

# Research into Partial Problems in Building Brand Image in Selected Small and Medium-sized Enterprises of Chemical Industry in the Czech Republic

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**Abstract:** While the importance of brands in the current B2C and B2B markets continues to grow, the issue of brand management and brand image building in small and medium-sized enterprises has not been consistently mapped. These types of businesses are faced with specific problems in their efforts to promote their brands, which need to be better understood and analysed. The primary qualitative research was carried out in the form of in-depth structured interviews with managers of three lines of business dealing with the processing and production of chemical products within three different Czech companies. The aim of the research was to analyse the current situation in selected companies in terms of creating and using brands, perception of the value and importance of brands as well as ways of creating the desired brand positioning and image. The research has made it possible to identify several general problem areas in brand management, the solution of which would probably make it possible to improve the brand image, both in the enterprises under review and in similar small and medium-sized enterprises.

**Keywords:** branding; brand image; chemical industry; small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

**JEL Classification:** L6; M21; M31

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## 1. Introduction

Brands have always been an important means of identifying and differentiating products and companies, especially in B2C markets. As a result of globalization, hypercompetition, competition between similar products and services, the increasing demand of consumers and the high pricing pressure (Kotler and Pfoertsch 2006) the brand has grown in importance in recent years not only on B2C but also on B2B markets. There, the interest in brand building is also boosted by the problems caused by significant mergers and acquisitions (Tetrevova 2004; Vlckova 2016), the high impact of many activities on the whole society and increased interest in brands and corporate reputation among customers (Lindgreen et al. 2010). Despite the generally growing interest in branding, the attention of many researchers is focused on large companies trading in global markets (Hirvonen et al. 2013; Juntunen 2014; Agostini et al. 2015). However, the importance of brands in small and medium-sized enterprises cannot be underestimated. As some studies confirm, e.g. Berthon et al. (2008), Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010), Odoom (2016), while the basic principles of brand management are more or less the same for all types of businesses, the local presence of small and medium-sized enterprises and their limited resources bring certain specifics that are linked to specific problems. The aim of our primary research was also to expand knowledge in this area.

The fact that the issue of brands has still not been resolved is already evident when we try to formulate its basic definition. The most cited brand definition is the definition of the American Marketing Association, which says "a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (Kotler and Keller 2006). While this definition can be considered the most popular, it is often criticized because it focuses too much on brand elements without taking into

account the wide range of associations related to brands (Keller et al. 2008; Kornberger 2010). Therefore, the definition of the American Marketing Association in 2016 was slightly reworded: "A brand is a customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas; often it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme" (Kladou et al. 2017). This definition seeks to create a link between the earlier emphasis on symbolic elements of the brand (name, logo, slogan, design) and the current preferred broader concept emphasizing how customers experience the brand (images, ideas). In this context, the value concept of the brand is increasingly important, as described in e.g. De Chernatony (2009). The author claims that the brand can be understood as a set of functional and emotional values that promise a unique and enjoyable experience while representing a dynamic interface between the actions of the organization and their interpretation by customers. Also, Batey (2008) defined the brand as a set of associations on attributes, benefits and values. It can therefore be accepted that "a brand is a label, designating ownership by a firm, which we experience, evaluate, have feeling towards, and build associations with to perceived value" (Brakus et al. 2009). As research shows, significant identifying elements of the brand, such as name, logo, slogan, URL (Uniform Resource Locators), representative and jingle (Kotler and Keller 2013) must be designed to uniquely identify the brand and form a set of positive associations that are reflected in the brand value (Kladou et al. 2017; Fajardo et al. 2016). Krake (2005) emphasizes the importance of the right set of brand elements in building the brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises.

As already indicated, effective brand management leads to improved brand image and value growth. According to Aaker (1991), brand value can be derived not only from brand image but also from brand associations, brand loyalty and brand awareness. The validity of this assumption has been verified by, among others, Sasmita and Mohd Suki (2015). The authors found that the perception of brand value by the young generation in Malaysia is based primarily on brand awareness and image, especially in relation to ecology (green brands). At the same time, it was found that associations and customer loyalty also played a role in brand evaluation. Several other studies have shown that the main dimensions of brand value in relation to B2B products are perceived quality (image) and brand loyalty (Michell et al. 2001; van Riel et al. 2005). Michell et al. (2001) and van Riel et al. (2005) emphasize that brand awareness and brand associations are relevant only in some specific industrial markets, but most B2B markets have shown that brand associations do not play a significant role in terms of brand value (van Riel et al. 2005). Associations and image are then the dominant dimensions in brand evaluation in B2C markets.

Building the desired image and appropriate associations requires that the company gain an extraordinary, unique place in the minds of its customers for its brands. It is based on the specific positioning of brands, which must be based on the uniqueness of all attributes of consumer value added where it is possible to achieve business uniqueness. (Kotler and Keller 2013). Only in this way can the customer establish a trust-based relationship with the brand and the brand itself represents guarantee for the customer in terms of all expectations he/she has in relation to all product parameters (Rosenbaum-Elliott 2018). Recent research has shown that customers who have a positive perception of the brand are also more willing to buy it, actively seek for it (Chan et al. 2013; Flek et al. 2012), talk more about it (word-of-mouth) and are willing to pay more for it (Han and Kim 2010). Many experts also agree that the brand generates more confidence in the correctness of purchasing decisions, improves the reputation of the company, offers more space for building and maintaining a competitive advantage, can increase barriers to market entry, enable better differentiation of companies according to product quality, leads to better financial performance of the company and serves as a basis for developing long-term relationships between companies that lead to a lasting competitive advantage by building a likeable, strong and positive brand image among many actors involved in the purchasing process and all other stakeholders (Sincic Coric and Jelic 2015). This is true for large as well as small and medium-sized enterprises. The importance of the brand, its proper management and effective building of its image is therefore indisputable for the company's success.

The aim of our research was to analyse the current situation in selected companies in terms of creating and using brands, perception of the value and importance of brands as well as ways of creating a desired brand positioning and image. The research has made it possible to identify several general problem areas in brand management, the solution of which would probably make it possible

to improve the brand image, both in the enterprises under review and in similar small and medium-sized enterprises.

## 2. Methodology

Primary qualitative research was prepared and implemented to identify current methods of brand management and profiling in small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the chemical industry. The research was carried out by the method of structured individual interviews based on the prepared interview scenario with senior managers of the respective sales and marketing departments. In order to find out the necessary information, it was necessary to prepare about 5 working meetings in each of the surveyed companies, with each meeting taking about 1.5 hours (Fialova 2017; Krejcik 2018).

Three Czech companies operating in the production and processing of chemical products were chosen for the research through deliberate judgment selection. Such lines of business were chosen for the analysis of the brands that correspond to the position of small and medium-sized enterprise on the Czech market.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Characteristics of examined brands and criteria of selection of their elements

Table 1 provides a basic overview of the companies surveyed and the selected brands within the selected lines of business. Based on the wishes of the monitored companies, specific brands or company names will not be published in the paper. From the point of view of the research objective, a specific identification of monitored companies and brands is not even necessary.

**Table 1.** Basic definition of examined groups of brands.

Company/Characteristics	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3
Business sector	Food and chemical industry	Research and development of hyaluronic acid, pharmaceutical, cosmetic and chemical industry + nanotechnology	Household chemicals, cosmetics and chemicals for professional cleaning
Line of business analysed	Agricultural division - market leader in the field of special fertilizers and other products intended for plant nutrition and stimulation.	Veterinary products - products aimed at the treatment of joints, wounds and problems in the oral cavity.	Household chemicals and cosmetics
Number of product brands analysed	11	5	7
Target market	Industrial customers (B2B markets)	Final consumers (B2C markets)	Final consumers (B2C markets)
Hierarchy of brands within the analysed line of business	Business brand Individual brands - 11 Two individual brands are grouped - they include 2 and 7 model brands	Business brand Umbrella brand – 1 Five individual brands One of the individual brands includes 2 model brands	Business brand Umbrella brand – 1 Three individual brands – each includes several model brands

A more detailed analysis of the monitored brands within the surveyed enterprises requires an analysis of the brand elements used by the companies. The research results in this area are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Identification of brand elements used by the companies.

Company/brand element	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3
Logo, Symbol	11 brands (100%)	5 brands (100%)	7 brands (100%)
URL	11 brands (100%)	5 brands (100%)	7 brands (100%)
Representative	0 brands (0%)	1 brand (20%)	0 brand (0%)
Slogan	5 brands (45%)	0 brands (0%)	1 brands (14%)
Jingle	0 brands (0 %)	0 brands (0 %)	1 brands (14%)

All examined brands bear their name, which is then graphically rendered in the form of a logo. In all cases, the brand names are relatively short, usable also on international markets and often refer to product characteristics (its composition and use). Most logos for each brand are created as a colour representation of the brand name. The most commonly used colours are green, blue-green and blue. The reason is the obvious desire of companies to create positive associations between brands and the natural and ecological mindset of the company and its customers. Product brands do not use any supporting graphics in the logo. The brands of the companies are accompanied by a small artistic representation - in the case of the first company these are green leaves in the first letter of its name; in front of the second company logo is an artistic abstraction, and logo of the third company is portrayed as a golden seal. In addition to the brand name, company 2 umbrella brand logo also displays silhouettes of a cat, a dog and a horse. One of the individual brands of company 3, which includes an environmentally friendly range of products, is placed on a green leaf.

All monitored brands have their URL address with a link to their own website with a detailed Czech description of the product. In the case of first two companies, there are also language versions, which are a simplified version of the Czech website. The website is in English, German and, in the case of the first company, in Russian.

Interestingly, almost half of brands of the first company are complemented with an advertising slogan. This is particularly surprising because of the fact that this company markets its production in an industrial market where the use of slogans is rather exceptional. The company justifies the use of slogans with a desire to make the brands more visible and to delineate a specific place for them in their own assortment and in relation to the competition. Only one of the monitored brands currently uses the jingle for its identification, while the same brand also uses the slogan. The reason for their use is the introduction of a new product line and, together with it, a new brand that carries information on the introduction of new environmentally friendly products. Spots on both radio and TV were used within their campaign. By investing in this brand, the company also wants to differentiate itself from the competition and attract customers with something new. This company also uses slogans for other brands, which are prepared for more intensive promotions, but are not actively used for now. A representative in the form of a fictional animal supports only one brand. The reason for using the brand representative was to target a **specific** group of end consumers.

When thinking about the design of individual brand elements, it is necessary to consider to what extent they meet the requirements for the ideal design of a brand element, which is shaped by its memorability, meaningfulness, accuracy, adaptability and degree of protection. (Keller et al. 2008) Of course, it is often impossible to achieve them all. Therefore, in our research we tried to determine the degree of importance that the respondents attribute to each of the recommended criteria when designing different brand elements. The results are summarized in Table 3. The evaluation used a scale where 1 represents the most important criterion and 5 the least important criterion.

**Table 3.** Average scores of importance of the recommended criterions.

Brand element/criterion	Name	Logo	URL	Representative	Slogan
Rememberability	1,3	1,3	3,0	1,0	1,5
Meaningfulness	1,7	2,3	2,7	5,0	1,0
Portability	2,3	3,0	1,3	2,0	3,5
Adaptability	4,0	3,3	1,3	3,0	3,5
Protection	2,7	2,0	3,7	4,0	2,0

Table 3 shows that the monitored companies agree that the most important parameters when formulating the brand name are rememberability, meaningfulness and its portability. Similarly, for a slogan these are meaningfulness and rememberability, but on the third position it is protection. As for the logo, the companies agree on the importance of its memorability and the possibility to protect it against copying by their competitors. Portability and adaptability are most important for URL of the brands.

### 3.2 Value and importance of brands for the companies

**Company 1** focuses its agricultural production on the B2B market, where traditionally the importance of brands is not as great as on the B2C market. The brand is especially important for the company because it represents the product in the market where it is sold and generates profit. The company does not invest too much money in the promotion and targeted building of brand image. The exception is a specific (Nitrogen Fertilizer) brand, which has been chosen as the company's flagship. Thanks to the extraordinary quality, but also the great marketing support from the company, a competitive advantage has been created for this brand based on an exceptional image and a very positive reputation. The success in the market enables further development of the brand and contributes to the good name of the whole company and thus of its other products too. The brand has also built a reputation on foreign markets and so a foreign distributor has decided to distribute the product under the given Czech brand.

Thanks to their efficiency and characteristics, the company products associated with the brand must solve a specific customer problem, meet customer expectations and thereby generate customer satisfaction and loyalty. Although the company does not systematically monitor customer satisfaction or loyalty, they believe that based on personal contacts with customers they can claim that their customers are satisfied with the business brands and that they are loyal. According to the managers, customer satisfaction and loyalty are then an expression of the brand value. The brand is a guarantee of quality and seriousness for customers. Thanks to quality brands, the company experiences a better negotiating position in relation to suppliers and customers.

The financial value of individual brands at this company has never been determined, but recently, an expert has determined the value of an entire company, which could be a good starting point for valuing both company brands and individual products.

**Company 2** offers its veterinary products in the B2C market where the brand can play a big role for both customers and businesses. According to the marketing manager, the brand value is *"a certain idea of how big the role is that the brand plays in business success"*. In this line of business, all products are sold under different brand names, so a brand-free product would be absolutely uncompetitive in this area. This company therefore considers brands to be a natural business tool, which appears to be absolutely essential for this category of products. Business brands naturally facilitate trading and customer communications. The company can also target specific customer groups directly with each brand. Although the company does not systematically monitor the value of its brands or the satisfaction and loyalty of its customers, it agrees with the claim that the value of the brand depends on customer satisfaction and loyalty. The company representative perceives the importance of brands in this line of business especially from the perspective of the customer, who can, thanks to the brand, clearly identify the manufacturer and product, perceive it as a guarantee of high quality and efficiency and can express his/her own personality through it. As manufacturing and sales of veterinary products is a minor business within the company, employees receive less financial support for this product category and, as a result, low brand awareness, which they are currently trying to address through increased promotion.

**Company 3** focuses its production of household chemicals and cosmetics on the B2C market, where, as mentioned above, the brand has a significant potential impact on both customers and the business itself. Similar to the second company, the products in the field of household chemicals and cosmetics are sold under different brand names, without which the products in the competitive environment, they face, could not stand up. For the company, the brand represents an opportunity to differentiate itself from the competition, not only visually or by design, but also by the perceived

quality and innovation delivered with the brand. The company uses both established brands and creates also new ones. The well-established long-term brands are subject to both visual changes in the form of a more modern design and changes in the quality delivered. Within these established brands, the company invests most in the main umbrella brand, with its sub-brands targeting selected market segments. The success of the umbrella brand helps the success of its umbrella sub-brands. New brands in the company are mostly associated with targeting new markets.

The company monitors customer satisfaction and loyalty programmatically, but not in relation to the brand. Therefore, it does not monitor the value of its brands programmatically, it can estimate it, as for the first company, from the value of the whole company or from basic financial indicators, which can be used to monitor the trend of interest in these brands. The company also agrees with the claim that the value of the brand depends on the satisfaction and loyalty of the customers, who can perceive it as a guarantee of the quality supplied and can also express its own personality through it.

### 3.3 Positioning and image of the examined brands

**The first company** aims its agricultural production at small and large farmers, where, according to the company's representative, the basic positioning and image of its brands do not actually differ from each other. With each brand used by the company, the customer should imagine the highest possible quality in which the company invests heavily in terms of the composition of individual products (it owns about 20 patents in the Czech Republic). Therefore, the company builds the extraordinary and unique value of its brands mainly based on the extraordinary characteristics and composition of its products while trying to use an appropriate price (as low as possible) to keep the required margin to achieve the desired economic results.

**The second company** target market for this product line is pet owners, animal factory farmers and veterinarians. Due to the specificity of the products, according to the representative of the company, the basic positioning and image of the individual brands do not differ from each other and can be summarized under the positioning of the Active Animal brand as a whole - premium veterinary products with the highest efficiency guaranteed by the company team. The premium character of the products is underlined by their high price.

The target market of **the third company** for a given product line are the households. Brands differ mainly in the function of household products. Due to the highly competitive environment, however, the basic positioning and image of the individual brands does not differ from each other and the brand value is built primarily by delivering extra features and high product quality, durability and reliability in accordance with customer requirements, while delivering unique style and design. At the same time, the company is building significant value in the brand image by reducing the cost of purchasing and disposing of the product.

The use of specific attributes of extraordinary consumer value of brands offered by individual companies is summarized in the following Table 4.

**Table 4.** Use of specific value attributes to create specific positioning in the surveyed companies.

Company / value element	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3
Extraordinary product properties	Yes	Yes	Yes
Exceptional durability or reliability of the product	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unique style and design	No	Yes	Yes
Unique assortment of accompanying services	Yes – for leaf fertilizers	Yes - consulting	No
Exceptional service quality	Yes – for leaf fertilizers	Yes - consulting	No
Price	Rather lower	High	Medium
Reduction of other costs associated with the purchase, use and disposal of the product	No	No	Yes

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions - Problematic areas of brand management in the surveyed companies

In the framework of brand management research in the companies surveyed, our goal was also to identify possible deficiencies and problematic elements that the companies experience. Our intention was to discover possible suggestions for improvement that could inspire other similar SMEs. The basic deficiencies in brand management identified by our research include:

- **Inconsistency in brand design** – The logos of the first company brands appear inconsistent, which is contrary to the recommended idea of unified corporate design. This is also the case with company 2, where the design of the logos presented on the website and on the packaging of the actual products differs. The varying appearance of the logos of the brands under review can result in confusing customers and creating an inconsistent image, which is certainly contrary to the intentions of the companies. A unified design supports the impression of sophistication, professionalism and contributes to the positive image of the whole company. On the other hand, as pointed out in the third company, by leaving the established individual brands, the company would lose a significant continuation of the positive reputation of these brands built in the past (over 50 years). For this reason, in an effort to unify, a business brand is always attached to individual product brands.
- **Insufficient use of slogans** – We believe that the companies surveyed do not make sufficient use of the potential of using brand slogans. Especially in consumer markets we see room for formulating slogans to the brands that would clearly and distinctly present the desired brand positioning and thus penetrate much deeper into the minds of consumers. Even first company, which uses slogans for some of its brands, could work with them more comprehensively - to clarify the rules for selecting slogans and to analyse the existing slogans for their aptness and intent. However, the fact that they are small and medium-sized enterprises can play an important role. As the third company said, it is financially challenging to raise the slogan to the general public and inefficient for development of online shopping.
- **Confusing and unclear arrangement of brands within the company** – For some brands, a large number of subgroups seem to be somewhat confusing. It may also be considered unnecessary to establish "umbrella" brands unless they are properly communicated. This problem can be seen in the company 2, where the customers, according to the interviewee, cannot accurately distinguish between the brand of the company and that of the product line. The basic recommendation here is to make the structure of brands more comprehensible, simplify it as much as possible and communicate it accurately and clearly.
- **Unsystematic monitoring of brand satisfaction, loyalty and familiarity** – The monitored companies ascertain customer satisfaction and evaluate customer loyalty and brand awareness on the market rather intuitively and unsystematically. We believe that regular analysis of these indicators would help the company not only to improve its products and services, but also to select appropriate communication tools and strategies. The results of these findings would in a way also reflect the value of brands and contribute to a better allocation of resources within the brand portfolio of companies.
- **Neglecting the tracking and use of associations in connection with brands** – We believe that businesses, especially in the consumer market, should better monitor and exploit the associations evoked by brands. The brand should be able to evoke clear positive associations (feelings, thoughts, ideas) in connection with the product. However, this area of psychological influence of the brand is rather neglected by the companies surveyed.
- **Failure to use all the possibilities of increasing customer value in creating brand positioning** – In building a unique image, the company should use all the possibilities of differentiation within all elements of consumer value added. Nevertheless, it can be noticed that the first company focuses its attention elsewhere than on the style and design of their products, and shortcomings are also evident in some services. Remedying these problem areas could significantly increase customer value and thus contribute to strengthening the competitive position of brands. A major

drawback of all the companies surveyed in positioning is the temporary inability to help customers to reduce other costs associated with the acquisition, use and disposal of products.

It is clear that our research is only a general insight into the very broad issue of brand management in small and medium-sized enterprises in the Czech Republic. We believe that its results will contribute at least to opening a deeper discussion on some problematic areas and inspire the professional public to conduct more comprehensive investigations.

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