

Adoption of corporate branding by managers: Case of a Nordic business-to-business company

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the previously neglected issue of which management practices of corporate branding the managers of B2B companies are actually motivated to adopt and what goals related to customers, on the one hand, and to other stakeholders, on the other, those practices are considered to serve. The study approach is data-driven, with a large Finland-based, globally operating pulp and paper corporation as the case company. As the main source of data, the authors use interviews of the case company's managers. The findings suggest that the managers became motivated to adopt various management practices of corporate branding, related to (1) managing the brand hierarchy of the brand portfolio, (2) having corporate name dominance in association to product brands, mills, sales offices, etc and (3) defining and communicating aspirational corporate brand image values. The management goals behind adopting these corporate branding practices were related not only to customers but also to investors and investment analysts, potential employees, and own employees and managers. The study improves B2B managers' understanding about what kind of management practices corporate branding may involve and what kind of goals those practices can be considered to serve.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed growing interest in industrial and business-to-business (B2B) branding.^{1–6} Furthermore, there has been particular interest in *company/corporate* branding, generally,^{7–21} as well as in the B2B context.^{1–3,22} Also, anecdotal evidence suggests that B2B companies have increasingly taken corporate brand management initiatives in recent years.

However, there has been little investigation of the motivations of B2B managers

to engage in corporate branding initiatives. Yet, on the one hand, it is a commonly held view that managers of B2B companies are not usually very interested in 'branding'. So, why would the management of B2B companies become motivated to engage in 'corporate branding' initiatives? On the other hand, managers of B2B companies have arguably always been interested in their companies' reputations or images as suppliers among customers and organisational buyers.^{23–27} Since 'corporate brand' can be considered

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fairly synonymous to 'company reputation/image', and if B2B companies have assumingly always been interested in that, why would the managers of B2B companies now *suddenly* become motivated to engage in corporate branding initiatives?

From another perspective, it can be recognised that ever since 'company branding' or 'corporate branding' was first explicitly discussed by consultants and researchers,^{28,29} corporate branding has been seen to be about managing and creating positive company images also in other stakeholders' minds than those of customers'.^{7,8,20} However, concerning this perspective, it seems unlikely that the managers of any company would be motivated to engage in corporate branding initiatives in order to make 'all stakeholders have a positive image of the company' in a vague and all-embracing way. Rather, it is likely that the managers are motivated to adopt certain management practices of corporate branding because these practices are considered to serve certain specific management goals, related to certain specific stakeholders.

Despite the growing literature dealing with (corporate) B2B branding, there has been a lack of studies that address the above questions by looking into (1) what management practices of corporate branding the managers of B2B companies are motivated to adopt and (2) what management goals related to customers, on the one hand, and related to other stakeholders, on the other hand, those practices are considered to serve and how. Thus, we set out to study these questions with regard to a particular B2B company: a globally operating, Finland-based pulp and paper (P&P) corporation, which is among the industry's top five largest companies worldwide. This Nordic P&P corporation represents a typical company whose top management has become

motivated to adopt management practices of corporate branding recently, in the early 2000s.³⁰ The company is also a prime example of a B2B company: it sells mostly to publishing, printing and package-manufacturing companies, as well as to other converters of paper and board products. According to the discussion above and in relation to the large Finnish P&P corporation, our research questions are:

Research question 1: *What management practices of corporate branding did the management of the Finnish P&P corporation become motivated to adopt?*

Research question 2a: *What management goals related to customers were the management practices of corporate branding considered to serve in the Finnish P&P corporation?*

Research question 2b: *What management goals related to other stakeholders than customers were the management practices of corporate branding considered to serve in the Finnish P&P corporation and which were these stakeholders?*

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Concerning the method, a principle of ours was to be somewhat faithful to the insights of ethnomethodology³¹⁻³³: learning from actors not only what they do, but how and why they do it. Thus, we considered that feasible sources of data would be interviews of managers of the case company and other persons who had been close to the managers. This was



particularly the case, as participant observation was not possible (past events).

We interviewed, first, 'corporate brand managers' in the case company. Secondly, we interviewed other managers, including line, marketing, sales, corporate communications, financial and human resources managers. Thirdly, since in studying the management motivation to adopt corporate branding we were particularly concerned with the motivations of the top management, we interviewed executives of the corporation. Fourthly, we interviewed consultants and analysts who had been in close contact with the executives and other managers. Altogether, 18 interviews were conducted. Five of the interviewees were or had been employed as executives in the corporation and seven as other managers. The other six interviewees had been close to the management of the corporation as consultants and analysts.

According to the research questions, we asked the interviewees what management practices of corporate branding the interviewee as a manager or the management in general had become motivated to adopt, as well as what goals those management practices had been considered to serve and how. We let the interviewees describe the management practices and goals in a fairly free-form discussion.

When it comes to data analysis, we largely followed an iterative process for building (grounded) theory from qualitative data.³⁴⁻³⁷ We conducted more interviews until no additional management practices or goals of corporate branding could be identified from the interviews. This suggested that a high level of saturation was achieved. As a factor increasing the reliability and validity of our findings, we found references to the same management practices and goals of corporate branding in materials produced by the corporation itself in the early 2000s. The

materials included annual reports, press releases and websites, as well as articles, editorials and opinions in magazines published by the corporation. The materials also included some internal materials produced by the corporation, such as training materials.

FINDINGS: MANAGEMENT GOALS AND PRACTICES OF CORPORATE BRANDING

We present our findings about the management practices of corporate branding adopted by the managers of the Finnish P&P corporation, as well as the management goals that those practices were considered to serve, in Table 1. The management practices of corporate branding which the management of the Finnish P&P corporation became motivated to adopt (research question RQ1) are identified with brief expressions in the columns under the heading 'Management practices of corporate branding'. The management goals which those practices were considered to serve (research questions RQ2a, RQ2b) are identified with brief expressions in the leftmost column. A dark cell in the table indicates that the management practice in the corresponding column was considered to serve the management goal on the corresponding row.

Furthermore, to point out how the management goals related to customers (RQ2a) versus other stakeholders (RQ2b), we note the relevant stakeholders for each goal in the rightmost column of the table. As seen in the table, the management goals of corporate branding in the P&P corporation related, besides to customers, particularly to *investors and investment analysts, potential employees and the corporation's own employees and managers*.

While in the table, we address the research questions only in summarised



Table I Management goals and management practices of corporate branding in the Finnish P&P corporation

Management goal of corporate branding	Management practice of corporate branding									Current employees, managers	Potential employees	Investors, investment analysts	Customers	
	MP#1. Having one brand name not referring to mill name for same product produced at different mills	MP#2. Having products offered to a customer group or end use in brand family	MP#3. Focusing promotion of products sold via intermediaries on few sub-brands	MP#4. Having core business brands and brand families in corporate master brand family	MP#5. Having core business units and sales offices under the corporate identity	MP#6. Defining values (identity) and slogans for the corporate brand	MP#7. Communicating to and training employees about the defined corporate brand values and slogans	MP#8. Introducing the corporate brand values with refined corporate name and visual identity	MP#9. Continuously communicating about and according to the brand values to employees and externally					
MG#1. Emphasizing customers the corporation's offering of a wide product range rather than that of individual products														
MG#2. Emphasizing customers the corporation's offering of large volume supply reliability rather than that of products														
MG#3. Emphasizing customers the corporation's offering of services rather than that of products														
MG#4. Emphasizing customers the corporation's offering of solution help rather than that of products														
MG#5. Making (direct) customers indifferent of the mill producing the products														
MG#6. Reducing salespeople and customer confusion, and eliminating														
MG#7. Increasing (direct) customer awareness of the corporation as a paper and board supplier														
MG#8. Developing and maintaining strong product brands and brand families														
MG#9. Having employees adopt way of working with initiative and proactive customer-helping attitude														
MG#10. Having employees adopt way of working with environmentally and socially responsible attitude														
MG#11. Communicating an image of the corporation's behaviour as environmentally and socially responsible														
MG#12. Increasing investor awareness of the corporation as paper and board company														
MG#13. Communicating clear and focused portfolio of core products and businesses to investors and analysts														
MG#14. Emphasizing the corporation's product brand strength to investors and analysts														
MG#15. Signalling renewal to analysts and investors														
MG#16. Increasing potential employee awareness of corporation														
MG#17. Having employees identify themselves with and be proud of the corporation														
MG#18. Committing managers to corporate strategies and goals														



form, in the discussion of the next section more is revealed about the management goals and how the management practices of corporate branding were considered to serve them.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Management practices of corporate branding

In this section, we discuss the management practices which the management of the case company became motivated to adopt, in the light of earlier research. In this section, we discuss merely the management practices *per se*; the management goals are discussed afterwards.

Aspirational values, internal and external communication

Although it seems intuitively strange—given that ‘brands’ are traditionally seen to refer to product names or trademarks—corporate branding researchers have recently shifted attention *away* from dealing with how managers can, through the use of corporate name and symbols in association with products, shape or benefit from corporate images. Concentrating on how corporate images can be shaped and benefited from, in general, branding researchers,^{10,14–18} also in the B2B context,^{22,38–40} seem to increasingly de-emphasise the role of corporate names, logos and other visual symbols, and even the role of products and services offered by the corporation and the related marketing communications. Instead, they emphasise aspects such as aspirational corporate image values linked to corporate strategies, internal as well as external communication, and the shaping of employee behaviour. These had, consistently, important roles also in some of the management

practices (MP#6–9) that the management of the studied B2B company became motivated to adopt.

Use of (corporate) names and symbols in product brand hierarchy

Nevertheless, there were also many management practices (MP#1–5) in which an important role was given, in the studied B2B company, to the (traditional) use of corporate names and symbols, and particularly to the use of *corporate* name and symbols (MP#4–5). Specifically, the important role given to the use of names and symbols in association with the products and organisational units of the company suggests that managing what can be called ‘brand hierarchy’ or ‘brand architecture’ of the brand portfolio^{41,42} was central in corporate branding in the studied company in the early 2000s. Particularly, renaming of existing products was done so that the same product produced by different mills would mainly be given one brand name (MP#1). Also, brand families were formed, usually for products sold to certain customers and/or to certain end-users (MP#2,4). Further, the aspiration to use the corporate name as dominant in product brand names (MP#4) suggests, in researchers’ terms,^{41,43} a strategy for *corporate dominance* in corporate/product brand relationships. Nevertheless, sometimes the corporate name would be used, in the studied company, as a more dominant element and sometimes as a less dominant element relative to product brand names, which suggests *mixed dominance* strategy.^{41,43} Corporate brand dominance would be largely aspired for but more product brand dominance would be applied, particularly in the case of products sold also to nonexpert buyers or consumers (eg office paper). Nevertheless, it should be noted that even



the strong dominance was often sought by *not* directly including the corporate name as an actual part of the brand names but only having it appear prominently in the packaging, signage and promotion materials. This means that, in the studied B2B company, corporate dominance was largely realised by *corporate brand endorsement* strategy.⁴¹

It must be further noted that the goal of having brands in a corporate master brand family by way of *endorsement*—rather than having the product brand names actually share a corporate name part—was, according to interviews, largely a response to hindrances in changing existing brand names and in making corporate name an actual part of brand names. Hindrances in changing existing brand names emerged particularly in relation to products sold via merchants: these intermediaries were reluctant to accept changes in established brand names and demanded to have exclusivity in selling certain brands in certain market areas. The merchants were also reluctant to sell products with the name of the paper producer company as an actual part of product brand names, for example to prevent end-customers from increasingly generating brand trust in the producer rather than in the merchants themselves.

Use of (corporate) name and symbols in mills, sales offices and other units

Concerning the use of corporate name and symbols, it can be noted that beyond product names, corporate dominance was pursued also in association with the names of mills, sales offices, subsidiaries and business units of the studied B2B company (MP#5). Especially, organisational units obtained in mergers and acquisitions would be put under the corporate identity, either by eliminating independent names

and symbols altogether or by incorporating the corporate name as part of the names. Particularly when it comes to the names of mills and sales offices, earlier branding research has largely remained silent, while usually discussing the use of corporate name only in relation to brand names of products and other offerings to customers.

Focusing promotion efforts on one or a few brands per product

Finally, it can be noted that promotion efforts across market areas would often be concentrated heavily on one or a few brands per certain product (MP#3). This particularly concerned products sold via intermediaries. A strong local brand of a certain product could be promoted to some extent in the local market area or the promotion could be left for the local merchant to handle exclusively. On the other hand, promotion efforts by the studied company would be heavily focused on a stronger general brand to be sold across market areas and also in the above market area. In this way, a customer in a certain market area, as well as an investor, would encounter the promotion of only one or a few brands per product, even if quite the same product could be sold and promoted to some extent locally in different market areas with several brands owned by the corporation, as well as with merchants' private label brands.

Integral practices: Brand hierarchy, corporate dominance and aspirational brand values

Taking into account that the management of the studied B2B company became motivated to adopt the various practices somewhat simultaneously and that they were all considered important in corporate



branding suggests that the management became somewhat integrally motivated to adopt management practices of corporate branding related to (1) managing the brand hierarchy of the brand portfolio (MP#1–5), (2) corporate name dominance in association with product brands, mills, sales offices, units, etc (MP#4–5) and (3) definition and communication of aspirational brand image values linked to corporate strategies (MP#6–9). While earlier research concerning corporate branding may emphasise the role of any one of these management practices, individual pieces of research emphasise usually only some of them—not their integral nature, identified in the present case.

Management goals of corporate branding

In this section, we discuss the management goals that would be served by the management practices of corporate branding in the studied Nordic B2B company. Reflecting the research questions R2a and R2b, we discuss the goals related to (a) customers and (b) other stakeholders, respectively.

Goals related to customers

Concerning the corporate branding goals related to *customers* (RQ2a), earlier B2B branding research^{1,2,4–6} stresses the importance of corporate brand for B2B companies due to the emphasis that customers put on a company's reliability as supplier and on service components such as delivery times. Consistently, we found that, in corporate branding, the management of the studied B2B company had the goals of emphasising to customers the corporation's offering of services (MG#3), supply reliability (MG#2) and solutions (MG#4), as well as wide product range (MG#1)—

rather than individual products. Nevertheless, earlier research does not stress much on certain specific issues concerning the goals related to communication about the corporation's offering of products and services. First, earlier research has not identified the present goal of actually de-emphasising individual products as the offering of the corporation. Secondly, although the brand extension literature deals with branding in relation to introducing new products to the product range of a company, earlier research has not identified the goal of emphasising the whole, currently wide product range as the offering of the corporation to individual customers. Thirdly, earlier research has not stressed the goal of communicating about specific services as the offering of the corporation, such as shorter delivery times and smaller order sizes, joint research projects and customised products, and help in specifying customers' business needs and problems in more detail and in finding optimal product and service solutions.

When it comes to the other customer-related goals, the finding that the management of the studied B2B company had the goal of having employees adopt a way of working with initiative and proactive customer-helping attitude (MG#9) and of emphasising to customers the corporation's offering of solutions rather than that of products (MG#4) is consistent with recent research. For instance, Lynch²² has emphasised the importance, in corporate branding, of having employees adopt proactive customer-helping attitude and communicating this. Finally, the other customer-related (MG#6–8) goals seem to reflect more commonplace notions concerning (corporate) branding.^{19,41} These included reducing salespeople and customer confusion and eliminating competing promotion among the corporation's



products; increasing customer awareness of the corporation; and developing and maintaining strong brand families.

Goals related to other stakeholders than customers

Concerning the corporate branding goals related to *other stakeholders* than customers (RQ2b), it can be noted that in the studied Nordic B2B company, there were goals particularly related to investors and investment analysts, potential employees, the corporation's own employees and managers.

With regard to investors and investment analysts, the management goals of corporate branding included increasing investor awareness of the corporation (MG#12) and communicating a clear and focused portfolio of core products and businesses (MG#13), emphasising the corporation's brands (MG#14) and signalling corporate renewal to investors and analysts (MG#15). With regard to potential employees, the management goal was that of increasing their awareness of the corporation (MG#16).

With regard to the corporation's own employees and managers, the management goal of corporate branding can be considered to be strongly related to internal marketing to employees—in the sense of having employees adopt more of a certain attitude in everyday working (MG#9–10), especially towards customers,^{44–48} and also (MG#17–18) in the sense of motivating them to do the best possible work.^{44,49}

Owing to the interesting finding that the other stakeholders to whom the goals of corporate branding were related to were particularly investors and investment analysts, potential employees, and corporation's own employees and managers, we finally discuss the ways in which certain management practices of corporate

branding were considered to serve those goals in the studied Nordic B2B company.

Management practices of corporate branding serving goals related to other stakeholders than customers

When it comes to *investors and analysts*, the management goal of emphasising the strength of the company's brands to investors and analysts (MG#14) was considered to be served, first, by having the same products produced by different mills to be promoted and sold with the same brand name which would not refer to any mill name (MP#1). Presenting these kinds of brand names to investors and analysts, for example in investor meetings or company websites, would give them the impression that the names were more like strong brands rather than mere identifiers of (mills') products. Secondly, the goal could be served by having products offered to certain customer groups or end uses to be promoted and sold in brand families (MP#2). Presenting a few brand family names to investors and analysts would further give them the impression that these few family names were strong brands of the corporation. Thirdly, the goal could be served by focusing promotion of products sold via intermediaries on one or a few brands per product (MP#3). Investors and analysts would encounter promotion of only one brand per product in, for example, company magazines and websites, and their impression of the strength of this brand would *not* be questioned by the fact becoming evident that the product was sold and promoted actually with numerous brand names by the corporation in different local market areas. Moreover, investors and analysts would pay less attention to the fact that beyond these own brand names, some 70–80 per cent of the



production of the product (eg office paper) could be sold with private label brands of merchants.

The management goal of communicating a focused and coherent portfolio of core businesses and products to investors and analysts (MG#13) was considered to be served, first, by having the same products produced by different mills promoted and sold with the same brand name (MP#1). Presenting these kinds of brand names to investors and analysts would give them a clearer picture of the product portfolio of the corporation and would make them perceive it as more focused. Secondly, the goal could be served by having products offered to certain customer groups or end-users to be promoted and sold in brand families (MP#2). Presenting products and product brands structured into these kinds of brand families would further give them a clearer picture of the product portfolio of the corporation and would make them perceive it as more focused. Thirdly, the goal could be served by focusing promotion of products sold via intermediaries on one or a few brands per product (MP#3). Investors and analysts would encounter promotion of only one brand per product and they would not get an unclear picture of the product portfolio of the corporation or perceive it as unfocused due to a myriad of brand names being promoted.

The management goal of signalling renewal to investors and analysts (MG#15) could be served by introducing the corporate brand values with a refined corporate name and identity (MP#8). The management introducing newly defined brand values to analysts and investors as new objectives guiding the behaviour and strategies of the corporation would signal to investors and analysts that the management was renewing the corporation in a

dynamic way. Further, introducing a refined corporate name and visual identity would further strengthen the signal as symbols of the renewal.

Interestingly, one management practice of corporate branding was considered to serve goals related to *both investors and potential employees*: increasing their awareness of the corporation (MG#12, 16). The goal of increasing investor awareness of the corporation as a paper and board company and of increasing potential employee awareness of the corporation could be served by having brands and brand families in a corporate master brand family (MP#4). Having the corporate name and/or logo placed quite visibly in ream wrappings and boxes, labels and promotion materials of office paper products—eventually ending up for the use of people at ordinary companies, public institutions and homes—would make these people considerably more aware of the corporation as a paper company. Since these people would be potential private investors and potential employees, the awareness of potential investors and potential employees would increase correspondingly. Actually, the consumers/end-users would come to take the role of potential private investors and potential employees and vice versa.

When it comes to the case company's own employees and managers, it can be noted that the management goal of having employees identify themselves with and be proud of the corporation (MG#17) was considered to be served by many management practices related to the use of names and symbols in association with the products and organisational units of the company. These included having brands in a corporate master brand family (MP#4), having business units and sales offices under the corporate identity (MP#5), and focusing the promotion



of products sold via intermediaries on one or a few brands per product (MP#3). While earlier research has, to some extent, highlighted the importance of employees being proud of the company's brand,¹¹ the role of the use of names and symbols in association with the products and organisational units of the company, in having the employees identify and be proud of the company, has received less emphasis.

Finally, it can be noted that the particular goals that the management practices related to defining and communicating corporate brand image values (MP#6-9) were considered to serve were: (1) having own employees identify themselves with and be proud of the corporation (MG#17) and (2) having own employees adopt—as one's aspired value—a way of working with initiative and proactive customer-helping attitude (MG#9). When it comes to earlier research concerning corporate branding, it does tend to stress the aspirational brand values as having an important role in doing business with customers, but has left the present aspect of having employees identify themselves with and be proud of the corporation with less attention.

CONCLUSION

By identifying management practices of corporate branding which the managers of a Nordic B2B company became motivated to adopt, our research contributes to B2B (corporate) branding research. Specifically, we found that the management of the studied company became somewhat integrally motivated to adopt management practices of corporate branding, consisting of (1) managing the brand hierarchy of the brand portfolio, (2) corporate name dominance in association with product brands, mills, sales offices, units, etc and (3) definition and

communication of aspirational brand image values linked to corporate strategies.

By identifying such goals related to customers, on one hand, and other stakeholders, on the other, which the management practices of corporate branding were considered to serve in a certain B2B company, our research contributes to B2B (corporate) branding research, which has not addressed the intriguing issues related to why managers of B2B companies would become motivated to adopt corporate branding. Our findings indicate that there were goals related to customers but importantly also goals related to other stakeholders, particularly to investors and investment analysts, potential employees, and own employees and managers.

Managerial implications

The present study improves the understanding of managers of B2B companies about what kind of management practices corporate branding may involve and what kind of goals the practices can be considered to serve. On the one hand, the findings show how some new management practices can be used to serve certain management goals. It is particularly worthwhile to note that with certain management practices (of corporate branding), relationships with various stakeholders, such as customers, investors and investment analysts, potential employees, and own employees and managers, may be managed simultaneously. On the other hand, the findings provide insight into what kinds of goals and practices have been related to the concept 'corporate branding' in a certain Nordic B2B company. This helps managers to assess the applicability of the concept in their own organisations, as well as to judge whether 'corporate branding' is just another fashionable



management concept or whether it can involve management practices that might really serve certain important management goals.

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