

[44]

## **DO BRANDS MATTER IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS MARKETING? A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF B2B BRANDING PRACTICES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

For major part of 20th century, prevailing paradigm in B2B research considered branding as less relevant. Most researches adapted B2C brand equity models to explain B2B branding. Though post 2000 onwards the subject received significant academic interest, there is lack of consensus about the relevance of brand information in organizational buying decisions. To address this, the present study aims to explore: 1) whether “brand” is an important decision criteria in B2B buying, 2) sources of brand equity for B2B firms and 3) key differentiators in building B2B brands. We conducted in-depth interviews among 56 distributors and 65 customers of B2B products across 13 industry sectors followed by content analysis of all interviews. The analysis shows a variance in organizational buyers’ sensitivity towards brands depending upon: 1) type of application (criticality) of purchased product/ technology and 2) relevance of ingredient branding. Accordingly, buyers can be categorized into high and low brand sensitive groups. Secondly, just like consumer brands, B2B brand equity has both functional and psychological components. Functional component includes product availability, reliability, credit facility (payment terms) and after sales service. Psychological component includes distributor’s brand value, manufacturer’s origin and market visibility. Lastly, product customization, focus on margins and role of channel partners helps to build B2B brands. Managerially, results encourage firms to adopt a multi-faceted strategy (logistics, contract/ payment terms, product customization and innovation in its offerings) to increase brand value. By systematically examining the key deliberations of B2B buyers, this study offers a basis for market segmentation and adds knowledge to the field of B2B brand research.

**Keywords:** B2B branding, brand sensitivity, brand equity