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Marketing through Promotional Items

An explorative study on the organizational characteristics determining the importance of promotional items as a channel of marketing communication

Abstract: The rapid increase in communication channels seen during the last two decades has suggested an increased importance in the coordination of a consistent marketing message through all channels of communication. “Promotional items” however is a channel that is seen as secondary, or even negligible in many companies’ larger marketing mix. In this study we analyse this problem by examining one company from the promotional items industry and comparing two samples of its customers that express different views towards the use of promotional items. We investigate what underlying organizational characteristics affect a company’s will and ability to assimilate advice regarding promotional items into its marketing investment decisions and conclude that the concepts of *brand orientation*, *brand identity strategy* and *integrated marketing communication* are of a high importance when answering this question. A close relationship between the concepts is suggested and a high level of brand orientation is finally identified as the most distinguished characteristic of a company that is able and willing to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments.

Keywords: Promotional items, brand orientation, brand identity strategy, integrated marketing communication

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Thank You...

Björn Axelsson for your inspiration and support

Cecilia Cederlund for your help and input

Company X for interesting discussions and insights into the field of promotional products

and

All participating companies for letting us take part in your organization

Life all comes down to a few moments.

This is one of them.

Bud Fox

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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem area

Promotional items have been used as a marketing tool for decades. The concept can briefly be defined as an item created to communicate a message to the receiver. This can be done either through a company logo or symbol printed on the item or by any of its characteristics, such as appearance, texture or smell. In Sweden, the promotional items industry is very fragmented, and competition is fierce. It is comprised of roughly 2000 companies that have an accumulated turnover of approximately SEK 4.7 billion while accumulated profits only reach a couple of millions (IRM, 2010).

Most companies in this industry are very small and a typical firm normally has less than three employees. The set-up of these smaller companies is diametrically different from the few larger ones and the usual tasks of an employee consists of collecting orders from customers and placing orders to subcontractors. Most small actors also have a very limited range of services and products and can only partially offer what the customers need. Low entry barriers and generic products justify this partiality and remove the need to provide a complete solution. Most suppliers offer the same type of items, often even from the same wholesaler or subcontractor, and the one with the lowest price closes the deal. Transaction-based buying therefore becomes the basis of competition. Another interesting aspect is that buyers of promotional items often see this spending as a pure cost, which enhances focus on the price instead of the performance of these items. This was a view expressed by Company X, an actor within the promotional items industry that helped us with this study¹. This market behaviour results in sales made at marginal cost. In the end, total solutions are neglected and administrative work is added to the customer who needs to juggle several suppliers in order to fulfil its needs.

Simultaneously, there has been a rapid increase in communication channels during the last two decades, with Internet and social media in the forefront. This has led marketing theory to suggest an importance in the need of creating efficient marketing channels that communicate a consistent message (Lee and Park, 2007). Classifying promotional items as a channel of communication increases its importance when focusing on delivering a consistent

¹ For confidentiality reasons, both Company X and their customers will remain anonymous throughout this study.

marketing message. With this classification, it can be argued that promotional items should be included in the larger marketing communication mix and therefore seen as more of an investment (Reid, Luxton and Mavondo 2005).

In light of these circumstances, a few companies have been started to meet these real, and theoretical demands. They are able to supply a full coverage service with highly customized promotional items that fit into the client's communication strategy, leaving them to focus on their core business. Compared to the traditional small firm mentioned above these larger firms often have their own design and sourcing departments in-house. Together with a sales force, they reach a size of about 15-25 employees. With the ability to provide these customized solutions to the same cost as standardized ones, a significant competitive advantage is created.

In spite of this assumed competitive advantage, the earlier mentioned larger firms are having immense difficulties prevailing and must constantly defend the importance of this marketing channel (Company X, 2011). Even though theory and suppliers suggest an importance of using promotional items as a part of the overall marketing mix, users seem to disregard it. We find this market resistance hard to understand and it is this discrepancy between theory and reality that our study originates in.

Empirical evidence suggests that the responsibility regarding purchases of promotional items often is decentralized and delegated one, or even two levels below the highest degree of marketing decision making in a company (Company X, 2011). In some organizations, millions of SEK are spent on promotional items annually, with no effort in making sure that they are consistent or integrated into the general communication plan. The result is an inconsistent brand image communicated to customers, employees and other stakeholders. By using two real-life examples from Company X we can highlight the dangers of this behaviour and the opportunities of using a more customized solution.

Case 1

A research team was invited to a Swedish automotive company in order to assess their current need for consulting services regarding promotional products. After a single day of data gathering at company headquarters the team was able to present collected pencils with

19 different variations of the company logo to the marketing management team. The result is hard to quantify but a situation like this is not very favourable from a branding or marketing perspective.

Case 2

Another large Swedish automotive company decided to consult Company X when creating promotional items for the anniversary of an engine model used in many of their vehicles. The design team decided not to use the actual company logo, only the colour of the engine block and specific design characteristics from the actual engine. These design attributes were transformed into a collection of promotional items that created a huge hype among their customers when they were launched. Even today, these items have a “cult” status and are still very sought after.

1.2 Purpose & research question

The primary purpose of this study is to describe and analyse the use of promotional items by companies. Our approach will rely on the observation that different companies tend to have different capabilities and attitudes towards the use of promotional items. It's a given situation in the industry as a whole that most customer companies see this type of marketing channel as secondary, less valuable or even negligible (Company X, 2011). Whether this depends on strategic choice or lack of knowledge is hard to speculate in but the fact remains: attitudes are notably different. We find this discrepancy very interesting and will focus this study on these differences and investigate what creates them. To accomplish this overlying purpose we will pose and focus on the following research question:

- 1. What underlying organizational characteristics determine a company's *will* and *ability* to assimilate advice regarding promotional items into their marketing investment decisions?**

In order to answer the quite broad and open-ended question above we will narrow our focus to three marketing concepts that we believed captured the essence of this problem and pose the sub-question below.

- 1.1 What impact does the concepts of brand orientation, brand identity strategy and integrated marketing communication have on the above mentioned *will* and *ability*?**

These are quite broad research questions and little research on the topic has been made before. Our study will therefore solely be made on an explorative level with the aim of

providing a conceptual framework from which future studies can be conducted on a deeper level. The framework will further be based exclusively on the three marketing concepts that we believed were most applicable to this study: *Brand Orientation*, *Brand Identity Strategy* and *Integrated Marketing Communication*. These concepts, and how they were chosen, will be described more closely in chapter 2.4 and 3.

1.3 Delimitations

We chose to perform this study in the format of a field study on one specific company and this situation naturally caused some limitations. The study was made solely on the Swedish market and the goal was to reach a conclusion based on the specific circumstances provided by this single company, not to attempt a description of the entire market. However, a discussion to what extent our findings are applicable on a larger scale will be held in chapter 7.

The study will further be delimited to the selling and purchasing behaviour associated with promotional items² and thus not study their commercial implications on end users. This delimitation has been chosen because we want to investigate the underlying organizational factors affecting the will and ability to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments and not how the actual end user perceives the items.

1.4 Disposition

The above pages serve as an introduction to this study. The rest is structured as follows. Chapter 2 will describe the applied method; chapter 3 will presents the literature review and chapter 4 the theoretical framework. In chapter 5 and 6 the results and analysis surrounding our interviews and research questionnaire will be presented while chapter 7 will contain our conclusions and discussions of limitations. Chapter 7 will finally be concluded with managerial implications and inspiration for further research.

² A promotional item is an item created to communicate a message to the receiver. This can be done either through a company logo or symbol printed on the item or by any of its characteristics, such as appearance, texture or smell. This concept includes any type of promotional give-away, tchotchke or gimmick, ranging from pencils and USB-sticks to jackets and more expensive items. Their commonality is that they are *items* that are *given away* for free. Thus, they do not include pure brand or sponsorship exposure such as logos on billboards, in sports tournaments or on sailboats.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

In our aim to explore what underlying organizational characteristics determine a company's will and ability to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments, we could as mentioned not find any universal theory to base our study on. Believing a theoretical framework was of great importance for the validity of the study we instead focused on finding closely related marketing concepts that we believed touched upon organizational marketing characteristics. Wanting a completely exhaustive analysis, we sought to find theories that described the capabilities of an organization from as many viewpoints as possible. The result is presented in figure 1 but in short we gathered theory to create a conceptual model that evaluates an organization from three different perspectives "*outside-in*", "*internal*" and "*inside-out*". These perspectives are represented by the concepts of Brand Orientation (BO), Brand Identity Strategy (BIS) and Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) in the corresponding order and will be further discussed in chapter 3.

We had to delimit our theory selection to the most appropriate theories, leaving out others that very well might have been useful, but in our opinion of less importance. As an example we did not use the theory of *Market Orientation*, mentioned in the Nexus model in appendix III. Even though it is an important concept in marketing communications literature, it is believed to be too broad for our study. It focuses more on organizational activities such as planning, controlling and human resources, which cannot be linked to promotional items in a suitable way (Reid, Luxton and Mavondo, 2005).

While this section describes how the theoretical framework was selected and what factors were considered in the research process, the theoretical framework in chapter 4 will examine the conceptualization attempts of these concepts more thoroughly and show how we have used them in our own research.

As mentioned above, the concept of promotional products is a rarely touched upon area within marketing literature. One article refers to it as a smart but small, non-traditional revenue stream in times of distress (Smith, 2002). It further mentions that a combination of a highly recognizable brand and touch of creativity can increase this stream substantially but never provides any real evidence, analysis or discussion. Other articles have discussed

closely related topics such as business gifts (Beltramini, 2000) but what can be concluded is that the research coverage this far has been on a very conceptual level.

To create a theoretical framework for our survey we chose to examine closely related marketing concepts that we believed touched upon the underlying marketing characteristics of organizations. We identified three perspectives in chapter 2.4, which sought to examine an organization from as many viewpoints as possible. The first was an “outside-in” perspective looking at the *attitude and approach* they have to creating value through marketing. The second was an “internal” perspective analysing the *processes* they have in place to leverage their before-mentioned attitude and approach. The third and final perspective was “inside-out” and depicts the way the organization has of *integrating and communicating a consistent* message to external observers.

This chapter will provide an overview of current research regarding the three marketing concepts that we believe fit these perspectives best: BO, BIS and IMC. Connecting these to our perspectives, BO will cover the attitude and approach, BIS the processes and IMC the integration, communication and consistency. The chapter will introduce the reader to these concepts and serve as base for the theoretical framework presented in chapter 4. There, we will further explain how the concepts interact and complement each other and what previous attempts have been made to conceptualize and measure them.

2.1 Integrated marketing communication (inside-out perspective)

IMC was first introduced in the 1980s and have been used as an accepted framework in the field of marketing communication since the early 1990s. (Kitchen, Brignell, Li and Jones, 2004). The concept originates from the increasing number of information sources that people come in contact with on a daily basis (Keller, 2001). The information they receive is accumulated into a single message about a company or a product and if this message is inconsistent or disparate, the brand positioning or company image easily gets distorted in the consumers mind (Lee and Park, 2007).

To protect brand image, the need to achieve strategic consistency in all communication channels becomes imperative when realizing that all aspects of the brand entity send a message to customers (Reid, Luxton and Mavondo, 2005). To reach this degree of consistency another important factor is to have working cross-functional internal integration

(Duncan and Mulhern, 2004). Without an organization, including top management, supporting the internal marketing processes crucial for effective IMC, external integration (consistency) will be hard to reach. Since every point of contact between consumer and company has an impact on brand equity, this support is of increasing importance.

There has always been some ambiguity surrounding the definition of IMC. No clear, or universally accepted, definition has been made and many areas still need clarification (Baker and Michell, 2000; Beard, 1996; Cornelissen, 2001; Duncan and Mulhern, 2004; Kitchen and Schultz, 1999). As the concept continuously evolves and more definitions are added the need to conceptualize IMC as a multidimensional model arise (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). When it essentially touches all aspects of marketing, some argue that all marketing function areas (Pickton and Hartley, 1998; Stewart, 1996) or at least the entire marketing communications mix (Phelps and Johnson, 1996), should be included. Whichever structure we use, it is clear that promotional products should fit within this concept when it's an obvious way for companies to use their brand to send a message. Since it is not our purpose with this study to derive a universal definition of IMC, or any of the theories we present, we will not divulge deeper into these boundaries. We would instead state that even if the definition of IMC is still fragmented, the underlying concept is clear:

“Everything sends a message”

2.2 Brand identity strategy (internal perspective)

To communicate a single message through multiple channels is not without its problems. A consistent BIS can therefore be seen as imperative when developing and implementing an overall IMC strategy (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan and McDonald, 2005). The abovementioned defines BIS as *“a set of processes that include the coordinated efforts of brand strategists in (1) developing, evaluating, and maintaining the brand identity/identities, and (2) communicating the brand identity/identities to all individuals and groups (internal and external to the firms) responsible for the firm's marketing communication”* (Madhavaram, et al, 2005, p.70). It is apparent that when creating a strong brand identity, the processes of the internal organization are very important. If all marketers and brand strategists fully understand the brand identity and the message the company wants to promote, it will be easy to communicate to the customers, and vice versa. Consequently,

such processes can increase brand equity by positively influencing the IMC process through a well-communicated and well-conceived brand identity. (Madhavaram et al, 2005). An important realization is the difference between brand identity and BIS. We want to emphasize that *brand identity* depicts the brand, as perceived by external observers, while *brand identity strategy* describes the organizational processes used to create it.

The use of a unique visual identity can further prove to be very valuable when creating the greater brand identity. In accordance with the statement “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” there’s an incentive to create a positive message that is communicated through the sheer appearance of a product or logo (Melin, 1997). In today’s competitive environment this has in some cases lead to a necessity. Organizations that cannot compete on quality and do not want to compete on price must create some additional “emotional” value and the brand identity is a great way to do this. This has lead research to develop a model (See appendix I) with five different carriers of brand identity (Melin, 1997), which will be presented in the theoretical framework section.

2.3 Brand orientation (outside-in perspective)

Maintaining a strong brand identity and a consistent marketing message additionally requires a lot of effort and it can be seen as crucial to have a determined approach in order to do so. The term *brand orientation* was coined by Urde (1994) who later defined it as an approach to creating, developing and protecting brand identity (see Table 1). Many definitions have been added during the years and what we believe is the essence of the brand-orientation concept has been bolded in all definitions. That it’s a deliberate approach to brand building where the degree to which an organization values its brands and the shared sense of brand meaning is of the uttermost relevance.

Definitions of brand orientation	
Author	Definition
Urde (1999)	An approach in which the processes of the organization revolve around the creation, development and protection of brand identity in an on-going interaction with target customers with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantage
Hankinsson (2001)	The extent to which an organisation regards itself as brands and an indication of how much (or little) the organization accepts the theory and practice of branding.
Bridson and Evans (2004)	The degree to which the organization values brands and its practises are oriented towards building brand capabilities.
Ewing and Napoli (2005)	The organisational wide process of generating and sustaining a shared sense of brand meaning that provides superior value to stakeholders and superior performance to the organisation
Baumgarth (2009)	A specific type of marketing orientation, which is distinguished by the high relevance accorded to branding by top management. It also implies a strongly systematic approach to brand management characterised by an offer that is relatively constant, consistent and relevant to the buyer and clearly differentiated from the competition.
Gromark and Melin (2011)	A deliberate approach to brand building where brand equity is created through interaction between internal and external stakeholders. This approach is characterised by brands being the hub around which the organisation's processes revolve, an approach in which brand management is perceived as a core competence and where brand building is intimately associated with business development and financial performance.

Table 1. Definitions of Brand Orientation

Melin and Gromark (2011, pg. 1) state that *“strong brands aren’t given, they must be earned, over and over again”*. The result of this line of thought is that many modern organizations see brand building as a process rather than a project. We therefore deem that being brand orientated could be seen as the *mental state* of an organization able and willing to construct and maintain a strong brand identity. Melin and Gromark (2011) continue to develop an 8-factor conceptual model used to explain BO and its link to financial performance. This will be discussed more thoroughly in section 4.1 of the theoretical framework.

Apart from the importance of a unique visual identity it has also been argued that it is important that all aspects of the brand identity are strategically driven (Reid, Luxton and Mavondo, 2005). Evidence shows that this is becoming increasingly true. A study by McArthur and Griffin (1997) says that the *“responsibility for marketing communication is becoming an internal, upper management affair”* and thus is becoming more strategically oriented instead of tactically oriented.

2.4 Discussion of literature selection

What we want to show with this literature review is that many modern marketing research concepts are closely related to the use of promotional products, but none talk about it in a direct manner. The concepts exist; they interconnect and show that it is an important goal in many organizations to create a fully IMC strategy. IMC theory states that a completely integrated marketing message through all channels of communication is crucial in delivering a consistent message to the consumer. A strong BIS is important when constructing the IMC strategy and without internal consistency in that message, discrepancies will easily be detected by external observers. Practicing BO will finally be a crucial factor for organizations in achieving a strong BIS and the internal consistency needed to create a successful external consistency, thus successful IMC strategy. All these aspects affect brand equity and an increase in brand equity is arguably favourable for any organization.

Promotional items, if we look at these concepts, is an undisputable channel of communication. It is often used or seen daily within an organization and it gives many potential customers and employees a first visual impression during career fairs, conferences and similar events. In regards to the abovementioned concepts and their link to promotional items we find the lack of research on the topic as a rather strange phenomenon. Empirical evidence additionally shows a great lack of integration between promotional items and the rest of a company's marketing communications mix (Company X, 2011). This implies that the lack of integration, or knowledge, of promotional items as a marketing channel in many organizations might be dependent on the existence, or lack of, BO, BIS and IMC.

2.5 Final note on financial performance

Studies have in the end shown that successful IMC can generate positive customer responses and thereby help organizations achieve superior financial performance through higher brand equity (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan and McDonald, 2005) and that consistency in the brand message is a key determinant of brand success (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003). However, the empirical evidence that exist in terms of evaluating IMC in quantifiable terms is very limited (Baker and Mitchell, 2000; Cornelissen and Lock, 2000; Eagle and Kitchen, 2000; Swain, 2004). The following theoretical framework section will therefore depict previous attempts to conceptualize and measure the three marketing concepts and how we have used them to create our research questionnaire.

2.6 Theoretical framework

From the literature review we have focused on the three earlier mentioned perspectives when creating the theoretical framework for our questionnaire: “*outside-in*”, “*internal*” and “*inside-out*”. Thus, these perspectives can be described as the *approach* an organization have to creating value through marketing, the *processes* they have in place to leverage this “mental state” and the way they have of *integrating* and *communicating* a *consistent* message to external observers. As mentioned in chapter 3, BO will cover the approach, BIS the processes and IMC the integration, communication and consistency.

These three concepts are by their nature very hard to quantify and measure. Some attempts have been made but only one model has comprehensively identified the anatomy of one of the concepts, namely BO. The other two rely solely on conceptual models. These attempts and models, despite their differences in diligence, denote a good base for our research questionnaire as they bring up the important aspects of each concept and suggest how to examine them. This section will briefly explain these models and how we have used them in our study. It will further assess additional parts of the overlying concepts that we believe are of interest as well as mention the empirical theories that we have received from Company X.

2.6.1 Brand orientation index (appendix I)

In a recent article, Melin and Gromark (2011) developed a theoretical framework where they presented eight different dimensions that could be seen as the anatomy of BO. They also identified a significant positive relationship between profitability and BO showing that the most brand-oriented companies in their study were almost twice as profitable as the least brand-oriented. By looking at previous attempts of conceptualization they extracted three factors as being of great importance, *attitude*, *behaviour* and *capabilities*. Before creating their own model they added *interaction* as a fourth important variable. From a 35-question questionnaire they distilled eight variables. The eight variables, or dimensions, are presented in appendix II as “the wheel” and in Table 2 below.

Brand orientation index factors	
Factor	Description
(F1) Approach	Extent to which: (1) strong brands are associated with profitability (2) brand management is perceived as a core competence (3) brand building is an integral part of the business model and (4) brand advertising is seen as an investment rather than cost.
(F2) Implementation	Whether: (1) companies use brand as a beacon in the development of a value-driven organization and (2) they use it in order to inspire employees.
(F3) Goals and follow-up	The ability to set clear goals for brand development and to measure the degree of goal achievement.
(F4) Relationships	How the brand is used to create and maintain relationships with external stakeholders.
(F5) Identity development and protection	Measures taken during a brand process: registering trademarks, creating visual identity, positioning the brand and protecting the brand from infringement.
(F6) Operational development	Ability to use core values as the basis for all their processes
(F7) Top management participation	Degree to which top management (1) takes strategic decisions regarding the brand and (2) serve as brand ambassadors
(F8) Responsibility and roles	Ability to allocate responsibility and accountability in the area of brand management

Table 2 Brand Orientation Index factors

The questions used to derive this model, and which dimension they relate to, is presented in appendix V. In the BO section of our questionnaire we used many of these questions, although translated to Swedish. Some were compressed into one, other deleted completely but we made sure to cover all eight factors. It also became clear that even if the greater concepts complement one another in a very good way, they also intersect on a few points. E.g. the question *the way an organization focus on making good brand ambassadors of their employees* touch both BO and BIS while *how they work to communicate brand values to new and existing employees* combines BO and IMC.

2.6.2 Brand identity carriers (appendix II)

Melin (1997) divides brand identity carriers into primary and secondary. Primary carriers consist of the *brand* in itself while *logotype*; *symbol*, *packaging* and *marketing communication* are listed as secondary. In some cases however, most often when the product is hard to assess pre purchase, such as spirits and perfume, the *brand* doesn't necessarily act as the most important carrier. Melin (1997) mentions the Swedish success story of Absolut Vodka as an example where the unique packaging, the distinct and controversial bottle design, has acted as the primary identity carrier instead. Regardless of

which carrier we assess, one fundamental condition that must be met in order for it to create a competitive advantage is that it is unique to some extent. These five carriers and what processes the organizations have in place to develop, evaluate and maintain them are interesting aspect that we will cover in our questionnaire. An additional interesting aspect is how the brand identity created from these five carriers is communicated to brand strategists throughout the company. Even if there is no theoretical model to describe this, we will cover it in our questionnaire.

2.6.3 IMC nexus model (appendix III)

In their article from 2005, Reid, Luxton and Mavondo created a conceptual model linking *IMC* with *brand orientation* and *market orientation*, shown in appendix III. It has the same principles as a Venn diagram and the aim is to get to a position where these three concepts are in balance in the middle of the diagram, called the Nexus. This region represents a simultaneous focus on customers, inter-functional integration and brand identity and the larger this area gets the closer an organization gets to harmonization between IMC, BO and market orientation. This is a valid construct but since we believe the concept of market orientation lies too far from our research object we have chosen to disregard it and solely look at IMC and BO. In this sense, the conceptual relationship between these two is the main contribution from this model to our questionnaire. It is stated that IMC is indispensable when trying to achieve the objectives of BO; providing a basis for creating and managing brands that are unique, deliver value for external stakeholder and create a basis for on-going profitable relationships.

2.6.4 Conceptual framework

When no single applicable research model existed we gathered inspiration from the abovementioned concepts and models to derive our research questionnaire (presented in appendix V). As mentioned in section 2.5.4 it is divided into five parts based on the same divisions as in this theoretical framework: personal questions, BO, BIS, IMC and empirical evidence. The model below depicts how our three different concepts complement each other, interlink and create one conceptual analysis model. We see BO as the *approach* an organization have to creating value through marketing, BIS as the *processes* they have in place to leverage this “mental state” and IMC as the way they have of *integrating* and

communicating a consistent message to external observers. BIS and IMC are seen as intra-organizational concepts affecting the marketing message sent to external observers while BO covers the external conditions entering an organization in terms of values, beliefs and attitudes. In the end, all these concepts have an impact on perceived brand identity and thus the brand equity and financial performance of an organization.

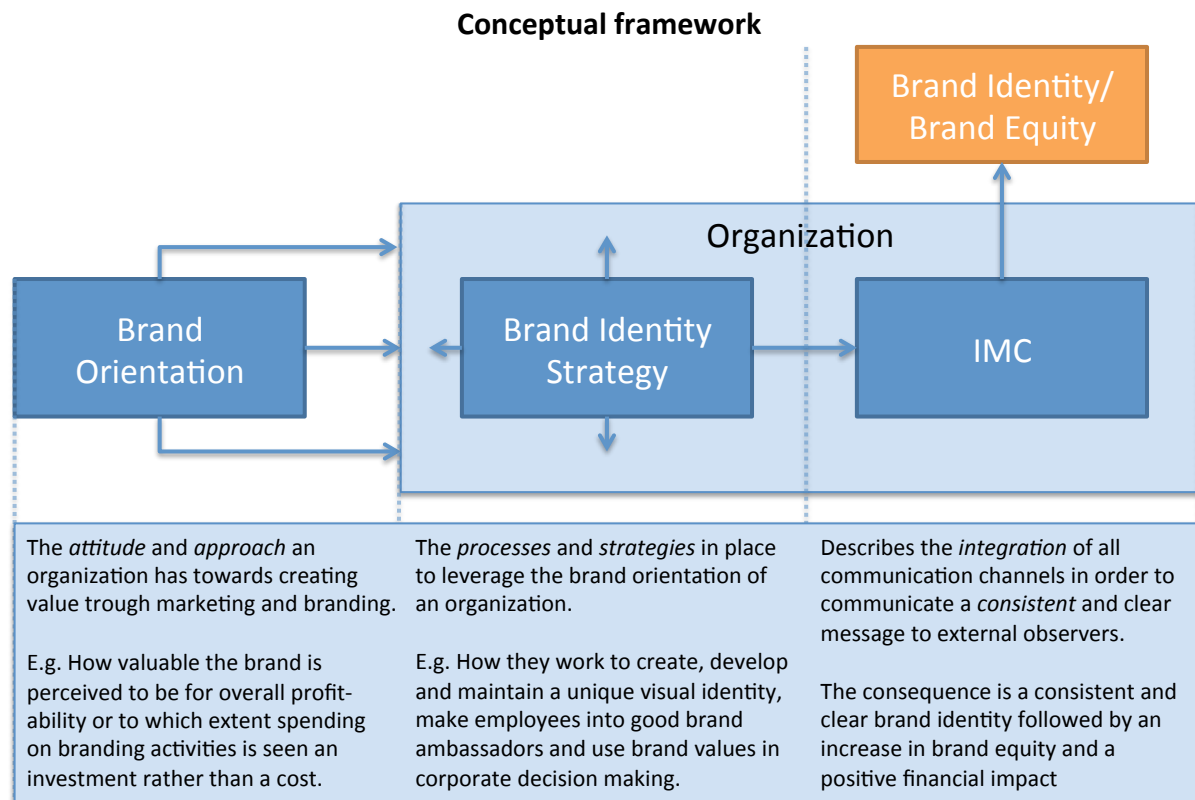


Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing how the three concepts complement each other

The conceptual framework can be further explained by the figure below, showing how the different aspects fit and interact within an organization.

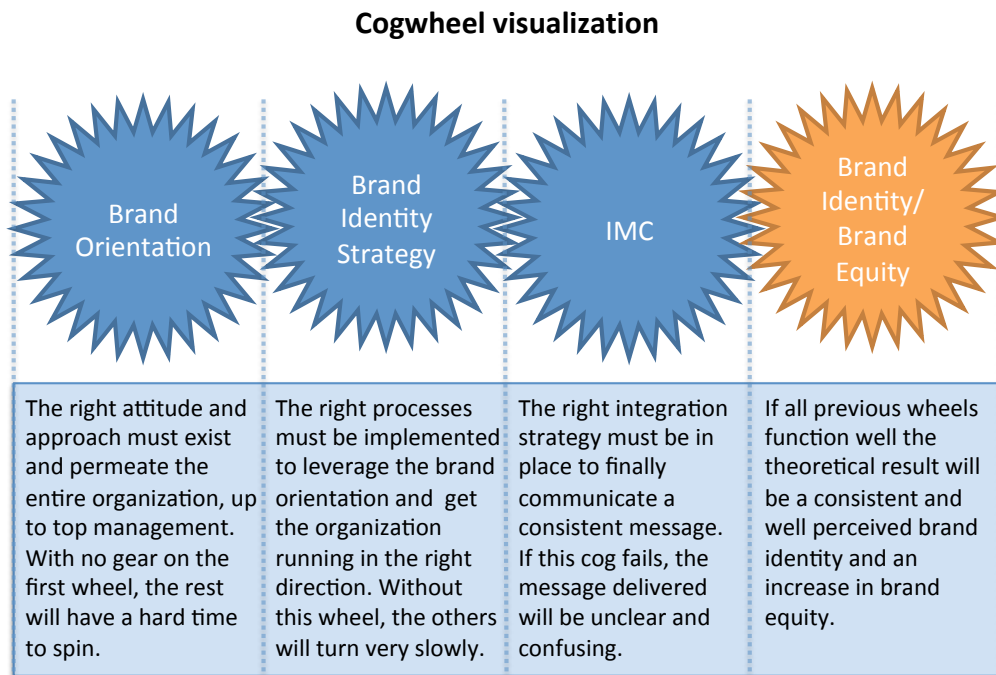


Figure 2. Visualization of organizational cogwheels showing how the three concepts interact

3. Method

This chapter will start with a short briefing of the method used to assess our research question; it will be followed by a more in-depth description of the research design and structure, how the appropriate theory was found and how data was collected and processed from different sources.

3.1 Method in brief

We have performed a field study on Company X, where we have used a population of their customers as research subjects. After creating an ideal customer together with company management we segmented this population into two research samples, one that comprised a high degree of similarity to the ideal customer and one that did not.

Telephone interviews were then performed with the employees responsible for purchasing promotional items in the organizations comprising our research samples. The interviews were backed by a questionnaire in order to achieve a high degree of comparability. By comparing these two populations we finally identified possible explanatory variables to our research question, and also eliminated those of less importance, by investigating which characteristics appear in one sample but not the other.

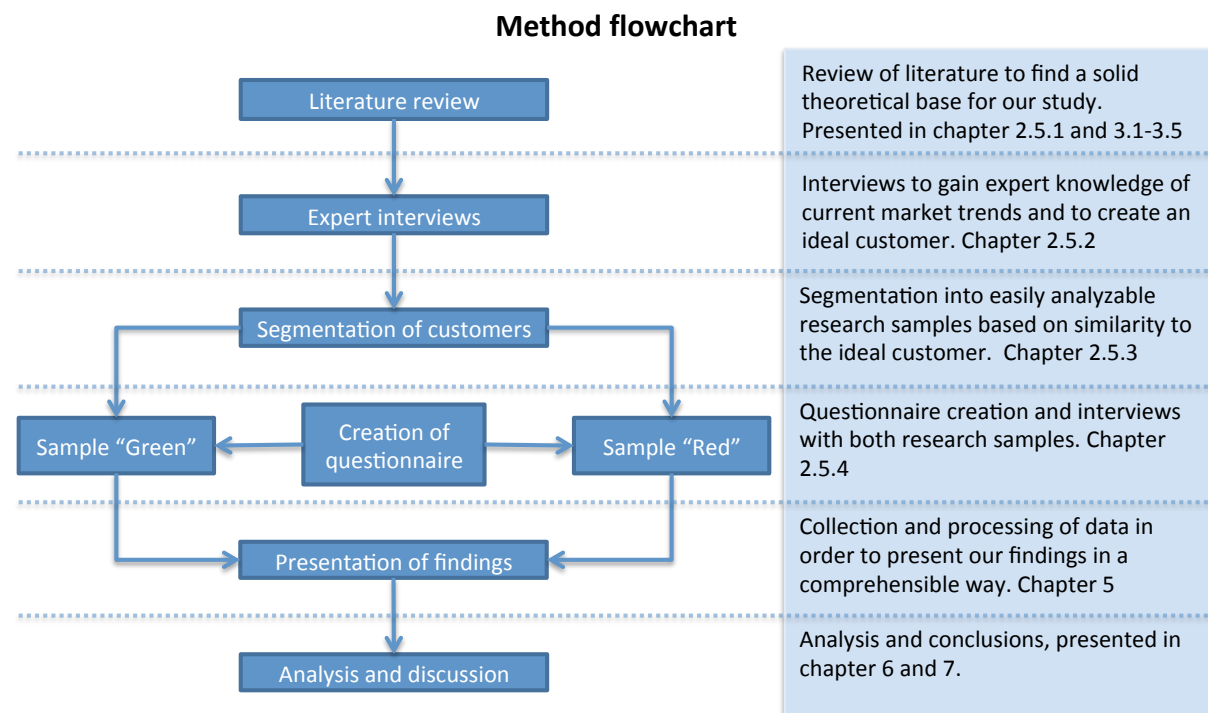


Figure 3. Method flowchart. An overview of the line of thought creating the backbone of this study

3.2 Research structure

Our research question originates in the observation of a discrepancy between theory and reality, mentioned in chapter 1. We subsequently used a qualitative approach to evaluate our research population, finding patterns and regularities in the customers of this industry by conducting interviews with industry professionals. It could thereby be argued that our initial approach was inductive (Wallén, 1996). From this point we based the examination of our two research samples on the analysis that three major marketing concepts, presented in chapter 3, were of importance for the will and ability to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments. By applying a mixture of qualitative telephone interviews backed by a quantitative research questionnaire on these samples we finally reached our conclusions based on deductive reasoning.

Since our aim was to explore promotional items through the perspectives of closely related marketing literature, it can further be argued that our approach is somewhat abductive. This is in accordance with the aim definition of abductive research mentioned by Kovács and Spens (2005). Abduction starts with a real-life observation and then employs an ongoing interaction between empirical findings and suitable theories, a mixture of induction and deduction (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 1994, p.42)

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Interviews with industry experts

If academic research on promotional items is lacking, there is an abundant source of information among today's industry professionals. In order to leverage their knowledge and experience but still produce an independent and unbiased study, we divided our qualitative data gathering into two parts. The first was conducted through interviews with management and account managers of Company X in order to find a common ground for segmentation that would be applicable across the whole population of customers (presented in figure 4 and chapter 2.6). Apart from the segmentation of customers, these interviews also introduced us to the world of promotional items and made us aware of different empirical theories that Company X believed to be of importance when determining if a customer was favourable or not.

3.3.2 Telephone interviews and research questionnaire

The second part of the data collection process continued when the segmentation was finished and we could examine our research samples. This examination was conducted through telephone interviews backed by a web-based questionnaire. Each employee responsible for the purchase of promotional items in the organizations of our research samples was given the questionnaire through email. It was later followed up by a telephone interview where we walked through the questionnaire, made necessary clarifications and asked a few follow up questions.

The questionnaire consisted of 30 primary questions, 69 counting sub questions, divided into five parts³. The first contained generic questions about age and gender while the middle three covered one of our marketing concepts each. In the fifth and final part we included a few questions that industry professionals believed to be of importance, beliefs they expressed during our interviews. These were used partly because we wanted to be as exhaustive as possible and partly because we wanted to investigate if we could find any statistical evidence to back up their empirical theories. To limit the respondents' ability to guess the study's purpose and answer accordingly we saved all questions relating directly to promotional items to the fifth and last part, where we also put the remaining empirical questions from Company X.

3.4 Segmentation and research population

The segmentation of business customers mentioned above was one of the most critical components of our study. From this point we would know that one sample was favourable and one not, and our task would then be to find out why. If the organizations were added to the wrong group, our results would be distorted. Since the segmentation had to be based on the views of the management and account managers of Company X we saw a risk that their choices would be subjective. We believed that their respective favourite customers would be chosen first and that a later analysis would identify the different characteristics that these exhibited as favourable. We wanted them to focus on what a favourable customer *should* look like, regardless of what current customers *actually* look like. They were therefore given

³ The questionnaire consisted of 30 primary questions, 69 counting sub questions, derived from previous attempts to conceptualize BO, BIS and IMC. Apart from generic questions regarding gender and age, these questions were primarily answered on a 6-graded scale ranging from "completely agree to completely disagree".

the task of creating an *ideal customer*, showing what a customer would look like if all different positive characteristics from their current customers were combined into one company.

Company X's core competencies are superior knowledge and design of promotional items. Thus, the ideal customer consisted of a company that first of all requested a high degree of advice in matters regarding promotional items, and did so far in advance, allowing time to create suitable solutions. Secondly the customer regarded Company X as an advisor, or even partner, they valued their expertise and were susceptible to their advice. What on the surface could be a *good* customer, creating high revenue, does therefore not necessarily make a *favorable* customer. This could instead be a typical unfavorable customer, ordering a large volume of items but disregarding the core competence of Company X and doing so with a focus on price instead of compliance with their own core values.

Our subsequent analysis of the ideal customer identified two important underlying factors that could be used to segment the population of customers: the degree to which it *demand*ed or *purchase*d consultative services regarding promotional items and the degree to which it *assimilated* the consultation advice into its purchase decisions. The ideal customer had high levels of both. These factors were agreed upon with Company X's management and figure 4 below gives a more graphic description of them and how they interact. When determining what degree of these two factors a customer had, we used two scales from 1-10. In order to keep biases and inconsistencies⁴ at a minimum, the same account managers and management members participating in our interviews were mutually responsible for ranking the companies in relation to one another. The rankings were also made at one point in time with all professionals gathered at the same place.

⁴ Biases and inconsistencies include apprehension and use of the two scales among management and account managers and external factors such as mood, time of day, surroundings etc.

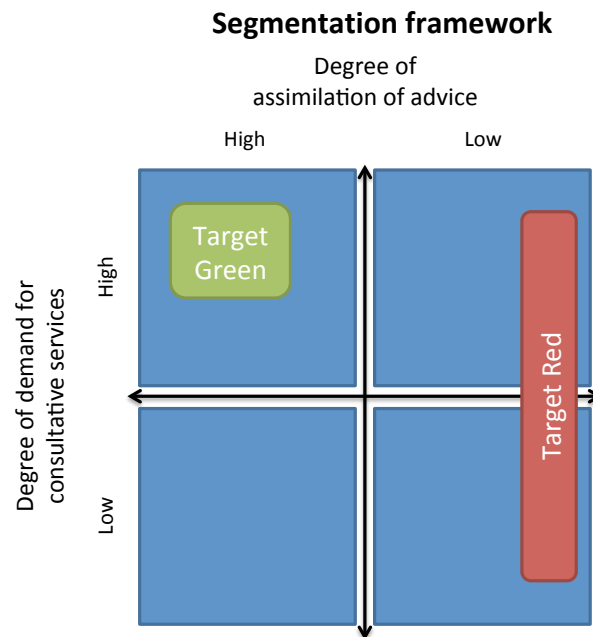


Figure 4. Segmentation framework showing how the research samples were extracted from the overall population.

The original population consisted of all 226 customers that Company X made business with during the previous 12 months⁵. When grading them on the 1-10 scales it became apparent that it was easy to distribute high and low grades, while the distribution of the middle ones were very hard. Three groups were therefore formed and since we only wanted to compare the extremes, this was not a problem. However, it resulted in a very large “middle” section. When finished, the groups were revised and misplaced companies were reallocated. The sample of favorable customers “Green” was created to have great similarities to the ideal situation. It a degree of both demand and assimilation above 8/10 and was comprised of 23 companies. The unfavorable sample “red” consisted of 12 companies that had a degree of assimilation below 3/10. As mentioned above, a large order does not necessarily imply that the customer is favorable or assimilates the information given into their purchase decision. They might just as well disregard the quality or strategic fit of a product to their own marketing strategy and base the order solely on price. Therefore, the red companies degree of demand was disregarded.

3.5 Quality of research

When determining research quality, Yin (2009, p.40) recommends the writer to examine its reliability and validity when evaluating the study. Validity can be divided into internal, external and construct validity. Below follows a discussion about each of the concepts.

⁵ All 226 companies placed at least one order between 2010-04 and 2011-03.

Reliability can be described as the degree to which a study can be replicated to produce the same results as the original (Yin, 2009, p.45). It is also determined by the extent to which we can achieve the same results by different measurements. Reliability is an important aspect because it minimizes the risk of bias and random errors (Malhotra, 2004, p.267) and we have applied several measures to secure this. The simplest way to reach a high reliability is to standardize the data collection process. Our initial interviews cannot be classified as standardized but the usage of a ranking exercise in this process, together with a research questionnaire base during the later interviews gives the study a more standardized character. By adding quantitative aspects to these two steps, the reliability is strengthened and the study becomes more easily replicated than if a sheer qualitative approach had been used. To eliminate the risk of bias in the customer ranking process we additionally conducted it at a single point in time when all professionals were seated together, as mentioned in section 2.5.2.

Construct validity describes a study's ability to measure what it aims to measure (Sekaran, 2000, p.208). Yin (2009) describes it as the importance of using the right types of measurements for the concept being studied and that using multiple sources of data collection can increase its level. The measurements that we use are the levels of BO, BIS and IMC in organizations. Since these three concepts cover different organizational perspectives, we believe that the construct validity of this study is increased. The three main concepts are by their nature however hard to quantify. We aim to overcome this obstacle by using conceptual, easy-to-understand, questions in our questionnaire combined with a ranking type of answer, as not to limit answers to a simple *yes* or *no*.

Internal validity can be defined as the extent to which a study's results correspond with reality (Merriam, 1994, p.177). The most important aspects are if empirical findings are reported and interpreted correctly and whether respondents are expressing their true viewpoints or not. In order to secure a high internal validity it's important to apply measures intended to eliminate the respondents' fear of answering truthfully (Yin, 2009, p.42). By using an anonymous questionnaire together with a set-up of questions that does not contain any personal or discomforting information we believe this fear have been reduced

substantially. We also do not want the respondents to guess the aim of this study and reply accordingly; therefore other measures have been used to mask the true purpose of the study in the questionnaire. E.g. we put the few questions specifically mentioning promotional items in the end of the questionnaire and solely stated that this was a study about marketing communication in the introduction.

External validity covers the cause-effect relationships of a study. It can be said that a study possesses external validity if its conclusions can be generalized from the unique and distinctive settings, procedures and participants of the research sample across to other populations and conditions (Shadish, Cook and Campbell, 2002). It is simply the extent to which a study's findings can be generalizable across the whole population from which the sample was drawn, as well as a universe of other populations.

Qualitative studies normally have a somewhat lower external validity than quantitative ones due to smaller sample populations (Bryman, 2006). Our research samples are not immense but by using a standardized questionnaire as a base for our interviews we achieve a higher external validity than if the interviews would have been made without it. However, the research samples in themselves have been chosen from the subjective views and specific characteristics of Company X. Therefore, the highest degree of external validity of this study will most likely only be applicable when this specific company applies our findings on a greater population. There will probably be larger discrepancies between our findings and the characteristics of the entire market but since this is a very un-researched field, this was a trade-off we had to make. The external validity of this study will be further discussed in chapter 7.3.

4. Results

The disposition of this section will follow the same structure as the interviews and questionnaire. The different marketing concepts will be presented separately and within each concept, an initial quantitative summary from our questionnaire will be followed by findings from specific questions and interviews. However, we will first present an elaborate description of the questionnaire responses.

In total, eleven companies chose to answer the questionnaire and participate in the interviews, seven from the green group and four from the red. This small number does not allow us to make any statistical analysis, why we have chosen to present the results as descriptive statistics in the chapter below. The complementary interviews also provided a foundation for some interesting discussions, which will be presented in form of small company cases throughout this chapter.

4.1 Descriptive statistics

In our questionnaire, each marketing concept was accompanied by a set of questions and sub-question, most of which were comparable on a 6-degree scale. These questions were subsequently used to derive a median value for each corresponding concept, presented in appendix V.

Due to demands from the participating companies, all companies will be kept anonymous. However, a brief description of each company is presented in appendix IV.

4.2 Brand orientation

The primary concept in our questionnaire was BO with a section comprised of 29 questions and sub-questions. 24 of these were measured on the comparable 6-grade scale (all except 14.1-14.5). The respondent was assigned to rank each question on the 6-grade scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The median values will be used below as a way of comparing the two groups.

When looking at the BO questions and their answers, the green group has a higher median value on every single question. This gives a hint of what this results presentation will look like and since we do not want to bore the reader with abundant and unnecessary data, we

will focus on presenting the most distinct differences and relating them to Melin and Gromark's (2011) brand orientation index wheel factors (appendix I). We will also give a couple of clarifying examples from our interviews.

The five questions with greatest discrepancies between green and red group answers were related to factors 1, 4 and 8 of table 2, thus the *approach, relationships and responsibility and roles*. 88% of the green respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the development of strong brands was an integral part of their business model and that these strong brands were closely tied to increased profitability. The red group only had one respondent, or 25%, who said the same thing.

Case 3.

One of the participating green companies "A" is an actor in the computer software industry. They claim to use brands to create tangible contact points with their clients. Since their product is intangible and resellers carry out the actual selling, they constantly conduct brand-building activities towards both resellers and end-users, promoting the brand and brand extensions. Thereby, as a way of reaching out to more customers and increasing profitability, the creation of brands becomes an integrated part of their business model.

When it comes to relationships we see large discrepancies in the way the two groups use their brands in order to create relations with media, potential employees and the public in general. Regarding responsibilities and roles there is only one red organization that agrees to have an employee who is responsible for brand building activities while 75% of the green respondents agree or strongly agree to this question.

The five BO related questions which fall under factor 7, *top management participation*, concern the level in the organization at which strategic branding and marketing decisions are made. Respondents in the green group had this decision-making at board level in 80 per cent of the cases and in half of these, they were complemented with a secondary decision making unit on a marketing or brand management level. Only 50 per cent of the red organizations involved their board members. The other 50 per cent placed this responsibility on their CEO, whereas the green group CEOs were excluded from these decisions completely.

Case 4.

Green company "B" is an actor on the beverage market, and has many different sub-brands. Because of this, strategic marketing decisions are made in two steps. First, decisions on which sub-brands to market and how to market them are made at Board level and documented as strategic brand guidelines. Secondly, each sub-brand has a brand manager who is given a significant strategic freedom to make his or her own decisions, within these pre-set guidelines.

Regarding factors 2, 3, 5 and 6, they cover, in corresponding order, *implementation, goals and follow-up, identity protection and development and operational development*. A quick go through of these indicates that green companies in an implementation aspect are more prone to convey their brand's core values to new and existing employees. In terms of goals and follow-up, they use these core values to a greater extent when making strategic decisions and guidelines, regardless of what part of the organization is affected. The following two examples show different attitudes towards how core values actually were valued

Case 5.

Green company "C" mentioned in an interview that their budget for promotional items was quite restricted but they still realized the need for items that were consistent and coherent with the rest of their marketing communication channels. To make sure that the promotional items purchased matched their requirements, they had decided to concentrate their limited budget into a smaller quantity of products, aiming at a higher degree of quality and uniqueness, which are values consistent with the company's brand values.

Case 6.

In an interview with the account manager of red company "1" we found out that price had been prioritized before quality and communicative fit to the rest of their marketing communications mix. When faced with two different purchase choices: one standardized and one customized for their internal brand building and HR policies, they went with the cheaper one although the price difference was negligible and the cheaper item did not communicate any of their core values. This had also been the case during a long time according to other account managers at Company X, who had the feel that "1" had a very ad-hoc approach and made purchase decisions based on single orders, neglecting the long-term implications of this strategy (Company X, 2011). Also, "1" did not see a priority in engaging in any follow-up activities regarding the outcome of their marketing communication activities.

The green companies further monitored their brands to a greater extent from an identity development and protection viewpoint, in order to prevent trademark infringements,

freeloading or dilution. Finally they also put more emphasis on being able to measure the effect of brand building activities when it came to operational development. The median levels of BO for the green and red groups were 78.0 respectively 51.3. The mean of each question is presented in appendix VI.

4.3 Brand identity strategy

The section of BIS questions in the questionnaire consisted of eight questions and sub-questions, which all could be used on the same scale as the BO questions. When two of the seven green respondents never finished the questionnaire, only five green companies could be used in this section. The median of the green group was 79.2, which was 52 percent higher than the red median of 52.1.

What was found to be the biggest differences in this section was that the green companies worked to a higher degree on all identity carriers, in order to create a unique visual identity. The most prominent ones were *marketing communication*, *brand packaging* and *brand symbols* were 4/5 respondents agreed or strongly agreed to doing so. The red group only had one respondent with the same answer on marketing communication and brand symbols while not a single one agreed or strongly agreed to use brand packaging as a way of creating a unique visual identity.

Case 7.

Green company "D", another company active within the beverage market, is not allowed to give away samples of their products due to legal reasons. Instead, by introducing promotional items that carry the same characteristics as their distinct brand packaging, they have found a great way to circumvent this problem. By constantly emphasizing their unique visual identity in all marketing communication channels, they hope to create long-lasting brand value for the company.

A more common answer from the red companies was that they did not think about their brands in the same way. When asking about the use of identity carriers in one of the red companies we were told it was something they used mainly because of history and tradition.

Companies in the green sample additionally worked more actively to educate their employees to become good brand ambassadors and also had a stronger focus on creating

clear guidelines for the visual usage and exposure of their brands. The individual companies from both samples also show great similarities between their degree of BO and BIS. A high degree of BO corresponds to a high degree of BIS, and vice versa.

4.4 Integrated marketing communication

The IMC section of the questionnaire consisted of 12 questions and sub-questions out of which only three could be used on the same scale as the previous concepts. Since all results have been presented we can combine them into the following figure, showing the mean results from our three marketing concepts.

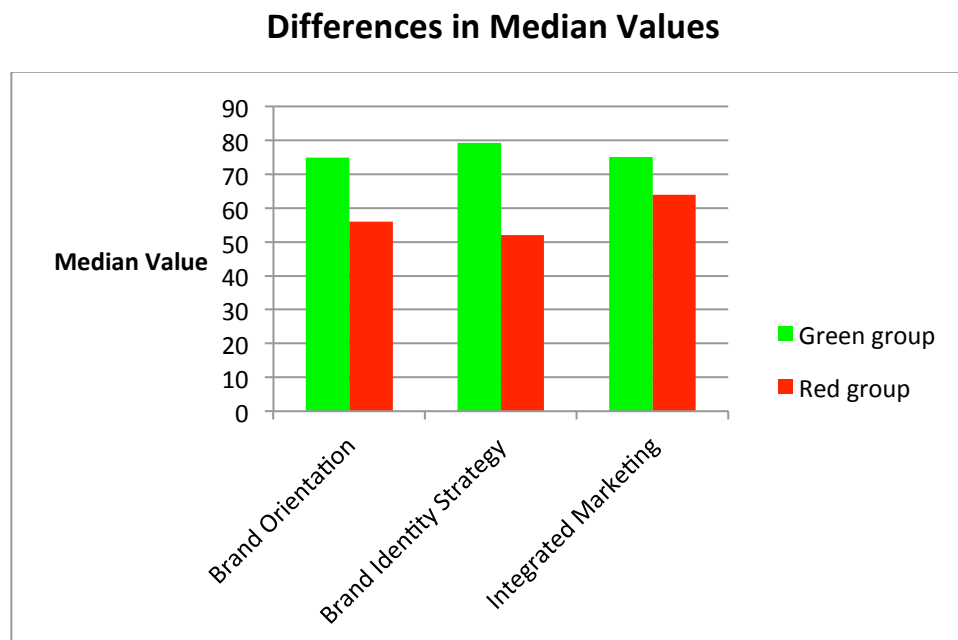


Figure 5. Median value of green and red responses in the three marketing concepts

The most noticeable differences in the IMC category was that the green group was associated with somewhat higher median values but that the differences were much smaller than in the BO and BIS questions. Green companies ergo worked more actively to coordinate the message sent through different communication channels and also cooperated more actively between departments with marketing responsibilities in order to make their messages more consistent. These differences were reinforced in the interviews.

Case. 8

An interviewee from green company "E" talked about a "single message" that should be integrated into every form of market communication activity. They even had a newly developed internal concept called "One E", focusing on this exact problem.

Case. 9

Green company "F" told us that they try to re-use the design from their product and packaging in all other types of communication. For instance, their promotional items are designed as if they were parts of the core product that the company sells.

There were additionally more employees and departments with authority to make marketing and branding decisions in green companies. The same companies also expressed a higher degree of actively cooperating between departments to make their marketing message more consistent.

4.5 Additional observations

The additional questions we tested were as mentioned a result of the beliefs we found during interviews with industry professionals. These do not connect directly to our research questions but rather to our overlying aim of shedding light on marketing through promotional items by contributing with statistical evidence to empirical theories. The questions regarded what position the employee responsible for the purchase of promotional items had within an organization. They also covered the time frame customers had when planning activities in different marketing channels and what factors were of importance when evaluating a potential purchase of promotional items. In the first question we could see a clear trend of red respondents being "under the line" with titles such as *Marketing Assistant*, *Purchase Coach* or simply *Sales Representative*. The green respondents on the other hand had "above the line" titles in most cases, such as *Head of Marketing*, *Marketing Coordinator* or *Manager - Global Marketing & Intelligence*. In the following questions the green companies had time frames ranging from 3-46 weeks when planning promotional item purchases while the red had a time frame span of 4-29 weeks. Both the red and green sample companies also chose the *appearance*, *quality* and *area of usage* as the three most important factors when evaluating promotional item purchases.

5. Analysis

In this chapter, we will analyse the results from the interviews and questionnaire responses presented in chapter five. We will start with an analysis of our overall findings and continue with the same structure as in chapter 2, keeping the three main concepts of BO, BIS and IMC separate in order to connect back to the initial proposed ways of analysing our research question:

What underlying organizational characteristics determine a company's *will* and *ability* to assimilate advice regarding promotional items into their marketing investment decisions?

5.1 Overall analysis

The results can briefly be summarized in the notion that the green sample differed quite substantially from the red. Specifically, it was more brand oriented, had a more developed BIS and a somewhat higher level of IMC.

The segmentation of these samples was based on their demand for, and assimilation of, advice regarding promotional items. Our interpretation of these results is therefore that the difference in demand and assimilation, or “will and ability to assimilate”, can be explained by the level of BO and BIS within the companies of these samples. This suggest that companies able and willing to assimilate advice regarding promotional items into their marketing investment decisions should have a more developed BO and be more prone to have strategies and processes in place to create, maintain and develop their brand identity. We cannot however prove a causal connection or discard that there are any other factors affecting the difference.

An interesting observation was additionally that green companies, with a higher degree of BO, also had a higher degree of BIS and a somewhat higher level of IMC. In our cogwheel visualization this implies that a positive relationship between these concepts actually exists. The green companies also achieved higher means on every single question but there are no specific questions that distinguish themselves more than others. This would indicate that no quick fixes could be made in order to improve the BO or BIS of an organization, thus improving the will and ability to assimilate advice regarding promotional products. A potential improvement would instead have to be made slowly and throughout the entire organization, focusing on many different aspects at the same time.

5.2 Brand orientation

The largest discrepancy between the BO of the two groups lies within their BO *approach*, especially in seeing marketing and branding as tied to profitability and as an integrated part of the business model. Our interpretation is that the green group tends to approach brand building as more of a process and the red more as a project. The difference could also be classified as being more strategic in green companies and more operational in red, in terms of on what level decisions are made. These findings can be further emphasized through our interview findings where Case 3 above shows a clear example of brand building as an ongoing activity in a green company. Case 6 instead shows the approach of a red company, where decisions are based on short-term thinking and long-term implications are disregarded. Our interpretation of this type of behavior, the ad-hoc initiation of marketing communication activities, is that these activities are seen as less important within the red companies, or even as excluded from the company's business model. Basing strategic decisions on brand identity and core values can also be seen as a risky contradiction to the classical business patterns of secure and short-term profitability. Brand oriented companies seem put higher trust in these decisions, even if the results are very hard to measure and hard to identify in a short-term perspective.

In our framework, BO comprises the outside-in perspective and also the first (from the left) cogwheel in our visualization. When relating it to the cogwheel visualization, BO represents the attitude and approach an organization has to creating value through branding and marketing. Being the first and most important aspect, we believe that if an organization fail on this level, or if top management entirely disregards this concept as important, the first wheel is lost and the whole organizational machinery will cease to function.

5.3 Brand identity strategy

The largest discrepancies in BIS were found in the use of identity carriers. Analyzing case 7, presented in chapter 5.3, we found that green companies seem to use these carriers as a way of creating brand awareness and leveraging the unique visual identities of their brands. Red companies on the contrary looked upon these carriers more as something they needed to use because of tradition, which also corresponded to their answers on the questionnaire. The answers to the remaining questions lead us to believe that attitudes towards the creation of brand identity as a means of value creation were rather different between the

samples. Core values and brand identities were phrased within all companies, but the green respondents used them as guidelines in most of their marketing related decisions, whereas the red group regarded them more as a marketing necessity.

BIS represents the internal perspective of our conceptual framework and the middle wheel in our visualization. It covers the processes in place to create, maintain and develop a strong brand identity and our results show that these processes exist to a higher degree in companies that are able and willing to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments. It also seems as if BO and BIS follow each other quite closely. The levels of BO correspond to the BIS levels in all our research objects, suggesting that this is a fairly common situation.

5.4 Integrated marketing communication

The most distinguished difference in IMC answers could be found in the degree to which companies cooperate between departments, even if it could not be proven statistically. In green companies, departments with authority to make marketing and branding decisions were more prone to cooperate in order to make their marketing message more consistent. We believe this can be seen as an extension of having a more developed BIS. E.g. implementing a process of having monthly meetings regarding marketing message consistency would connect the processes of BIS with the focus of IMC.

The attitude of the green group was further very different from that of the red. When similar cases could not be found in the red group, our interpretation of the interview responses presented in cases 8 and 9 is that green companies put more focus into translating their company strategies into means of communication. They principally seem to work towards a higher external integration of their accumulated marketing message.

IMC is finally our last concept, representing the inside-out perspective of our framework and how an organization works to integrate and communicate a consistent message to external observers. This is also the final wheel in our visualization. The consequence of failing on this level would be an unclear and confusing marketing message. The message would still be sent, with the help of the supporting BO and BIS. However, in order to achieve a noteworthy effect on the final perceived brand identity and its corresponding brand equity, we believe

the IMC aspect still is very important. With green companies, with higher levels of BO and BIS, achieving higher results on the IMC ranking, we would also suggest that if an observed company communicates an inconsistent message, there would probably be other reasons than purely poor IMC. An important cause would possibly also be a lower degree of BO and BIS as well. On the same line of thought, the IMC level of a company should be the easiest one to manipulate since the concept deals with more concrete questions than the more intangible BO and BIS.

5.5 Promotional items questions

Industry professionals seem to have a ground for saying that a difference between favourable and non-favourable customers can be seen in what position the employee responsible for promotional item purchases have. That these decisions are made at different levels could very well reflect that the organizations have different levels of BO. A favourable customer, thus one with higher BO, arguably assign the responsibility to more senior employees since they believe this branding and marketing aspect to be of high importance. This is also in accordance with the levels at which strategic branding and marketing decisions are made in favourable customers.

6. Discussion

In this chapter we will conclude the results of our study, discuss their managerial implications and provide concrete answers to our research questions. We will also put our findings into a broader perspective, discussing the future of the promotional items industry and how our conclusion could be implemented on the promotional items market. Finally, we will review the limitations of our research and make suggestions for future research.

6.1 Conclusions

We started this paper with the observation of a discrepancy between the potential advantages of marketing through promotional items and real world observations of the actual usage and demand for such items. The aim of the study was to contribute with insightful knowledge to the field of marketing through promotional items and it did so by posing the research question below.

What underlying organizational characteristics determine a company's *will* and *ability* to assimilate advice regarding promotional items into their marketing investment decisions?

Two research samples were compared from the perspectives of three closely related marketing concepts, *brand orientation*, *brand identity strategy* and *integrated marketing communication*, in order to answer this question. Since potential explanatory characteristics could be found within each concept, we will present our conclusions in three sections, separating the concepts from each other.

6.1.1 Brand orientation characteristics

Our research show that the most important characteristic of a company able and willing to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments is its level of BO. Translating this to more specific characteristics means that it has a top management that engages in strategic branding and marketing decisions, and that believes these decisions to be of importance for the overall business model of the company. They see engagements in marketing activities as investments rather than costs and tend to base decisions on their brand identity and core values, even if these contradict the classical business patterns of safe, short-term returns. A risk historically rewarded with higher profitability.

The BO characteristics also permeate an organization and its entire approach to creating value through marketing and branding. Doing so, the concepts of BIS and IMC are affected as well, suggesting a close relationship between the three. An engagement in the latter concepts therefore becomes less effective without a developed BO and even if brand orientated actions still can be made, the absence of these traits will result in a substantial loss of momentum in “the machinery” shown in our visualization model.

6.1.2 Brand identity strategy characteristics

In order to leverage BO and being able to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments one also need to have a developed BIS. This includes having processes in place for creating, maintaining and developing brand identity, such as conveying brand values to new and existing employees and having clear guidelines for brand usage.

A good BIS enables an organization to make brand oriented decisions, historically consistent with higher profitability. A lack of such strategy would instead imply an increased risk of brand dilution, due to an inconsistent or unfavorable communication of brand identity.

6.1.3 Integrated marketing communication characteristics

The will and ability to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments can finally be said to arrive from the acceptance of promotional items as a marketing channel and the belief that a consistent marketing message is of high importance. The organizational characteristics needed to integrate communication channels are covered by the concept of IMC. It emphasizes the need of an intra-organizational cooperation and coordination between departments and employees with marketing responsibility. This study also suggests that a greater attitude towards translating company strategies into means of communication is an important characteristic. The importance of IMC cannot be proven by statistical means in this study. Through the use of qualitative measures we could however draw the conclusions that the IMC concept, and its underlying characteristics, is as relevant as the other two. Since it is easier for an organization to change its IMC level compared to its level of BO and BIS, its relative importance is nevertheless somewhat lower in a larger perspective.

6.2 Managerial implications

This study shows that the concepts and characteristics of BO, BIS and IMC in organizations are important, and closely interlinked, when it comes to their will and ability to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments. The managerial implications from these conclusions are basically two fold.

First of all we can see them in the perspective of a company within the promotional items industry that provides consultation advice as a part of its business model. As mentioned in the introduction, these have a difficulty finding customers that actually are susceptible to advice in these questions and who not only use them as suppliers. Our study suggests that in order to do so, one should look at the potential customer's, or target organization's, levels of BO, BIS and IMC. There are unfortunately no specific organizational characteristics that one can concentrate on but complex questions seldom have simple answers. With a similar approach as our questionnaire though, organizations with the characteristics of a potentially favourable customer could easily be found.

After finding favourable customers, this study can additionally be used to educate them further on the subjects. One could point to certain characteristics that could not be identified in the company and for example say "if you want this communication channel to work even better, you need to improve the involvement of top management in these questions"

The different attitudes towards promotional items that exist, and the characteristics that drives them, are also useful for suppliers on the promotional items market as a whole. As mentioned in the introduction, it suffers from low margins and low entry barriers. What seems to be a potentially profitable niche for suppliers is to offer consultation and advice regarding promotional item investments, creating stronger relationship with customers and increasing their will to form long-term partnerships. This would result in higher margins and entry barriers but if choosing to exploit this niche, our study suggests that one would probably gain from working exclusively with companies expressing high levels of BO, BIS and IMC.

The other perspective would be from an ordinary organization looking to improve their usage of promotional items, or arguably similar marketing concepts. For companies with little or no knowledge of these concepts, this study could be an eye-opener. Through the increased knowledge on the importance of BO, BIS and IMC, or simply by looking at our conceptual model, one could easily identify the different characteristics that the concepts are made up of. By conducting an individual study with a similar questionnaire as ours, one could later identify specific non-thought-of aspects in their respective organization that could be targeted and improved. For companies that have the knowledge, and actively work with these concepts, the study also act as a confirmation of that it actually works.

6.3 Limitations and suggestions of further research

What need to be emphasised is that we only compared the two extremes of a larger population, and that this population was comprised of the customers of a single company in the promotional items industry. Therefore, it is hard to speculate in how our findings are applicable on a larger scale. If we made the assumption that the entire market had the same characteristics as our population, any company extracted for an analysis would probably get a result somewhere between the two extremes in this study. Our samples of 23 and 12 companies out of the total 226 only correspond to the upper 10 and lower 5 percent of the population. This means that only 10% of the entire market would consist of favourable customers. However, considering that Company X is one of the players that actually offer advice in this market, we would argue that this fact has attracted a larger part of “favourable” customers to them. Hence, the population we analysed probably consisted of a larger part of favourable customers than the entire market, reducing the potential 10 percent target window even further.

If the knowledge of marketing communication increases and more companies adopt the concepts of this study as important we believe the demand for consultation regarding promotional item investments will rise in the future.

In accordance with our delimitation, this study has only covered the buying and selling aspect of promotional items. Our framework and the structure of our results, analysis and conclusions have also been kept to the three marketing concepts, with the exception of a few complementary empirical questions that provide additional insights to the overlying

purpose. Before ending this paper, we want to comment on a few limitations that our delimitations, and other factors have created.

By first of all choosing to answer our research question from the perspectives of only three marketing concepts, there is a risk that additional explanatory characteristics may have been left out. This was however a choice we had to make in order to keep the study within its pre-determined scope. Due to the same reason, and because of ethical issues, the study was also limited to one company. A more comprehensible view of the entire market might have been reached if several companies had participated with their own customers as additional research samples. This would however have caused a problem of confidentiality, why we chose to narrow our focus.

The result only having one source of data, and only using the extremes of it, was that our research samples became fairly small. When not all companies chose to participate, a high statistical significance could therefore not be reached on our results. By using these small samples and applying a qualitative research we could however succeeded in finding clear differences between them.

Additional improvements could also have been made to our questionnaire. With few conceptualization attempts to base our questions on, especially regarding IMC, we had to create the questions from our own interpretations of the three concepts. This primarily resulted in a low number of comparable questions regarding IMC. A comprehensible mean was therefore hard to derive.

The results to our questionnaire are also something that must be discussed as a limitation. Every single question received a higher mean value in the green group. Either this mean that there actually was an immense difference between the groups, or that we created the questionnaire in a wrongful way. Regardless of which, additional controlling questions should have been used, on which the results should have been the same regardless of group. The overall results should thereafter have been adjusted to reflect potential biases in the answers. When this was conducted as an explorative study however, with the purpose of

providing insightful knowledge to this field, we do not consider this as a shortcoming of immense proportion.

A final comment can also be made on the causality of our findings and the relationship between our marketing concepts. As with many explorative studies, the actual causality between a company's will and ability to assimilate advice regarding promotional item investments and its level of BO, BOI and IMC, cannot be proven in this study. We can only use our results to assume a causal relationship but the results may have entirely different reasons for looking as they do. In the same way, the perceived relationship between our three marketing concepts cannot be proven to be causal either.

For future references, the relationship and causality between these three models could be an interesting aspect to perform additional research on. Further conceptualization attempts of either model would also prove to be very useful additions to their respective marketing field. In the introduction to this study it was mentioned that the effects of using customized promotional items compared to standardized ones was an ideal area to investigate and even if promotional activities are very hard to measure, this is something that could be researched further. We also proposed a theoretical competitive advantage for customized promotional item companies. Why there is a discrepancy in the number of competing companies and the apparent potential in the industry, and what this discrepancy originates in, could finally be interesting areas of research.

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7.4 Interviews

Representatives from Company X

2011-02-25, 2011-03-16 and 2011-03-29

Representatives from responding companies

11 interviews during 2011-04-25 to 2011-05-05

Cecilia Cederlund, PhD Student, Department of Marketing Strategy, Stockholm School of Economics, 2011-02-23

Appendix I – Brand orientation index “the wheel”



Brand orientation index wheel, (Melin and Gromark, 2011)

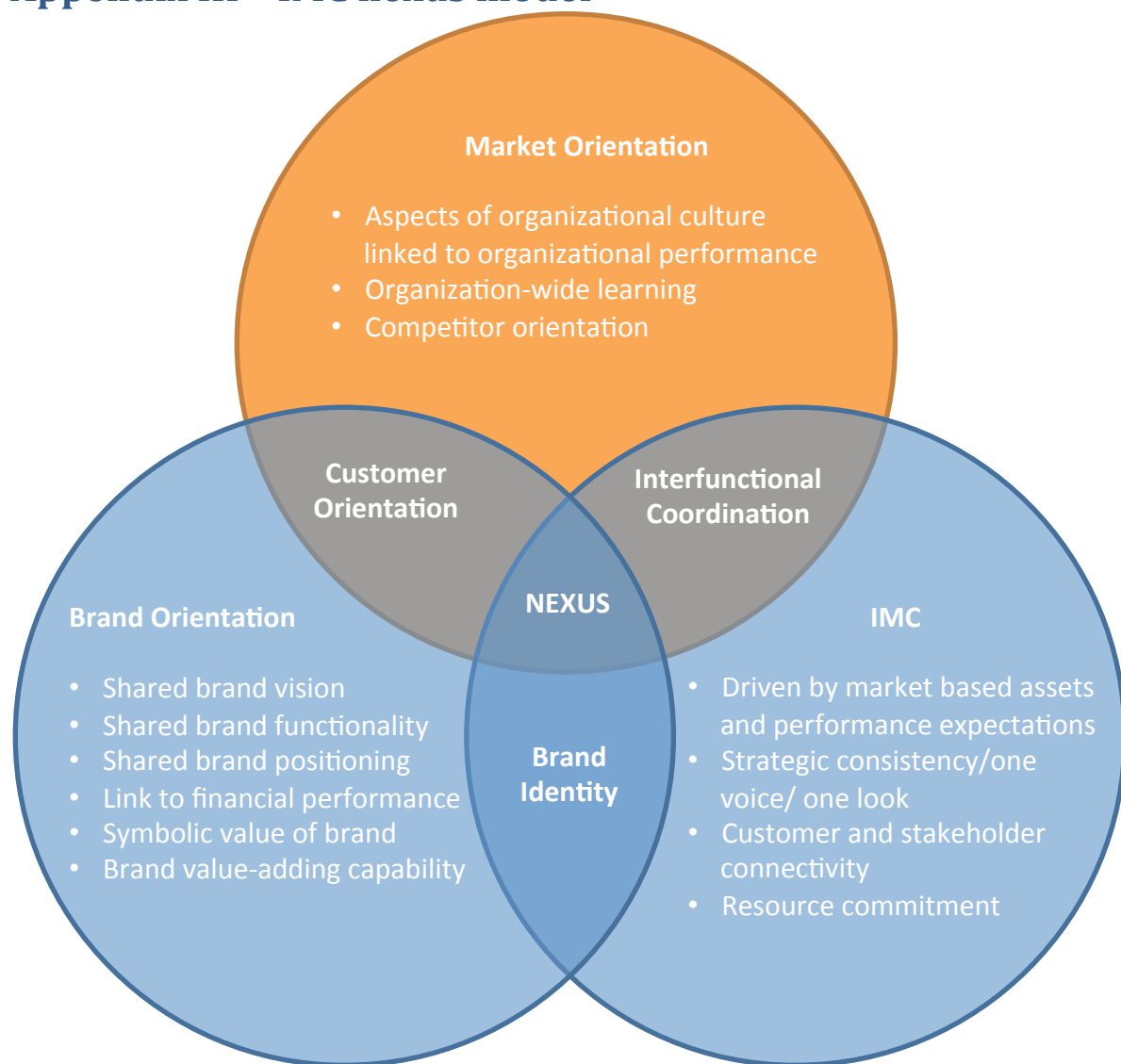
Factor	Description
(F1) Approach	Extent to which: (1) strong brands are associated with profitability (2) brand management is perceived as a core competence (3) brand building is an integral part of the business model and (4) brand advertising is seen as an investment rather than cost.
(F2) Implementation	Whether: (1) companies use brand as a beacon in the development of a value-driven organization and (2) they use it in order to inspire employees.
(F3) Goals and follow-up	The ability to set clear goals for brand development and to measure the degree of goal achievement.
(F4) Relationships	How the brand is used to create and maintain relationships with external stakeholders.
(F5) Identity development and protection	Measures taken during a brand process: registering trademarks, creating visual identity, positioning the brand and protecting the brand from infringement.
(F6) Operational development	Ability to use core values as the basis for all their processes
(F7) Top management participation	Degree to which top management (1) takes strategic decisions regarding the brand and (2) serve as brand ambassadors
(F8) Responsibility and roles	Ability to allocate responsibility and accountability in the area of brand management

Appendix II – Brand identity carriers



The five carriers of brand identity identified by Melin (1997)

Appendix III – IMC nexus model



IMC Nexus Model (Reid, Luxton and Mavondo, 2005)

Appendix IV – Participating companies

Green Companies

Company	Respondent	Turnover	Number of employees
A	Project Manager	2 500 MSEK	700
B	Trade Marketing Manager	450 MSEK	50
C	Internal Communication Manager	800 MSEK	600
D	Marketing Coordinator	1200 MSEK	550
E	Manager Global Marketing and Intelligence	750 MSEK	240
F	Marketing Assistant	1 400 MSEK	300
G	Brand Manager	3 300 MSEK	1200

Red Companies

Company	Respondent	Turnover	Number of employees
1	Marketing Assistant	300 MSEK	80
2	Purchaser	8 000 MSEK	1600
3	Salesman	100 MSEK	50
4	Head of Purchasing	770 MSEK	1300

Appendix V – Research questionnaire

#	Question	Personal	Brand Orientation	Melin Factor	Brand Identity Strategy	IMC	Empirical
1	Kön	x					
2	Ålder:	x					
3	Vad har du för titel/position i den organisation du jobbar för	x					
4	Vi tror att utvecklingen av starka varumärken är tätt knutet till lönsamhet.		x	F1			
5	Vi anser att utvecklingen av starka varumärken är en integrerad del av vår affärsmodell		x	F1			
6	Vi har registrerat våra varumärken		x	F5			
7	Vi följer aktivt våra varumärken för att förhindra varumärkesintrång		x	F5			
8	Det finns en person i organisationen som ansvarar för varumärkesbyggande aktiviteter		x	F8			
9	Vi lägger högre prioritet än våra konkurrenter på branding som ett sätt att förbättra vår konkurrenskraft		x	F1			
10	Vi använder aktivt varumärken för att skapa relationer med våra medarbetare		x	F2			
11	Vi betraktar varumärkesreklam som en investering snarare än en kostnad		x	F1			
12.1	Vi använder vårt varumärke för att skapa en god relation med följande: Media		x	F4			
12.2	Kunder		x	F4			
12.3	Medarbetare		x	F4			
12.4	Potentiella medarbetare		x	F4			
12.5	Allmänheten i stort		x	F4			
13.1	I vilken utsträckning använder ni ert varumärkes kärnvärde som vägledande princip för följande: Marknadskommunikation		x	F3			
13.2	Affärsutveckling		x	F3			
13.3	Intern kommunikation		x	F3			
13.4	Produktutveckling		x	F3			
13.5	Finansiell kommunikation		x	F3			
14.1	Strategiska beslut gällande varumärkesfrågor görs av: Ledningsgrupp		x	F7			
14.2	VD		x	F7			
14.3	Varumärkeschef		x	F7			
14.4	Marknadschef		x	F7			
14.5	Övrig/annan		x	F7			
15	Vi genomför regelbundet undersökningar av våra målgrupper för att bedöma deras kännedom om våra varumärken		x	F6			
16	Vi etablerar aktivt tydliga mål för att bedöma effekten av varumärkesbyggande aktiviteter		x	F8			
17.1	Vi arbetar aktivt för att skapa en unik visuell identitet genom utformning av vår: Varumärkeskommunikation					x	
17.2	Produktförpackning					x	
17.3	Logotype					x	
17.4	Varumärkessymbol					x	
18	Alla våra varumärken har tydliga riktlinjer för hur de får synas och användas visuellt		x	F5		x	

19	Vi arbetar aktivt för att våra anställda ska känna till samt förmedla vår varumärkesidentitet			x
20	Vi arbetar aktivt med att göra våra medarbetare till bra representanter för våra varumärken	x	F2	x
21	Vår organisations varumärkesidentitet (kärnvärden och image) påverkar samtliga beslut som fattas inom organisationen	x	F3	x
22.1	Hur viktiga är följande marknadsföringskanaler som delar av er totala marknadskommunikation?-TV			x
22.2	Internet			x
22.3	Radio			x
22.4	Tidningar			x
22.5	Profilprodukter			x
22.6	Event			x
22.7	Utskick med post			x
23	Hur många avdelningar i er organisation har befogenhet att besluta om hur dessa marknadsföringskanaler ska användas			x
24	Hur många personer i er organisation har befogenhet att fatta beslut om hur dessa marknadsföringskanaler ska användas			x
25	Vi arbetar aktivt för att koordinera de budskap vi sänder ut genom olika marknadsföringskanaler			x
26	Vi samarbetar aktivt mellan avdelningar med marknadsföringsansvar för att göra vårt budskap mer konsekvent			x
27	Vi arbetar aktivt för att förmedla våra varumärkens kärnvärden till både nya och befintliga medarbetare	x	F2	x
28.1	Ungefär hur lång framförhållning brukar ni ha i respektive marknadsföringskanal när ni bestämmer hur marknadskommunikationen ska se ut-TV			x
28.2	Internet			x
28.3	Radio			x
28.4	Tidningar			x
28.5	Profilprodukter			x
28.6	Event			x
28.7	Utskick med post			x
29.1	Hur stor kunskap bedömer ni att den leverantör ni använder till respektive marknadskanal har om er varumärkesidentitet och era kärnvärden?-TV			x
29.2	Internet			x
29.3	Radio			x
29.4	Tidningar			x
29.5	Profilprodukter			x
29.6	Event			x
30.1	Hur viktiga är följande faktorer när ni fattar beslut om inköp av profilprodukter?-Utseende			x
30.2	Kvalitet			x
30.3	Pris			x
30.4	Antal			x
30.5	Livslängd			x
30.6	Användningsområde			x
30.7	Humor			x
30.8	Funktionalitet			x

Research questionnaire used in this study

Appendix VI – Research questionnaire results

The median answers for the two groups are presented in this part of the appendix. Each question number refers to a corresponding question number in appendix V. Questions 4 to 16 refers to Brand Orientation, questions 17-21 refers to Brand Identity Strategy and questions 22-27 refers to IMC. Different scales have been used and therefore the scales for each question are also presented below.

Question number	Scale	Median (Green)	Median (Red)
1	-		
2	-		
3	-		
4	1 to 6	6	4,5
5	1 to 6	6	3,5
6	1 to 6	6	5,5
7	1 to 6	5	3
8	1 to 6	5	3
9	1 to 6	5	4
10	1 to 6	5	3,5
11	1 to 100	81	53
12.1	1 to 6	5,5	3
12.2	1 to 6	6	5
12.3	1 to 6	6	4,5
12.4	1 to 6	6	3,5
12.5	1 to 6	5,5	3,5
13.1	1 to 6	5,5	4
13.2	1 to 6	5,5	4,5
13.3	1 to 6	5	4
13.4	1 to 6	5	4
13.5	1 to 6	4	3,5
14.1	1 to 6	1	0,5
14.2	1 to 6	0	0,5
14.3	1 to 6	0	0
14.4	1 to 6	0	0
14.5	1 to 6	0	0
15	1 to 6	5,5	3,5
16	1 to 6	4	2,5
17.1	1 to 6	6	3,5
17.2	1 to 6	6	3
17.3	1 to 6	6	4,5
17.4	1 to 6	6	3,5
18	1 to 6	6	4
19	1 to 6	5	3
20	1 to 6	5	4,5
21	1 to 6	5	3,5

Question number	Scale	Median (Green)	Median (Red)
22.1	1 to 10	8	0
22.2	1 to 10	8	3,5
22.3	1 to 10	1	0
22.4	1 to 10	5	3,5
22.5	1 to 10	4	1,5
22.6	1 to 10	8	1
22.7	1 to 10	1	4,5
23	-	4	3,5
24	-	5	6,5
25	1 to 6	5	5
26	1 to 6	5	3,5
27	1 to 6	5	4
28.1	1-52 weeks	20	0
28.2	1-52 weeks	8	2
28.3	1-52 weeks	12	0
28.4	1-52 weeks	16	7
28.5	1-52 weeks	16	6
28.6	1-52 weeks	16	15,5
28.7	1-52 weeks	11	4,5
29.1	1 to 100	76	0
29.2	1 to 100	71	12,5
29.3	1 to 100	51	0
29.4	1 to 100	75	5
29.5	1 to 100	63	50
29.6	1 to 100	52	36,5
30.1	1 to 100	92	65,5
30.2	1 to 100	91	85
30.3	1 to 100	81	44,5
30.4	1 to 100	71	0
30.5	1 to 100	89	52,5
30.6	1 to 100	79	67,5
30.7	1 to 100	40	4,5
30.8	1 to 100	81	74