Media Brands and the Advertising Market: Exploring the Potential of Branding in Media Organizations' B2B Relationships

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Abstract

Because of the changes in the media industry over the last years, brand management has become a key issue. Media brands fulfill important functions to compensate media product characteristics, one of those being the need to address the audience as well as the advertising market. Accordingly, branding strategies have to be developed from the brand identity for both groups of customers while being considerate about the match of the evolving images. This approach offers benefits not only in the audience market, but to media companies and advertisers alike. Through laying emphasis on a brand's exceptional contents, audiences and services, media companies can build up brand equity and differentiate themselves from competitors. Advertisers on the other hand profit from media brand activation and context leading to involvement of a distinct target group with the advertisement. Associations with the media brand are transferred to the commercial message, making it more credible and effective.

Keywords

Media management • Media product characteristics • Media brands • Media brands functions • Brand management • Branding strategy • Two-sided markets-Advertising • Media planning

1 Introduction

In recent years, brand management has become more important in several industries because of increasing competition and market segmentation. This holds true for the media especially. For years, newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television and

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movies have been distinct media with equally distinct production and consumption characteristics. Because of digitalization and convergence, media boundaries have disappeared and are no longer valid (Sommer & von Rimscha, 2014). In addition, the homogenous mass audience is becoming divided and subdivided into ever smaller target groups, who can choose from several niche products. While the number of options has skyrocketed and is almost limitless, usage has not kept pace. This is a classic example of the law of diminishing returns: more choice has not translated directly into more consumption. The ultimate consequence is a zero-sum market, where the number of brands within a product category increases, while the number of potential customers remains the same. The only way to attract more customers is to take market share from direct competitors (McDowell, 2004, 2006). These developments made it inevitable to put effort into branding strategies as brands can serve as heuristics simplifying decision-making. In doing so, media organizations focus on the audience, working on their differentiation to other products and services, while the advertising side is discussed less frequently.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in brand management research. Studies primarily investigate branding strategies in the audience market. As an exception, Ots and Wolff (2008) connect this stream of research to the advertising market. They look at consumer-based brand equity's implications for media planning and show that it has an influence on decision-making. However, a lot of questions remain unanswered. Therefore, I explore the uniqueness of branding in the media in more detail and investigate the potential of branding in the advertising market as well as potential benefits of media brands for advertisers.

Accordingly, this article looks at branding in the media, pointing out differences to other industries (Sect. 2). In the following, functions of media brands are explored (Sect. 3). Addressing the research gap in the advertising market, the focus lies on media brands' potential in the relationship between media organization and advertisers (Sects. 4 and 5). I suggest an integrated media branding model, considering audience and advertisers in media organizations' strategies. Last but not least, an agenda for future research is proposed (Sect. 6).

2 Branding in the Media

In brand management, *brand identity* is a well-established concept (Aaker, 1991; Esch, 2005, 2012; Meffert, Burmann, & Kirchgeorg, 2008). Based on Aaker (2010, p. 68) it can be described as a "unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization". Furthermore, with the help of the brand identity a relationship between the brand and the customer should be established by generating a value proposition involving functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 2010).

Thus, the concept of brand identity is integrating an internal (self image of the brand) and an external (public image of the brand) perspective and their interactions. The brand is positioned through the brand identity and perceived by the customer through the brand image. *The fit of brand identity and brand image is crucial as it determines the credibility of the positioning of the brand* (Burmann & Meffert, 2005).

McDowell (2006, p. 234) defines a brand in the context of media as “a name, term, sign, design, or unifying combination of them intended to identify and distinguish a product or service from its competitors. Brand names communicate thoughts and feelings that are designed to enhance the value of a product beyond its product category and functional value.” According to Siegert (2008), media brand management is defining and communicating what a brand stands for. These definitions are not at all different to those used in other industries. However, when applying the brand identity approach to the media, *media product characteristics* have to be considered.

Firstly, traditional media organizations serve two groups of customers, which is described as a *two-sided market* in scientific literature (e.g., Dewenter & Haucap, 2009; Wildman, 2006). While they offer content to the audience, they create opportunities to promote products and services. Hence, in addition to the audiences’ brand image, advertisers have a brand image too. As seen in Fig. 1, media companies define their brand identity, from which strategies for the audience as well as the advertising market are derived. Subsequently, the brand is perceived by both groups of customers and a brand image develops among audiences and advertisers. *In addition to a fit of brand identity and brand image, there should be a match between audiences’ and advertisers’ brand images*. Both images as well as their match serve as a feedback to the brand strategy as well as the brand identity. Despite audience and advertisers having different interests, they are very likely to come across advertisements targeted at the other group of customers, where contradictory information would be harmful. In the event that a media outlet targets mostly young audiences, but focuses on its wealthier readers, viewers and users when promoting its advertising services, it might lead to the confusion of business customers and less credible positioning. The example of Austrian newspaper *täglich Alles* shows that a bad image amongst advertisers can lead to failure despite success in the reader market (Fidler, 2008). In certain media businesses more than

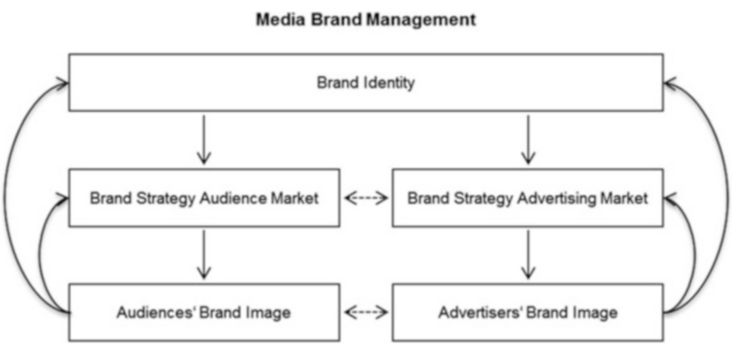

Fig. 1 Media brand management

two groups of customers are important. For instance, cable networks compete not only for the audience's attention and advertiser revenue, but also for carriage on cable systems as well as subscriber fees paid by the system operators (McDowell, 2004). Media not funded by advertising on the other hand, such as movies or books, also have to take the interests of other stakeholders into consideration, such as culture or location promotion (e.g., Castendyk, 2008; Knorr & Schulz, 2009).

Secondly, content and promotion opportunities are immaterial. In addition, media production involves high first-copy costs, creating a one-of-a-kind product in terms of content and design, while up-to-dateness vanishes because of the lack of exclusivity and imitability as they are public goods. From a normative perspective content is important, as media products are not only economic goods but also cultural and merit goods, fulfilling certain functions for society. Hence, branding a media product is different to branding in the consumer goods sector or other industries (Chan-Olmsted, 2006; Craig, 2013; Doyle, 2013; Kiefer, 2005).

Thirdly, media consumption involves high insecurity about the quality of the content as it can be evaluated after consumption or not at all. This makes products experience and credence goods (Heinrich, 2010; Kiefer, 2005; Siegert, 2001). On the other hand, media products are not particularly price sensitive which seldom makes a bad purchase significant, despite the high risk. Therefore, media consumption has been considered a low involvement experience, where there is little motivation to invest in decision making, and competing products are easily accessible (McDowell, 2006). Against this backdrop, branding becomes even more important. While content and design are ever changing, the brand is the only constant. High quality in terms of fulfilling user's needs is not sufficient for success. It has to be signalised through additional information and conveyed effectively before reception.

Lastly, the consumption of media products leads to external effects, such as the issue of climate change and everyone's responsibility in that context being on the agenda, leading to recipients buying something because of an article or consuming something because it was portrayed in the media as environmentally friendly (Kiefer, 2005). Furthermore, media consumption creates network effects. The more people watch a programme, the more important it gets, e.g., you have to watch a certain series to be able to join the conversation about it. Media brands can try to benefit from these effects through being part of the discussion.

In addition to these characteristics that in their unique combination differentiate the media from any other industry, media organizations have the option of self-promotion (McDowell, 2006; Siegert, 2001). Through their content they can contribute to their branding, try to influence brand images in the audience and advertiser markets, as well as set the agenda in a meta-discussion about the brand.

Because of the two-sided market, immateriality, insecurity, external effects and self-referentiality, marketing in the media is very challenging. However, brands fulfil several functions, which help to overcome these obstacles.

3 Functions of Media Brands

In the literature, *media brands' functions* are differentiated from the organizations', the audiences' and the advertisers' perspective (Siegert, 2001; see Table 1). In the following, they will be described in more detail.

For advertisers, media brands provide a known and reliable marketing concept and the attention of a well-defined target group. This in turn might reduce the need of own marketing tools. Hence, adverts can benefit from the fit of the product brand and a media brand as well as reach their target group more effectively. Media brands even offer the opportunity of equal partnerships between the advertiser and the media brand.

For audiences, media brands provide orientation when buying, consuming and interpreting media. They can assure quality and reduce risk in the selection process. For instance, when buying The *New York Times*, one expects a certain journalistic standard, a certain range of topics as well as a certain framing. Hence, when reading political news, the political orientation of the paper can be taken into account. On top of that, media brands provide additional individual and social benefits. As an example, someone might be able to influence his or her image through reading *The Economist* in public (see also Ots & Hartmann, 2015; as well as Scherer, 2015).

For the media organization, brands facilitate choices in the selection process or when setting up selection guidelines. They can also be a point of reference for decisions in production and buying (see also Siegert, 2015). Another function is the media brand's role in recruiting, where it can serve as a signal for human resources management. Furthermore, it is important for deciding on cooperation. For instance, a newspaper defining high quality as the core of its brand identity should

Table 1 Functions of media brands (Siegert, 2001)

Organizations' perspective	– Facilitating decisions in the selection process – Facilitating decisions in buying and production – Facilitating recruiting and cooperation – Securing innovation – Building a corporate identity – Attributing ad effects to products – Structuring program planning and audience/media research – Boosting and stabilizing sales – Differentiating from competition – Strengthening the position in negotiations with advertisers
Audiences' perspective	– Facilitating decisions in the selection process – Giving orientation while using media – Providing a frame for interpretation – Securing quality (e.g., credibility) – Reducing the risk of a mistake – Providing additional individual and social benefit
Advertisers' perspective	– Providing a known and reliable marketing concept – Providing target group specific attention – Reducing the need of own marketing tools – Giving opportunities for equal partnerships

therefore pay attention to the accuracy of its content and invest in exclusive information as well as its employees. The media brand also offers the potential of securing innovation within the organization and building a corporate identity. It allows attributing effects to certain organizations or products. A TV station could stand for very young and innovative programming, transferring these values to products in its environment. From the organization's perspective, the stabilization of sales through media brands is important. It can also be a basis for structuring program planning and audience research. In addition, media brands allow differentiation from the competition and potentially strengthen the position in the advertising market. An online outlet might be able to benefit from its offline reputation and therefore have a strategic advantage over its competitors.

However, *certain functions of media brands for media organizations and audiences are of importance to advertisers as well.* In particular, a media organization's corporate identity and differentiation from competitors are potential benefits. Advertisers also profit from stable sales figures, as it reduces the risk of buying advertising space and time. The benefits of media brands' functions from the audiences' perspective are a frame for interpretation, and especially a proxy for a certain quality.

To sum up, the media brands' communication and signalling opportunities are important for the media organization, audiences and advertisers. In addition, they can compensate immateriality and insecurity within the media selection, consumption and interpretation process, as well as assure an expected quality. Media brands can also support external and network effects through a fit and transfer of associations between brand, content and advert.

As media brands can help to compensate for media product characteristics which complicate marketing, brand management is seen as an important factor in the media industry (Baumgarth, 2009; Köhler, Majer, & Wiezorek, 2001; Walter, 2007; for an overview of success factors in the media see Sommer & von Rimscha, 2013). Its key role is pointed out in the media, brands, actors and communication model (MBAC model), which suggests a brand identity-driven decision making by journalists and media managers (Siegert, Gerth, & Rademacher, 2011). Thus, the media brand is a key asset of media companies (Wirtz, 2011).

A number of studies investigated different aspects of media brand management such as its relation to success (Baumgarth, 2009; Caspar, 2002; Chang & Chan-Olmsted, 2010; Collins, 2006; Förster, 2011; Habann, Nienstedt, & Reinelt, 2008; Rademacher & Siegert, 2007; Schnell, 2008). However, *research shares a focus on the reader or viewer side, while lacking a discussion of the advertising market.*

When focusing on the relationship of the media brand and the advertising market, two perspectives can be distinguished. On the one hand, the media brand can serve as a marketing tool for the media organization in its business with the advertising industry. On the other hand, advertisers can benefit from strong media brands. In the following, these perspectives will be investigated in more detail.

4 Media Brands as a Marketing Tool in the Advertising Market

Baumgarth (2004) assumes that strong media brands are more likely to be in the consideration set of decision makers and that their evaluation will show better results than what you would expect from nothing but quantitative figures. In addition, Ots and Wolff (2008) state that brand equity influences media buyers' selection process. However, this argument focuses on the customer based brand equity with the customer being the audience. But media organizations need to build brand equity in the advertising market as well. It is crucial to communicate information about the company, its media outlets and their contents to potential audiences as well as the business community (Baumgarth, 2004; McDowell, 2004). "Consequently, media brands must generate two sets of brand strategies" (McDowell, 2006, p. 245).

As shown above, brands help to simplify life. Consumers often lack motivation, capacity or opportunity, to process all of the information which they are exposed to. Hence, they opt for quick resolution techniques stored in memory. In addition, strong brands also reduce risk and uncertainty. The behavioral outcome of relying on brands is therefore a cultivation of habits: Loyalty (McDowell, 2006). This holds true for consumers as much as for advertisers.

However, *business-to-business (b2b) advertising* has different objectives compared to advertising for consumers (b2c). While consumer ads are typically aimed at the general public segmented into narrower demographics or lifestyle groups, b2b advertising focuses on business decision makers, such as marketing managers or media planners. In doing so, it has to be considered that members of a business community share a common understanding of what is read, viewed or heard (McDowell, 2004). This makes differentiation easier and more difficult at the same time.

Ots and Wolff (2008) recommend media companies to influence the perception of media buyers in four aspects: Firstly, media companies should focus on the superiority of their audience profile based on either quantitative measures or segmentation. Secondly, commitment of consumers and brand loyalty are important aspects. Thirdly, media marketing should work on the match of media brand image and advertised product brand image. Lastly, media companies have to concentrate on the responsiveness of branded editorial content to certain consumption needs. They conclude that media brands "with a clear audience segmentation profile, the ability to show strong emotional and behavioural attachment of the consumers to the consumer brand, and a clear response to consumption patterns and needs are perceived to have high brand equity, according to our respondents. If these brand positions are communicated consistently to the advertising market, they seem to have good opportunities to build brand equity on the b2b markets" (Ots & Wolff, 2008, p. 108).

A study of cable network's b2b advertising reveals seven differentiation strategies (McDowell, 2004):

- Affluence: Differentiation from “poorer” competitors through statistical information on income and buying power of the audience (“upscale”, “professional”, “sophisticated”)
- Targeted sex or age demographics: Concentration on narrow attractive demographics (“The first network for men”, “Dedicated to young American Hispanics) or even ratings growth potential (“fastest growing”, “ratings on the rise”, “building on the momentum”) based on statistical data
- Targeted personality or lifestyle: Combination of statistical information with intangibles of an audience (“Our viewers are a different breed . . . Savvy. Curious. Active”, “Passionate in their Pursuits”)
- Unique audience behaviour: Appreciation of practical needs of advertisers through information on audience behaviour and attitudinal research such as length of tune-in, internet usage, loyalty or satisfaction (“Attracts early adopters—first on the block”, “. . . among the highest in commercial recall”)
- Best off-network hits: Focus on previously successful programs (“Prime Time in the daytime”)
- Original or first-run programming: Emphasis on original programming not available elsewhere (“. . . a great passion and investment behind our vision”, “Critically acclaimed”)
- Reputation: Focus on intangibles rather than quantitative ratings data (“risk taking”, “bold”, “cutting-edge”, “most-trusted”)

While quantitative and qualitative criteria play a role in these strategies, the media brand can be a signal for both. In addition to an emphasis on content (topics, quality) or audience (figures, demographics), a media brand can stand for exceptional customer service in the advertising market which is highly valued as well as a means of differentiation (Ots & Wolff, 2008). In doing so, media companies can reduce advertisers’ information overload and support their decision process in order to build up brand equity in the advertising market. High brand equity means strong favourable associations towards a brand, which leads to behavioral loyalty, in this example a repeated buy.

5 Advertisers’ Benefits from Strong Media Brands

Media brands have certain effects on advertising messages, which provide potential benefits to advertisers (Baumgarth, 2004). Two key concepts are activation and context, which are highly relevant to the level of involvement in reception and perception processes (Marty, 2013).

Watching TV or listening to the radio are common examples of low activation and hence lead to passive media consumption and low involvement. High involvement on the other hand, is characterized through an active consumer, who looks for information intentionally, such as reading a newspaper or a magazine (Berkler, 2008). In the literature, high involvement is attested a positive influence on advertising success and recall. Attention for media content is transferred to placed adverts (Moorman, Willemsen, Neijens, & Smit, 2012).

Context is the environment in which the advertisement is embedded. In television, a positive effect of the programming on advertising success was shown because of a spillover from consumers' interest in the media context on the embedded advert (Moorman et al., 2012; Tsiotsou, 2013). For print media these context effects are even stronger than in TV, as readers can decide how much attention they want to devote to an advert. Involvement with the publication leads to the positive assessment of advertisements and the advertised product as well as a connected buying decision (Tipps, Berger, & Weinberg, 2006). Hyun, Gentry, Park, and Jun (2006) show a positive relation of context and advertising recall for magazines. In radio, the involvement of listeners had a positive connection to the opinion on the advertised brand and the buying intention, as they are more responsive to adverts when listening to a program which they like and are involved in (Norris & Colman, 1996).

It is shown that a positive experience with a medium leads to more ad efficiency (Malthouse, Calder, & Tamhane, 2007). According to Unger, Durante, Gabrys, Koch, and Wailersbacher (2002) the placement of an ad next to a related article affects the effect of the advert. More generally, the fit of media content and ad message also has a positive effect (Norris & Colman, 1996). This is emphasized by Esch, Krieger, and Strödter (2009), who point out that the environment influences a positive or negative attitude towards advertisements and brands.

Involvement and fit can both be provided by the media brand in the relationship between advertisers and media company. In addition, the media brand's image is important. Positive associations such as credibility or high quality are transferred to the advertised product or service (Gierl & Hüttl, 2009). Ots and Wolff (2008) are more specific and point out that the audience's relationship to the personality of the medium can rub off on commercial messages and make the communication more effective.

Another advantage of a strong media brand is its consumer based brand equity. Three different brand effects leading to potential benefits for advertisers can be distinguished (Ots & Wolff, 2008, pp. 105–106; see Fig. 2):

- Behavioral loyalty of consumers to the media brand increases predictability and stability making purchase of ad space less risky
- Attitudinal loyalty of consumers of the media brand improves advertising impact and efficiency
- Differentiation of well-defined target groups of the media brand allows more advanced media planning routines and higher target group affinity

Siegert's (2001) functions of media brands from the perspective of the media company and audiences are closely related to those brand effects.

Baumgarth (2004) summarizes the benefits of strong media brands for advertisers. They stand for a high subscriber ratio, a high reading quantity and a positive reading environment leading to more effective advertising. Another effect

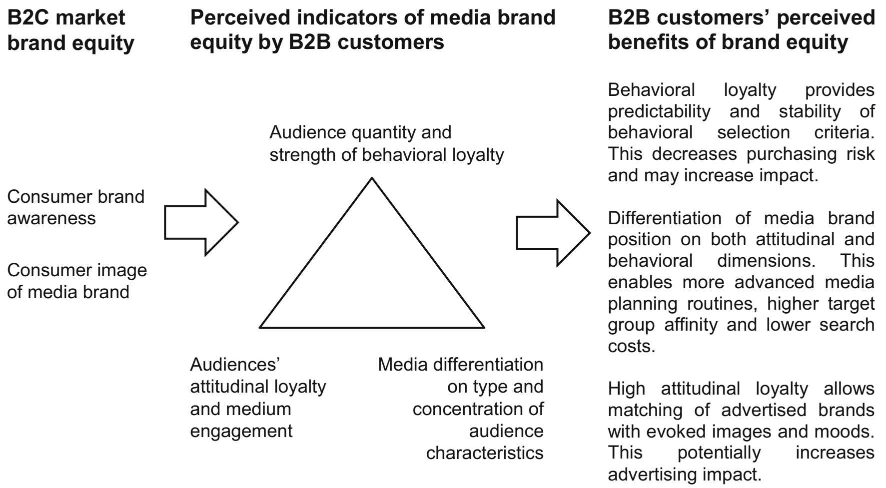

Fig. 2 Consumer based brand equity in media's b2b relationships (Ots & Wolff, 2008, p. 107)

results from addressing a distinct target group. These potential benefits of strong media brands lead to higher brand equity and make media planners accept premium prices.

Despite the potential benefits just discussed, as well as the willingness to pay a premium, the media brand as such does not seem to be an important criterion in the advertising market. Within a study in Switzerland, we investigated the role of the media brand in *media planning* (for details see Marty, 2013). In total, 47 advertising and media planning professionals answered our questionnaire about media selection criteria and the importance of the media brand for different elements in the process. When comparing qualitative with quantitative criteria, they are rated as less important: while 21 % said the relation of qualitative versus quantitative would be 70:30, 40 % chose 30:70. Amongst qualitative criteria which we selected from the literature, the media brand ranks seventh (out of 10 items), after media mix fit ($M = 4.38$), image ($M = 4.34$), involvement ($M = 4.15$), editorial environment ($M = 4.13$), target group profile ($M = 4.04$) and role of the medium ($M = 3.89$) with an average of 3.64 on a five point Likert scale. However, all qualitative criteria are related to the media brand. It is the connecting element when content is offered on multiple channels and therefore closely related to the media mix. The image is an integral part of the media brand concept. Involvement, editorial environment, target group profile and role of the medium are also aspects the media brand can stand for, as shown above. Therefore, *we see a lack of in-depth knowledge in the field of brand management amongst media professionals* (McDowell & Batten, 2005). Difficulties in differentiating qualitative criteria and the media brand are also a conceptual and methodological challenge, as media planners clearly acknowledge the values brand attributes represent (Ots & Wolff, 2008).

6 Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

Digitalization and convergence lead to increasing competition in the media industry, which made it inevitable for media companies to put efforts into branding strategies. Media brands fulfill important functions to compensate media product characteristics. Despite the two-sided market being one of those characteristics, a strong focus on the audience can be observed, particularly in media management research.

However, in media's b2b relationships, branding offers benefits to media companies and advertisers alike. Through laying emphasis on a brand's exceptional contents, audiences and services, media companies can build up brand equity and differentiate themselves from competitors. Advertisers on the other hand profit from media brand activation and context leading to the involvement of a distinct target group with the advertisement. Associations with the media brand are transferred to the commercial message, making it more credible and effective.

Despite the potential of branding, media companies are not able to fully use their brands as marketing tools in the advertising market to put themselves ahead of the competition. This might be also because of a lack of in-depth knowledge of media brands amongst media professionals. Ots and Wolff (2008, p. 108) conclude that media firms "need to support their case with more convincing evidence in order to take full advantage of these largely unexplored resources". Therefore, they have to work on their branding strategies laying emphasis on information relevant to media planners, which could be quantitative as well as qualitative. They need to communicate what they stand for (e.g., target group, content, quality), considering the fit between the brand identity and the brand images of both groups of customers. While Siegert, Gerth, and Rademacher (2011) put brand identity in the center of decision making by journalists and media managers regarding content for the audience side, this paper suggests an integral approach. *Brand identity should be central to the whole organization and a point of reference for developing business models and business activities. Only then, potential conflicts between audiences and advertisers can be avoided and coherent brand strategies lead to matching brand images in both markets as well as a credible positioning.*

Future research needs to explore this holistic approach to brand management in the media. Focusing on the advertising market, there is a lack of studies on the importance of the media brand in media planning. Following Ots and Wolff's (2008) exploratory qualitative interviews, a quantitative survey is necessary. Once a better understanding of media brands in the advertising market is achieved, research should also look into b2b brand equity and brand management's contribution to success in the media industry.

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