

## A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO BRAND DEFINITIONS

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### Abstract

In the context of developing a theory relevant to the term "Brand", this article focuses on how "Brands" are perceived by executives active in Greece. Based on the empirical research undertaken, useful conclusions have been reached regarding the "Brand", as it is perceived by business executives. Apart from that, this article expresses a view of how the practitioners should perceive the Brand, so that, under the scope of Strategic Brand Management, to achieve the development of strong Brands.

### 1. Introduction

In very few areas of research in the field of Marketing there has been such a wide range of approaches as for the term "Brand". However, discussion regarding comparison, synthesis, and evaluation of relevant research findings has started quite early (Kollant, et al. 1970).

Noticeably, the diversity of positions regarding just what the term "Brand" suggests to the academics (e.g. Aaker, 1996, Kotler, 1991, Farquhar, 1989) as well as to the practitioners (de Chernatony, 1998), may not, in some instances, express an exclusion between their positions, but implies a more open view, resulting in outlining wider limits and capabilities for the Brand.

### 2. Literature Review

Characteristically, already since the 1980's, there has been a profound acknowledgement of the economic significance of Brands (Murphy, 1992), with the consequence that the development of Brands invited special research

interest among both the academics (Shocker, Srivastava and Ruekert, 1994) and the practitioners (McCrae, 1997). Ever since, the new realities such as the market globalization and the formation of more uniform consumer profiles, point to the necessity of defining a new identity for many of a company's "available resources" leading to their more efficient exploitation. Among these assets, it becomes increasingly recognized that the Brand holds a dominant position (Pitta & Katsanis, 1995). The Brand, as a multi-dimensional term, combines functional with symbolic values of significant importance and as such it becomes a strong competitive power and a vital company resource. This new identity of the Brand could eventually liberate new capabilities of a company resource which, until the present time, had not been recognised and therefore used to its full potential.

Despite all the above, and up until recently, most of these approaches were made from the point of view of the Brand's relationship with their consumers, and less so from the point of the companies that own and manage the Brands (Kapferer, 1997; Aaker, 1996). Therefore a thorough search has not yet been completed, neither regarding the structure, nor regarding the limits of the term Brand. However, the viewpoint has been formed that both aspects, namely, the Brand's relation to consumers and its management as a resource, should be balanced. For this reason it is recognized that there is a need for supportive research into the issues of "building" Brands from the companies' side (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Balmer, 1995). This approach is considered critical, as the quest for new sources of competitive advantage through the exploitation of the companies' available resources, not only invites a research interest in the area of Strategic Management, but also a business interest in how Brands are "used" as being amongst the most important sources of sustainable competitive advantage (Hitt et al., 1997).

The importance of these topics associated with the Brand and the need for business to adopt strategies for successful Brand Management has been expressed by many academics (Gardner and Levy, 1955; Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993; Farquhar, 1989), as well as practitioners (McCrae et al. 1995, Mazur and Hogg, 1993).

This vacuum concerning the development of an integrated theory relevant to a "Brand" was addressed by de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998), who made a systematic and detailed study which, on one hand included previous research findings integrating all accumulated approaches, and on

the other conducted an empirical research addressed to the "brand specialists" investigating their opinions on the various issues of Brand definition.

This approach is also adopted by the methodology of this research by seeking ways of revealing the attitudes and opinions of Greek executives who hold "Brand related" positions. This quest aims mainly at showing to what extent Brands are perceived by those executives who manage and administer them, as "capital" or "available resources" of their company. This approach stems from the realisation that the way in which a Brand is perceived by the executives will eventually affect significantly or even define the way they handle Brand decisions.

### **Definitions in the Literature**

According to de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998) the definitions of the term "Brand" as they appeared in more than 100 articles of academic and business nature during the 1980's and 1990's, could fall into 12 thematic or conceptual categories defining the Brand as follows:

"Legal instrument", "Logo", "Company", "Shorthand", "Risk reducer", "Identity system", "Image in the consumers mind", "Value system", "Personality", "Relationship", "Added value", "Evolving entity".

This existence of the various conceptual approaches is consequential in defining the term Brand as having a wide range of characteristics, at some point giving emphasis to the tangible elements and at other times, to the non-tangible elements thus suggesting a varying level of sophistication.

Additionally, the various approaches, which were mentioned, differ in terms of the level of their customer-focus. In this way it appears, as mentioned by the authors, that on certain occasions the approach of the "firms' input" is overly strong and on other, the approach of "output towards the consumer" emphasizes the consumers' perceptions of the Brand.

In the context of their quest to define the term "Brand", de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998), proceeded in investigating the meaning of the term Brand as expressed by the experts, who were involved as business consultants in Branding decisions. What their research shows is that: "All the themes from the literature review were mentioned" ... while "Value System", "Personality", "Image", "Logo", were most commonly mentioned" (p. 431). The Brand was also perceived as "Risk Reducer", "Company",

"Adding Value", "Shorthand", "Legal Instrument", "Identity", "Relationship", "Evolving", while additional themes mentioned by the executives were: "Positioning", "Vision", "Goodwill".

### **3. Definitions in our Research**

The definitions adopted in the research undertaken are consequential to the approaches of Kapferer, Aaker, de Chernatony, Kotler, Bennett (1988) and many others, as well as to the recent research undertaken by de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley. More specifically, the conceptual framework which served as the platform for the statements we used, was constituted of existing definitions such as of AMA, (1960), i.e.: "A name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". Furthermore, we also define the Brand as it was approached by Alt & Griggs (1988); Blackston (1992); Arnold (1992); Goodyear (1993), who defined Brands as symbolic devices with personalities that users value beyond their functional utility. Gardner & Levy (1995), also offer a definition, according to which "a brand name is a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas & attributes", whereas Murphy (1992) suggested that "Brands are said to add values to products".

Clark (1987) on the other hand, offered another definition relating Brands with "values", i.e. "Brand is values that provide the important link between consumers and marketers" while Kapferer (1992), approaching Brands under a holistic view, claims that "A Brand is not a product. It is a product's essence, its meaning and its direction and it defines its identity in time and space... too often Brands are examined through their component parts: brand name, logo, design or packaging... its central concept is brand identity, not brand image..." (p.11).

Based on the above expressed views, the statements, which were included in this specific research, cover a wide range of views concerning the term Brand, implying specific roles and characteristics, namely:

1. "A Brand is a product of a specific producer/manufacturer which is differentiated from the competition by its name and its appearance"-Definition similar to the one of AMA (1960)

2. "A Brand is the name of a product", reflecting a distinctive position among the defining elements of the Brand as revealed in a recent survey (Rigopoulou, 2000)
3. "A Brand is all those elements that enhance the functional value of the product, a view in line with the suggestion of Murphy (1992) that Brands add values to products. This definition was included to check Farquhar's viewpoint that the product provides functional benefits, while the brand name is responsible for creating symbolic ones.
4. "A Brand is the personality of a product, product group, or organisation, as it is formed in terms of consumers' perceptions evolving from tangible and non-tangible characteristics", according to what de Chernatony and McDonald proposed (1994, p. 18), i.e. "an identifiable product, service, person or place augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant unique added values which match their needs more closely"
5. "A Brand is any symbol and/or design which is associated with a product", which is an approach close to the references related with "legal instrument" (Crainer, 1995; Broadbent & Cooper, 1987), as well as the Oxford English Dictionary ("A particular sort of class of goods, as indicated by the trade-marks on them")
6. "A Brand is the value added on a product", according to de Chernatony and McDonald (1992), who postulate that a brand is something additional to a commodity product, suggesting that brands and added value are to some extent synonymous.

and

7. "A Brand is the combination of all of the elements (name, symbol, design and packaging) by which the product differs from the competitors, thereby lending it a unique identity", which represents Kapferer's view.

Among the Brand statement definitions included in our survey, it was intentional to avoid the inclusion of certain definitions suggesting or relating to "capital", "asset", or "available resources" considerations. This was decided as simply the inclusion of such a statement would affect the frequency of associated responses, disproportional to the real perspective of the Brand management practice. It was therefore interesting to observe the extent to

which the executives would take the initiative to mention the "capital" or "available resource", i.e. any "asset" consideration, since they of course had the option of adding any other statement or position of their choice.

Each of the statements put forward for examination implies a specific "focus" from the managers' perspective. The first "group" of statements, these of the "market-driven" or "extrovert" view, is characterised so, since the Brand is understood and perceived through external parameters, either the consumers or the competition. In turn, the second group of statements are formulated in a way more "esoteric" or "introvert" to the Brand, i.e. not directly related to and affected by the above mentioned external factors.

More specifically, the following statements express mostly a "market driven" / "extrovert" view, i.e.:

- "A Brand is the personality of a product, product group, or organization as it is formed and perceived by the consumer and is attributed to tangible and intangible elements and characteristics", and
- "A Brand is the combination of all those elements (name, symbol, design and packaging) by which the product differs from that of the competition and by which it lends the product its unique identity"

On the other hand the following definitions are more "esoteric" and particularly some of them are closely related to the value added by the Brand.

- "A Brand is a product of a specific producer, which differs from the competition by its name and appearance"
- "A Brand is the name of a product"
- "A Brand is all of those elements that enhance a products functionality/value"
- "A Brand is every symbol/symbols and/or design which are associated with a product"
- "A Brand is the additional value of a product"

Apart from that, based on the suggestion that the product provides functional benefits, while the brand name is responsible for creating symbolic ones (Farquhar 1989), these statements are assigning to the brand a different degree of symbolic enhancements.

More specifically, the statements are listed below in a ranking order, from the most symbolic one, to the less symbolic, having in mind that according to the related literature (Mittal et al., 1990; de Chernatony and McWilliam, 1990; Spangenberg et al., 1997; Bhat and Reddy, 1998), the functional approach describes the brand in a rational and practical manner, while the symbolic in a more emotional.

i.e.:

- "A Brand is the personality of a product, product group, or organization as it is formed and perceived by the consumer and is attributed to tangible and intangible elements and characteristics", and
- "A Brand is the combination of all those elements (name, symbol, design and packaging) by which the product differs from that of the competition and by which it lends the product its unique identity"
- "A Brand is all of those elements that enhance a product's functionality/value"
- "A Brand is the additional value of a product"
- "A Brand is every symbol/symbols and/or design which are associated with a product"
- "A Brand is the name of a product"
- "A Brand is a product of a specific producer, which differs from the competition by its name and appearance"

#### **4. Research Objectives and Methodology**

Based on this literature review, the basic goal of this empirical research is to determine to what extent the executives who hold a different range of responsibilities regarding the management and administration of the Brands, adopt a more extrovert / market-driven view, or an opposite introvert view, leading to the realisation that Brands constitute important and unique company capital and/or available resources and assets.

Besides, the examination of whether the executives perceive the Brands mostly through their symbolic or their functional dimensions, of course, within the "symbolic frames" that the Brand itself creates, is also discussed in the context of the research.

The sample was composed of executives working for companies that have the following characteristics:

1. They are both Greek owned and multinationals.
2. They belong to the largest Advertisers in Greece and as such they are listed in the reference Publications

The first criterion of sample choice was considered as being important since it was interesting to assess the situation in Greece as created not only by Greek but also by multinational companies. With regard to the adoption of the second criterion, it was considered that when a company has made an advertising investment large enough to be one of the largest advertisers, it is reasonable to assume that since it invests in the success of its products and Brand in the market and employs executives with considerable Marketing background and expertise, these executives will be adopting advanced marketing principles.

Therefore, from the total number of active companies in Greece, this specific research focused on the companies included in the Directory of "the largest advertisers" in Greece, totally 129 companies.

On the basis of an "average organisational structure" it was considered realistic that there was the possibility of approaching 5 persons in each company, approximately a total of 645 persons, occupying positions ranging from Product Manager to Commercial and General Manager.

As for the product categories that the companies in the sample cover, as indicated by the respondents themselves, they include fast moving and durable consumer products, services, as well as industrial products.

In order to avoid "consultation" and influence of higher rank executives, each executive received a personal letter along with the questionnaire. Additionally, a personal follow up approach was adopted by making reminder phone calls to each executive.

Assuming that executives "carry" with them their own set of Marketing values and in order to arrive at generally applicable positions, it was decided to probe into the executive's personal convictions, opinions and personal expertise and avoid, as much as possible the influence of the specific characteristics of the company or situational factors. This was effected through the appropriate wording of the question and the introductory instruction to express their own viewpoint as experts in branding.



The question was replied on a 5point scale measuring the degree of agreement or disagreement (5: totally agree, 4: partly agree, 3: neither agree /nor disagree, 2: partly disagree, 1: totally disagree) of each executive with the various statements. Of course, the opportunity was also given to the executives, to express additional positions or declarations of any nature, by offering them the option of "other: ...".

In the statistical processing of the data, apart from the descriptive analysis, which is based on frequency tables, we proceed with the non-parametric tests of chi-square and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests. Additionally, k-means clustering has been used in order to further evaluate the results.

### 5. The Experts' Approaches on Brands

Before proceeding with the analytical presentation of the results of this survey, it is interesting to refer to the profile of the executives who responded (FIGURES A-F, below). In order to put their characteristics in perspective, they were asked to declare their education, their working experience in the field (in Years), and the period of time of their cooperation with the particular company, as well as the position they held at the time.

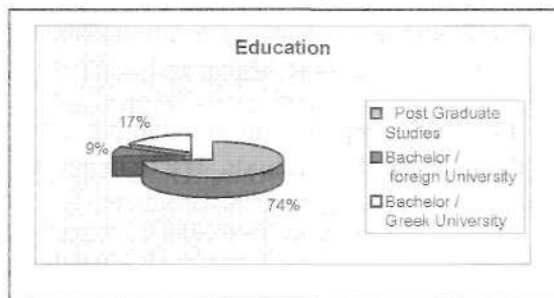


FIGURE A

Respondent's profile.  
Education

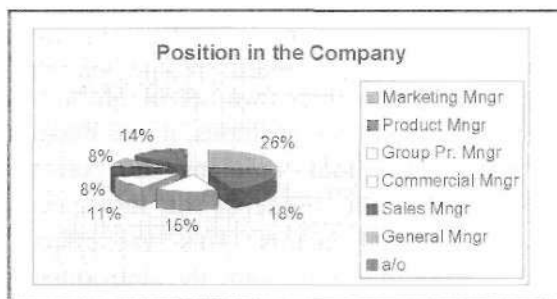


FIGURE B

Respondent's profile.  
Position in the Company

FIGURE C  
Respondent's profile.  
Working Experience

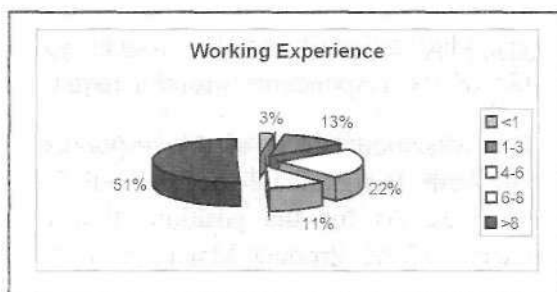


FIGURE D  
Respondent's profile.  
Cooperation with the Company

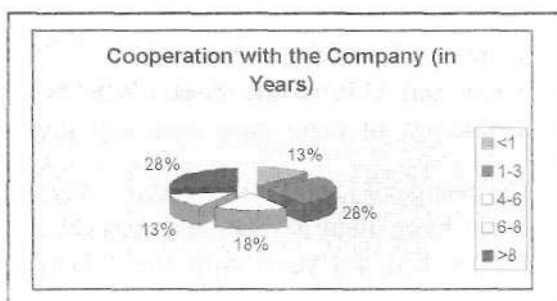


FIGURE E  
Respondent's profile.  
Nature of the Company

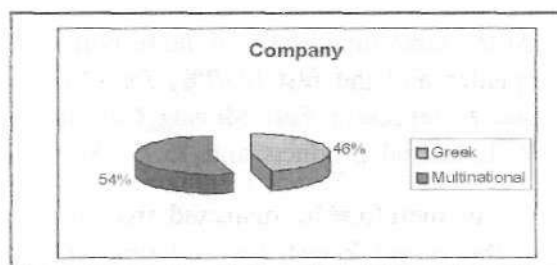
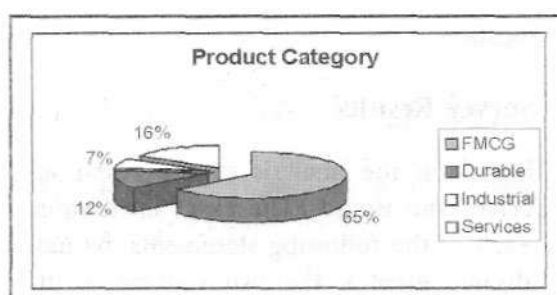


FIGURE F  
Respondent's profile.  
Product Category



Regarding these parameters, as well as the nature of their company (Greek Multinational) and the product types the company is marketing, the profile of the respondents was the following:

The educational level of the respondents was generally very high, since 74,5% held postgraduate degrees and 83% were graduates of foreign Universities. As for the positions they occupied, 26,4% were Marketing Managers, 17,9% Product Managers, 15,1% Group Product Managers, and 11,3% Commercial Directors. The remaining 29,3% was divided mainly between Sales Managers (7,5%) and General Managers (7,5%).

In terms of working experience, over 50% had more than 8 years, 22% 4-6 years and 11% of the respondents have 6-8 years working experience, while the rest of them have even less they 4 years experience.

The company loyalty picture shows that 28% had been working for their company more than 8 years and 28% had done so for 1-3 years. The rest 44% have had 4-8 years with their company, and only a 13% are "new comers" in their company (less than 1 year), while another 13% are quite "loyal" working 6-8 years with the same company.

At the same time 54,3% of the respondents were working for Multinational companies and the rest (45,7%) for Greek companies, while 64,5% of the responses represent Fast Moving Consumer Goods, 12,4% Durable goods, 7,4% Industrial products and 15,7% Services.

It can therefore be deducted that the majority of the respondents have both theoretical knowledge and practical experience, whilst both company types are covered (Greek and multinational) over the four product groups with emphasis of course to Consumer goods, where branding finds wider application.

## **6. Survey Results**

Based on the analysis of the responses to the question of how "they perceive" the Brand (The exact instruction was: "Please, express your view on each of the following statements, by indicating your degree of agreement or disagreement"), the two statements that attracted the highest level of agreement are the following:

1. "A Brand is a combination of all those elements (name, symbol, design, logo) whereby the product differs from its competitors' products, thereby lending the product its unique identity", and,

2. "A Brand is the personality of the product, product group or organisation as it is formed in consumer's perceptions evolving from the tangible and non-tangible elements and characteristics"

Analytically the responses, which present how the executives perceive the Brand, are expressed in terms of Percentages as follows

TABLE 1  
Frequencies of responses (in Percentage)

*	Statements	Totally agree (%)	Partly agree (%)	Neither agree, nor disagree (%)	Partly disagree (%)	Totally disagree (%)
1	"A Brand is a product of a specific producer which differs from the competition by its name and appearance"	18.5	50.0	10.2	11.1	10.2
2	"A Brand is the name of a product"	8.4	34.6	11.2	14.0	31.8
3	"A Brand is all of those elements that enhance the operational value of the product"	12.3	25.5	23.6	19.8	18.9
4	"A Brand is the personality of a product, product group, or organisation as it is formed in consumers' perceptions evolving from the tangible and non-tangible elements and characteristics"	62.0	32.4	.9	1.9	2.8
5	"A Brand is any symbol and/or design which are associated with a product"	14.0	38.3	18.7	11.2	17.8
6	"A Brand is the value added on a product"	18.5	34.3	13.9	13.0	20.4

(continues)

7	"A Brand is the combination of all of the above elements (name, symbol, design and packaging) by which the product differs from the competitors thereby lending it a unique identity"	72.7	19.1	4.5	3.6	0
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Seeing the above frequency table under the scope of a normal distribution, it was observed that the values of the skewness and kurtosis for statements 1.1 to 1.7 (TABLE 2, below) clearly showed that there was considerable influence in the way respondents expressed their views on the statements.

TABLE 2  
Normal distribution analysis

	Valid N	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
Statement 1	108	1,000000	5,000000	-0,89019	-0,18271
Statement 2	107	1,000000	5,000000	-0,01969	-1,54756
Statement 3	106	1,000000	5,000000	-0,04058	-1,12881
Statement 4	108	1,000000	5,000000	-2,45109	7,10732
Statement 5	107	1,000000	5,000000	-0,47022	-0,97803
Statement 6	108	1,000000	5,000000	-0,35743	-1,24043
Statement 7	1100	2,000000	5,000000	-2,09134	4,02479

Furthermore, in statements 2,3,5,6, the distribution of the answers was almost bimodal. In all instances the distribution of the answers deviated significantly from the expected normal distribution. Pertinent diagrams are given below (Figures 1-7).

It can be seen therefore that the executives participating in the research, identify themselves to a larger extent with the two more "extrovert" ("market-driven") approaches. Contrarily, the degree of "agreement" or, "partial agreement", with the remaining statements, was significantly lower. Furthermore, the sums of the percentages in the scale's two "positive" positions: "Totally Agree" and "Partly Agree", as well as the of two "negative" positions ("Partly disagree" and "Totally disagree"), are presented in TABLE 3.

FIGURES 1-7

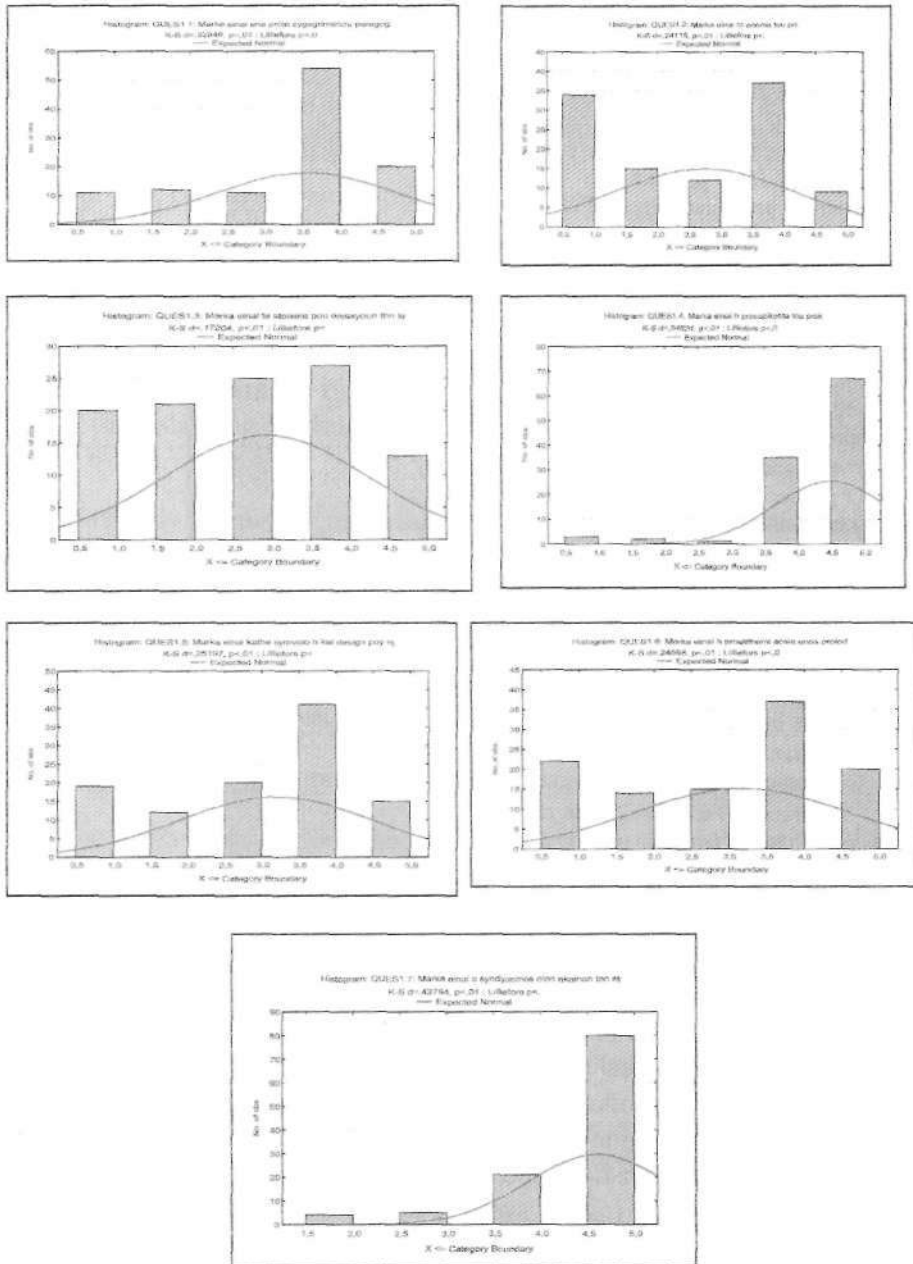


TABLE 3  
Positive and Negative aggregations"

	Statements	Totally agree & Partly agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Partly disagree & Totally disagree (%)
1.	"A Brand is a product of a specific <b>producer</b> , which differs from the competition by its name and appearance"	68.5	10.2	21.3
2.	"A Brand is the name of a product"	43.0	11.2	45.8
3.	"A Brand is all of those elements that enhance the operational value of the product"	37.8	23.6	38.7
4.	"A Brand is the personality of a product product group or organisation <b>as it is formed in consumer's perceptions</b> evolving from the tangible and non-tangible elements and characteristics"	94.4	.9	4.7
5.	"A Brand is any symbol and/or design which are associated with a product"	52.3	18.7	29
6.	"A Brand is the value added on a product"	52.8	13.9	33.4
7.	"A Brand is the combination of all of the above elements (name, symbol, design and packaging) <b>by which the product differs from the competitors</b> thereby lending it a unique identity"	91.8	4.5	3.6

What the table shows, is that in terms of overall agreement ("totally agree" and "partly agree"), two "extrovert" statements (no 4: "A Brand is the personality of a product, product group, or organisation as it is formed in consumers' perceptions evolving from the tangible and non-tangible elements and characteristics" and no 7: "A Brand is the combination of all of the above elements (name, symbol, design and packaging) by which the product differs from the competitors thereby lending it a unique identity"), present very high percentages indicating a clear agreement. The statements

1 ("A Brand is a product of a specific producer, which differs from the competition by its name and appearance"), 6 ("A Brand is the value added on a product") and 5 ("A Brand any symbol and/or design which are associated with a product") are following in a certain distance, while the statements 2 ("A Brand is the name of a product") and 3 ("A Brand is all of those elements that enhance the operational value of the product") are following further behind without being able to sum up to a higher than 50 % in the two agreement options of the scale.

Apart from looking at the replies from the "Extrovert introvert" point of view, we can turn our attention to the results based on the criterion of more or less symbolic view of the Brand. By using this criterion it is immediately observed that the two more extrovert statements being also strongly symbolic, attract the highest agreement, followed by statements 1 and 6, thus showing a clear orientation towards the symbolic dimensions of the Brand.

Additionally, it must be emphasized that there was no mention whatsoever regarding the dimension of the Brand which could characterize it as "capital", "available resource", or at least, "source of competitive advantage for the company".

At this point, it must also be noted that other statements made by the respondents, are the following

- (a) "The product's and its family artistic pseudonym"
- (b) "The Legal Designator who declares that the Brand's owner has the right to the exclusive use of the Brand as it is forbidden by law for anyone else to use it"
- (c) "The additional value which is given to a product and is characterized by name, design, style and symbol"
- (d) "Elements which enhance the emotional value"
- (e) "A combination of all of those elements (name, symbol, design, packaging, history, heritage and special production methods) which compose a product's personality"
- (f) "The combination of all of those tangible and intangible elements, characteristics and symbols which lend the unique identity to the product"



and blend together to create a unique product personality which characterizes and describes this product in the consumer's mind"

- (g) "A promise to satisfy a need"
- (h) "The total of all the experience, knowledge, emotions, convictions which the customers develop for the product"
- (i) "The total of those impressions which we have in our mind regarding a specific product"
- (j) "A combination of a Brand name, packaging, design, product performance, delivery as promises, image via communication"

By collecting and analysing these statements, it becomes evident that for the majority of the executives, the Brand is perceived through the consumers and in consumers' terms. Only one respondent, made a statement (Statement b), that is relevant to the legal framework corresponding to similar remarks recorded by de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley.

It must be also mentioned that another statement (a), identifies the Brand with the product name and recognises some communication capabilities, since it is not simply connected with the name but especially with its artistic pseudonym.

Furthermore, three statements (c, d, and e) can be characterised as "introvert" describing some type of value which the Brand might have, whereas five other statements (f, g, h, I, j) point to the executives' focus on what a Brand suggests to their customers. Among these statements one is characteristic in pointing out that a Brand constitutes "a promise to satisfy needs" (statement g).

Besides, it is interesting to note that none of these additional statements, concerned the Brand's capital dimension and none of the respondents suggested that the Brand constitutes a strong and unique strategic "tool" in which they must make long term investments.

The clear preference of the respondents to the statements:

"A Brand is the personality of a product, product group, or organisation as it is formed in consumers' perceptions evolving from the tangible and non-tangible elements and characteristics" and

"A Brand is the combination of all of the above elements (name, symbol, design and packaging) by which the product differs from the competitors thereby lending it a unique identity" appears even through the clustering exercise. More precisely, as the following tables present, the k-means clustering revealed the existence of two distinct groups of respondents. Those with a definite "positive" approach regarding all statements and those with a less positive approach, particularly towards the statements 2, 3, 5 and 6.

TABLE 4  
k- means clustering

	Between	df	Within	df	F	signif.
Statement 1	44,40255	1	109,5109	102	41,35715	0,000000
Statement 2	49,20089	1	158,7895	102	31,60468	0,000000
Statement 3	57,28738	1	116,9338	102	49,97113	0,000000
Statement 4	3,48651	1	72,4750	102	4,90685	0,028974
Statement 5	79,01608	1	100,5128	102	80,18524	0,000000
Statement 6	37,78238	1	166,4388	102	23,15448	0,000005
Statement 7	4,98682	1	47,6286	102	10,67964	0,001477

Apparently attitudes covered by the statements 4 and 7 are quite similar in the entire sample.

However, even for these statements a conventional analysis of variance approach showed statistically significant differences, albeit without real significance due to the nature of the scale they express.

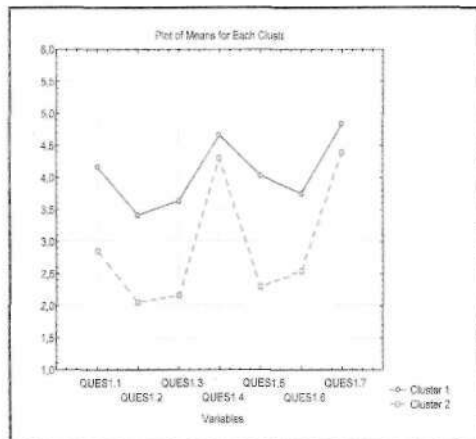


FIGURE 8

Finally, consistent with the theoretical approach adopted in this research, we wanted to tap into the perceptions of the executives, regardless their current position in the company they are working with, or the nature or the "nationality" of the firm itself. As our intent was to understand better their personal views through statistical analysis (chi-square), we found out that, indeed, no significant statistical differences were observed among the answers that can be attributed to the various executive levels or the nature (nationality) of the companies the respondents were working with at the time (s. Appendix).

## **7. Discussion and Managerial Implications**

The topic of strategic Brand management is mainly related to two managerial dimensions. The one is relevant to WHO handles the Brands and the other to HOW this person handles it. On one hand, these dimensions refer to the management level on which the Brands are managed and on the other, to the way in which the issues relating to Brand management are perceived and handled.

Characteristically, according to Shocker, Srivastava and Ruekert (1994, p.149), the executives which handle the Brands (Brand Managers) are described as "Murderers of Capital-Brands". This is explained by the fact that the management of Brands is in the hands of young, relatively inexperienced people, who quite often concentrate on the short-term view and results (Landler, Schiller and Therrien, 1991). Although top management may often focus on short term results for reasons relating to profits or company stock, the challenge for these people should not be how to face the daily market crises (customers-competitors) but how to adopt a more strategic way of thought regarding the management of their Brands.

This viewpoint is definitely correct if one discusses principles. On the other hand as the literature review has shown, the Marketing education that most of these executives has received, does not treat brands as assets but instead concentrates on positioning as a panacea for strategic thinking. At the same time corporations are short or medium term driven thus obliging their executives to think and act accordingly. Finally, the continually diminishing loyalty of executives to their companies and vice versa, does not encourage long term thinking on behalf of the executives.

Shocker, Srivastava and Ruekert also mention (1994, p. 155) that: "the executives discovered that satisfying a customer is accompanied by especially attractive characteristics, such as that the customer purchases the product, that he is prepared to pay more for it etc. This has led the executives to focus on the customers' satisfaction as an indication of operational success".

As hard as these words of the academics might sound, they nevertheless pose serious concerns pointing at the danger of emphasis on the short-term and the lack of long-term strategic vision, and all this through concentrating on consumer behaviour. It is therefore no exaggeration that often the Brand seems to be, "the unconditional response to what at any moment is demanded by customers" (Urde, 1999, p. 130 ). Along these lines, Marketing Strategy can be developed on the basis of two main approaches.

According to the first, the weight that is given to the market as the basis for strategic planning, forms a Strategy, oriented and driven by the market and mainly by the customers. (Cravens, Gordon, Piercy and Slater, 1997; Day, 1994).

So far, the leading role of the market in the strategic orientation of the Brand, is characteristic of the way the Brand is approached and managed. This focus offers a series of opportunities for Marketing that come from the customers and/or competitors.

On the other hand, the other approach based on the resources of the firm (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Peteraf, 1993) is focusing on the firm itself and its strengths from which its competitive advantage is derived. This approach is based on the exploitation and management of available resources, capital and competencies and pointing at the value and role that resources can play, it gives emphasis in the internal analysis of the firm (Penrose , 1958; Barney, 1991; Grant, 1995).

The work of Barnard (1938); Sloan (1963); and Rumelt (1974), represents main references of this approach where emphasis is given to the resources, in the context of the availability and combination of human, physical and intangible capital, linking them directly to the performance and core competencies of the firm.

Along these lines the debate on the two basic strategic approaches, the "Market-driven" and the "Resource-based" approach, is particularly important, since both approaches, in search of competitive advantage, perceive

and "manage" the available company resources, assigning to them varying importance. Indeed, the quest for sources of sustainable competitive advantage is an ever-relevant research topic in the field of Strategic Management (Porter, 1985; Rumelt, 1984), where Marketing as a business function handling company resources or central business philosophy, could not be absent.

The drawbacks of both approaches, the "ex-post" adaptation in the first case, and the lack of consideration of the environment leading away from the Marketing concept in the second, brings forward a new approach, known as "Brand orientation" or "Market Orientation plus" (Urde 1999, p.118).

According to this approach, the company places its Brands at the centre of the strategy formulation process, thus centering its activities on the development and protection of the Brands and the enhancement of their competitive advantage.

Behind this approach stands the idea that the Brand, in contrast with the other resources and competencies, has the capacity to develop an identity through a process of creating "value" and "meaning". Ideally, this identity is communicated to the customers with exactness and is recognised as important and unique as it builds a strong relationship with them.

Strategically, this means that the concentration of the operations of the company is on procedures that create value to the Brands enforcing their identity and reflecting an orientation to what is considered as contributing to the Brand in the long term.

In this sense, and quite simply, the Brand represents the expression of the strategic intent of the company.

The research survey that was conducted, shows that most executives perceive the Brand mainly in relation to the competition and the customer, adopting an intensely "extrovert viewpoint thus ignoring the internal strength that the Brand possesses.

Along these lines, as it was earlier mentioned, the highest percentage of agreement with a statement lies with the position that the Brand in effect consists of a set of defining elements that set it apart from competition, while the next statement, in terms of agreement, is clearly and equally

extrovert, speaking of "personality" as it is formulated in consumer perceptions, thus making a Positioning statement.

However, even if the impact that a Brand has on the target group is very important, this focus on the target group without previously considering the Brand itself even by its own "administrators", can create identity problems for the Brand.

The problems will arise when, in order to focus on and adapt to the customer, the Brand might "shrink" or "over-extend" losing its ability to satisfy the customers of the target group it was developed for.

So, we must be alert to realise that what is demanded by the customers at any point in time, might not be in line with what is required to strengthen the Brand as strategic resource.

Besides, as Kaldor, since 1971, has pointed out, "the customer does not always know what he needs or desires" (page 20). Therefore, the relatively recent appearance of "Brand (or "Market plus") Orientation" (Urde and Melin, 1997), is clearly pointing at a firm which is totally focused on its Brands, its main objective being to create value through them, for a target group, of course.

The strategic management according to this approach is geared at developing Brands only within the limits set by the Brands identity and in this sense, the starting point of a Brand-oriented firm is related to the mission of the Brand(s) it possesses.

Questions like "who is the Brand", "for what reason does the Brand exist", "how can the Brand objectives be met", are very crucial as they relate to the basic values, the identity, the personality and the strategy of the Brand and suggest a symbolic role of the Brand.

According to the supporters of the "Brand driven approach", the market orientation in the long run, might prove detrimental to the growth and development of the Brand, if the values and the personality of the Brand itself have not been protected and secured.

Therefore, statements such as those included in the survey, might imply a one-sided focus on the basic parameters of the market environment with very limited introspection, analysis and consideration of the "self" of the Brand.

Besides, based on the criterion: "Functional-symbolic" dimension of Brands, and the relative preference of the executives to the statements revealing the "symbolic" dimension of Brands, one could suggest that this is happening as a side-effect of their orientation.

It is beyond any doubt that symbols, as well as signals, do exist as communicational vehicles transferring particular message(s) to particular audiences. It seems that this view, adopted by most of the respondents of our study, is also "extrovert" in the way that allude the existence of a certain "transmitter" and a certain "receiver" / "acceptor".

### **8. Directions for further research**

It is increasingly becoming obvious that, the availability of comparable technology in more and more markets in combination with the use of similar marketing tools by most competitors, must make Brand managers realise that differentiation comes from the value that the Brand offers.

Of course, to focus on the value of a Brand requires a certain level of consciousness that according to the findings of a broader survey that we conducted (Rigopoulou, 2000) does not exist. However, the field of the sources of sustainable competitive advantage is still open for more researchers to contribute. In the meantime, the way that the approaches are developing might lead to a wider redefinition of some established concept such as the Marketing concept or the Brand concept.

Besides, it has long been recognized in the literature that the consumer's evaluations of the brands are centered either in functional or in symbolic dimensions of the Brands. Along these lines, the relative emphasis on these dimensions could be dealt with by examining the executives' viewpoint and not the Consumer's alone. In this frame, the relative role and influence that each of the defining elements of the Brand plays, i.e. the name, the signal, the logo, and symbol, should be further examined.

### **9. Conclusions**

Given that the strategic approach followed by a firm is shaped to a significant extent by the level of expertise as reflected in the decisions of its executives, it is very interesting and important to investigate their positions and the behaviour they adopt in practice.

It was this realisation that drove this particular research especially because of the relatively limited empirical data generally available, and particularly so in Greece. The research has shown that the overwhelming majority of the respondents perceive the Brand in terms of the main external parameters, customers and competition.

This in effect shows an "outward looking" approach of the concept of the brand whereas the "inward driven" perspective, that of the Brand as a sum of values or even a company capital or resource, appears relatively very weak.

Unfortunately, as the international experience shows, very few strong Brands are being built and even fewer meet the conditions for development partly because of the way that those responsible for them are handling them.

The recent commentary and literature on Brand loyalty and Brand switching, point to the fact that the promotion stereotyping has led to shifts in market share that can be attributed to marginal or "symbolic" price changes. To the extent that this is true, it proves that the cases where Brands have been treated as valuable available resources are very few.

To put it simply, nobody can argue against the links of the firm to its environment along the lines of the Marketing concept and philosophy. However, there is a need to realise that there is quite a difference in terms of strategic approach to be ahead of the customer in comparison to running after him.

In the later case we run the danger of adopting a "reactor" behaviour, according to the strategic archetypes of Miles and Snow, which is characterised by opportunistic if not sporadic reactions, duplication of actions and activities and very quick changes and adaptations that under no circumstances imply leadership behaviour and management with long term perspective.

On the other hand a deeper self appreciation and an enhancement of the values that characterise the Brand, allows a proactive behaviour that is a "sine qua non" condition of competitive superiority. It is therefore on this point that executives managing Brands must focus, particularly because the age of global competition will give the lead to those that really stick to principles



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