communication with employees may be more important than with customers, because of the important role employees play in the service delivery. This is consistent with the notion emerging from the definitions of relationship marketing as involving many stakeholders besides customers (e.g. Grönroos, 1990a; and Gummesson, 1996 reported earlier).

The notion of building relationships with employees as well as with customers is consistent with the work of Reichheld (1997), who relates customer loyalty and increased economic value to employee satisfaction and retention. Significantly, some of Reichheld's argument is based on evidence from professional services, such as consulting firms, advertising agencies and insurers.

Research aims and methods of analysis

With the aim of progressing our understanding of *services* branding, we wished to compare the frame of reference emerged from scholarly articles and books earlier reviewed with branding reality. The management press highlighted that new pragmatic ideas in branding are predominantly led by consultants. Through their daily activities, consultants are in touch with a wide variety of branding problems, thus their knowledge of brands is broad and their thinking should reflect best brand management practice. In contrast, only a dearth of brand managers are cited as influential brand thinkers. In fact many authors are critical of brand managers' lack of vision and understanding of branding principles (Freeling, 1994; Low and Fullerton, 1994; Mitchell, 1994).

In view of the high degree of their branding expertise and knowledge, it is appropriate to understand how leading-edge brand consultants, whose daily activity is shaping the future agenda for brands, interpret them. To our knowledge no previous research has undertaken a comprehensive and structured analysis of the concept of the service brand from the perspective of 'experts'. Specifically we investigated: (a) the experts' understanding of services brands and branding principles; (b) their views on executing service brand strategies; and (c) the emerging framework for services branding. Future research will test the emerging services branding propositions on other stakeholders, as highlighted in the discussion section below.

As we wished to uncover as wide a perspective as possible, we followed Gordon and Langmaid's (1988) suggestion and undertook 20 focused interviews. To avoid any confirmatory bias, we purposely avoided reviewing any papers or books authored by our intended respondents. To be selected for this study, respondents had to be senior consultants in agencies which specialize in advising clients about brand marketing issues. They needed to be sufficiently well recognized for their brand consulting expertise that they frequently present at management conferences on branding, or had written books or papers on branding for management journals, or being recommended by other experts, albeit only two of the twenty respondents were chosen through recommendation. The 20 consultants were either chairmen, partners, or directors in brand consultancies (9), advertising agencies (7), market research agencies (2) and corporate communications agencies (2). They were all involved with branding projects on a national and international scale. Interviews were undertaken in or around London, mostly at the premises of each agency, between January and March 1996.

Given the nature of the research, the most appropriate approach was to conduct qualitative focused (or semi-structured) interviews (Sampson, 1967). This allowed us to elicit experts' views within their frames of reference, without imposing our preconceptions. A topic guide was used to steer the overall interviewing process. We should mention, however, that the data we use in this paper was not collected with the specific purpose of investigating the connection between relationship marketing and the brand (otherwise we would have included more specific questions aimed at testing more directly some of the issues emerging from the literature). The questions asked, for example, did not specifically concern the topic of relationship marketing. However, we felt that the richness of the data we had collected through our broad questions allowed us to expand our knowledge in the area of services branding (as per the three objectives stated above), with implications for the broader theoretical framework of this paper.

At the beginning, all respondents were asked: '*How would you define a "brand"?*' (the answers to this question were the main thrust of the paper referred to earlier – de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Respondents were also asked more detailed questions, such as: '*Is your definition of a brand equally appropriate for services?*' and '*In your opinion, are the principles of branding products exactly the same as those when branding services?*', which are the basis for this paper. We did not wish to taint respondents thinking and thus deliberately kept the questions broad, encouraging them to develop their own arguments. Respondents were encouraged to talk as much or as little as they wished, with no interruptions on our part, except when we needed clarification. The focused interviews were recorded, then transcribed. Each author worked through the transcripts and, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), independently analysed the interviews by developing coding frames to appreciate any patterns. The results of the two authors were compared and the coefficient of agreement (i.e. the total number of agreements divided by the total number of coding decisions) was calculated at 84%. Where disagreements occurred these were discussed and an agreed view adopted (cf. Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Defining the service brand and the principles of services branding

As described elsewhere (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998), a perspective of brands as complex entities linking firms' activities with consumers' perceptions had emerged from our interviews. The experts recognized the importance of marketing activities aimed at building and sustaining brands as distinctive value systems relevant to consumers. They also noted that, to consumers, brands represent a shorthand of knowledge and trust, and a guarantee of consistent quality, enabling them to habitually make choices with little thought.

Defining the service brand

Of the 20 experts, 18 felt the same conceptual definition of 'the brand' would equally apply to services and goods. Four justified this, saying that, for both goods and services, brands are perceptions in consumers' minds. Others made the point that, regardless of whether they are goods or service-based, brands are a blending of rational and emotional components (three experts); that they can thrive by building a relationship with consumers (two consultants), that they are based on trust (two experts), and that both types of brands symbolize an ability to satisfy consumers' needs. A further reason is that both goods and services have physical manifestations which can reinforce the brand's positioning, if effectively managed (advertising consultant).

The principles of services branding

The *principles* of branding goods and services were also deemed similar at the conceptual level. As a brand consultant remarked, the principles are the same '*in terms of being consistent and reflecting the core values both in imaginary terms and personality terms and how to differentiate between a brand image and a brand personality*'. Another brand consultant stated: '*a brand is there to serve a role indicating the origin . . . irrespective of BA or Avis or Kodak or Heinz*', and an advertising consultant felt that both product and service brands are '*still about building relationships*'. Finally, some of the experts justified the similarity of service and product branding principles by drawing on specific techniques. For example, an advertising consultant and a market research consultant discussed how both goods and services needed positioning and personality work, while another advertising consultant spoke about them both relying on similar market research and symbolic development to ensure they could communicate something about consumers.

Difficulties with services branding

Two disagreed that branding principles and definitions for goods and services are similar. The first (a brand consultant) started off by identifying a chasm, whereby there is '*very sophisticated fmcg branding and you've got this naive, at the other end, business to business and financial services type branding*'. In his opinion, a brand '*creates an identity in the market place which has values and characteristics which create loyalty and repeat purchase, and add value to both the shareholder and the consumer*'. Within this context, he noted how prevalent such values and personal characteristics are in product brands, yet are rare in service brands, with the majority still providing inconsistent services. He added that he was less concerned about an adequate definition which could span both product and service brands, but was more concerned that service companies are not adopting appropriate branding principles. A market research consultant also disagreed, stating that her definition of a brand, '*it defines people's expectations*' had to change to suit services brands. Consumers have a much better understanding of product rather than service based brands.

Both experts talked about the difficulties in branding services, such as a mortgage, which are less regularly consumed, are not visible, involve a lengthy process with many intermediaries, resulting in a more abstract relationship which makes it more difficult for the brand to be the definer of expectations.

Executing the services brand strategy

Of the 18 who said their interpretations of a brand are the same for goods and services, nine added that the *implementation* of branding of services is slightly different or more difficult than the branding of goods. For example: '*I don't think it's different in many ways, I just think it's more complex*' (advertising consultant), and: '*at the broadest level I think the principles are the same, but from an operational level, I think it means you have to handle the thing differently*' (brand consultant). An advertising and a brand consultant also spoke about differences being '*executional*'. The primary reason for this, as seven experts explained, is due to the greater control that can be exercised ensuring consistent quality standards for goods rather than services brands. Factory processes can be monitored and controlled, but, as one brand consultant explained, '*if you have got a guy who has woken up in a bad mood, your whole brand strategy can be thrown out of the window*'. Three consultants also mentioned that, when branding, services managers are faced with the further problem of having an intangible offering, resulting, as a brand consultant explained, in consumers facing '*regular reality testing*'.

Consistent with Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry's (1985) schema, the experts saw service brands' executional strategies differing from those of goods because of their intangibility, heterogeneity, and simultaneous production and consumption.[2] As a consequence, we follow this categorization, although the extent to which services differ from goods under the above criteria is debatable. For example, the service offered by an airline is relatively tangible to the passenger

[2] Due to their close interrelationship, heterogeneity and the simultaneous production and consumption of the service were talked about within the same context by the experts, without drawing any distinction.

experiencing it. On the other hand, financial services such as pension funds, whose outcome is removed in time, are more intangible to the customer. The degree of heterogeneity may also vary amongst the wide array of services: from an almost standardized McDonald's service to the potentially great difference in medical service provided by consultants versus junior doctors within the same health care facility. At the same time, there are goods such as wine where one can expect (and even value) a certain degree of product heterogeneity in spite of the producer's quality checks. In addition, many factors other than the distinction between goods and services influence the execution of the branding strategy. Factors like the nature of the competition, the risk and involvement associated with the category, the frequency of purchase and the experience of the buyers are likely to prompt real differences in execution even within goods or services branding strategies. In contrast, there might be considerable correspondence in the branding execution of goods and services with similar purchase frequencies, risk and involvement (e.g. Coke and McDonald's or, at the other end of the spectrum, a car and a holiday package).

(i) Intangibility

Six of the brand consultants who felt goods and services branding principles are similar, added the caveat that services brands are intangible and thus their '*physical manifestation requires more thought*' (corporate communications consultant). Due to the way people use visual cues as surrogate evaluation variables (Hansen, 1972), an advertising consultant explained that is why '*service companies have these enormous manuals for corporate identity*'. Two brand consultants remarked that intangibility also means branding is more difficult in services since it is '*more difficult to get the sharpness of differentiation*' and '*services brands are constantly confronted with branding*'. The sub-branding techniques commonly used for fast moving consumer goods were considered inadequate. Instead, five suggested emphasizing the corporate brand as a means of differentiation and building relationships since, especially in financial services, '*people are not familiar with the sub-brand concept and consumers are still immensely confused by who offers what and what a [sub-]brand signifies*' (brand consultant). Another brand consultant used the example of Midland Bank's ineffective sub-branding of Vector, Orchard and Meridian accounts. '*At the moment,*' – an advertising consultant continued – '*almost without exception, the only customer perception is the corporate brand.*' A brand consultant clarified this by saying: '*people are buying into the assurance that Barclays is going to deliver against its promise.*'

The emphasis experts placed on corporate branding is consistent with the literature, particularly concerning the correlation between the size and reputation of the corporate brand with consumers' trust about the quality of the services and the company's ability to keep its promises. This implies that, in this context, relationships with consumers should be sought at the corporate brand level, rather than at the individual product level. For example, a brand consultant noted that '*people don't think very deeply about the selection of things as complex and as important as financial services because they take the [corporate] brand to signify that it is the right choice*', therefore they buy '*the service more on trust than a physical product*.' This is consistent with the literature that in financial services consumers know little about specific products, nor do they want to know more, and are content to continue assuming that the best known companies have the best financial products (Boyd, Leonard and White, 1994; Ford, 1990; Watters and Wright, 1994).

The challenge for many financial services organizations, added one corporate communications consultant, is that '*the corporation as a whole has got to think about a portfolio of products and businesses that it represents and where it operates and to get the corporate branding right is much more difficult [than product branding]*.' This is consistent with the literature (e.g. Denby-Jones, 1995) which, in the context of banking, perceives the difficulty translating the brand into different service deliverables in different markets. In this context, product-specific brands would confuse customers, who see the same staff and the same physical evidence for differently named offerings. However, multibranding in banking may work well when setting up a genuinely new product or service, since consumers expect a fresh approach (e.g. First Direct vs. Midland Bank).

(ii) Heterogeneity through simultaneous production and consumption

As a corporate communications consultant observed, one way round the problem of the intangibility of a services brand is to consistently have a particular type of behaviour between the corporation's staff and consumers. In essence, he argued, services branding is much more about the people in the organization. Whilst technology enables the quality of product brands to be standardized and controlled, in services brands '*your brand deliverer, or indeed the brand, walks around on two legs and is, as we all know, of inherently variable quality and mood*' (brand consultant), so that: '*on two different days you get two different experiences*' (brand consultant).

'*One of the manifestations of a brand in a service sector is how people communicate to customers*' (advertising consultant) and because it is '*much more interactive [it is] much less easy to control*' (brand consultant). At the same time marketers '*must trust employees to deliver*' (brand consultant). Another brand consultant added: branding is '*more complex with a service because it relates to regular reality testing which is a function of the regular transaction of human relationships. The personal experience of the transaction will change constantly.*' As a market researcher enlarged, '*I don't think they've actually taken on the idea that the brand has to talk to the consumer in a consistent voice*'. Managers tend to be focused on their departments' functional objectives, and the service brand suffers through managers' '*lack of understanding that a brand has to work holistically, each bit has got to support each other*' (market research consultant).

Suggestions for achieving greater consistency focused around having a customer delighting culture that permeates every department. Depending on the circumstances, a variety of means can be used to engender such a culture. These range from better use of scripting and training (or rehearsal), to a better communications approach within the organization revolving around the brand's core values. As a brand consultant stressed, staff '*briefing is terribly important in a service context*', since they can appreciate the crucial role they play in service delivery. This was reinforced by another brand consultant, saying: '*the single most important budget is internal communications and training*'. Through more integrated communications, supported by staff training, employees are better able to deliver the claims made in commercials. Service brands are likely to succeed by exceeding consumers' expectations, he argued, because they make a more significant impact. The comments we have reported are consistent with the literature regarding the notion of relationship marketing being relevant to interactions not only between the marketer and the consumer, but also between the marketer and the employee and the latter with the consumer. This was summarized by a corporate communication consultant stating: '*In services there should be far more of a interaction. . . . that's what you call a dynamic communication process*.'

Building services brands through relationships

Several experts believed there are only a few notable financial services brands with emotional values, for example First Direct and Co-operative Bank. It would appear that managers are too concerned with building their brands' functional values, anticipating emotional values to subsequently evolve. As a brand consultant said, particularly in financial services '*there are a lot of names, trade-marks in use, but very little in the way of brands*', and no emotional values to differentiate between them. To obviate this problem, a brand consultant believed there should be '*a symbiotic relationship between functional values (what a product is) and the non-functional values that flow from it . . . that are understood by consumers and consumers can identify with. And you need a group of people who care and feel ownership for that brand.*' As remarked in the previous section, the latter can be achieved by initiating relationships within the organization, aimed at building shared knowledge of, and belief in the brand's values and a customer delighting culture permeating every level of the organization.

Consistent with the literature, in many cases the experts perceive the services brand (particularly the corporate brand) to be the focus and the inspiration for relationship building both outside and inside the organization. The brand, conceived as a cluster of functional and symbolic values, must be communicated by building a close relationship with consumers, via an interaction with the employees which is consistent with consumers' expectations of what is going to be delivered. As one advertising consultant summarized: '*a brand is about creating a relationship and a dialogue with a customer or a consumer. . . . The art of managing a brand is how to create that relationship to be beneficial and to add value to the service you are trying to sell. . . . What you have to try and do is forge a bond and a relationship.*' Branding then becomes '*an iterative process, that having defined a position you have to get the product to substantiate that position*' (brand consultant) and the challenge to the service company is '*actually getting a deliverable proposition, something that the staff can genuinely buy into and sign up for and actually deliver*' (same brand consultant).

Summary of qualitative research findings

Consistent with the literature (e.g. Faust and Eilertson, 1994) our qualitative research findings highlighted that, regardless of whether they are goods or service-based, brands fulfil the same basic functions. These include representing a distinctive value system, relevant to consumers, indicating the origin of the offering and enabling the building of relationships based on trust.

However, specific features within both goods and services may require adjustments in the execution of branding strategies. For instance, consumers may not understand the detailed technicalities of the more complex and intangible services brands (such as financial and professional services), and may not be able to differentiate between alternatives. Particularly in these instances, the experts stressed a strong identity and reputation of the 'company as brand' as a crucial way of enhancing consumers' perceptions and trust in the firm's range of services and as the basis for differentiation.

Furthermore, the experts stressed that because many services brands are enacted by the company's staff, a strong 'company as brand', coupled with internal communication, scripting and training, can be used to strengthen the internal corporate culture and increase employees' service delivery motivation, making them more committed to not only satisfying, but also delighting the consumers. In their view, successful services organizations will exploit any inherent opportunities of nurturing their brands through a holistic process of relationship building, both inside and outside the organization, focusing on corporate brand values.

Limitations of the study

We acknowledge that this study suffers from several limitations, some of which have been already mentioned in previous sections.

First, the study was limited to canvassing the opinions of only one stakeholder group in the branding process, namely brand, advertising and communications consultants. They might have had a vested interest in stressing the importance of brands as relationship builders. This is a limitation of the study which we intend to overcome in future research by examining the opinions of other brand stakeholders and influencers. This study should therefore be regarded only as the initial step within the broader plan of measuring the opinions of more parties involved in the branding process (consultants, managers, staff and consumers).

The second limitation was that the nature of the data available to us did not allow us to explicitly and systematically compare high involvement – high risk services with high involvement – high risk products and with low involvement – low risk services and products. Again, this is a limitation that we intend to overcome in future research. This should allow us to substantiate our findings so far, specifically with reference to the continuum between goods and services brands and to the degree to which risk and involvement are necessary conditions for real relationships to be established between firms and customers, in either sector, via the branding process.

Conclusions

We started the paper analysing the notion of relationship marketing and its applicability to various contexts. From the literature review, we concluded that, for true relationship marketing to exist, both parties (the consumer and the firm) must see the benefits from engaging in a relationship. It appears to us that two main criteria, the degree of perceived risk and purchase involvement, are important determinants in the willingness of consumers to establish relationships with either goods or services-based brands.

We also drew attention to the theoretical similarities between the concept of 'the brand' and relationship marketing as risk reducers, simplifiers of choice and guarantees of quality. Whilst this might imply redundancy between the two concepts, we suggested that relationship marketing might be a second step in the branding process, whereby whenever perceived risk and consumer involvement are high, relationship marketing would act as a supplementary tool enabling consumers to maintain cognitive consistency and psychological comfort.

We believe that, in the circumstances just described, brands can act as relationship fulcrum for both services and goods. However, we chose to focus this paper on the services field since, as earlier discussed, the branding of services has not received a great deal of attention in the literature. Moreover, we could identify services such as financial and professional advisers for which the notion of relationship marketing might be especially pertinent, due to the degree of intangibility, risk and involvement characterizing them.

The experts' interviews have substantiated these views. The brand consultants advocated increasing the emphasis on building and sustaining a 'relevant' corporate brand identity, in order to create brands as effective shorthand devices of functional and emotional values. Especially for more intangible offerings, such as financial services, the experts stressed the use of corporate brand identity,[3] rather than the branding of individual service products, as the basis of relationship building both inside and outside the organization and as a means to achieve differentiation and provide the focus for homogeneous and consistent service delivery. This is because the corporate brand and its values can be managed to give consistency to the flow of communications between the company, its employees and consumers, and also bind the mutual interaction between employees and consumers. Moreover, the corporate brand's identity can be managed in such a way to make it relevant to employees (through internal marketing and training) and help motivate staff exceed consumers' expectations and create a customer delighting culture.

[3] In practice, corporate brand identity building has been increasingly advocated also for fast moving consumer goods (e.g. Balmer, 1995).

We believe that, whilst initiated top-down by the organization, this internal communications process should be aimed at building shared knowledge and objectives between the organization and the employees. This should help motivate and retain consumer-conscious employees, hence ensuring greater consistency in the service quality. A cohesive and consistent organizational culture revolving around the brand 'concept' should allow employees retain the flexibility to deal with different people and situations, while conforming to the brand concept.

From the literature and the interviews, we propose a notion of 'the service brand' as a *holistic process* which provides focus to the internal relationship between the service company and the employees, and comes alive in the external relationship (encounter) between consumer and service provider (employee). When excellent service is experienced, or the promised brand is delivered in a way consistent with expectations, the consumer is encouraged to engage in a long-term relationship with the service provider. This can be conceptualized in terms of a virtuous circle, whereby a strong 'brand as a company' identity permeates the organization and provides a relevant focus to both consumers and employees. This can be achieved using internal marketing and incentives to motivate and retain good employees (cf. Reichheld, 1997), and by so doing stimulate them to offer a better service, and delight consumers by offering unexpected extras. Enhanced consumer satisfaction results not only in enhanced employee motivation (Ennew and Binks, 1996), but also in favourable word of mouth (cf. George and Berry, 1981; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1985) and increased customer loyalty (Reichheld, 1997). Favourable word of mouth, reinforcing an image in consumers' minds consistent with the consumer caring identity the company wishes to project, completes the virtuous circle of service branding and relationship building.

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