

# Multiple roles of brands in business-to-business services

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper seeks to investigate the role of branding in a B2B service context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper focuses on a particular B2B service industry, namely leasing mall space to retail tenants. A quantitative study is undertaken of 201 mall tenants using SEM analysis.

**Findings** – The main finding was that brand attitudes were the most important influence on the contract renewal. Another major finding was that brand attitudes were mainly explained by service quality. Branding also played another, albeit minor role, in building trust between the supplier and the customers.

**Practical implications** – The results can be used by industrial firms to build stronger brands and, in turn, to use these brands to maximize customer retention.

**Originality/value** – This is one of the first studies to examine service B2B brands. It is also one of the first studies to examine the multiple roles that brand can play in B2B marketing.

**Keywords** Business-to-business marketing, Services, Brands, Trust, Customer retention

**Paper type** Research paper

**An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this issue.**

## Introduction

Extant research on branding, in the context of business-to-business (B2B) marketing, remains scarce. This applies equally to products and services. Historically, branding has been almost synonymous with consumer products, particularly the type of products that appear in supermarkets, such as toothpaste or coffee. The last decade has seen an extension of branding principles to a wide number of areas that hitherto had not seemed pertinent, including companies as brands (De Chernatony, 2002), retailers as brands (Burt and Sparkes, 2002), cyber-firms (Merrilees and Fry, 2002) and many others.

A small number of dedicated recent articles have examined business-to-business (B2B) brands. However the literature is embryonic, so much remains to be done. The current paper is conventional to a certain extent in that it seeks to explain alternative brand building possibilities (antecedents of brand attitudes) and consequences of brand attitudes to the B2B brand, both in the context of B2B services. Although the paper makes a contribution to understanding both brand building (antecedents) and consequences of B2B branding, it is in terms of the latter that a new conceptual contribution is made. Multiple roles are purported for B2B service brands.

It will be argued that for developing B2B service brands, service quality competence and harmonious relationships with

customers are important. This is a contribution not clearly articulated previously. However, a more novel contribution is to open up the role of brands in B2B marketing. A traditional role is to see branding as adding a point of difference (competitive advantage) in the purchasing decision of potential customers. A customer choosing between two options, that otherwise seem about equal in terms of product and servicing specifications, might prefer the stronger brand. More generally, brand reputation has always been a factor in B2B purchasing decisions. Yet B2B services might be more complex, with more emphasis on the ongoing relationship. A challenge is to better understand such complexity. We propose in this paper that B2B brands help build trust with the customer that in turn enhances a greater chance to purchase. As such, this view provides a potentially new conceptual understanding of the role of branding in B2B service markets. Empirical tests were undertaken in the context of a mall tenancy service – that is, the provision of mall space to retail business tenants. A study of 201 shopping mall tenants in Australia was included in the sample and was tested empirically.

The primary research objectives, then, are:

- to identify the determinants of brand attitudes in B2B services;
- to ascertain whether branding mediates the service quality to trust relationship; and
- to determine whether branding influences the contract renewal decision.

## Literature review

Business-to-business branding research is relatively scarce compared to consumer markets. This is somewhat surprising, because one would expect the brand to be one of selection criteria for most B2B decisions. Some of the uncertainty about branding is that there are two inter-related processes, namely purchasing products and selecting suppliers. The latter decision

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has always included the reputation of the supplier as a selection criterion. In nearly all studies of industrial buying, reputation usually appears as a top-four selection criterion. Corporate reputation is part of the branding process, albeit corporate branding (see van Riel *et al.*, 2005). In other words, although much of the original B2B literature makes little *explicit* reference to branding, it has always played a prominent *implicit* role via the reputation variable.

In the 1990s there were few articles on B2B branding. Gordon *et al.* (1993) outline how brand equity for business products can be developed over time, starting with brand awareness. Mudambi *et al.* (1997) case researched two precision bearings firms in an attempt to understand the relevant segments better. They emphasized that the brand is more than a name. However, their results seem to emphasize price, product quality, and distribution and support services ahead of the company reputation. This may be an industry in which buyers at least contemplated switching and even breaking contracts if necessary, so it may not be typical. Kim *et al.* (1998) provide a useful conceptual base for the role of brand equity in business markets, without progressing to empirical testing.

Credit is due to these authors for these pioneering articles that provide a framework for examining the nature of brands and their relative role in particular products and segments. Much of the early B2B branding research has emphasized the role of branding as a product *differentiator* (Hutton, 1997; Saunders and Watt, 1979; Shipley and Howard, 1993; Sinclair and Steward, 1988).

Subsequent research continues to highlight the relevance of branding to business markets. Mitchell *et al.* (2001) asked operating managers to comment on whether branding was relevant to them. Although the results seemed encouraging, there was an emphasis on *tangible* features such as brand name, quality, reliability, performance, service and value for money. Low and Blois (2002) mainly focused on a single case of an optic sorting machinery supplier to discuss basic branding concepts and how to deal with the threat of generic brands. Webster and Keller (2004) applied some consumer-based branding tools to business markets, but also highlighted some distinguishing features. The role of industrial buyers and buying centers suggests an important role for relationship management, and that is used to develop ten guidelines for successful industrial branding.

The three most recent articles on business branding at the time of writing the current paper were more sophisticated in their use of quantitative analyses (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004; McQuiston, 2004; van Riel *et al.*, 2005). Bendixen *et al.* (2004) used conjoint analysis to assess the relative importance of branding as a selection criterion. Price, delivery and quality were found to be the most critical attributes. However, branding did make a significant contribution to adding value. The article concludes with support for communication programs that help build the corporate brand. McQuiston (2004) provides an in-depth analysis of a particular (steel) brand, with an emphasis of the brand promises (in terms of technical, logistical and support services) to particular segments. van Riel *et al.* (2005) use a chemical company to apply a structural model of the determinants of brand loyalty. They show that both product branding and company branding contribute to loyalty. Product quality and support services in particular contributed to the branding success. This is one of the more explicit modeling studies of industrial branding.

Webster (2000) provides a different perspective on B2B brands. Usually, manufacturers' brands are discussed in a B2C context; for example Coca Cola or Nike. One issue that Webster (2000) notes is the declining power of manufacturers relative to retailers and therefore the declining significance of manufacturers' brands in the total schema. Such brands would seem to be out of the scope of B2B marketing. However Webster (2000) calls for a reconceptualization of manufacturers' brands by taking into account the broader business network. Webster introduces a B2B context by focusing on the role of manufacturers' brands in dealing with other channel members such as wholesalers and retailers. Attributes like pre-established demand, quality levels, credibility and trust are likely to be greater when resellers deal with strong manufacturer brands. Thus strong brands have value in penetrating the distribution channels. One way that manufacturers' brands are conceptualized (Webster, 2000, p. 21) are as "a pledge of support to retailers".

Building on Webster (2000), Brodie (2005) argues that brands are important as facilitators of relationships. In the B2C context, brands facilitate the relationship between the firm and the final consumer. In the B2B context, brands potentially moderate the relationship between firms. This is a powerful perspective provided by Brodie (2005). However, although a number of student theses have been conducted using this perspective, the published material has not yet eventuated.

The above literature does show a growing research interest in business-to-business branding, especially in the last five years. It is too early yet to have a consensus because we do not yet have a critical mass of studies in the field.

### Gap in the literature

The main gap in the literature is firstly that *products* (including components, chemicals, steel and machinery) dominate the conventional B2B branding approach, with little attention to B2B *services*. Referring to the B2C literature, it was not until the early 2000s that the branding literature was seriously adapted from products to services. (Berry, 2000; De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003; Grace and O'Cass, 2005). The B2B branding literature is following a similar evolution with a late examination of B2B service branding relative to product branding. The recent B2C branding literature does suggest some idiosyncrasies that especially apply to services compared to products. The B2C services branding literature has highlighted the greater number of points of contact and communication, the greater role of relationships, the role of internal branding (with employees) and a greater experiential component. Performance variability, complexity and inconsistency suggest that it might be more difficult to generate brand equity in services compared to products (Berry, 2000; De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003; Grace and O'Cass, 2005). Further, until we do the research then we have no way of knowing whether the product branding B2B studies carry over to service firms. Moreover, service B2B markets have been growing very rapidly in recent decades, due to the outsourcing of IT, HRM and even management consulting components of manufacturers. Thus we have a growing component of B2B markets for which we have little or no academic branding studies.

We will address this gap by studying mall property services to retail tenants, that is, the leasing of mall space to retail

tenants. A second gap in the literature is that branding is mainly studied at the final stage of decision-making, namely as an extra influence on the final product or supplier selection. Emerging research (Berry, 2000; Webster, 2000; Brodie, 2005) suggests a potential role for brands further up the value chain. The suggestion is that brands may facilitate relationships between channel members. However, there is limited empirical investigation of this possibility. Such a research gap is addressed in the current paper by explicitly modeling and testing the proposition that brands facilitate relationships between business firms.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study can be formulated in terms of a path analysis, shown graphically in Figure 1. The model represents a hierarchy of effects leading to the final contract renewal decision by the tenants. This model can be split into three main parts, moving backwards through the hierarchy of effects. Each path can be specified in terms of a specific hypothesis. For example, as shown below, *H1* refers to the path from brand attitude to renewal of the contract.

The end stage of the model is the contract renewal decision. It is hypothesized that brand will be a major influence here (*H1*), consistent with the B2B product literature synthesized above. An additional influence could derive from trust (*H2*). The link between trust and behavioral intention has been studied in the B2C context (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003; Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2000), but not the service B2B brand context.

The middle part of the model is the explanation of trust between the (mall) supplier and their customers (tenants). The traditional determinants of trust include empowerment (*H3*) and interaction that we term responsiveness (*H4*) (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Mohr and Spekman, 1994). Responsiveness can also be considered in terms of one of the

two key components of the initial way that Grönroos (1982) divided service quality. Grönroos (1982) divided service quality into technical aspects, such as *what* type of services was provided and functional aspects, referring to the way or *how* (such as responsiveness) services were delivered to the customer. Later, Grönroos (1987) added a third type of service quality, namely the support provided by the firm; this is similar to our empowerment variable. The role of different types of relationship antecedents to trust is discussed in Merrilees and Fry (2003), Mohr and Spekman (1994), and Morgan and Hunt (1994). Finally, unlike most traditional approaches to explaining trust, we introduce a relatively new potential influence, namely brand (*H5*) (Brodie, 2005; Webster, 2000). This additional component adds to the richness of how brand might influence the overall performance of a supplier.

The front end of the model seeks to (partially) explain the development of brand attitudes. Service quality is one of the potential influences on brand attitudes (*H6*) (Berry, 2000; Selnes, 1993). We define service quality as similar to the technical aspect defined by Grönroos (1982). A process variable, empowerment, is also included as a potential influence that might gain acceptability by the tenant (*H7*). No previous study has included such a potential influence, but we can hypothesize that the empowerment support given by the mall management to the tenant could positively influence the perceptions of the brand held by the tenants. Seven hypotheses (*H1-H7*) have been devised for testing.

The brand has three entries in the model. First, the model explains the factors leading to stronger brand attitudes. Second, industrial brands help build the relationship between the parties. Third, brands contribute to the contract renewal decision.

The key constructs are explained as follows.

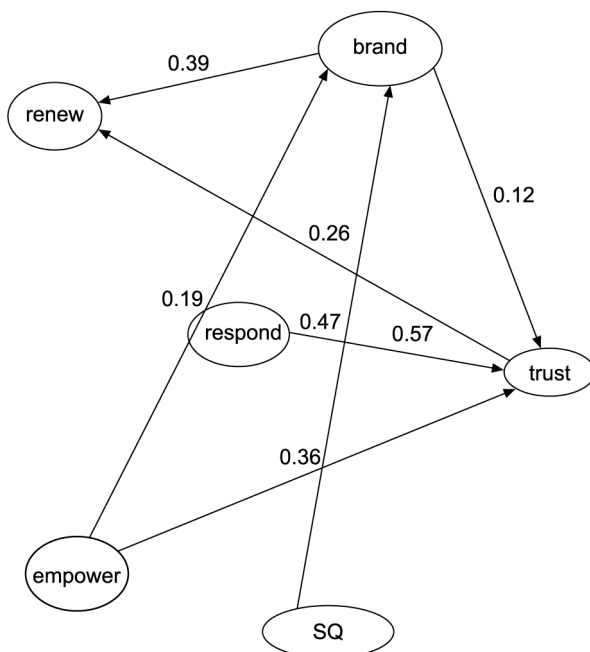
*Brand* relates to the overall performance and image of the center. It considers the consumer perspective in relation to the center brand. Particularly, in the way consumers identify the special or unique characteristics of the center brand itself and the strength in which they then feel the brand performs. The literature refers to not just the role of branding as a means of differentiation but also the important role of establishing business or corporate reputation (Hutton, 1997; Saunders and Watt, 1979; Shipley and Howard, 1993; Sinclair and Steward, 1988).

*Empowerment* relates to the way in which one party feels able to direct their own actions towards a desirable outcome. This construct considers whether tenants feel that they have some power in their dealings with centre management and have a chance to have their concerns heard. It further considers whether they feel that centre management treats them as an equal (Shaw and Dawson, 1996; Davies, 1996; Daprain and Hogarth-Scott, 2003).

*Trust* is generated when both parties can anticipate a consistent level of performance and behavior from each other. It would mean that both parties would be satisfied that the behavior of the other party's service quality dimensions are met, that communication is open, relevant and timely, that any disputes are dealt with appropriately and that any power potential is used without any undue coercion (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Mohr and Spekman, 1994; Ruppel and Harrington, 2000).

*Service quality* relates to how well the core services undertaken by one partner in the relationship are actually

Figure 1 Structural equation model of B2B service branding



performed compared to the expectation of how well the service should be performed. The core services in the shopping center context relate to the performance of tangible measures such as the landlord's responsibility to maintain the center, promote the center and provide an attractive retail mix (Bitner, 1995; Sit and Birch, 2001).

*Responsive behavior* reflects the way the landlord responds to issues, provides information, consults and seeks feedback on issues, and the timeliness and relevancy of the information provided. A large component of responsiveness is the way both parties are able to communicate their needs. However, communicating is one step. Being available for meaningful communication to take place, responding to the issues raised and following through with any commitments made, is as essential as the communication itself. Responsiveness also relates to the way in which center management actively promotes the relationship between itself and the tenants. It considers whether center management encourages positive suggestions from tenants, nurtures and develops the relationship and provides ongoing assistance to tenants (Mohr and Spekman, 1994; Howard, 1997; Baker, 2002; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

*Lease contract renewal* relates to the strength of positive feeling towards the center, which is demonstrated through a willingness to continue the relationship into the future. This has most often been measured in terms of intention for a consumer to purchase a product from the same retailer/supplier again. Hennig-Thurau (2000) sees customer retention as the central objective to relationship marketing and has examined the correlation between customer retention and relationship quality. This study looked at the enhancement of customer product knowledge and skills as a means to promote better relationships and therefore customer retention.

## Methodology

### Data collection

A stratified collection approach was used to collect the data. In the first stage, centers were conveniently chosen on the basis of covering a range of mall types, namely both large and small and both metropolitan and regional, across three states of Australia (NSW, Queensland and Victoria). Twenty malls volunteered to participate in the study. The second stage was to get the mall management to distribute the survey to all of the tenants within that mall.

Data was collected using the self-administered questionnaire that was distributed by the center managers through their network. The total sample size was 201 tenants. The response rate for the tenants was 20 percent. The tenant sample was made up of 44 percent regional centers and 56 percent small community to neighborhood centers.

### Measures

The items for the brand scale (see Table I) were adapted from the performance satisfaction literature to relate to the shopping center environment. All scales tested as reliable, with the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranging from 0.78 to 0.93, comfortably above the 0.70 threshold required. The average variance extracted was also satisfactory, ranging from 0.58 to 0.87, all above the desired threshold of 0.50.

Particular attention was given to discriminant validity, across all pairs of constructs. Similar tests apply for testing for

Table I Scale Items

Scale	Scale items
<b>Trust</b>	(1) You trust centre management without hesitation
	(2) You believe that centre management will continue to provide high levels of service quality in the future
	(3) We are able to exchange confidences with centre management
	(4) I trust that centre management will do their best to support my business
	(5) I believe that centre management will live up to its promises
	(6) I can depend on centre management to always operate with integrity
	(7) I personally trust centre management
<b>Brand</b>	(1) The centre has generated a lot of customer visits
	(2) The centre has a good reputation among consumers
	(3) This centre is a great brand from the consumer perspective
	(4) This is an excellent shopping centre for consumers
	(5) There is something special about this centre for consumers
	(6) Customers greatly admire this centre
<b>Empowerment</b>	(1) Center management treats me as an equal
	(2) I have some power in my dealings with center management
	(3) Even if I do not have too much power I get a chance to have my concerns heard
	(4) Both the landlord and tenants invest a lot of time and effort in developing the relationship between them
<b>Service quality</b>	(1) The central areas are kept clean and tidy
	(2) There is a pleasant ambience that makes it an attractive place to shop
	(3) The centre is marketed well throughout the year
	(4) There are effective centre wide promotions
	(5) There are effective periodic special events
	(6) Overall the quality of service that centre management provides is excellent
	(7) Everyday maintenance of centre, such as lighting, plumbing and rubbish collection are well managed <sup>a</sup>
<b>Responsiveness</b>	(1) Centre management are always friendly and approachable to deal with
	(2) Centre management is responsive to emerging problems
	(3) Centre management is readily accessible when you need them
	(4) I am kept informed with timely and appropriate information
	(5) Information about forthcoming changes of the centre is shared with tenants
	(6) Centre management is skilled at working with us to solve problems
	(7) Centre management prevents emerging problems getting out of hand
<b>Lease renewal</b>	(1) I am keen to renew my lease
	(2) It is likely that I will renew my lease
	(3) I wish to stay as long as possible in this centre
	(4) I have no doubts whatsoever about renewing my lease

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Deleted due to cross loading; <sup>b</sup>deleted due to low loadings

unidimensionality (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Discriminant validity occurs when the average variance extracted for a pair of constructs is greater than the squared correlation coefficient between the same pair of constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The results (not shown here) revealed that all pairs of constructs met this condition.

Confirmatory analysis, using AMOS, was used to test the validity of the constructs. The two-stage Gerbing and Anderson (1988) method was used, with the first stage focusing on measurement. The model was assessed using a partially disaggregated approach. Partial disaggregation involves the creation of two or more composite variables for each construct (Bentler and Wu, 1995; Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996). The composites may be created from identified sub-dimensions of an indicator construct of the overall latent construct (Bagozzi and Heatherton, 1994) or items may be allocated and aggregated randomly as “it is expected that any combination of a construct’s variable indicators should yield the same model fit” (Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996). The latter approach was taken for this research. Partial disaggregation provides particular benefits of being able to assess a complex higher-order model, while reducing the level of random error, and give more stable estimates from reducing the number of parameters to be estimated and improving approximation of normality distributions (Bagozzi and Heatherton, 1994; Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996).

The measurement tests relating to the first stage (measurement) of the two-stage Gerbing and Anderson (1988) test are shown in Table II. The relevant goodness of fit indices is greater than the 0.90 threshold needed for an indication of a good fit between the model and the data. The standardized root mean residual (SRMR) is also appropriately less than the threshold of 0.05, indicating good overall fit, while the CMIN/df ratio ( $\chi^2$  divided by degrees of freedom) is appropriately less than 3. Table II shows that this set of measures is valid.

## Results

First, we note that there were two determinants of *brand attitudes*. *Service quality* was the main influence on brand, with a standardized beta coefficient of 0.47 ( $t$ -value = 5.68), with further support from *empowerment*, with a beta coefficient of 0.19 ( $t$ -value = 2.31). These coefficients were statistically significant at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels, respectively. *H6* and *H7* are supported by the results because each beta coefficient is statistically significant.

Second, three determinants of trust were identified by the SEM analysis. *Responsiveness* was the most important ( $\beta = 0.57$ ;  $t$ -value = 6.20), followed by *empowerment* ( $\beta = 0.36$ ;  $t$ -value = 3.99) and *brand* ( $\beta = 0.12$ ;  $t$ -value = 2.31). The first two coefficients were significant at the 0.01 level and the last at the 0.05 level. *H3*, *H4* and *H5* are supported.

Third, two determinants of contract renewal were indicated. *Brand attitude* was the most important influence on contract renewal ( $\beta = 0.39$ ;  $t$ -value = 4.65), with *trust*

( $\beta = 0.26$ ;  $t$ -value = 3.13) next in importance. Each beta coefficient was statistically significant at the 0.01 level. *H1* and *H2* are supported.

The fact that all the SEM paths were statistically significant suggests convergent validity. It also indicates that all hypotheses were supported. The overall SEM estimating model fit statistics are given in Table II and indicates a broadly satisfactory fit of the model with the data. All of the fit indices are greater than 0.90; SRMR is less than 0.05; and CMIN/df is less than three.

## Discussion

The previous literature on B2B branding has focused on products rather than services and has yet to reach a consensus on how important branding is in terms of purchase selection, supplier selection or repurchasing. The current study has evolved B2B branding research by studying B2B services. Importantly, the branding and other measures in this services context were found to be valid and the overall model acceptable. Therefore the results can be considered with confidence, though additional B2B service brands will need to be conducted before we can rigorously compare product brands with service brands.

With this limitation in mind, the results are clear in terms of identifying brand attitudes as the most important determinant of contract renewal among the sample of 201 tenants. That is, for B2B service brands, *brands do matter* for major repurchase/renewal decisions. This is one of the first studies to establish this proposal. In at least some of the B2B product brand studies, branding was not always the main determinant, so the research raises the possibility that branding may be more important in B2B services than B2B products, but this is put up as a proposition at this stage, pending more studies into B2B service branding.

Apart from extending the application of B2B branding from products to services, the study also explores more *complex mechanisms* associated with B2B branding, within an integrated SEM model. Two mechanisms have been investigated, namely the *determinants of brand attitudes* towards B2B services and the *role of branding as a trust builder*.

The determinants of brand attitudes towards B2B services have been studied by incorporating brand attitudes as a dependent variable. Likely possible antecedents were then specified in the model. Two antecedents of brand attitudes were identified. Service quality in terms of promotion and management aspects had the greatest influence, followed by empowerment. Other influences on brand attitudes would be exogenous to the model used and would need to be studied separately.

The final role of brand in the model is as a trust builder. The work of Brodie (2005) and Webster (2000) had flagged the possibility that brands have a potential role in building trust in the relationship between the supplier (the mall in the case of the current paper) and the customer (the retail tenant in the case at hand). The current study provides empirical support for this trust building role of brands. Notwithstanding, other variables dominate the trust equation. In the SEM modeling, brand comes third out of three. But it is statistically significant (at the 0.02 level). Thus we have established a role for branding as a trust builder, with the qualification that it is a *minor* and *not* the dominant influence on trust.

Table II Model fit statistics

	$\chi^2$	df	GFI	TLI	CFI	SRMR	CMIN/df
CFA measurement	103.2	39	0.92	0.94	0.96	0.035	2.65
SEM estimation	111.3	44	0.91	0.94	0.96	0.036	2.53

In sum, the model we have conceptualized and tested includes three pivotal roles for branding, which is more than any other B2B quantitative study. The additional roles of branding provide insight into the mechanisms that lead up to major B2B repurchase decisions.

### Managerial implications

The results are very clear in terms of how to build a B2B service brand. In particular, continuous B2B service relationships are likely to depend on the service quality provided by the supplier. Service quality was the main determinant of retail business tenants having a positive brand attitude of the mall. Mall services generally are provided on the basis of a long-term relationship, embedded in a contract that is renegotiated every 3–5 years. The contract provides a stable base to form such a long-term relationship. Service quality reflects what can be considered to be a competency-capability on the part of the mall manager. It is a core production skill that is essential for any service provider. In this particular case it is the quality of services, such as maintenance and promotion, which drive the favorable (brand) attitudes that the tenants have of the mall. We would expect this factor to be important for most B2B services, though future research is needed to test this.

If we switch the attention of managers away from building strong brands to maximizing customer retention, the paper provides clear guidance: *brand attitudes are the most important determinant of contract renewal*. Customer retention is regarded as the most profitable way of growing a business, so the results of this study put the spotlight on building strong brands as the best strategy for achieving this. Companies need to have suitable metrics for understanding their brand strength and to continuously monitor this over time. Strong brands appear to be the most powerful way of maximizing customer retention. However, trust also contributes to B2B service contract renewals. B2B service firms can therefore supplement brand building with trust building in a combined way to retain customers.

Finally, the paper provides guidance to B2B service firms on how they can build trust with their customers. Responsiveness and empowerment were seen as critical factors in this respect. However, a somewhat novel (supplemental) way to build trust is through strong brands. This reinforces the need by B2B service firms to develop and build strong brands, not just for customer retention but also trust building.

In summary, if we focus on the two key components of brand loyalty advocated by Day (1969), namely brand attitudes and high repeat patronage, it can be seen that the model integrates the two components. Brand attitudes have been estimated to be the main determinant of repeat patronage. The model thus potentially assists service B2B firms build genuine brand loyalty, namely by building strong brand attitudes and understanding their role in driving repeat patronage.

### Conclusions

This study moves B2B branding research from products to services. The results show that service quality is the most important determinant of brand attitudes in the sample examined. Companies wishing to build strong B2B service

brands should focus on delivering high levels of (appropriate) service quality.

In keeping with past studies, branding has a major contribution to the renewal of contract decision. In fact, strong brands were the most important factor in the intended contract renewal decision. Perhaps the most critical practical implication of the study is the advocating of brand as the centerpiece of any major customer retention program.

A novel finding was that brands also enhance the quality of the relationship between a B2B service provider and their clients.

Our study thus provides evidence that supports the multiple roles that brands might play in B2B marketing.

### Limitations and future research

The main limitation is that a single service industry has been used. At face value, the results seem generalizable, but additional research is needed to verify this point. The sample size (201) was reasonable, but a larger sample would have been preferred. The particular service was continuous, so we still do not have studies on discrete B2B services, such as management consulting projects. Another limitation is the application to a single country. Finally, the lack of consensus of the B2B product branding studies makes it difficult to compare services and products.

Future research is needed on other B2B *service* industries (both continuous and discrete) and countries to see whether the pattern of results hold more generally. Researchers are encouraged to get samples of 300 or more, though this is not always possible. It would also be interesting to apply the same model to B2B *product* firms, so that a clearer difference could be made between B2B services and products.

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