

Franchisees' Websites and Concept Uniformity: A New Challenge for Franchisors

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Abstract This paper aims to highlight the challenges associated with network uniformity and brand image for franchisors, more specifically when their franchisees set up and manage their own website. This practice has some impact on network uniformity which is a key concept in franchising. We analyze the presence of franchisees on the Internet of 471 networks, both in retailing and services, described in the 2011 franchise directory. We find that only 38 franchise networks are concerned about this practice. We use a qualitative approach based on multiple cases studies of these 38 franchise networks. It points out the different aspects of franchisees' websites that can damage concept uniformity. Maintaining network uniformity when there are various websites set up and run by franchisees entails challenges to franchisors that are presented in this paper within a managerial

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perspective linked to technical and organizational know-how. Some insights from the legal perspective are also provided.

Keywords Franchising • Franchisees' websites • Internet • Uniformity

1 Introduction

The trade press often highlights the importance of the use of the Internet in the franchising sector. The Internet is considered “a good vehicle for advertising and promotion” (Trice 2001). The Internet is also viewed as “an effective tool for promoting [the] systems, communicating efficiently with [the] franchisees and suppliers, and capitalizing on the opportunities presented by ‘e-commerce’” (Plave and Almosch 2000). Franson and DeSmith (2005) asserted that “[v]ery few franchise concepts have no need of the Internet as a means of increasing communication and contact with the customer in a way that the customer finds convenient. As a customer, it is a bit shocking when a company has no Web site or online inquiry capability (almost as shocking as going to a retail store and finding they only take cash).” Other benefits associated with the use of the Internet in the franchising sector are brand recognition, lead generation, the possibility of reaching out to new customers virtually anywhere, higher-market saturation and new sources of revenues (Franson and DeSmith 2005; Rogers et al. 2007).

The impact of Internet on franchising is of great interest. First, it is essential for franchisors to establish a consistent presence on the Internet in order to maintain network uniformity and reinforce their brand image, given that uniformity and brand name are key elements of franchising (Caves and Murphy 1976; Klein 1995). From this perspective, Flosdorf (2002) asserted that “[m]aintaining a consistent brand image can help build business in any industry, but for franchises consistency is imperative for success and survival.” Second, in the field of European competition Law, the Guidelines (2010/C 130/01) associated to the EC Regulation on vertical restraints n° 330/2010 of April 20, 2010, opened a new conceptual field of reflection which is now calling more extensive research. These guidelines recognize that the Internet, which should be free to be used not only by franchisors but also franchisees, is a very powerful tool for selling products. They define the set of rules to be respected when being present on the Internet and stipulate that a supplier—here, the franchisor—may control the quality of the websites used by its distributors—here, its franchisees. Third, the impact of Internet on franchising is very important since franchising has become a key sector in the economy. Franchising deserves specific attention due to its continuous growth in many developed and emerging countries. For instance, in the US, there are 2,200 franchise networks including 784,802 franchised units, generating 7.8 million jobs and 739.9 billion dollars of turnover (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2011). In Europe, as well, franchising is particularly developed with about 10,183 different franchisors and 427,000 franchised stores (European Franchise Federation 2012).

Most previous research has dealt with the use of the Internet by franchisors (Cedrola and Memmo 2009; Dixon and Quinn 2004; Kaufmann et al. 2010; Perrigot and Pénard 2012; Rao and Frazer 2006). Nevertheless, the literature on the use of the Internet by franchisees, i.e., when they set up and manage their own website, is very scarce. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the risks of such franchisees' practices which can jeopardize both network uniformity and brand image. Indeed, "[b]rand identity, or image, is one of the most prized assets of successful franchise organizations. Yet, while most franchisors today build excellent brand recognition through national advertising and marketing programs, many fail to extend brand identity to every marketing piece used by their franchisees" (Oseland 1995). In this paper, uniformity is considered on two levels: between the franchisor's website and its franchisees' websites and between franchisees' websites. We explore the following research questions: (1) What is the extent of franchisees' presence on the Internet (via their own website)?, (2) What are the main characteristics of the franchise networks within which some of the franchisees have their own website?, and (3) what are the main elements for which we find similarities or, contrarily, differences that break network uniformity and then damage brand image?

The empirical study deals with the French market. From the population of 471 franchise networks described in the 2011 franchising directory published by the *French Franchise Federation*, we build a sub-sample of franchisors whose franchisees have their own website. Using these networks, we analyze in depth the content of the franchisor's websites along with the content of the franchisees' websites in order to point out the similarities and differences in terms of network uniformity.

This research offers three main contributions. First, it builds on the franchising literature for which more franchisee-based perspectives are encouraged (Dant 2008). Secondly, this paper contributes to the literature on the use of the Internet in the franchising sector for which Cedrola and Memmo (2009) and Rao and Frazer (2006) called for more research. Thirdly, it draws on the literature on uniformity and brand name in the franchising sector (Kaufmann and Eroglu 1998) by focusing on uniformity between franchisor's and franchisees' websites, as well as among franchisees' websites themselves and not between physical stores as usually studied in the literature (Streed 2007; Streed and Cliquet 2008).

The paper is organized as follows. In the second section, we briefly review the literature on the use of the Internet in the franchising sector to highlight the need for more research on the use of the Internet by franchisees and its impact on network uniformity. The third section describes the research methodology. We then successively present and discuss the findings of our empirical study in the fourth and fifth sections. The last section is the conclusion.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *The Use of the Internet by Franchisors*

Some scholars have already investigated the use of the Internet by franchisors (e.g., Cedrola and Memmo 2009; Dixon and Quinn 2004; Kaufmann et al. 2010; Perrigot and Pénard (forthcoming); Rao and Frazer 2006). For instance, Dixon and Quinn (2004) analyzed the use of the Internet by 364 franchisors in the U.K. Their main research questions consisted of determining the percentage of franchisors who have websites and seeing if this percentage depended on the industry; highlighting the percentage of franchisors' websites allowing customers to order online; exploring if franchisors had pages dedicated to individual franchisees; and exploring other uses for the franchisors' websites. They found that about two thirds of the sampled franchisors were present on the Internet. This figure depended on the industry in which they run their business. They also pointed out that 15 % of the franchisors offered the ability to order and pay via the website. Moreover, they confirmed that many franchisors used their websites to provide Internet users with products and services information, company information, franchisee solicitation and franchisee location. Finally, they pointed out three main categories of franchisors' online activities: information, sales and franchising.

Rao and Frazer (2006) studied a random sample of 202 Australian franchisors. They distinguished two main activities on the franchisors' websites: franchisee solicitation and coordination activity (company history, franchising background, franchisor services, testimonials, etc.) and promotion activity (store location, product information, discounts, online sales, etc.). They found that only 11.4 % of franchisors websites allowed customers to buy online. They also examined differences in website activities according to network size and age. They found no systematic patterns and concluded that the use of the Internet by Australian franchisors was still in its infancy.

Kaufmann et al. (2010) focused their examination on a sample of 166 US networks present in industries that were "the most susceptible to direct on-line sales to end users" (p. 6) and completed this approach by using two case studies. They observed that 34 % of the websites in their sample were transactional. This high figure, in comparison with previous findings, is probably due to the types of industries selected, as well as the exploratory nature of their study. The results of their logistic regression model revealed that, beyond the significant and negative influence of the percentage of franchised stores, a significant and positive influence of network internationalization on the adoption of an E-commerce strategy by franchisors was also being exerted.

Cedrola and Memmo (2009) explored a sample of 305 franchisor websites selected from eight different industries and various markets (Australia, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Spain, the U.K. and the US). They analyzed the way franchisors used their websites. They focused on several elements displayed on franchisor websites: franchisor presentation and website features, product, communication,

pricing, distribution and customers relations. They found that 80 % of the franchisors under investigation were mainly using the Internet to provide information on their products and services, that only 44.3 % advertised on their websites using banners, pop ups, or specific online ads, that 41 % provided clear information on product and service prices and that only 19 % carried promotional campaigns on their websites. They also found that only 10.2 % of websites offered functionalities related to online purchases, again depending on the industry in which they run their business.

Perrigot and Pénard (forthcoming) focused on the E-commerce strategies of 486 franchise networks in the US market. Using the resource-based view, they formulated various hypotheses on the factors that influence the adoption of an E-commerce strategy by franchisors, namely the percentage of company-owned stores in the network, network size and age, franchisor resources (franchising fees and franchising royalties), and the allocation of exclusive territories to franchisees. Their findings suggest that the percentage of company-owned stores and the brand image, as represented by network size, both exert a significant and positive impact on the adoption of an E-commerce strategy, whereas network age and franchising royalties exert a significant and negative impact on the adoption of such a strategy.

2.2 The Use of the Internet by Franchisees and the Consequent Need for Uniformity

The papers on the use of the Internet in the franchising sector—mentioned above—have all dealt with the franchisor perspective, as does most of the research in the franchising field. Moreover, their authors have mainly focused on the transactional capabilities of the websites, even if some of them have also analyzed the content of the franchisor websites. In this paper, we adopt another perspective. More specifically, we explore the presence of the franchisees on the Internet and the associated challenges for their franchisors in terms of network uniformity and brand image. “On the surface, branding is the public perception of [the] company, but on a deeper level it is every single point of contact that a consumer makes with [the] company. It is the products and the services provided. It’s the Web site, advertising and special events. It is word-of-mouth and any press coverage the franchisee received. Perhaps most importantly, branding is the message every one of the company’s franchisees communicates to consumers” (Gould 2005). Franchisees’ websites thus contribute to network brand image. In terms of network uniformity, as Findley (2007) wrote, “maintaining and strengthening brand identity, though sometimes difficult, is vital to franchise success. If the brand message is not consistent between units, the message can become confusing and unclear.”

From this perspective, Oseland (1995) asserted that “[f]ranchisees, as well as franchisors, can play a role in managing brand identity by ensuring that all components of the brand have a consistent look and message. The logo, copy points

and slogan that consumers see in a local direct mail piece should be the same as those they see in a nationally televised commercial. The graphic look should be the same, the colors the same, the feel, the signature, the tonality, all the same." Findley (2007) talked about consistency as critical to maintaining uniformity and specified that "[t]here are key areas in marketing where consistency should be expected and enforced by the franchise company. The areas include customer service, operations, logo usage, advertising campaigns and quality control systems." We can also mention marketing-mix elements, advertising, logos, signs, URLs, etc. We detail now these elements that have to be consistent on the Internet, whatever the considered website.

First, uniformity in terms of products and services deals with products and services that must be displayed on the franchisees' websites. A customer will not appreciate seeing a product or service available in a specific store of brand X, or on a franchisee X's website, that is not available on the website of another franchisee of the same brand X. So, the question of product and service assortment and overlap is relevant. Second, uniformity in terms of price is very important as well. The price represents one of the essential elements of brand positioning and can have an impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Drastic differences in pricing would not be understood by customers even though imposing prices is contradictory to anti-trust laws (Lafontaine 1998). Thirdly, uniformity in terms of communication deals with promotion, slogans and mascots that refer to the brand. The management of promotional activities in a uniform way across websites is essential. Fourth, there are some other elements that can be associated with the "place" of Marketing's 4P in the Internet arena. It deals with the URL (respect of the brand name use, use of the city name, etc.). As Plave and Almosch (2000) reminded, "[c]oordination of domain names is [...] critical, as this process protects the entire network." There is also the question of graphic chart and use of logos (respect of colors, fonts, etc.). Graphic charts can correspond to the appearance of the physical store. Customers have to have the same impression when they visit a store as when they visit any of the brand's websites. Concerning logos, Findley (2007) specified that "[I]logo usage is another huge aspect of marketing consistency. A logo is a representation of brand identity. It means much more than just a name or symbol, which is why it's so important to remain consistent in all usage of it." Finally, there is the website design because the challenge is to create and maintain a uniform "look and feel" for all Websites. "Inconsistencies in the "look and feel" of a network's Websites may damage the public's general perception of the network's uniformity, which is the hallmark of any franchise network" (Plave and Almosch 2000).

All the above elements have to be consistent across all franchisor's and franchisees' websites, even if differences do exist among the franchisors and the franchisees in terms of technical, human and financial resources and entrepreneurship orientation. Franchisees can set up and run their own website. However, according to Paragraph 54 of the 2010 guidelines on vertical restraints, "[the] supplier may require quality standards for the use of the internet site to resell its goods, just as the supplier may require quality standards for a shop or for selling by catalogue or for advertising and promotion in general." Thus, from a practical

perspective, maintaining uniformity across the network of stores and maintaining uniformity across the network of franchisee websites are almost similar tasks in terms of managerial and marketing aspects.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data

3.1.1 The Franchising Sector in France

Our empirical study deals with the Internet-related practices of franchisors and franchisees and their associated challenges in terms of network uniformity in a European market: France. In Europe, franchising is well developed with about 10,183 different franchisors and 427,000 franchised stores. As in other European countries, franchising in France has experienced a continuous growth since the 1970s. In late 2010, the number of franchisors equaled 1,477 (+ 5.8 % compared to 2009) and the number of franchised stores equaled 58,351 (+ 10 % compared to 2009), generating 335,000 jobs and more than € 47.88 billion of turnover (French Franchise Federation 2012). Franchising is present in all industries in France, including retailing and services. Many French franchisors have succeeded at the worldwide level with famous brands such as *Brioche Dorée*, *Cache-Cache*, *Ibis*, *Jacques Dessange*, *Morgan*, *Novotel* and *Yves Rocher*. France is also an attractive market for foreign franchisors. This is particularly the case for US franchisors in the fast-food industry with *Domino's Pizza*, *KFC*, *McDonald's*, *Pizza Hut*, *Subway*, etc. currently expanding in the French market.

3.1.2 The Population of Franchisors Under Investigation

The observation process—detailed below—was conducted on the 471 networks described in the franchise directory published by the *French Franchise Federation* in 2011. Figures on the characteristics of the franchise networks allow for a global overview of franchising in France. From these 471 franchise networks, we see that the average network size is 90.46 stores, including both franchised stores and company-owned stores within the French market (min: 1; max: 928; st. dev.: 116.78). The average percentage of company-owned stores within the network in the French market is equal to 33.10 % (min: 0; max: 100; st. dev.: 28.88). Mean network age is 15.03 years (min: 1; max: 98; st. dev.: 13.19). The entry fees are equal to € 16,596.62 in average (min: 0; max: 80,000; st. dev: 12,458.75). The mean franchising royalties are equal to 3.67 % of store turnover (min: 0; max: 38; st. dev. 3.13). Franchising contract duration is 6.07 years on average (min: 0; max:

20 years: st. dev. 2.10). Finally, 57 % of the sampled franchisors are in the service industry (versus the retail industry).

3.2 *Methods*

3.2.1 **The Multiple Cases Approach**

We chose to illustrate the uniformity-related issues faced by franchisors, when their franchisees set up and ran their own website, using a qualitative approach and, more specifically, the multiple cases approach. Qualitative research offers several advantages, among which is richness of data (Hair et al. 2008). The multiple cases approach allows scholars to explore phenomenon as multi-unit franchising (Weaven and Frazer 2007a, b) or plural form (Brookes and Roper 2012; Perrigot and Herrbach 2012) by using a general perspective. In this paper, the main form of data collection relies on the observation of franchisors' and franchisees' websites. This observation was conducted in a short period of time (from April 28, 2011 to May 20, 2011) in order to limit all kinds of biases associated with website observation (modification/update of the content of the websites, creation/suppression of the websites, etc.). The URLs of the franchisors' websites were displayed in the 2011 franchise directory published by the *French Franchise Federation*. Regarding the franchisees' websites, we searched their URL using the *Google* search engine, with the name of the franchise network as the keyword. We looked at the first 20 pages of the *Google* results and if a franchisee's website appeared on one of the last five pages of the *Google* results, i.e., on pages 15–20, we pursued the search process to include five additional pages of the *Google* results.

One of our first findings was that only 38 networks out of the 471 under investigation, i.e. 8.07 % of the sampled franchisors, have franchisees (at least one) running their own website. Table 1 describes the characteristics of these 38 franchise networks.

Results of t-tests displayed in Table 2 show that there are some significant differences, in terms of network characteristics, between franchisors who have franchisees running their own website and those who do not have. More specifically, franchisors who have franchisees running their own website are significantly older, with a lower percentage of company-owned stores and requiring less franchising royalties than those who do not have franchisees running a website.

3.2.2 **The Observation of Franchisors' and Franchisees' Websites**

We examined in detail all the franchisees' websites of the 38 franchise networks under investigation, along with those of 38 corresponding franchisors. We made screenshots of all the pages of each website. This led to 38 Word documents of 121 pages on average, with two screenshots per page. We then had a total corpus

Table 1 Characteristics of networks where at least one franchisee runs its own website

Network name	Industry	Network age	Network size	Percentage of company-owned stores	Franchising royalties	Franchising fees	Franchising	Contract duration
<i>Abithea</i>	Real estate	6	26	7.69		7,500		5
<i>Akena</i>	Hotel	19						10
<i>Anne Carole</i>	Real estate	11	26	3.85		12,000		5
<i>Archea</i>	Household equipment	11			2.25	19,000		5
<i>Atout Ménage</i>	Services for people	4	22	9.09	4	13,500		5
<i>Axeo Services</i>	Services for people	4	126	6.35	5	25,000		5
<i>Balladins</i>	Hotel	26	140	45.71	4			5
<i>Bistrot du Boucher</i>	Restaurant	23	36	2.78	3	45,000		7
<i>Brasseries Flo</i>	Restaurant	42	22	63.64	3	30,000		10
<i>Brit Hotel</i>	Hotel	11	100	15		2,000		5
<i>Café Leffe</i>	Restaurant	24	17	0	3	47,000		5
<i>Camille Albane</i>	Aesthetics	17	226	3.1	3	8,500		5
<i>Cavavin</i>	Specialized food	26	83	3.61	1	14,000		7
<i>Dafy Moto</i>	Services for car	37	100	30	5	9,000		5
<i>De Neuville</i>	Specialized food	25	131	11.45	4	15,000		7
<i>DistriClub Medical</i>	Services for people	36	37	2.7	2.45	15,000		5
<i>Easy Cash</i>	Other businesses	10	54	0		24,750		9
<i>Ecotel</i>	Services for companies	35	35	2.86		23,000		3
<i>Eric Stipa</i>	Aesthetics	20	109	26.61		2,750		5
<i>Guy Hoquet</i>	Real estate	17	500	0	2	28,000		5
<i>In & Fi</i>	Services for people	7			5	27,650		5
<i>Inter Caves</i>	Specialized food	28			3	0		5
<i>Jack Holt</i>	Aesthetics	26	61	6.56	4	7,000		7
<i>Jardiland</i>	Household equipment	29	149	54.36	1.1	25,000		5
<i>La Maison des Travaux</i>	Real estate	3	32	0	5	12,000		5
<i>La Mangoune</i>	Restaurant	6	4	50	4	40,000		7

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Network name	Industry	Network age	Network size	Percentage of company-owned stores	Franchising royalties	Franchising fees	Contract duration
<i>La Pâtisserie</i>	Restaurant	8	79	3.8	4	45,000	7
<i>Les Domaines qui montent</i>	Specialized food	5	17	17.65	1.5	17,000	7
<i>Maison de la Literie</i>	Household equipment	31	287	34.15	3	20,000	5
<i>Maxauto</i>	Services for car	30	78	8.97	2	20,000	5
<i>Novotel</i>	Hotel	44	115	65.22			12
<i>Saint Algue</i>	Aesthetics	26	268	4.1		10,000	5
<i>Simply Market</i>	Specialized food	29	324	84.88		0	7
<i>Solvimo</i>	Real estate	8	160	0	2	20,000	5
<i>Speed Rabbit</i>	Restaurant	18	119	6.72	5	15,000	10
<i>La Taverne de Maître Kanter</i>	Restaurant		40	12.5	3	30,000	10
<i>Tonic Hôtel</i>	Hotel	17			1.5		5
<i>Villaverde</i>	Household equipment	25	86	16.28	0.6	6,100	5
		20.11	109.36	18.17	3.09	18,698	6.18

Table 2 Results of *t*-tests

Variables	Franchisors without any franchisees running their own website	Franchisors with franchisees running their own website
Network age**	14.58 (13.25) <i>n</i> = 429	20.11 (11.48) <i>n</i> = 37
Network size	88.71 (117.61) <i>n</i> = 357	109.36 (107.23) <i>n</i> = 33
Percentage of company-owned stores***	34.48 (29.03) <i>n</i> = 357	18.17 (22.68) <i>n</i> = 33
Franchising royalties**	3.72 (3.24) <i>n</i> = 300	3.09 (1.33) <i>N</i> = 28
Franchising fees	16,418.40 (12,439.13) <i>n</i> = 401	18,698.53 (12,685.02) <i>N</i> = 34
Contract duration	6.06 (2.12) <i>n</i> = 417	6.18 (2.01) <i>N</i> = 38

Legend: standard deviation values are indicated in brackets

*Significant at the 0.10 level; **0.05 level; ***0.01 level

of 4,641 pages, i.e. 9,282 screenshots. The information provided in Table 3 shows the significant differences across the networks, and also within each network, in terms of number of franchisees that have their own website and the minimum and maximum number of pages on the franchisees' websites. For instance, networks such as *Atout Ménage*, *Simply Market*, and *Solvimo* each have only one franchisee with their own website, whereas *Brit Hotel* has 28 franchisees running their own website. Table 3 also indicates that only 334 franchisees out of several thousands have their own website.

4 Findings

4.1 Uniformity and Product Policy (Product and Service Assortment)

Uniformity-related issues are highlighted in the following four cases, as far as product and service assortment is concerned. The first case deals with *Jardiland*. On the franchisor's website, the assortment includes six categories of products: "houseplants," "pet shop," "seeds & bulbs," "breeding-ground," "garden fittings" and "inspiration." The number of product categories displayed on the franchisees' websites varies from one to five. Regarding the categories similar (or almost similar) to these displayed on the franchisor's website, we have "nurseryman" and "garden" appearing on three of the four franchisees' websites, "pet shop" and "other activities" appearing on two websites, "garden furniture" is close to "garden

Table 3 Information on franchisors and franchisees websites

Network name	Number of pages on the franchisor website	Number of franchisees having their own website	Average number of pages on the franchisee website	Minimum number of pages on the franchisee website	Maximum number of pages on the franchisee website	Total number of analyzed pages for the network
<i>Abithea</i>	23	7	12	6	16	107
<i>Akena</i>	29	15	10	5	19	175
<i>Anne Carole</i>	45	3	9	13	11	77
<i>Archea</i>	30	4	13	10	21	81
<i>Atout Ménage</i>	23	1	5	5	5	28
<i>Axeo Services</i>	46	6	11	4	23	114
<i>Balladins</i>	33	24	12	1	39	312
<i>Bistrot du Boucher</i>	31	5	8	5	18	73
<i>Brasseries Flo</i>	8	14	5	1	16	71
<i>Brit Hotel</i>	57	28	15	2	34	465
<i>Café Leffe</i>	6	5	8	1	14	46
<i>Camille Albane</i>	25	11	9	4	33	127
<i>Cavavin</i>	14	13	8	1	29	124
<i>Dafy Moto</i>	36	15	12	7	37	214
<i>De Neuville</i>	29	3	9	6	15	56
<i>DistriClub Medical</i>	31	8	8	4	13	94
<i>Easy Cash</i>	28	2	9	9	9	46
<i>Ecotel</i>	16	5	9	6	10	59
<i>Eric Stipa</i>	36	8	7	4	9	92
<i>Guy Hoquet</i>	18	27	8	1	19	244
<i>In & Fi</i>	58	12	15	7	28	239
<i>Inter Caves</i>	23	13	7	3	21	117
<i>Jack Holt</i>	30	3	8	7	11	55
<i>Jardiland</i>	73	8	16	7	28	199
<i>La Maison des Travaux</i>	17	14	11	7	20	166
<i>La Mangoune</i>	5	1	12	12	12	17
<i>La Pataterie</i>	20	6	10	6	19	80
<i>Les Domaines qui Montent</i>	46	8	14	5	28	160
<i>Maison de la Literie</i>	28	16	10	6	15	180
<i>Maxauto</i>	22	6	9	2	14	73
<i>Novotel</i>	21	9	12	2	19	126
<i>Saint Algue</i>	30	6	8	5	12	75
<i>Simply Market</i>	29	1	2	2	2	31
<i>Solvimo</i>	3	1	7	7	7	10
<i>Speed Rabbit</i>	30	6	14	6	28	115

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Network name	Number of pages on the franchisor website	Number of franchisees having their own website	Average number of pages on the franchisee website	Minimum number of pages on the franchisee website	Maximum number of pages on the franchisee website	Total number of analyzed pages for the network
<i>Taverne de Maître Kanter</i>	8	14	13	1	20	183
<i>Tonic Hôtel</i>	11	3	22	6	35	77
<i>Villaverde</i>	–	3	44	34	55	133
TOTAL	1,018	334	421	220	764	4,641

fitting” and “inspiration” that appear on the franchisor’s website. “Florist” is close to “houseplants” and “seeds & bulbs.” One category is particularly threatening in terms of network uniformity: that is “swimming-pool” because it is not at all consistent with the franchisor’s assortment.

For the second case, *Ecotel*, the franchisor’s website displays eight categories (“art of entertaining,” “disposable,” “cooking,” “meal transport and caterer,” “hygiene,” “work clothes,” “hotel business” and “furniture”) while the franchisees’ websites only display two to seven categories. One franchisee’s website displays six categories that are similar to the franchisor’s website. One is quite similar: “upkeep” instead of “hygiene,” but doesn’t include “meal transport and caterer.” Two franchisees’ websites differ from the franchisor’s, but both look alike with categories such as “bar and pub supplies,” “restaurant supplies,” “hotel furniture,” “setting out,” and one of the two websites has another category: “hotel supplies.” Finally, two franchisees split their assortment into only two categories: “restaurant equipment” and “public sector equipment.”

Concerning the third case, *Maxauto*, on the franchisor’s website the assortment includes seven categories of products: “workshop services,” “tires,” “technical parts,” “my check-up,” “maintenance products,” “equipment & comfort,” “discounts and selected deals.” Assortments displayed on the five franchisees’ websites include three to four categories. The five of them include “car garage,” four include “tires,” and “car maintenance centre,” two include “industrial vehicles.” All those categories, though they are different from those of the franchisor’s website, still deal with the franchisor’s main products and services. The most worrying part regarding this case is that one franchisee displays two categories that are not included in the franchisor’s assortment: “car rental” and “windscreen and sunroof.”

The last case deals with *La Maison des Travaux*. We studied 12 franchisee’s websites that displayed different assortments. On average, the assortments included 4.33 categories (min: 3; max: 5). “Building” is the most quoted category and appears in seven websites. It is followed by “insulation” and “extension” quoted six times. “Roofspace fitting” and “renovation” appear five times while “roofing,”

“refacing” and “others” appear three times. “Bathroom” is quoted twice and “fitting” and “windows” appear only once.

In highlighting uniformity-related issues as far as products and services assortment is concerned, we notice that most of the franchisees, in these examples, do not offer Internet users the entire assortment advertised by the franchisors, i.e. what is available on the franchisors’ websites. Variations in terms of assortments also exist between franchisees’ websites. Even if selecting the product and service assortment to be sold is one of the franchisees’ rights, these differences in terms of product assortment—between franchisor’s and franchisees’ websites and simply franchisees’ websites—break the uniformity and can have a negative impact on the brand image of the franchise network as a whole. Customers perceiving this lack of uniformity related to products and services assortment may be confused, above all when information is so close—at one click—on the Internet.

4.2 Uniformity and Price Policy (Price Indication and Level)

Four cases highlight uniformity-related issues as far as price indication and price level are concerned. The first case that shows price consistency on the Internet deals with *Saint Algue*. The franchisor explicitly displays the prices of the services offered on its website, and three franchisees out of six do the same on their own website. We notice that, in general, prices on franchisees’ websites are one or two euros higher than those displayed on the franchisor’ website.

As far as the second case is concerned, *Café Leffe*, the franchisor does not display product prices on its website, whereas all the franchisees explicitly do so on their websites. We can observe price differences across franchisees’ websites. For instance, a rib steak is priced at € 12.00, € 12.90, € 14.50 or € 18.20, and mussels are priced at € 11.80, € 14.70 or € 14.95, depending on the franchised restaurant.

In the third case, *La Pataterie*, the franchisor makes its summer menu and all prices available on its website. One franchisee displays its menu without prices. Three franchisees out of six show neither the menu, nor the prices. Another franchisee shows its winter menu, thus indicating that the website has not been updated.

The same comments apply in regards to the fourth case, *Bistrot du Boucher*. The franchisor makes its menu and prices available on its website as does one franchisee out of five who have their own website. We also notice a difference between the prices displayed on the franchisee’s website and those displayed on the franchisor’s website, with some items more expensive and others cheaper.

In highlighting uniformity-related issues as far as price indication and price levels are concerned, we notice that even if these franchisees are free to display prices on their websites—prices that they set themselves as independent business owners—the differences in terms of price indication and level, can raise some issues

and damage the franchise network's brand image as a whole. Customers may also see this lack of uniformity related to the franchisor's the franchisees' price policy.

4.3 Uniformity and Promotion Policy (Communication and Promotions)

Four cases highlight uniformity-related issues as far as promotions are concerned. The first case deals with *Saint Algue*. The franchisor displays on its website a 20 % discount on the fixed price of haircolor and highlights, this discount being available in participating stores only. But none of the franchisees mention this discount on their websites. One franchisee offers a 20 % discount for customers under 20 years old and a *Saint Algue* loyalty card. Another franchisee displays offers specific to its store: a "discovery offer" gives a 10 % discount for a first time visit along with a "birthday offer" (on their birthdays, customers get a hair-product worth € 7).

In the second case, *Intercaves*, at the time of observation, the franchisor neither mentioned a specific promotion, nor any loyalty program, on its website. However, many franchisees display information about promotions on their websites, e.g., "Special offer – beautiful days," "Special offer – Club and association," "Offer – Beers," "For 45€ of purchase. . . a barbecue set offered," "Week-end package," etc. Consequently, all these promotions are instigated by the franchisees, underlining a lack of uniformity in terms of communication strategies. Regarding the loyalty program, only one franchisee highlights its loyalty program; the loyalty card is usable in the specific store only and not in all network stores. Finally, one of the franchisees, in May, was still advertising promotions that were available for St. Valentine's Day, three months before. This lack of information updating can damage the brand image of the whole network, not only the brand image of the specific store associated with this website.

The third case we can mention is *Les Domaines qui Montent*. There are two types of promotions: discounts offered for large quantities and discounts following the seasons and/or limited to a specific period of time. Concerning the franchisor's website, one promotion is available only in company-owned stores: "currently, in the company-owned stores, € 5.75 per bottle by box of six bottles, instead of € 6.90." One franchisee, in addition to proposing the same discount, offers a similar discount on another product with a different price reduction. Another franchisee shows the specific product but does not mention any associated discount. One discount is announced on the franchisor's website as being available in the whole network, "the winning 15," even though it is only mentioned on one franchisee's website. Finally, two franchisees mention their own promotions (a 15 % discount and gift cards of € 10, € 20 or € 50).

Regarding the fourth case, *Dafy Moto*, the franchisor offers a loyalty card called "Dafydélité," (fidélité meaning loyalty in English). It also proposes a game and a discount on *Michelin* tires. The loyalty card is mentioned on one franchisee's

website only. Concerning promotions set up by franchisees, 3 out of 16 offer discounts with dedicated tabs (“good deals”) on their website.

In highlighting uniformity-related issues as far as promotions are concerned, we notice that there is a clear lack of uniformity in terms of communicating about the promotions available in the network. When the network is a plural form network, composed of franchised stores and company-owned stores, it can be difficult for customers to understand that promotions are only available in part of the network. The same comment applies to the loyalty card that is specific to some stores and sometimes not usable in the whole network.

Some comments should be made as well regarding slogans and mascots because they are other means of brand promotion and communication. For instance, concerning *Axeo Service*, the franchisor’s slogan is “the commitment in a provided service,” and it has a mascot on its website. This slogan is used by four franchisees out of six, while the mascot is used by only two of them. The two franchisees that do not display the franchisor’s slogan have their own slogans: “a personalized and fitted assistance!” and “a daily helping hand!”

Another case is *Maxauto* whose franchisor’s slogan is “Our job is your car.” This slogan is taken up by only one franchisee out of the five who have a website. The other franchisees use different slogans on their websites, e.g., “Maxauto, a MAX of experience,” “Maxauto, everything for your car,” “A team at your service,” “At Maxauto, we take care of your vehicle.”

A last case is *Abithea*. The franchisor’s slogan is “For us, proximity has a signification,” which is taken up by one franchisee out of three. But even though this franchisee uses this slogan, it also uses another one: “Proximity to help you better.” The two other slogans on franchisees’ websites are “A prime example in real estate” and “Your partner in real estate projects.”

To conclude, as slogans and mascots are significant elements related to brand image, a lack of uniformity in their use on franchisees’ websites has some negative impact.

4.4 Uniformity and Place Policy

4.4.1 URL

Four cases highlight uniformity-related issues as far as URLs are concerned. The first case is *Speed Rabbit Pizza*. The URL for the franchisor’s website is www.speedrabbitpizza.com. The franchisees have URLs ending with “.fr” (two), “.com” (three), and “.net” (one), and all of them mention the name of the network in their URLs. All of them indicate a geographic indication except one. We can also highlight two surprising cases. The first mentions the word “pizza” three times and the name of the network twice in the same URL. Last, but not least, a franchisee uses the name of a competitor’s network, “dominos,” in its URL, in addition to the

network's name "speedrabbithpizza" as <http://pizza-livraison-empporter-pizzeria-dominos.speedrabbithpizza-bobigny.com/>.

In the second case, *La Taverne de Maître Kanter*, the URL for the franchisor's website is www.taverne-maitre-kanter.fr. Three franchisees do not really mention the name of the network in their URLs. Most franchisees indicate a geographic zone. One franchisee mentions the name of another network in its website URL, *Ibis*, which is a hotel network. Finally, three URLs can be considered challenging for the network, because they are very close to the franchisor's website URL (www.taverne-de-maitre-kanter.com, www.la-taverne-de-maitre-kanter.fr and www.tavernemaitrekanter.fr).

Concerning the third, *Distri Club Medical*, the URL of the franchisor's website is www.distri-club-medical.fr. Only three franchisees mention the name of the network in their URLs. Some use a geographic indication in their websites' URLs, while others mention their own name. One URL appears quite strange; it includes six key words (e.g., "incontinence") in addition to the classic URL.

The last case is *In & Fi*. Here, four franchisees do not mention the network name in their website URL but provide a geographical situation. Two other franchisees mention neither the network name nor a geographical indication in their URL (www.courtage-express.fr and www.destination-credit.fr). Without any clear reference to the brand name, this totally breaks the link with their franchisor.

While these four cases highlight uniformity-related issues as far as URLs are concerned, the dissimilarities in the URLs of the franchisees' websites indicate that franchisees do not follow any guidelines when they set up their websites. This can complexify the search process on the web, on the one hand, and raise some issues and damage the brand image of the franchise network as a whole, on the other hand. Moreover, customers may perceive a lack of uniformity related to the visibility of the franchisor and of the franchisees as well.

4.4.2 Graphic Chart and Logo

Four cases highlight uniformity-related issues as far as graphic charts and logos are concerned. The first case is *Intercaves*. In November 2009, one of the specialized websites dedicated to franchising displayed *Intercaves* new logo. Two years later, in May 2011, our observation of the franchisees' websites pointed out that ten out of the 14 franchisee websites still displayed the former logo and not the updated one. This also applied to their display of the former graphic chart with warm colors (i.e., red and chestnut) rather than the current trendy colors (i.e., purple and apple green).

Concerning the second case, *Guy Hoquet*, three years after the logo changed (in July 2008), our observation of the franchisees' websites in May 2011 pointed out that five out of the 28 franchisees' websites displayed the former logo and not the updated one, which is more modern and dynamic than the former one. Moreover, two franchisees used their own logo in addition to the franchisor's logo. Regarding

the graphic chart, seven franchisees' websites were designed by the franchisors with links between franchisor and franchisee's websites, so the graphic chart was fully respected. One multi-unit franchisee had four websites very similar to one another. The most challenging case relates to nine franchisee's websites that had completely different graphic charts than the franchisor's website, as well as those of the other franchisees' websites (e.g., use of different colors: black, grey or yellow background instead of the blue recommended by the network).

As far as the third case is concerned, *Novotel*, three franchisees out of nine respect the franchisor's graphic chart with similar tabs and colors. A multi-unit franchisee uses, on its two distinct websites not only the blue color but also other colors such as yellow, purple and orange, and uses a slogan different from this of the franchisor.

Finally, regarding the fourth case, *Cavavin*, the franchisor uses a light green background on its website but none of its franchisees use this color on their websites. Instead of this specific color associated with the brand, they use dark green, yellow, black, brown, red, white or grey. Regarding the logo, nine franchisees display the franchisor's logo on their websites, but the three remaining franchisees do not display it.

This lack of uniformity in terms of use of the logo and graphic chart raises an issue related to the identity of the franchise network. Internet users may be lost when visiting several franchisee websites associated with the brand, and by extension when visiting the physical stores.

4.4.3 Website Design

Four cases highlight uniformity-related issues as far as website design is concerned. The first case is *Akena*. Among the 17 franchisee's websites we studied, seven were built through the "Yellow pages" service, the ten remaining are traditional websites but display very heterogeneous designs. Three franchisee's websites appear modern and professionally-built. Four websites appear to be either house-made or professionally-built but already several years old with some signs of obsolescence. And three franchisee's websites display a very obsolete and unattractive arrangement and set of colors.

In the second case, *Intercaves*, whereas the franchisor's website seems to have been "in-house" created, due to a clear lack of professionalism in terms of design, ergonomics, etc. and the frequent unavailable pages, some of the franchisees have recruited web experts to design their websites. On the fourteen franchisees' websites, we noticed that at least six web experts have worked on an *Intercaves* website. One of these six web experts has designed the websites of four different franchisees. This can contribute to maintaining brand uniformity in terms of website design. However, some franchisees created a blog instead of a website, not in accordance with the other websites, and two franchisees created their websites via the "Yellow Pages" services.

Concerning the third case, *Camille Albane*, among the ten franchisee's websites under investigation, seven were built using the "Yellow pages" service, and one uses a blogging platform that allows very few ways to personalize the pages. The two remaining websites appear professionally-built and display a modern arrangement and set of colors.

It is important to mention the last case, *Brasseries Flo*. All the franchisees' websites have been built upon the franchisor's initiative, and we can find links to franchisees' websites on the franchisor's websites. Thus, the graphic chart is strictly followed, but to underline franchisees' independence, a different color has been allocated to each franchisee.

In conclusion, these cases highlight significant differences across websites in terms of website creation, design and updating that have a negative impact on brand image.

5 Discussion

5.1 Research Contributions

This paper contributes to the literature on franchising providing a different perspective—the franchisee one—than those usually adopted in the previous literature, i.e., the franchisor one. We followed the recommendation of Dant (2008) who insisted on the need for further investigation of franchising issues from a franchisee perspective. More specifically, we analyzed franchisees' websites along with their respective franchisor's websites, as well as the consequences of the content of these franchisees' websites on network uniformity and franchisor's brand image. We thus observed that franchisees' practices have some impact on the whole network.

Secondly, we built on the literature on the use of the Internet in the franchising sector in several ways. Contrary to previous literature dedicated to the E-commerce strategy of franchisors (Cedrola and Memmo 2009; Dixon and Quinn 2004; Kaufmann et al. 2010; Perrigot and Pénard (forthcoming); Rao and Frazer 2006), we focused on franchisees' presence on the Internet. Moreover, regarding the extent of their presence, we found that only 8.07 % of the franchisors listed in the 2011 franchising directory, published by the *French Franchise Federation*, have franchisees managing their own website. This figure is low and suggests that Internet-related challenges remain specific to some individual franchisors for the moment and has not yet become a generalized issue. Nevertheless, due to the continuous growth of the Internet and the European legal environment, this figure should increase in the future, and franchisors have to anticipate this trend.

Finally, this paper draws on the literature on franchising, uniformity and brand image. More specifically, we focused on the uniformity issue in the Internet arena, contrary to previous researchers who analyzed uniformity across the physical stores

(Kaufmann and Eroglu 1998). We pointed out that the issues are the same, whether in physical stores or the Internet, and that all the dimensions have now to be considered. Franchisors do not only have to focus on the compliance of franchisees to respect the uniformity basics in their stores, but uniformity has to be also considered between physical stores and Internet websites in order to maintain and strengthen their brand image. The issue then becomes more complex.

5.2 *Managerial Implications*

In this paper, we highlighted the consequences of franchisees who set up and run their websites on network uniformity and brand image. In fact, franchisors have two main ways to face this challenge and maintain network uniformity. Both are linked to know-how which is a core element of franchising; one deals with technical know-how, the other concerns organizational know-how.

5.2.1 *Technical Know-How*

The first way is to consider Internet use and activities as part of technical know-how that the franchisor transfers to its franchisees. According to the European Franchise Federation, “[technical] know-how means a body of non-patented practical information, resulting from experience and testing by the Franchisor, which is secret [], substantial [] and identified []”. The definition of know-how provided by the Commission Regulation (EU) (No 330/2010) is almost similar: “‘know-how’ means a package of non-patented practical information, resulting from experience and testing by the supplier, which is secret [], substantial and identified.” This technical know-how is usually described in an operational manual, also called the “Bible.” It provides franchisees with all the standards and rules to be applied in the physical stores. Why not inserting standards and rules regarding online activities in this operations manual? Or why not creating an E-Bible, i.e., an operations manual dedicated to technical know-how related to Internet activities, in particular the rules to be followed when setting up and managing a website (transactional or not)? The E-chapters of the already existing Bible or a separate E-Bible would complement the already existing chapters/Bible as far as online activities of the franchisees are concerned. This could for instance include templates for setting up the website, rules to include mandatory information and categories of products and services, advice for promotions and for price settings, etc. From this perspective, Plave and Almosch (2000) for instance mentioned that “any network will benefit from using a model that allows for easy updating of the information circulated to the public via the Internet (such as seasonal promotions, products changes or franchisee information).” This E-Bible could significantly contribute to keeping the uniformity of the network.

5.2.2 Organizational Know-How

The second way is to consider Internet use and activities as part of an organizational know-how that the franchisor internally masters. It deals with know-how relative to network engineering and management without being necessarily transferred to the franchisees (El Akremi et al. 2009; Perrigot et al. 2011). Such organizational know-how reflects the systemic and cross-disciplinary capacities that allow a franchisor to coordinate on a sustainable basis the generation and use of its strategic assets, along with its professional skills, in pursuit of achieving objectives. Based on a study conducted among 211 franchisors, several categories of organizational know-how have been pointed out (El Akremi et al. 2009). They deal with codification/transmission/replication, as well as support for human resources management, monitoring/oversight of store operations, external communication, internal cohesion/uniformity building, organizational flexibility, purchasing/logistics and access to financing sources. According to some franchising experts, the benefits for a franchisee in setting up and running its own website are greatly diminished if the franchisor has been able to previously develop a website offering an effective communication platform, eventually with an E-commerce functionality, provided the franchisor has successfully integrated its franchisees into a multi-channel strategy. It may be considered that over time, an online activity proves to be a standalone organizational know-how or a component of one of the previously identified organizational know-how, particularly as regards organizational flexibility, external communication and logistics.

In this specific case, the franchisor has to do everything in its power to ensure a mastery of the know-how components tied to the use of the Internet by investing sufficient amounts of financial, technical and human resources. The franchisor's website has to derive its full legitimacy and meet franchisees' expectations in terms of establishing the brand's web presence. Under such a scenario, franchisees will find no great benefit in setting up and managing their own website and facing the associated challenges, whether logistical, financial, etc. They will not “re-designs the wheel” [by] developing individual sites” (Plave and Almosch 2000). And as said in the trade press, “[t]he most effective way for franchise systems to manage the Web site issue is for the franchisor to maintain one site for the system” (Trice 2001).

5.3 Legal Implications

This research opens the field for further collaborations between experts of different fields. In a legal perspective, franchising is “schizophrenic”. On the one hand, franchising management, based on the concept of uniformity, is considered as promoting an economic and social progress: equal level in the quality of products and services, creation of a physical network which implies local employment,

improvement of the access to consumption, etc. On the other hand, as franchised stores are independent firms, according to competition Law, they must preserve their own management: price policy, choice of suppliers, products' assortment, etc. The legal significance of these risks presents an additional issue related to franchisee's websites. The findings mentioned in this study highlight the ways franchisors strike to find a balance between the distinct aims in the respect of competition law. This "schizophrenic" character of franchising raises a significant challenge to be overcome.

5.4 Limitations and Tracks for Future Research

This research has some limitations that future research could address. First, the empirical study is based on observations of franchisors' and franchisees' websites. It could still be argued that subjectivity has been introduced into this study via the interpretation of promotional aspects, web designs, etc. In order to minimize research bias, we initiated the observation together by comparing each individual observation to that of the other team members for the purpose of harmonizing our website observation process. Screen captures of all websites were also produced. Moreover, this approach only provides a snapshot in time of the content of franchisors' and franchisees' websites. This content likely evolved over the course of the observation period. A longitudinal approach spanning several months or years would be instructive in an effort to better understand the evolution of the content of franchisors' and franchisees' websites and the associated uniformity-related challenges for the franchisors.

Secondly, our research has been limited to the French market. Though Dant (2008) and Dant et al. (2008) mentioned the importance of studying franchising issues in other markets than the US, in pointing out the current predominant mono-cultural view towards franchising research, the exploration of uniformity-related issues raised by the franchisees' presence on the Internet with different legal context could be of interest. Some researchers have begun adopting multi-country perspectives in their studies of franchising issues (Dant et al. 2008; Dos Santos Silva and de Azevedo 2007; Dunning et al. 2007; Perrigot et al. (forthcoming)). For instance, such comparisons have highlighted significant differences in the strategies developed by US and French franchisors. It would thus be interesting to examine their respective strategies in terms of presence on the Internet.

Thirdly, in addition to the issues related to network uniformity and brand image, it would be of interest to focus on internal conflicts (franchisor/franchisee and also franchisee/franchisee) that are expected to increase with the growing presence of franchisors and franchisees on Internet. For instance, franchisees, who often benefit from exclusive territories, might consider the creation of a transactional website by the franchisor or by franchisees of the network as unfair competition, in extending the key concept of encroachment (Emerson 2010; Kalnins 2004).

Fourthly, this paper is managerially-oriented even if some insights from law have been introduced in the manuscript. The concept of uniformity will deserve a

detailed attention from a law perspective in future research. First, uniformity may be perceived as being the main element of protection of intellectual and industrial properties. Secondly, uniformity may be perceived as being in contradiction to the free competition principle. Thirdly, uniformity may be perceived as being in contradiction with international law.

6 Conclusion

This paper is a first attempt to highlight the challenges for franchisors facing the existence of various websites set up and run by their franchisees. “Brand image and identity is the responsibility of both franchisee and franchisor. It’s the part of the partnership that separates your business from the competition, keeps customers coming back, and encourages growth and expansion. By each taking a role in managing the brand, franchisors and franchisees can synergistically maximize its power, and its profit” (Oseland 1995). So, the use of the Internet by franchisors and franchisees has to be carefully examined. More research, from both business and law fields, is needed in the future. Other practices leading to the same kinds of issues in terms of the use of the Internet and network uniformity could be explored in further research. These practices deal with the presence of brands on social networks such as *Facebook*, *LinkedIn*, *Viadeo*, etc. Recently, the US franchisor, *Applebees*, worked with a media company to propose to its franchisees specific and regular contents to be included on their own *Facebook* page. This move highlights the know-how of the franchisor and its involvement. It is also a way to maintain the uniformity of *Applebees* on this social network.

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