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SHIRLEY LEITCH AND SALLY DAVENPORT

Corporate Brands and Social Brands

Co-Branding GM-Free and UK Supermarkets

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

Corporate brands enable organizations to differentiate themselves from competitors and, in doing so, add considerable value to the balance sheet (Balmer and Gray 2003). Arguably one of the most effective ways of increasing the value of corporate brands is through co-branding (Blackett and Boad 1999; Motion, Leitch and Brodie 2003) that involves the public linkage of brands in order to enhance the value of one or both brands. Co-branding has been theorized in terms of the relationship between the brands of organizations, products, and services (Blackett and Boad 1999). However, issues may also

Shirley Leitch is dean of commerce at the University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia (tel.: + 61-2-4221-5080; fax: + 61-2-4221-4157; e-mail: sleitch@uow.edu.au). Sally Davenport is associate professor in the Management School at Victoria University, P.O. Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand (tel.: +64-4-463-5144; e-mail: sally.davenport@vuw.ac.nz).

be understood to have the potential to function as brands and, therefore, to become co-branded allies. It is this potential of issues to function as a type of brand that is examined in this paper.

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

The potential benefits and dangers of co-branding between corporate and social brands are investigated by analyzing the strategies adopted by supermarkets in response to the campaign against genetically modified (GM) food in the United Kingdom. The case study method adopted in this paper enables researchers to develop theory from research questions (Eisenhardt 1989). The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. From a brand perspective, can issues be understood to function as social brands?
2. How might co-branding with social brands add value to corporate brands?
3. How might co-branding with social brands damage corporate brands?

The case study examined here provides a starting point for theory building in this new area. Before analyzing the GM-free case, however, the new concept of the social brand will be defined within the context of the brand literature and in terms of its place within the brand web (Leitch and Richardson 2003). A brand web analysis of the social brand “GM-free” is then outlined, followed by a discussion of the implications of our analysis for corporate brand strategy.

Branding issues

The brand literature is both extensive and diverse, offering numerous perspectives on brands, their value, and their purpose (e.g., Aaker 1996; Balmer

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

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

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

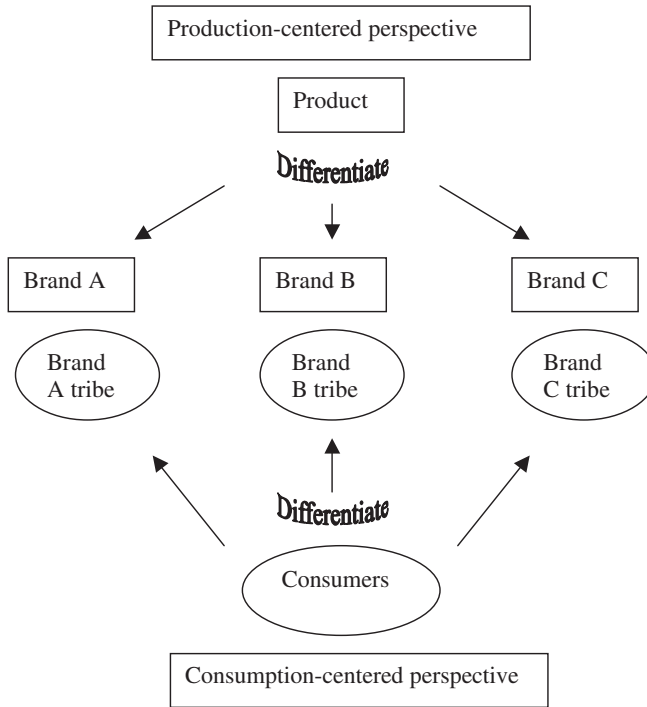


Figure 1. Production-centered and consumption-centered brand differentiation

the same issue. A parallel may, therefore, be drawn with corporate brands such as Virgin that also have multiple organizational associations, such as Virgin Airlines, Virgin Records, and Virgin Brides (Balmer 2001a, 2001b; Leitch and Richardson 2003).

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

Global warming provides one example of an issue that we would argue has come to function as a social brand. Many organizations that produce products

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

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

Corporate brands and social brands

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

The multiple stakeholder focus of corporate brands lends them a social and political dimension that has seen many become the focus of anti-corporate-brand campaigns by pressure groups. High-profile corporate entities are often singled out by activists for attention on issues that may be generic to the industry because such actions are likely to attract significant media coverage. Nike, for example, became the target of a campaign drawing attention to the labor practices of multinational corporations in developing nations. McDonald’s continues to be the target of campaigns on a whole array of issues

ranging from the destruction of rain forests to the treatment of farm animals and the inclusion of GM ingredients in their meals. These examples provide instances in which organizations have used issue management to deal with issue-based attacks that threaten to damage the corporate brand by creating undesirable brand associations.

Organizations have responded to issue-based attacks in a variety of ways, the most significant of which has been the advent of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Marchand (1998) has traced the origins of CSR back to the 1920s when large U.S. companies sought to legitimize their growing power by convincing the populace of the existence of the “corporate soul.” Their concern was to counter the socialist political movement that portrayed big business as a threat to democracy. Their goal was to reverse the groundswell of public opinion in favor of increased government regulation in areas such as health and safety, environment, urban planning, and employment.

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

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

We now outline the brand web framework that we use to analyze the co-

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

The brand web

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

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

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

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

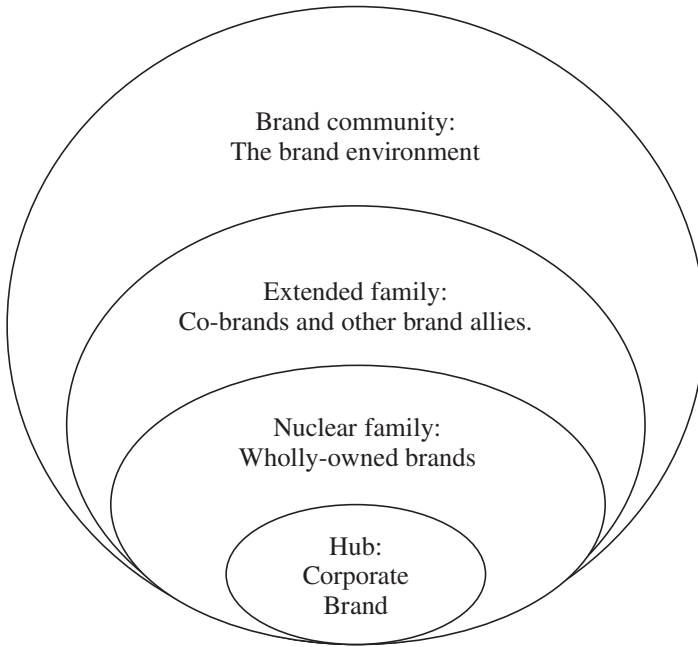


Figure 2. The brand web

inclusive concept than is “corporate brand.” The corporate brand is only a partial representation of corporate identity that is communicated to stakeholders (Motion and Leitch 2002).

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

The fourth zone of the brand web is the brand community made up of the broader brand environment. All of the brands that interact in some manner with brands in the first three zones lie in the fourth zone. For example, Coca-Cola is a member of Pepsi’s brand community as are the brands of all of Pepsi’s

suppliers, retailers, and advertising media. The brand community is a potent source of future members of the extended brand family as organizations draw related brands into strategic alliances and co-branded relationships. Social brands that lie within the brand community also provide a rich potential source of future co-branded partners.

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

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

Brand web analysis

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

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

4. The strategies pursued in association with each brand (Leitch and Richardson 2003, 1071–1073)

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

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

The brand values of social brands are potentially valuable to corporate brands as sources of discursive power. Through co-branding, organizations can acquire associations with desirable brand values that would otherwise be difficult to establish. For example, in the United Kingdom, the social brand “GM-free” may be characterized by the brand values of “natural,” “environmentally friendly,” and “healthy.” These are all brand values with which supermarkets and others involved in the food industry might seek to be associated (Harper and Makatouni 2002). However, a public clash between a UK supermarket and GM-free activists might lead to a negative brand association that would position the supermarket as opposed to these positive brand values. Co-branding with social brands may thus serve to protect corporate brands from such negative associations as well as extend the range of positive brand associations open to them.

The third and fourth elements of the brand web analysis involve an assessment of the goals and strategies pursued by each brand. Social brands cannot be said to have goals and strategies. Instead, it is the organizations that have co-branded with social brands that pursue goals and strategies. When social brands are brought into a corporate brand web, they bring their existing brand relationships with them. For example, “GM-free” is co-branded with international activist organizations such as Greenpeace, and it is the

goals and strategies pursued by Greenpeace and other co-branded organizations that must be considered by an organization seeking to co-brand with the GM-free issue. If the goals and strategies of the corporate brand are at odds with those of the social brand's existing co-branded partners, then the relationship may be untenable. Further, instead of adding to their reputation for CSR, organizations may find themselves the targets of activist groups or consumers angry at what they may perceive to be a cynical marketing tactic (Frankental 2001; Polonsky and Speed 2001).

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

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

Genetically modified food in the United Kingdom

The advent of GM food and the unease it has generated with many consumers has created problems internationally for the food industry (Pringle 2003). On one side, U.S. agribusiness has strongly advocated GM as a panacea for many of the problems facing agriculture, particularly erosion caused by tilling of the soil and the increasing use of chemicals. On the other side, some consumers and environmental or consumer interest groups have rejected what they have dubbed "Frankenfoods," arguing that these foods have not been in existence long enough for scientists to be sure that they are safe for human consumption or that they will not have long-term negative environmental impacts (Rifkin 1998). In the United States, agribusiness appears to be winning, but in Europe and Australasia, where consumer resistance is

higher, the battle is still being fought. The response of UK supermarkets to GM food is now analyzed in order to illustrate how co-branding between an organization and a social brand may work in practice as well as its associated potential benefits and pitfalls.

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

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

During the same period, in June 2003, the UK government sponsored its own set of public discussion forums called “GM Nation?” The official report produced at the end of the debate offered seven key messages: (1) people are

generally uneasy about GM; (2) the more people engaged in GM issues, the harder their attitudes and more intense their concerns; (3) there was little support for early commercialization of GM crops; (4) there was widespread mistrust of government and multinational companies in relation to GM food; (5) there was a broad desire to know more about GM and for more research to be done; (6) developing countries were seen to have special interests in the GM debate; and (7) the debate was welcomed and valued by participants (Department of Trade and Industry 2003).

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

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

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

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

Power relationships between brands

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

Brand values

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

Brand goals

The third element of a brand web analysis involves the *goals* associated with each brand. Supermarkets have profitability as their primary goal, but

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

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

Brand strategies

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

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

Changing goals and strategies

In the long term, the value of co-branding GM-free will be reduced if the supermarkets' claims to offer GM-free retail branded products are proved false or if their commitment to the issue does not match the expectations of other organizations with which GM-free is co-branded. For example, the Sainsbury's chain proclaimed in July 1999 that it had eliminated GM ingredients from

all of its retail brand food, pet food, and dietary supplements. Sainsbury's also publicized that it stocked eggs and beef produced by organic—and thus GM-free—producers. However, Sainsbury's continued to offer retail brand milk sourced from cows fed on GM corn.

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

Discussion

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

In the case of UK supermarkets, the strategy of co-branding with GM-free had four major effects:

1. It *harnessed* the discursive power of the social brand for the benefit of the corporate brand.
2. It *aligned* the brand values of the corporate brand with the social brand in order to avoid negative brand associations.
3. It *reduced* the conflict between the goals of the corporate and social brand.
4. It *deflected* the potentially damaging strategy of the social brand away

from the corporate brand and onto other targets, such as corporate brands that had not become aligned through a co-brand or other strategy.

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

As the Sainsbury example illustrates, co-branding with social brands carries with it the potential for both benefit and damage to the corporate brand. However, the same could be said of co-branding with any other type of brand. In all cases, the co-branded relationship must be consonant with the brand covenant (Balmer 2001a, 2001b; Balmer and Greyser 2003), which is the implicit or explicit set of promises made by the brand to key stakeholders. If it is not, then the equity built up in the corporate brand may be diminished.

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

Conclusion

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

The fact that we have considered only one social brand means that we have only just begun to answer our second and third research questions relating

to the ways in which social brands might add value to or damage corporate brands. Additional in-depth analysis of social brand and corporate brand co-branding cases is, then, the next step for this research.

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