

STEALING THE SHOW? HOW THE SALESPERSON AFFECTS THE INDUSTRIAL BRAND MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of the salesperson in the context of industrial brand management. While branding was discussed to be an issue of consumer markets for long, more and more practitioners realize its necessity to develop advantages in highly competitive business markets (e.g. Doyle 2002; Michell et al. 2001). According to the „Global Brand Scoreboard” four of the ten strongest brands including Microsoft, IBM, GE and Intel are operating partially or exclusively in the b2b-context (businessweek.com 2010). However, b2b-literature still lacks empirical studies dealing with brand-effects to customer loyalty (Herbst and Merz 2011). Brand values expressed by many b2b-companies focus on functional characteristics and neglect the emotional brand potential to create strong and long-lasting relationships (Lynch and Chernatony 2007; Majahan and Wind 2002).

To communicate an industrial brand and handle the highly complex and customer-specific products an intense and individual interaction with the customer is demanded – realizable through interpersonal relationships (Caceres and Paparoidamis 2007). Bingham et al. (2005) presume that personal selling continues to be the key form of industrial brand communication while Mudambi (2002) indicates the salesperson’s outstanding role in affecting the brand message. They suppose that the behavior of a salesperson is perceived as a hint to the firm’s interest in a customer relationship and determines the extent of the brand effects to future loyalty - without providing empirical results. Lynch and Chernatony (2007) argue that b2b-literature shows gaps regarding the process of brand value communication and raise the question about the salesperson’s precise role in b2b-brand management. Thus our research addresses the topic and discusses the following opposed questions: (1) Is the salesperson necessary to build up a brand and intensify the effect to the customer behavior (brand ambassador)? or (2) Is the salesperson rather able to compensate the brand impact on the customer loyalty to the firm (brand substitute)?

To answer the question about the role as a brand ambassador or substitute in establishing customer loyalty, we test our research model against a sample of 169 b2b-customers evaluating their sales representative in the chemical and pharmaceutical industry. We assess the impact of emotional and rational brand values on the customer loyalty behavior and include the moderating effects of the satisfaction with various salesperson characteristics. Results indicate that both emotional and rational brand values affect the industrial customer loyalty and reveal a buffering (instead of an amplifying) impact of the salesperson characteristics on both brand value effects. Our findings emphasize the salesperson’s outstanding but risky role in establishing and maintaining b2b-relationships and provide new insights to the industrial brand management.

References available upon request