University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Commerce - Papers (Archive)　　Faculty of Business and Law

2007

Corporate brands and social brands: co-branding GM-free and UK supermarkets

S. R. Leitch
University of Wollongong, sleitch@uow.edu.au

S. Davenport
Victoria University, New Zealand

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/commpapers

Part of the Business and Corporate Communications Commons, Marketing Commons, and the Social Influence and Political Communication Commons

Recommended Citation

Leitch, S. R. and Davenport, S.: Corporate brands and social brands: co-branding GM-free and UK supermarkets 2007.
https://ro.uow.edu.au/commpapers/526

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Corporate brands and social brands: co-branding GM-free and UK supermarkets

Abstract

In this paper we introduce the concept of “social brands” and examine the potential for co-branding between corporate brands and social brands to enhance or damage the value of corporate brands. Co-branding has been theorized in terms of the relationship between the brands of organizations, products and services. However, from a discourse perspective, issues may also be understood to function as what we term “social brands” that may be incorporated in a co-branding strategy. We deploy Leitch and Richardson’s (2003) brand web model to analyze the potential benefits and dangers of forming co-branded relationships with social brands. We draw on the case of co-branding between UK supermarket brands and the GM-free social brand to investigate this relationship in practice.

Keywords

corporate brands, social brands, activism, co-branding

Disciplines

Business | Business and Corporate Communications | Marketing | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

Publication Details

This article was originally published as Leitch, S & Davenport, S, Corporate brands and social brands: co-branding GM-free and UK supermarkets, International Studies of Management and Organization, 37(4), 2008, 45-63.

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/commpapers/526

Shirley Leitch and Sally Davenport

Corporate Brands and Social Brands

Co-Branding GM-Free and UK Supermarkets.

Biographical details

Shirley Leitch is Pro Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Corporate Communication at the University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand (tel.: +64 7 838 4494, fax: +64 7 838 4300, e-mail: sleitch@waikato.ac.nz). Sally Davenport is Associate Professor in the Management School at Victoria University, PO Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand (tel.: +64 4 463 5144, e-mail: sally.davenport@vuw.ac.nz).

Abstract: In this article we introduce the concept of "social brands" and examine the potential for co-branding between corporate brands and social brands to enhance or damage the value of corporate brands. Co-branding has been theorized in terms of the relationship between the brands of organizations, products and services. However, from a discourse perspective, issues may also be understood to function as what we term "social brands" that may be incorporated in a co-branding strategy. We deploy Leitch and Richardson's (2003) brand web model to analyze the potential benefits and dangers of forming co-branded relationships with social brands. We draw on the case of co-branding between UK supermarket brands and the GM-free social brand to investigate this relationship in practice.

Introduction

Corporate brands enable organizations to differentiate themselves from competitors and, in doing so, add considerable value to the balance sheet (Balmer and Gray 2003). Arguably one of the most effective ways of increasing the value of corporate brands is through co-branding (Blackett and Boad 1999; Motion, Leitch and Brodie 2003) which involves the public linkage of brands in order to enhance the value of one or both brands. Co-branding has been theorized in terms of the relationship between the brands of organizations, products and services (Blackett and Boad, 1999). However, issues may also be understood to have the potential to function as brands and, therefore, to become co-branded allies. It is this potential of issues to function as a type of brand that is examined in this article.

An issue is a point of disagreement between two or more parties. The types of issues with which we are concerned in this paper are those that involve differing views that have entered the public domain and involve organizations. One possible response by organizations to issues that affect them may be to embark on issues management strategies in order to either resolve these points of disagreement or reduce their potential to negatively affect the organization (Heath 1997). This approach frames issues as problems with which an organization must deal. However, if issues are reframed as a class of brands, then they may be seen to have both positive and negative potential in terms of their impact on the organization and its public representation, the corporate brand. The way in which issues may affect the value of corporate brands is addressed in this article. We offer the term "social brands" to describe this new category of potential co-brand allies and we deploy Leitch and Richardson's (2003) brand web model as a framework for analyzing their co-branding potential.

The potential benefits and dangers of co-branding between corporate and social brands are investigated by analyzing the strategies adopted by supermarkets in response to the campaign against genetically modified (GM) food in the UK. The case study method adopted in this article enables researchers to develop theory from research questions (Eisenhardt 1989). The research questions for this study are: (1) from a brand perspective, can issues be understood to function as social brands; (2) how might co-branding with social brands add value to corporate brands; and, (3) how might co-branding with social brands damage corporate brands? The case study examined here provides a starting point for theory building in this new area. Before analyzing the GM-free case, however, the new concept of the social brand will be defined within the context of the brand literature and in terms of its place within the brand web (Leitch and Richardson, 2003). A brand web analysis of the social brand "GM-free" is then outlined followed by a discussion of the implications of our analysis for corporate brand strategy.

Branding issues

The brand literature is both extensive and diverse, offering numerous perspectives on brands, their value and purpose (e.g.: Aaker 1996; Balmer and Gray 2003; de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998). The definition of brands adopted here is that they are most usefully understood as systems of meaning rather than as objects (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998). That is, our focus as brand researchers should primarily be on the way in which brands are understood and used by consumers rather than on the way in which brands are produced by organizations. Accordingly, brand theory has become less production-centered and more focused on brand consumption (Hanby, 1999). Production-centered brand theory emphasized the creation process, particular the visual elements of design, advertising campaigns and logos. In contrast, consumption-centered brand theory emphasizes the way in which brand consumers interpret and make use of a brand. It focuses on the ways in which consumers draw on brands to construct and express their identities (Balmer and Gray 2003; Simeos and Dibb 2001).

From a production-centered perspective, brands function to differentiate products, services and organizations from their competitors, while from a consumption-centered perspective, brands function to differentiate consumers from one another (see Figure 1) and to unite consumers into "brand tribes" that are, in turn, differentiated from other tribes. This phenomenon is highly evident in relation to, for example, car, motorcycle and entertainment brands. Consumers proudly display these brand labels and may purchase supporting merchandise – such as Harley Davison tee-shirts or model Ferraris – even if they are unable to purchase the product. They may also join clubs comprising other fervent brand tribe members or attend brand conventions to learn more about the brand.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Besides brands, issues may also provide a vehicle for the expression of personal identity. Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003) argued that the desire to express elements of their identities drives individuals both to join issue-related stakeholder groups and to participate in group actions. Issues may unite adherents into "tribes" that are differentiated from other tribes which have taken positions on other issues or opposing positions on the same issue. Thus, we contend that issues may function as brands, for which we offer the term “social brands”, differentiating consumers into brand tribes and providing vehicles for the expression of social identity. Social-brand consumers are able to purchase brand merchandise, such as tee shirts, bumper stickers and posters. They are also the target of large-scale direct-marketing and advertising campaigns designed to elicit support, donations and sponsorships to particular causes. Social-brand consumers may choose to join organizations that are associated with particular issues or may join in with their activities without becoming members. Consumer allegiance may, then, be to the social brand itself rather than to particular organizations. One reason for the potential dominance of brand over organization is that multiple organizations may be associated with the same issue. A parallel may, therefore, be drawn with corporate brands such as Virgin that also have multiple organizational associations such as Virgin Airlines, Virgin Records and Virgin Brides (Balmer 2001a, 2001b; Leitch and Richardson 2003).

As outlined above, the types of issues with which we are concerned here are points of disagreement between an organization and one or more of its stakeholders that have become public domain issues. Organizations may elect to deal with such issues through the techniques of issues management in order to gain or retain ongoing stakeholder support. This approach frames issues as problems that must be dealt with in order to reduce potentially damaging effects on the organization. While not denying that issues may constitute problems, we concur with Heath (1997) that issues also provide opportunities for organizations. In particular, when conceptualized as social brands, issues provide the opportunity to augment the value of the corporate brand, as discussed in the next section.

Global warming provides one example of an issue that we would argue has come to function as a social brand. Many organizations that produce products which once contained chemicals likely to damage the ozone layer, now proudly boast of being “CFC-free” in their advertising and on their product labels. This is not to argue that all issues have such a positive marketing dimension. Rather, it is to suggest that one component of issues management should be an analysis of co-branding potential. Co-branding is defined here as “a form of cooperation between two or more brands … in which all the participants brand names are retained” (Blackett and Boad, 1999). Thus, co-branding must involve a public linkage between two or more brands. The primary reason for adopting a co-branding strategy is to create a new brand association for consumers that will add value to at least one of the brands.

Co-branding is not necessarily a long-term strategy since it may be a tactical response to a particular issue that an organization must deal with. If conditions change, the need for the brand association may drop away and ties severed with the co-brand. Thus, co-branding with social brands may provide organizations with the flexibility to adapt quickly to changes in their social and political environments without permanently altering their core corporate brands. Thus far we have considered the first of our research questions by outlining how issues might be understood to function as social brands. We now turn to examine the way in which organizations have responded to issue-based attacks on corporate brand value, including the response of social brand co-branding.

Corporate brands and social brands

Corporate brands are a controlled representation of an organization's identity (Motion, Leitch and Brodie 2003). One of the primary differences between corporate brands and product or service brands is that the former have a multiple stakeholder focus rather than a customer focus (Balmer and Gray 2003; Donaldson and Preston 1995). That is, corporate brands represent organizations and organizations may have many stakeholders, including shareholders, employees, local and central government, activist groups and so forth. Product and service brands have only an indirect connection to these stakeholders via the corporate brand.

The multiple stakeholder focus of corporate brands lends them a social and political dimension that has seen many become the focus of anti-corporate-brand campaigns by pressure groups. High profile corporate entities are often singled out by activists for attention on issues that may be generic to the industry because such actions are likely to attract significant media coverage. Nike, for example, became the target of a campaign drawing attention to the labor practices of multinational corporations in developing nations. McDonald's continues to be the target of campaigns on a whole array of issues ranging from the destruction of rainforests to the treatment of farm animals and the inclusion of GM ingredients in their meals. These examples provide instances in which organizations have used issue management to deal with issue-based attacks that threaten to damage the corporate brand by creating undesirable brand associations.

Organizations have responded to issue-based attacks in a variety of ways, the most significant of which has been the advent of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Marchand (1998) has traced the origins of CSR back to the 1920s when large

US companies sought to legitimize their growing power by convincing the populace of the existence of the “corporate soul”. Their concern was to counter the socialist political movement which portrayed big business as a threat to democracy. Their goal was to reverse the groundswell of public opinion in favor of increased government regulation in areas such as health and safety, environment, urban planning and employment.

CSR shares some of the concerns of the corporate soul movement but adds the additional element of creating or enhancing corporate brand value by creating associations between the corporate brand and popular positions on social issues. Anita Roddick, for example, built the Body Shop into a hugely successful global franchise largely on the basis of CSR. Her concern was not to counter negative public opinion but to capitalize on it by offering an eco-friendly alternative to the major cosmetic companies. This initial focus on the environment has broadened to include a range of social and political issues that have little or nothing to do with the cosmetics industry, such as the war on Iraq. Through its CSR programs, the Body Shop brand has become better known for its politics than for its products. The Body Shop is, therefore, an example of an organization that has elected to enhance corporate brand value by creating co-brand associations with social brands. Indeed, one could argue that the Body Shop’s social brand co-brand connections have been the primary means by which it has differentiated its corporate brand from those of its competitors.

From a branding perspective, therefore, some components of CSR programmes may be seen to involve co-branding corporate and social brands. Such co-branding may enable consumers who intend to make social brand related purchase decisions to do so with ease (Follows and Jobber 2000). Carrigan and Attala (2001) have demonstrated that, while consumers express willingness to make ethical choices, they are more likely to do so if no inconvenience is involved, which includes having to seek out information. Corporate and social brand co-branding may also enable organizations to avoid attacks on their integrity or operations from pressure groups (Lantos 2001) and act as a signal to shareholders that companies are good corporate citizens.

We now outline the brand web framework which we use to analyse the co-branding strategies of UK supermarkets in relation to the social brand of GM-free. Analysis of this case provides the starting point for theory building in response to our research questions relating to how co-branding between corporate brands and social brands might either add value to or damage corporate brands.

The brand web

The brand web (Leitch and Richardson 2003) is an appropriate analytical framework for examining co-branded relationships because it is relationship-centered rather than organization-centered (see Figure 2). Organization-centered approaches to corporate brands portray them as composites of the elements that make up a single organization (Olins 1989). In contrast the brand web draws on semiotic (Barthes 1972) and discourse theory (Fairclough 1992, 1995; Van Dijk 1997) in which meaning is considered to be relational, which means that the meaning of a concept is to be found by exploring its relationship with the meanings of other related concepts. For example, one understands the meaning of "red" by understanding the meaning of other colours. In this sense, red is what purple, pink and other colors are not. Similarly, the meaning of brands is determined relationally in terms of their positioning relative to other brands. For example, we make sense of the Pepsi brand by understanding the meanings that have come to be associated with the brands of competitors, such as Coke. Coke may claim to be ‘it’ but Pepsi seeks to reposition Coke as an historical brand by portraying itself as the choice of the “new generation”. The meaning of Pepsi and of all brands is therefore both constructed and understood relationally. It is for this reason that the relationship between brands is the focus of a brand web analysis.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The brand web (Leitch and Richardson 2003) consists of four zones or levels of interaction (see Figure 2):

1. Hub -- the corporate brand
2. Nuclear brand family -- wholly owned product, service or subsidiary brands
3. Extended brand family -- brand allies not wholly owned or controlled
4. Brand community -- the broader brand environment

The hub of the brand web consists of the corporate brand, such as IBM or P&G. The corporate brand is not equivalent to the corporate identity of an organization because the latter is defined in its simplest terms as what an organization is and what it stands for (Balmer 2002; Cheney and Christiansen 1999). According to this definition, then, “corporate identity” is a much more inclusive concept than is “corporate brand”. The corporate brand is only a partial representation of corporate identity that is communicated to stakeholders (Motion and Leitch 2002).

The second zone of the brand web is inhabited by the nuclear brand family which comprises brands that are wholly-owned and controlled by the organization represented by the hub corporate brand. Product, service and subsidiary organization brands are all members of the nuclear brand family (e.g. Tide for P&G). The third zone of the extended brand family comprises co-brands, brand allies and strategic partners. Co-brands, as defined above, are brands that are publicly linked through a product, service or joint venture (e.g. “Intel Inside” on Compaq computers). They also include brands that are shared by organizations through licensing or other arrangements, such as the Virgin example outlined above. Our article offers social brands as a further category of co-brands that organizations may consider as potentially beneficial additions to their extended brand families.

The fourth zone of the brand web is the brand community made up of the broader brand environment. All of the brands that interact in some manner with brands in the first three zones lie in the fourth zone. For example, Coke is a member of Pepsi’s brand community as are the brands of all of Pepsi’s suppliers, retailers and advertising media. The brand community is a potent source of future members of the extended brand family as organizations draw related brands into strategic alliances and co-branded relationships. Social brands that lie within the brand community also provide a rich potential source of future co-branded partners.

The brand web is conceptualized from a discourse perspective which means that brands are analyzed within the context of the discourses within which they operate. Discourse is a concept for which there are numerous competing definitions but is here understood to mean an interrelated set of texts -- both spoken (e.g. conversations, meetings, speeches) and written (e.g. newspaper advertisements, reports) -- that together constitute an area or topic (e.g. health, education, government). Brands may operate within multiple discourses and different meanings may be attached to brands depending upon the discourse context. These contexts may be created by the organization or they may be created for the organization by others, including competitors, consumers, news media, or activist groups. For example, while Nike has positioned itself within the discourses of sport and fashion, activist groups have positioned it within a political discourse centered on the exploitation of third world workers and child labor. What the Nike brand 'means' to individuals depends upon which of these discourse contexts is predominant for them at a particular point in time.

Having explained the brand web's component zones, we next outline the way in which relationships within a brand web may be analyzed and then apply this analytical framework to our case study of UK supermarket co-branding with the social brand "GM-free" in order to address our research questions about the potential value or pitfalls for corporate brands of such co-branding.

Brand-web analysis

Within the context of the brand web, the interaction between corporate brands and social brands occurs in the third zone of the web (see Figure 2). A brand-web analysis provides an analytical framework that may be used by organizations contemplating the addition of a social brand to the extended brand family. There are four elements to a brand-web analysis:

1. the power relationship between the corporate brand and the social brand;
2. the brand values associated with each brand;
3. the goals associated with each brand; and

4. the strategies pursued in association with each brand (Leitch and Richardson 2003, pp. 1071-73).

Power relationships have both discursive (i.e. related to the creation of meaning) and non-discursive (i.e. related to physical resources) dimensions. The discursive dimension encompasses the power the brand has by virtue of what it has come to mean in the minds of stakeholders relative to the meanings of other related brands. The non-discursive dimension encompasses the infrastructure, capital and other tangible resources available to support the brand relative to that available to other related brands. For example, the discursively powerful Coke brand is supported by an international network of manufacturers, distributors and retailers, which means that the brand also has substantial non-discursive power relative to other brands, including its major competitors.

Generally speaking, corporate brands will have significantly more non-discursive power than social brands. Indeed, the only non-discursive power available to social brands is that lent to them by co-branded organizations. The discursive power of social brands may, however, be considerable if the issue concerned has gained widespread popular support. It is this discursive power that the corporate brand seeks to harness for its own purposes when it co-brands with a social brand.

The brand values of social brands are potentially valuable to corporate brands as sources of discursive power. Through co-branding, organizations can acquire associations with desirable brand values that would otherwise be difficult to establish. For example in the UK, the social brand “GM-free” may be characterized by the brand values of “natural”, “environmentally friendly” and “healthy”. These are all brand values with which supermarkets and others involved in the food industry might seek to be associated

(Harper and Makatouni 2002). However, a public clash between a UK supermarket and GM-free activists might lead to a negative brand association that would position the supermarket as opposed to these positive brand values. Co-branding with social brands may thus serve to protect corporate brands from such negative associations as well as extending the range of positive brand associations open to them.

The third and fourth elements of the brand web analysis involve an assessment of the *goals* and *strategies* pursued by each brand. Social brands cannot be said to have goals and strategies. Instead, it is the organizations that have co-branded with social brands that pursue goals and strategies. When social brands are brought into a corporate brand web, they bring their existing brand relationships with them. For example, "GM-free" is co-branded with international activist organizations such as Greenpeace and it is the goals and strategies pursued by Greenpeace and other co-branded organizations that must be considered by an organization seeking to co-brand with the GM-free issue. If the goals and strategies of the corporate brand are at odds with those of the social brand's existing co-branded partners then the relationship may be untenable. Further, instead of adding to their reputation for CSR, organizations may find themselves the target of activist groups or consumers angry at what they may perceive to be a cynical marketing tactic (Frankental 2001; Polonsky and Speed 2001).

Although there are many similarities between social brands and other brand types, they have distinctive elements which must be taken into account during any brand analysis. In particular, social brands are distinctive because they are not owned in any legal sense by the organizations that establish their brand equity. There are two major implications of this distinctive quality. The first is that the relationship with the social brand does not, indeed cannot, involve a commercial contract. The legitimacy of the co-branded relationship must therefore be established directly with the social brand's stakeholders because it cannot be bought. The second implication is that in engaging in social brand co-branding, private sector organizations enter a discursive realm that is dominated by discourse contexts with which they may have had little prior engagement. The activist organizations that have created the value of the social brand engage in social, political and environmental discourses. It is within the context of these discourses that the legitimacy of the co-branded connection must be established.

We now provide a brief overview of the GM-free issue in its UK context and then undertake a brand-web analysis of the co-branded relationship between GM-free and UK supermarkets. This analysis will address our second and third research questions as to how social brands might add value to or damage corporate brands.

Genetically modified food in the UK

The advent of GM food and the unease which it has generated with many consumers has created problems internationally for the food industry (Pringle, 2003). On one side, US agri-business has strongly advocated GM as a panacea for many of the problems facing agriculture, particularly erosion caused by tilling of the soil and the increasing use of chemicals. On the other side, some consumers and environmental or consumer interest groups have rejected what they have dubbed "Frankenfoods", arguing that these foods have not been in existence long enough for scientists to be sure that they are safe for human consumption or that they will not have long-term negative environmental impacts (Rifkin 1998). In the United States, agri-business appears to be winning but in Europe and Australasia, where consumer resistance is higher, the battle is still being fought. The response of UK supermarkets to GM food is now analyzed in order to illustrate how co-branding between an organization and a social brand may work in practice as well as its associated potential benefits and pitfalls.

At the time of writing, no GM crops were being grown in the UK. In February 2004, the Blair Government had agreed to allow such crops to be planted despite the fact that the "public was unlikely to be receptive" because they wished to back the UK science sector (Brown 2004, p. 1). The Government also expressed the hope that "Opposition might eventually be worn down by solid, authoritative scientific argument" (ibid). However, only one organization, Bayer CropScience, indicated that it wished to plant GM crops in the UK and even they had retreated from this plan by March 2004. Bayer cited security concerns as a prime reason for their withdrawal following a concerted programme of so-called "decontaminations" by activist groups such the Genetic Engineering Network, which involved pulling out GM crops. GM livestock was not reared in the UK but livestock was fed imported grain sourced from countries which had GM crops. The UK also imported fresh, canned and frozen fruit and vegetables from these countries as well as ingredients in processed foods, such as soya beans, which were a further potential source of GM in the UK food chain.

Surveys of consumer opinion in the UK had shown majority opposition to GM food and majority support for detailed labeling of food as GM even if the modification was not detectable in the food. The latter case referred to milk and meat produced from livestock fed GM grain. According to a survey conducted in May 2002 by the UK Consumers Association, 68 per cent of UK people rejected food produced from GM plants and 89 per cent rejected GM meat (http://www.which.net/campaigns/food/gm/findings). In 2003, the Consumers Association joined with Greenpeace, the Co-operative Group (which included a supermarket chain) and Unilever to stage citizens' juries on the GM issue. The juries were organised by the Newcastle University Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences Research Institute (PEALS). Jury members were selected randomly from the general population and participants were invited to take part in the juries without being told of the subject under debate. According to the report produced at the conclusion of the process, the juries called for: (1) a halt to the sale of GM food; (2) a halt to the growing of GM crops; (3) long-term research into the risks of damage to the environment; and (4) an end to simplistic assertions that GM crops will feed the Third World (PEALS 2003, p. 1).

During the same period, in June 2003, the UK Government sponsored its own set of public discussion forums entitled *GM Nation?*. The official report produced at the end of the debate offered seven key messages: (1) people are generally uneasy about GM; (2) the more people engaged in GM issues, the harder their attitudes and more intense their concerns; (3) there was little support for early commercialization of GM crops; (4) there was widespread mistrust of government and multinational companies in relation to GM food; (5) there was a broad desire to know more about GM and for more research to be done; (6) developing countries were seen to have special interests in the GM debate; and (7) the debate itself was welcomed and valued by participants (Department of Trade and Industry, 2003).

Public antipathy to GM food positioned supermarkets at the center of one of the most controversial social issues of the day. Initially, food industry groups had adopted a cautiously positive attitude to GM products. For example, the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) in its 1996 report (Brown, 1996) recommended a public-information campaign and the clear labeling of food to facilitate consumer choice. The IGD's stance was based on a belief that additional information would lead consumers to accept the benefits of biotechnology, including GM food. However, as the GM Nation project found, increasing information appeared to increase public unease about rather than acceptance of GM. Having outlined the background to the GM food issue in the UK, we now analyse the co-branded relationships that were formed between UK supermarkets and the social brand GM-free.

Brand-web analysis of GM-free and supermarket co-branding

GM food may originate with multi-national biotechnology companies but supermarkets are the primary consumer interface between the end-products and the consumer. As the GM issue gained increasing prominence internationally in the closing years of the twentieth century, supermarkets became the targets of direct-action campaigns by activist groups. If supermarkets could be persuaded not to stock GM food, then a major pathway to market would be closed off and GM foods might become uneconomic to produce.

Faced with the prospect of ongoing campaigns by activist groups that appeared to have at least the tacit backing of the majority of their customers, UK supermarkets elected to co-brand with GM-free. Ensuring that all of the food supplied to supermarkets was GM-free would have been an extremely difficult if not impossible task. Instead, in 1999, most UK supermarkets elected to turn to their own private retail brands, a range over which they could exercise maximum control. This strategy is akin to ingredient co-branding (e.g. the Intel inside" co-brand) in that it relates to the actual content of products sold under the co-brand (Blackett and Boad, 1999). Social issue co-branding thus occurred at the level of a sub-brand rather than at the corporate-brand level. However, the corporate brand was also enhanced and, as will be discussed below, it was the corporate brand and not the retail brand that received publicity in relation to the GM-free stance.

Power relationships between brands

Private retail brand ranges have a distinctive place in UK supermarkets that differs from that held in other countries, particularly the United States (Wrigley, 1997). UK supermarkets, such as Sainsbury, have succeeded in moving private retail brands from the category of low-cost generics to the value-added category of premium brands (Burt, 2000). Co-branding these premium retail brands with GM-free made commercial as well as political sense because it harnessed what was defined above as the *discursive power* of this social brand to enhance the value of the corporate and retail brands. This discursive power was created for the GM-free brand by organizations such as Greenpeace and the Genetic Engineering Network, which had invested considerable resources into building public awareness of, and concern about, GM food. Supermarkets had initially been the target of campaigns by these activist organizations. Following their co-branding of private retail brands with "GM-free", supermarkets removed themselves from the target range and, instead, became the subject of positive media stories on the issue. Supermarkets thereby harnessed the discursive power of the social brand "GM-free" to enhance their corporate brands.

Brand values

The second element of a brand-web analysis involves *brand values*. In the UK, supermarkets have generally adopted "caring for the community" as a central brand value and have demonstrated this brand value through their CSR programmes which have emphasized contributions to community projects and a concern for providing safe food to customers. The advent of BSE or "mad cow" disease in British beef as well as the foot-and-mouth epidemic have left British consumers highly sensitive to such food safety concerns. One of the primary brand values established for GM food by activist organizations was that it was unsafe food because its long term effects on human health had not been tested. Thus, the brand values of supermarkets and of the GM-free issue were compatible. Indeed, through their co-branding, supermarkets were able to provide another tangible example of their commitment to caring for the community by providing safe food.

Brand goals

The third element of a brand-web analysis involves the *goals* associated with each brand. Supermarkets have profitability as their primary goal but food retailing is a highly competitive industry in the UK and so achieving profitability involves a constant struggle between corporate brands to attract consumers. As noted above, social brands cannot be said to have goals but, instead are associated with the sometimes competing goals of the organizations with which they are co-branded. In the case of the GM-free brand, the goal of halting the production and distribution of GM food was shared by the associated activist organizations.

Clearly, the goals of supermarkets, which centered on profitability, and those of activist organizations, which centered on stopping GM food production and distribution, differed and were a potential source of conflict. In co-branding with GM-free, the supermarkets did not adopt the activists' goal but they did reduce the potential for conflict because their interests were -- for the moment at least -- aligned. However, in continuing to stock brands that were not GM-free, supermarkets left the way open for future conflict.

Brand strategies

The final element of a brand web analysis focuses on the *strategies* pursued in association with each brand. The primary brand strategy pursued by supermarket brands to achieve their goal of profitability has been to positively differentiate themselves from their competitors in ways that appeal to a mass consumer market. The primary strategy pursued by activist organizations associated with GM-free has been to undertake direct action to put pressure on governments and business in order to achieve their goal of keeping GM food out of the UK.

By co-branding "GM-free", supermarkets removed themselves from the list of targets for direct action and avoided the negative and potentially damaging publicity associated with such action. No supermarkets wished to be differentiated from its competitors on the basis that it supported GM and so, once one major supermarket chain had taken this stance, the others were under strong pressure to quickly follow suit. We contend that in creating GM-free retail brands, the supermarkets demonstrated the efficacy of the activist organization's strategy.

Changing goals and strategies

In the long-term, the value of co-branding GM-free will be reduced if the supermarkets' claims to offer GM-free retail branded products is proven false or if their commitment to the issue does not match the expectations of other organizations with which GM-free is co-branded. For example, the Sainsbury's chain proclaimed in July 1999 that it had eliminated GM ingredients from all of its retail brand food, pet food and dietary supplements. Sainsbury's also publicized that it stocked eggs and beef produced by organic -- and thus GM-free -- producers. However, Sainsbury's continued to offer retail brand milk sourced from cows fed on GM maize.

In March 2004, nearly five years after announcing their GM-free co-branding stance, Sainsbury's found themselves once again in the media spotlight as the result of direct action by Greenpeace. Activists dressed as cows and giant mutant ears of maize danced on the roof of a Sainsbury's store and attached GM stickers to Sainsbury's retail brand dairy products. Following the protest, the Greenpeace website called on Sainsbury's to follow the example set by competitor chains Co-op and Marks & Spencer's, which not only offered GM-free private retail brands but stocked only non-GM reared meat and dairy (http:www.greenpeace.org.uk). These two chains had in effect lifted the bar for the behavior expected of supermarkets if they were to gain the full benefit of GM-free co-branding. Thus, the co-branding between supermarket corporate brands and the GM-free social brand involved the supermarkets in an ongoing negotiation with activist organizations that were also co-branded with GM-free as to the behavior that the supermarkets had to exhibit.

In our analysis so far we have introduced the new concept of “social brands”, applied this concept to the issue of GM food in the UK by identifying the GM-free social brand, and investigated the potential of the GM-free social brand to contribute positively or negatively to the value of UK supermarket corporate brands. We now discuss the findings of our investigation.

Discussion

As the case of UK supermarkets and GM-free has illustrated, social brands have the potential to negatively impact on the value of brands by creating damaging brand associations. In moving social brands from their brand communities into their extended brand families through the creation of co-branded relationships, organizations have the opportunity to turn these negative associations into positives. Indeed, ignoring the positive or negative potential of social brands to impact on corporate brands may be just as foolhardy as ignoring the potential impact of competitor brands. However, social brand co-branding may also carry some potential dangers for corporate brands.

In the case of UK supermarkets, the strategy of co-branding with GM-free had four major effects: (1) It *harnessed* the discursive power of the social brand for the benefit of the corporate brand; (2) It *aligned* the brand values of the corporate brand with the social brand in order to avoid negative brand associations; (3) It *reduced* the conflict between the goals of the corporate and social brand; and (4) It *deflected* the potentially damaging strategy of the social brand away from the corporate brand and on to other targets, such as corporate brands that had not become aligned through a co-brand or other strategy.

According to our brand-web analysis, then, the GM-free social brand was a good candidate for inclusion in the extended brand families of supermarkets. In the long-term, however, the ability of corporate brands to benefit from any social-brand co-branding will be largely dependent upon the actions and values associated with the two brands. In particular, if activist organizations continue to move the GM-free goal posts, by, for example, targeting supermarkets that stock any GM products, then the co-branded relationship may cease.

As the Sainsbury example illustrates, co-branding with social brands carries with it the potential for both benefit and damage to the corporate brand. However, the same could be said of co-branding with any other type of brand. In all cases, the co-branded relationship must be consonant with the brand covenant (Balmer 2001a, 2001b; Balmer and Greyser 2002), which is the implicit or explicit set of promises made by the brand to key stakeholders. If it is not, then the equity built up in the corporate brand may be diminished.

Co-branding with social brands is difficult because their power, values, goals and strategies are derived from the organizations with which they are associated. Moreover, these organizations may themselves have conflicting sources of power, values, goals and strategies. A brand web analysis of a social brand must, therefore, include all of the brands of associated organizations. The same rule applies, however, to corporate brands such as Virgin whose multiple organizational links have been described above (Balmer 2001a, 2001b).

Conclusion

The GM-free social brand co-branding examined in this study involved multiple organizations. However, it should still be considered as a single case study and, for this reason, provides insufficient basis for claiming that we have fully answered our three research questions. Rather, this study should be considered the first step in the process of theory building in this new area. We contend, however, that we have answered in the affirmative our first research question as to whether some issues can be understood to function as social brands. The clear implication for business is that social brands can be incorporated into corporate brand strategy and, by deploying a brand-web analysis, assessed for their potential to contribute positively or negatively to corporate brand value.

The fact that we have considered only one social brand means that we have only just begun to answer our second and third research questions relating to the ways in which social brands might add value to or damage corporate brands. Additional in-depth analysis of social brand and corporate brand co-branding cases is, then, the next step for this research.

References

Aaker, D. 1996. *Building Strong Brands.* New York: Free Press.

Balmer, J.M.T. 2001a. "Corporate Identity, Corporate Branding and Corporate Marketing. Seeing Through the Fog." *European Journal of Marketing* 35 (3/4): 248-291.

___________. 2001b. "The Three Virtues and the Seven Deadly Sins of Corporate Brand Management." *Journal of General Management* 27 (1): 1-17.

__________. 2002. “Of Identities Lost and Found.” *International Studies of Management and Organization* 32 (3): 10-27.

Balmer, J.M.T., and E. Gray. 2003. “Corporate Brands: What are they? What of them?” *European Journal of Marketing* 37 (7/8): 972-997.

Balmer, J.M.T. and S.A. Greyser, eds. 2003. *Revealing the Corporation: Perspectives on Identity, Image, Reputation, Corporate Branding and Corporate-Level Marketing*. London: Routledge.

Barthes, R. 1972. *Mythologies*. London: Vintage Books.

Blackett, T., and B. Boad. 1999. *Co-Branding. The Science of Alliance*. London: MacMillan.

Brown, C. 1996. “UK Food Industry Initiatives.” *British Food Journal* 98 (4/5): 24-30.

Brown, P. 2004. “GM Crops to Get Go-Ahead.” *The Guardian,* February 19: 1.

Burt, S. 2000. “The Strategic Role of Retail Brands in British Grocery Retailing.” *European Journal of Marketing* 34 (8): 875-890.

Carrigan, M., and A. Attala. 2001. “The Myth of the Ethical Consumer – Do Ethics Matter in Purchase Behaviour?” *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 18 (7): 560-577.

Cheney, G., and L. Christensen. 1999. “Identity at Issue: Linkages Between Internal and External Organizational Communications.” In *New Handbook of Organizational Communications,* eds. F.M. Jablin and L.L. Putnam, 231-69. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

De Chernatony, L., and F. Dall’Ormo Riley. 1998. “Defining a ‘Brand’: Beyond the Literature with Experts Interpretations.” *Journal of Marketing Management* 14: 417-443.

Department of Trade and Industry. 2003. *GM Nation? The Findings of the Public Debate*, London.

Donaldson, T., and L. Preston. 1995. “The Stakeholder Theory of the Corporation. Concepts, Evidence and Implications.” *Academy of Management Review* 20 (1): 65-91.

Eishenhardt, K. M. 1989. “Building Theory from Case Study Research.” *Academy of Management Review* 14 (4): 532-550.

Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity.

____________ 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. New York: Longman.

Follows, S.C. and D. Jobber. 2000. “Environmentally Responsible Purchase Behaviour: A Test of a Consumer Model.” *European Journal of Marketing* 34 (5/6): 723-746.

Frankental, P. 2001. “Corporate Social Responsibility – a PR Invention?” *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 6 (1): 18-23.

Hanby, T. 1999. “Brands – Dead or Alive?” *International Journal of Market Research* 41 (1): 7-18.

Harper, G.C. and A. Makatouni. 2002. “Consumer Perception of Organic Food Production and Farm Welfare.” *British Food Journal* 104 (3/4/5): 287-299.

Heath, R. 1997. *Strategic Issues Management. Organizations and Public Policy Challenges*, CA: Sage.

Lantos, G.P. 2001. “The Boundaries of Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility.” *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 18 (7): 595-630.

Leitch, S. and N. Richardson. 2003. “Corporate branding in the new economy.” *European Journal of Marketing* 37 (7/8): 1065-1079.

Marchand, R. 1998. *Creating the Corporate Soul. The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. The University of California Press.

Motion, J, and S. Leitch. 2002. “The Technologies of Corporate Identity.” *International Studies of Management and Organization* 32 (3): 45-64.

Motion, J., S. Leitch and R. Brodie. 2003. “Equity in Corporate Co-Branding. The Case of Adidas and the All Blacks.” *European Journal of Marketing* 37 (7/8): 1080-1094.

Olins, W. 1989. *Corporate Identity: Making Business Strategy Visible through Design*. London: Thames and Hudson.

PEALS (Policy Ethics and Life Sciences Research Institute). 2003. *The People’s Report on GM Crops.* Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Polonsky, M.J. and R. Speed. 2001. “Linking Sponsorship and Cause Related Marketing. Complementarities and Conflicts.” *European Journal of Marketing* 35 (11/12): 1361-1385.

Pringle, P. 2003. *Food Inc. Mendel to Monsanto – The Promises and Perils of the Biotech Harvest.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Rifkin, J. 1998. *The Biotech Century*. New York, NY: Tarcher Putnam.

Rowley, T. and M. Moldoveanu. 2003. “When Will Stakeholder Groups Act? An Interest- and Identity-Based Model of Stakeholder Group Mobilization.” *Academy of Management Review* 28 (2): 204-220.

Simeos, C. and S. Dibb. 2001. “Rethinking the Brand Concept: New Brand Orientation.” *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 5 (4): 217-24.

Van Dijk, T. ed. 1997. *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Approach. Vol. 1 and 2*. London: Sage.

Wrigley, N. 1997. “British Food Retail Capital in the USA – Part 1: Sainsbury and the Shaw Experience.” *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management* 25 (1): 7-21.