Strategic Brand Concept and Brand Architecture Strategyba Proposed Model

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ABSTRACT - Some of the most pressing brand-related problems concern the management of a system of several brands, i.e. brand architecture, rather than one individual brand. By integrating three fields of theory, (a) the theory of strategic brand concepts, (b) the theory of information processing, and (c) a typology of brand architecture strategies, this paper proposes an explorative instrument, BASE, from which to derive an appropriate brand architecture strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

Some of the most pressing brand-related problems concern the management of a system of several brands rather than one individual brand, be it a portfolio of several brands in isolation ("House of Brands", see Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000) or a complex brand architecture of several connected subbrands or endorsed brands. There are a number of reasons why the brand architectures of many companies are becoming increasingly complex. Many product categories are in the maturity stage and consumer preferences are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, forcing companies towards a higher degree of product differentiation. Furthermore, mergers and acquisitions heighten the need to merge not only different corporate cultures, but also different brand portfolios in a way that makes good business sense. The Internet provides an opportunity to develop existing brands into e-enabled offline brands or to build pure e-brands. And finally, the increasing demands of shareholders have also heightened pressure to improve the efficiency of marketing, not least with a view to creating a cost-effective brand structure. Thus, many brand manufacturers are currently streamlining their brand portfolio.

Building on an analysis of existing literature, this article contributes to the theory of brand architecture management by combining three fields of theory, (a) the theory of strategic brand concepts (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986), (b) the theory of information processing, in particular dual-process models (e.g. Chaiken, Wood, and Eagly 1996; Epstein 1983; Petty and Cacioppo 1986), and (c) a typology of brand architecture strategies.

BRAND ARCHITECTURE STRATEGY

Brand-architecture strategy pertains to the "organizing structure of the brand portfolio" (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000, p. 134) and defines the number and roles of brand names that a company uses for its range of products and the target groups or target markets it serves (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Kapferer 1999; Keller 1998; Laforet and Saunders 1999). As for the number of brands, brand-architecture strategy ranges from a single brand for all products and target groups of a company to a strategy in which every single product carries its own brand name. Starting from a hypothetical matrix of four products and/or service categories (P_1 to P_4) and four target groups or markets in which the company operates (T_1 to T_4), there are five brand architecture strategies representing ideal types from which to select (see figure 1). A *corporate brand strategy* (subsequently abbreviated to "C-branding") adopts a uniform brand for all product categories and target groups. In a *product brand strategy* ("P-branding"), each product category of the company has its own brand name which yields four different brand names. These P-brands have no recognizable connection for the customer. However, one and the same brand name is used for all target groups within the product category. A P-branding strategy can be based on a fine distinction between product categories, resulting in product brands in the narrower sense, or to a more general classification of product categories ("line" or "range brands", e.g. Kapferer 1999, p. 188). In a *target group brand strategy* ("T-branding"), the company targets each of its four target groups with a separate brand name, which stands for a number of products. With a *product and target-group-specific brand strategy* ("PT-branding") each field in the matrix is given its own brand name which results in 16 different brands. And finally, in a *brand family strategy* ("F-branding"), hierarchically ranked brand names have a common endorser, together with a certain number of endorsed brands or subbrands with their own personality. These brand families can also include more than two hierarchical levels and differ from the C-branding strategy in that the subbrands are not merely given purely generic product descriptions, but have registered brand names, which are generally promoted individually. These subbrands can be P-brands, T-brands or PT-brands.

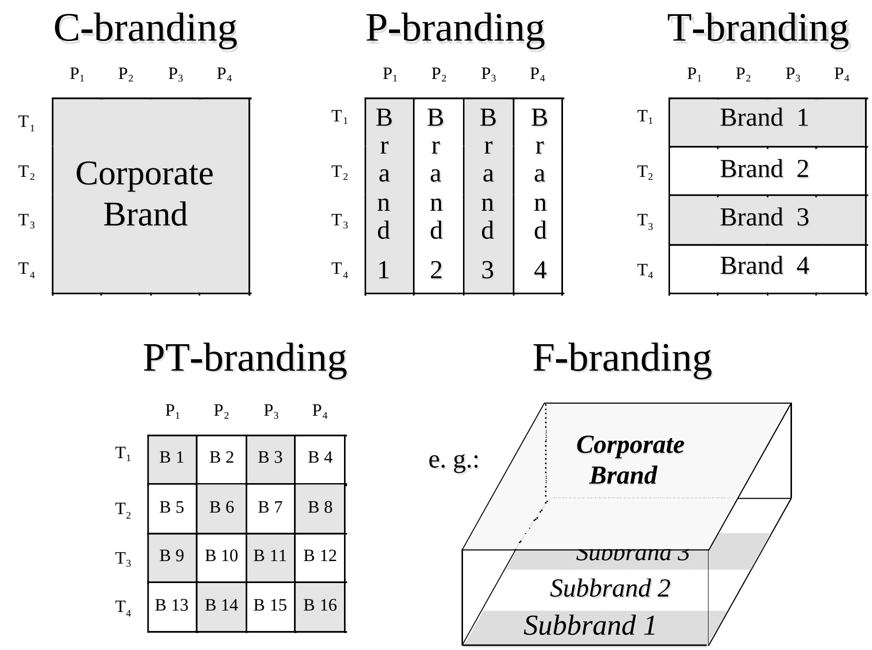
One of the core conclusions drawn from research to date is that brand architectures with a large number of brands such as P-branding, T-branding or–in extreme cases–PT-branding require compelling reasons (e.g., Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000, p. 123; Kapferer 1999, p. 209), as more closely integrated brand architectures with fewer brands such as C-branding or F-branding generally offer a higher degree of efficiency and effectiveness (e.g., Esch 2003; Erdem and Sun 2002; Morrin 1999; Sander 1994; Smith and Park 1992; Swaminathan, Fox, and Reddy 2001). Based on the empirical findings of research on brand extension, the theory of strategic brand concepts (Park et al. 1986), and the theory of information processing, particularly dual-process models (e.g. Chaiken et al. 1996; Epstein 1983; Petty and Cacioppo 1986), this paper proposes a new model called BASE ("Brand-Architecture Strategy Explorer"), from which to derive an appropriate brand architecture strategy.

STRATEGIC BRAND CONCEPTS AND INFORMATION PROCESSING

As research on brand extensions illustrates, success not only depends on the perceived quality of the parent brand (e.g. Aaker and Keller 1990; Bottomley and Holden 2001), but also on the similarity of products (e.g. Sattler et al. 2002; Smith and Park 1992; Swaminathan et al. 2001; Taylor and Bearden 2002) and the transferability of abstract image components of the parent brand to the new product (e.g. Aaker and Keller 1990; Bottomley and Holden 2001; Bridges 1992; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Mayerhofer 1995; Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991, Schweiger and Mazanec 1981). In fact, a good match between the strategic brand concept and the new product seems to contribute significantly to the success of a brand extension (Keller 1998, p. 510; Park et al. 1991). Park, Jaworski and MacInnis (1986) distinguish three strategic brand concepts–"functional", "experiential" and "symbolic brands", to which a fourth concept has been added here, "relational brands" (see figure 2). With a reasonable degree of plausibility, these four strategic brand concepts can be classified according to the motives and benefits as well as the predominant styles of thinking displayed by customers in their buying decisions.

Functional brand concepts promise a higher product benefit, for example, through technical superiority, higher durability, reliability or simply good value for money (e.g. Wal-Mart, see field 1 in Figure 1). As this brand concept focuses on the use of central

FIGURE 1
Brand architecture strategies



arguments (e. g. product attributes), it should be utilized by companies with leading brands especially in cases where the customer's involvement and product knowledge suffice to enable such arguments to be processed. This style of thinking is described in the literature as "central" (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1986), "systematic" (e. g., Chaiken et al. 1996) or "rational" (Epstein 1983), and can be "integrative" as far as the adopted brand architecture is concerned in two respects: On the one hand, this style of thinking tends to delineate very accurately and focuses on logical connections (Epstein et al. 1992, p. 329). In cases where a brand encompasses a broad product range, for example, this prevents an excessive degree of psychological overlap between one product and another, evoking unsuitable or undesired associations. On the other hand, a wide product range encompassed by one brand, together with the fact that the brand is purchased by many consumers, are arguments in favor of brand quality and brand reliability for functionally-oriented customers (e.g., Aaker and Maheswaran 1997; Dacin and Smith 1994; DelVecchio 2000; Hellofs and Jacobson 1998; Kirmani and Rao 2000; Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999; Wernerfelt 1988).

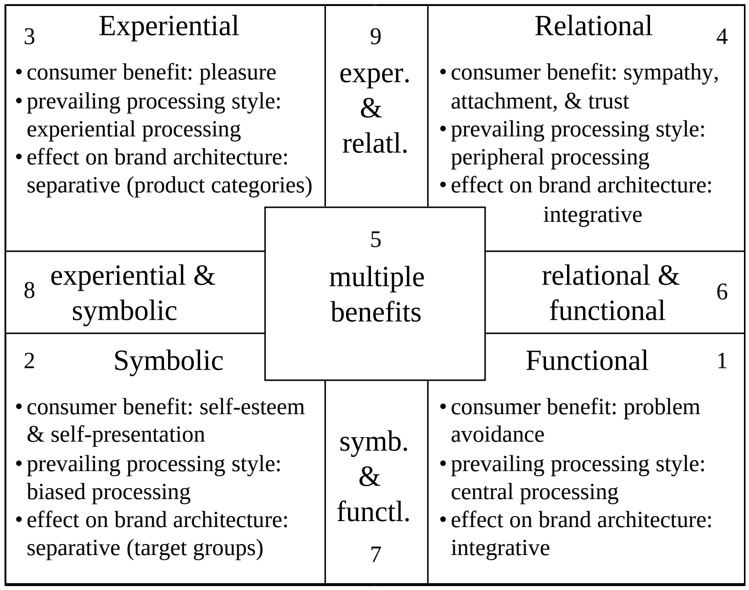
Experiential brand concepts (field 3) emphasize the sensual experience of the product by building up associations with the five senses–taste, smell, hearing, sight, and touch. This includes the crispiness of potato chips as well as the freshness of toothpaste or the feel of clothes on the skin. Products are often designed to appeal to more than one of the senses. Such is the case with detergent, whose powerful cleaning properties are portrayed synesthetically through smell, color and viscosity. Experiential brand concepts aim to evoke hedonism and pleasure through a sensual product experience and are most closely comparable to the processing style termed "experiential" by Epstein (1983). In many cases, the sensual product experience is based on a largely preconscious processing which works without, or in addition to, rational processing (e.g. Epstein et al. 1992, p. 329). It is assumed that this style of thinking works "separatively" as far as brand architecture is concerned: As a consequence of its holistic nature experiential processing tends to overgeneralize and adopts a simple covariance learning which cannot recognize logical barriers between products (cf. Adaval 2001; Lewicki, Hill, and Czyzewska 1994). A food brand, which the customer has frequently experienced in the form of savory products, will have difficulties launching sweet products under the same brand name (Strebinger et al. 2003). In addition, the consumer does not appear to be interested in "compromise products" when it comes to sensual pleasure, but in unique, clear experiences. This desire is expressed in a higher degree of variety seeking among experiential products (Inman 2001).

Symbolic brand concepts (field 2) enable the buyer to express personality, values and status and help to improve self-esteem and social self-presentation (e.g. prestige). This goal is typically linked to biased processing, creating a highly advantageous self-image or high degree of prestige–often in contrast to the facts and feedback of the social environment (e.g., Aaker 1999; Chaiken et al. 1996). This biased information processing can be both a systematic process as well as a heuristic one (Chen, Shechter, and Chaiken 1996). Considering the impact on brand architecture strategy, there are two arguments in favor of a separative effect of symbolic brand concepts: First and foremost, most consumers–at least in the western world–want to differentiate their own personality from that of others (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Markus, Kitayama, and Heiman 1996). Second, biased information processing is always a highly fragile game, which only works as long as the cue used manipulatively (e.g. a prestige brand) is absolutely clear and unmistakable. A brand personality that does not unequivocally stand for certain values or user imagery will lose its symbolic value.

Relational brand concepts try to evoke an emotional attachment to the brand and to impart a sense of familiarity with the brand. Quite often, relational brand concepts (field 4) are based on a

FIGURE 2

Strategic brand concepts, consumer benefits and processing style



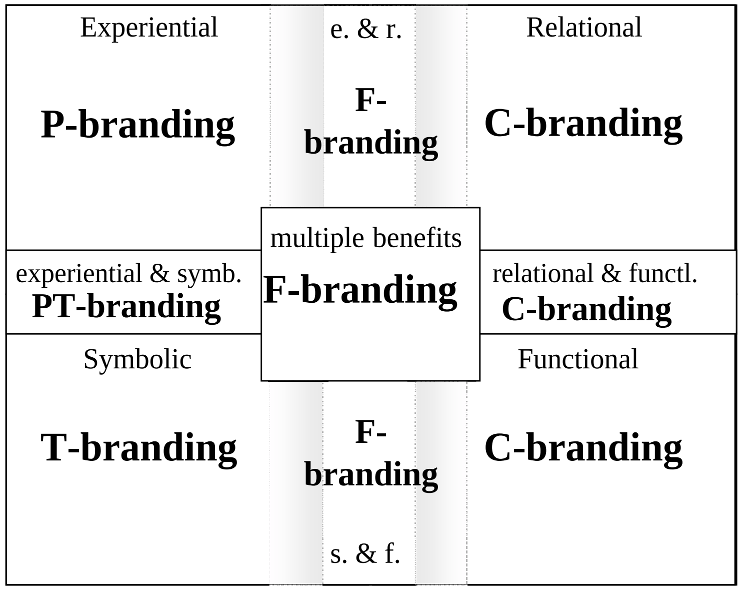
commitment to generally accepted social values (e.g., social responsibility, sponsoring) and advertising techniques of emotional conditioning (e.g., through pictures or music). These associations serve to build up sympathy for the brand without–in contrast to symbolic brand concepts–polarizing customers. This form of brand concept is frequently used by market leaders or in product categories where the degree of trust placed in a brand plays an important role (e.g. financial service providers). Relational brand concepts tend to be used in cases where there are either no central arguments in favor of the brand, or where the customer is not willing or unable to adequately assess such product differences ("peripheral processing", e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1986). As is the case with functional concepts, relational brand concepts are assumed to work integratively as far as the brand architecture strategy is concerned: In contrast to symbolic brand positioning, identification with the brand is not motivated by the desire to be different, but rather by the desire to belong socially. Relational brands therefore work with integrative advertising appeals such as generally accepted social norms or genetically determined stimulus-response mechanisms to ensure that no gap emerges between the brand's various target groups. On the other hand, the emotional attachment to the brand is also a positive signal of trustworthiness that can be applied to a variety of products.

Two remarks need to be added. Firstly, strategic brand concepts are not linked to specific products. Functional, experiential, relational or symbolic concepts can be applied to most products. For example, a watch can be mainly functional (e.g. Timex) or can be positioned symbolically (e.g. Rolex, see Park et al. 1991). Secondly, most real brands do not correspond to the ideal "pure" forms, but are a mixture of two or more of these concepts (fields 5 to 9 in Figure 2). For example, most car brands constitute mixed forms of functional (e.g., reliability), symbolic (e.g., prestige), relational (e.g., patriotism) or experiential (e.g., comfort or the pleasure of driving) brand concepts.

BASE–LINKING STRATEGIC BRAND CONCEPT TO BRAND ARCHITECTURE STRATEGY

Building on the four strategic brand concepts and the corresponding consumer benefits and styles of thinking, the Brand Architecture Strategy Explorer (BASE) is proposed as an instrument to explore and identify an appropriate brand architecture strategy (figure 3). Companies whose positioning on the markets they serve is purely or mostly functional are assumed to benefit from a C-branding strategy, as is frequently the case in the technical goods sector (e.g., Panasonic, General Electrics, IBM). The common image denominator between products in closely linked product categories can evoke relatively specific product associations. The wider the product range, the more abstract the common values of the C-brand will be (e.g., Dawar and Anderson 1994, p. 128; Klink and Smith 2001, p. 329). Provided there are no incompatibilities of a symbolic or experiential nature, C-brands can unite a wide range of products under one roof, as consumers can get used to extensions which may seem unusual initially (e.g., Klink and Smith 2001). For example, the Yamaha name can be found on tennis rackets and Panasonic is associated with bicycles, whereas the General Electrics brand covers hundreds of different products from jet engines to power generation, from financial services to plastics as well as from television to medical imaging. As long as the common denominator of the brand schema is appropriate and important in all of the product categories covered by the brand (e.g., Bridges 1992), integration via a functional C-brand strengthens brand awareness and brand trust. In the case of large submarkets and a high degree of product and target group heterogeneity, it can, however, be worthwhile complementing an abstract C-brand with specific subbrands at product or target group level (e.g., Ford and Focus, Mustang, Taurus etc.). In this case, there is some overlap between C-branding and F-branding (see the grey shaded area between the dotted lines in figure 3).

FIGURE 3
BASE–Linking Strategic Brand Concept To Brand Architecture Strategy



The same is true for companies with a portfolio consisting of products with a relational positioning as well as for a product portfolio with a mixture of functional and relational concepts (cf. e.g., Johnson & Johnson), as both concepts do not give rise to any incompatibilities between the various products offered or target groups served. However, in this case as well, too high a degree of product heterogeneity might make it seem expedient to create subbrands for larger submarkets in addition to the C-brand, which once again overlaps with F-branding.

If the range of a company's offerings includes a number of concepts with various symbolic traits, BASE recommends a T-branding strategy. These symbolic target group brands can include a wide range of products. For example, luxury brands like Gucci, Cartier, Louis Vuitton or Giorgio Armani have little difficulty in uniting a great variety of products under one brand, as long as the image of the typical brand users is uniform and continues in the direction desired by the target group (cf. Kapferer 1997; Park, Lawson, and Milberg 1989; Park et al. 1991). Difficulties arise whenever such brands mix up different target groups or do not protect their clients from non-clients. For example, the Chanel brand severely suffered from its Chanel T-shirts that were sold in large quantities and ended up being worn by too many women (Kapferer 1997, p. 256). Likewise, the BOSS brand, formerly targeted predominantly at male customers, recently found it very difficult to enter the market of women´s business wear. Sometimes, symbolic incompatibilities may be rather subtle in nature: When the Emminence brand, positioned as "for the tough man", tried to extend its brand name from men´s underwear to elegant perfumes "for the fashionable gentleman", it caused severe irritation among its customers and eventually altered its strategy. The transition to F-branding is smooth in this case, too. Provided the groups targeted are not too heterogeneous, but the costs of brand management are high in comparison to the consumers' willingness to pay a premium for the added symbolic value of the brand, it can make sense to integrate target markets to a certain extent through hierarchical F-branding.

BASE proposes a P-branding strategy for a range of offerings with different experiential characteristics. Even if the product categories covered by such P-brands can be very broad on occasion (e.g. all sweet-tasting foodstuffs), they are limited by the physical properties of the product category due to their experiential nature, as both laboratory research and real-life examples demonstrate. In laboratory experiments, subjects appeared to be reluctant to try Crest chewing gum for fear that it would taste like toothpaste, did not like a hypothetical Heineken popcorn extension, and were suspicious of McDonald´s film processing, beliefing that the films would be developed quickly but would be greasy (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Sullivan 1990, p. 311). In real life, the Natreen brand was successfully extended to jam as well as to fruit-juice, but failed to convince customers of the quality of its diet sausage as the latter product category was incompatible with the association of sweetness that dominates brand associations (Schiele 1999). However, as long as the brand does not make symbolic promises in addition to experiential ones (as would be the case with, e.g., gift confectionery), using the same brand name for very different target groups, as illustrated above, should not present a problem (e.g. sweets for young and old).

If a company's product range includes combinations of symbolic and experiential brand concepts (e.g., Dom Perignon champagne, Martini vermouth), it should turn to PT-branding, the most separative (and most costly) form of brand architecture. Otherwise, the brands will either lose their symbolic credibility (as is the case with P-brands) or their experiential character (T-brands).

Mixtures of symbolic or experiential brand concepts, on the one hand, and functional or relational concepts, on the other, as well as mixtures which contain three or all four of these added value components (e.g., most car brands), require the complex brand architecture of F-branding, integrating a diverse range of combinations of C-, P-, T- and PT-brands in a hierarchical concept. If we intend, for example, to target a certain number of groups with different symbolic demands, but with the same high functional demands, a functional C-brand is recommended as a guarantee of technological expertise and quality, beneath which T-subbrands can be distinguished symbolically for different target groups. Which of these levels is given stronger emphasis will depend on the weighting of functional and symbolic buying motives. If symbolic motives dominate, an endorsing C-brand is recommended together with strong symbolic T-subbrands (cf. Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000, p. 104). If the functional motive has the upper hand, a strong C-brand is recommended as a "master brand", with supplementary T-subbrands.

DISCUSSION

By linking five brand architecture strategies with the strategic brand concept model and with human information processing models, the Brand Architecture Strategy Explorer proposes standard brand architecture strategies for various combinations of strategic brand concepts. The considerations that have gone into BASE incorporate a significant number of empirical studies, which are summarized in the form of a uniform model.

Some considerable limits should be noted on the theoretical side. Firstly, the standard strategies in BASE maximize the success of the company's brand(s) in customer terms. They do not involve further consideration of the company's positioning with regard to other stakeholder groups such as current or future employees or shareholders. All in all, the involvement of additional stakeholders in brand architecture strategy is an even stronger argument in favor of C-branding (e.g. Meffert et al. 2002). On the other hand, the goal of avoiding channel conflicts or the intention to capitalize on consumer heterogeneity in price sensitivity through price differentiation are arguments in favor of a higher number of brands than BASE would recommend (e.g., Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000). Secondly, BASE is based on a typical cost structure of different brand architectures, for which highly integrated brand architecture strategies are more cost-effective than highly separated strategies. The extent of this cost benefit can, however, vary from sector to sector, and the significance of this cost benefit depends, among other factors, on the size of the (sub)market and the price sensitivity of customers. Larger markets with less price-sensitive consumers in sectors where customer subgroups can be easily and selectively reached justify a higher number of brands. This results in a grey area in the standard strategy recommendations between C-branding and F-branding, and between P- or T-branding and F-branding. Thirdly, many companies have a mixture of functional, experiential, symbolic, and relational offerings and a brand architecture that has developed over time. Even in such cases, it is possible to develop strategy recommendations based on BASE. These strategies, for example, could unite the products with functional or relational emphasis through C- or F-branding, complemented by some isolated T- or P-brands. Finally, BASE is a model based on psychological assumptions, which may only be valid in western cultures. In eastern cultures, for example, the motive for symbolic consumption tends to be the desire to belong rather than to be different (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991; Markus et al. 1996). This could explain the emergence of very broad C-brands in Japan (e.g., Kapferer 1999, p. 128).

All in all, BASE is an explorative instrument that can provide assistance in making strategic brand architecture decisions, bearing in mind its limitations. However, it does not replace the fine-tuning required in the specific design of the brand architecture, nor the particular caution to be exercised when crossing cultural boundaries.

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