



How to Manage Customer Satisfaction through Brand Association and Perceived Value Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Objective – The purpose of this study is to identify which factor has a stronger influence on customer satisfaction: perceived value or brand association. By understanding the influencer, the seller understands what policies and implications should be addressed to maintain and even enhance customer loyalty.

Methodology/Technique – This empirical study uses a quantitative method and employs a PLS program to ensure a correlation between the constructs.

Findings – The study concludes that brand association is a crucial determinant factor in customer satisfaction. Brand associations influence satisfaction relatively more than perceived value does. From the customer perspective, brand associations are affected more by salesman personality than brand image.

Type of Paper: Empirical

Keywords: Brand Association; Brand Image; Perceived Value; Salesman Personality; Satisfaction.

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JEL Classification: M30, M31, M39.

1. Introduction

Globalization across countries and commoditization encourages companies to develop branding strategies to give themselves a competitive advantage in the market (Jensen & Klastrup, 2008; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007; Wind, 2006). Perceive brand quality influences customers to pay a higher price (Vera, 2015). This finding triggered the authors to investigate this influence in the context of the chemical market. Successful B2B branding will enhance a company's sustainability in a turbulent business environment and even help with the company's financial performance (Aaker, 1991; C. Baumgarth, 2010; Keller, 2013; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011).

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Fornell (1992) identifies that every company's objective is to achieve customer satisfaction; this will give the company a stronger competitive advantage and business sustainability amongst tight competition. Customer satisfaction leads to loyalty and long-term profitability (Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2006; Pfeifer, Haskin, & Conroy, 2005; Samudro, Sumarwan, Simanjuntak, & Yusuf, 2019).

The chemical market concerns product quality, product safety, delivery, accessibility and availability, and correct technical documentation (Ćorić & Jelić, 2015; Susanti, Sumarwan, Simanjuntak, & Yusuf, 2019). The chemical market perceives their products as high quality, dependable, consistent, and innovative (van Riel, de Mortanges, & Streukens, 2005). In the revised model, Ćorić & Jelić (2015) identify the mean of the product price as one of the factors contributing to customer loyalty.

The chemical market sets its prices by comparing product quality and price. BASF AG, a worldwide chemical corporation in Germany, introduced eco-efficiency tools, which correlates chemical products with environmental awareness and the possible effects of chemicals on human health and the product cost (Saling et. al., 2002). The positive impact of this awareness is then associated with the company's brand (Shonnard, Kicherer, & Saling, 2003). The socio-eco-efficiency solutions combine a relatively environmental friendly chemical product performance with perceived value (social benefits and low costs) at the same time (Schmidt et. al., 2004). This study aims to examine the effect of emotional brand associations and rational perceive value on customer satisfaction. In other words, this empirical study seeks to answer the following question: 'How strong is the influence of emotional brand association on customer satisfaction relative to the rational factors of perceived value?'

This empirical study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, the findings confirm the importance of brand associations over price. The final purchase decision is influenced by brand associations more strongly than price, thereby demonstrating the importance of positive activities related to the brand. Second, the study provides insight on brand associations, which is more strongly assessed by salesmen personality than brand image. This demonstrates the importance of proper recruitment and development of talent, in particular salesmen as brand ambassadors.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section provides a background and introduction. An examination of previous literature is provided in section two and the hypotheses are provided in section three. Section four describes the research methodology and section five describes the sampling. The validity measurements are detailed and explained in section six. Section seven describes the results, discussion, and implications of the findings. The paper is concluded in section eight.

2. Theoretical Framework

Satisfaction refers to a buyer's perspectives and expectations of the products and/or services (Oliver, 1980). Buyers evaluate products and/or performance of services by whether it meets their expectations. If the seller's products and/or service performance meets the customer's expectations, then the customer will be satisfied, and confirmation occurs. On the other hand, if the products or services do not meet the customer's expectations, disconfirmation occurs. This concept introduces positive and negative disconfirmation. When the buyer's perspective of a product and/or service exceeds their expectations, positive disconfirmation occurs. On the other hand, if a buyer's perspective of a product and/or service is less than expected, negative disconfirmation occurs. Oliver and DeSarbo (1988) state that a successful product should be able to generate profit in the long run and should consistently satisfy customers. Perceived value is a trade-off between the performance or quality a customer perceives in the product relative to the sacrifice they perceive by paying the price (Monroe, 1990). The concept of perceived value is a comparison between obtaining attributes and giving attributes (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994). Grönroos (1997) defines perceived value as the consumer's benefit (in terms of core solution and additional services) towards sacrifice (in terms of price and relationship costs).

Aaker (1991) introduces five categories of brand equity: perceived quality, brand quality, brand awareness, brand associations, and other proprietary brands. Satisfaction is the outcome of perceived quality

and brand association (Elsäßer & Wirtz, 2017). Industrial buyers tend to mitigate risks in purchasing decisions by purchasing from a strong brand (Low & Blois, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009; Wise & Zednickova, 2009). A strong brand has a rational influence and an emotional influence on its customers (Keller, 2013). In this empirical study, a rational influence is reflected by perceived value, which compares the product and/or service performance towards the price.

Meanwhile, emotional influence is reflected by brand association. Brand image refers to the associations and beliefs the consumer has about the brand (Feldwick, 1996). Based on this concept, anything that comes into the customer's mind concerning the brand is relevant as an image element. Customers perceive brand value in a value co-creation activity between employees and customers (Samudro, Sumarwan, Yusuf, & Simanjuntak, 2018; Zhang & He, 2014). Hence, sales personality is important from a customer's perspective. Employees should be able to deliver brand value that is consistent with, or even exceeds, a customer's expectations (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). Zhang and He (2014) identify two kinds of necessary employee behaviors: a superior service experience and the development of personal relationships with customers.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Customers are willing to pay a premium price for brand products than purchase similar offers from lesser known brands (Aaker, 1996). Buyers are willing to purchase products made by known brands at premium prices (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004). These concepts lead to the investigation of the association between a brand and perceived value in terms of the influence on customer satisfaction. An emotional approach identifies a B2B brand as brand association and brand image (Davis, Golicic, & Marquardt, 2008; Kuhn, Alpert, & Pope, 2008). Brand associations relate to corporate ability (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Corporate ability is a result of innovation and expertise (Aaker & Jacobson, 2001). Chemical product characteristics must stay within rational, measurable technical parameters. In other words, company ability is necessary.

The American Marketing Association (2013) defines a brand as the total of its customer experiences and thoughts as they relate to the image of a company. Bondesson (2012) examines how brand image builds price premium in the market. In past studies, scholars have treated the price premium as a critical brand strength (Ailawadi, Lehmann, & Neslin, 2003; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Sethuraman, 2000). The premium price is a result of a strong brand image. Brand association is reflected by salesmen performance: expertise, leadership, leadership in innovation, transparency, and communication skills. Internal brand equity is manifested by sales personality in terms of service performance and relationships. Sales personality influences the customer's perception of brand value (Zhang & He, 2014). From the above, the following hypothesis is developed:

H1: Brand associations, which are a reflective and latent construct of the second order, contains two constructs, brand image and sales personality, and has a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Economic effectiveness is a relationship between results and expenditure. In marketing theory, this is commonly known as perceived value (Skrzypek, 2012). This economic effectiveness becomes a competitive advantage. The expectations of consumers have changed, and this requires advanced products and services (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001). In a previous study, point of differentiation helps in giving judgment on products and/or services (Holbrook, 1992). In the chemical industry, SEE-Socio Eco-Efficient solutions is a chemical-product quality with a green concept, high social benefits, and low cost as a point of differentiation (Schmidt et al., 2004). As the perceived value concept, environmental and social benefits are divided by total costs of ownership. Emulsion chemical product concerns involve safety risks, emission levels, and toxic ingredients as free of formaldehyde content and less solvent-based material. The eco-efficiency analysis is determined by calculating the total cost to the customer as the cost of purchasing, using, maintaining, reselling, and disposing of the product. Perceived value has a positive effect on customer satisfaction (Lam, Shankar,

Erramilli, & Murthy, 2004; Mackevičiūtė, 2013; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). In the model of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), perceived value has a positive influence on customer satisfaction (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996). From the concept of perceived value and its implementation in the chemical industry, the following hypothesis is developed:

H2: Perceived value has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

4. Research Methodology

The research design is a conclusive and quantitative method. It starts with a literature review, which is used to develop the constructs and an initial model. A strong brand has a rational influence and an emotional influence on the market (Keller, 2009). This empirical study exercises a rational influence of perceived value towards the emotional influence of brand association. From the conceptual framework and its implementation in the chemical industry, the following model is developed:

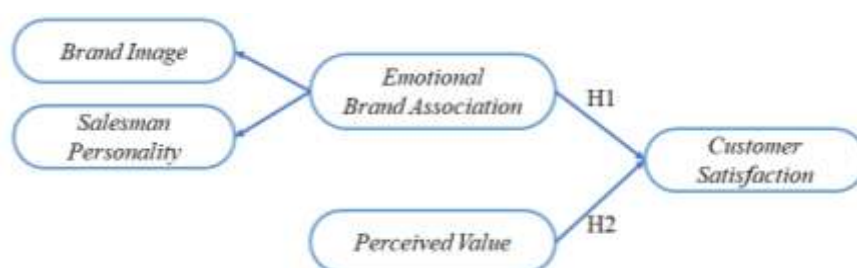


Figure 1. Proposed Model

5. Sampling

Before the field research is conducted, the research questionnaires are validated by a professional in the related industries (Carmin & Zeller, 1979). A pre-test was administered at the chemical buyers meeting to obtain 30 samples. The questionnaire utilizes a five-point Likert scale. The unit analysis comes from various industries: coating, paper, textile, wood panel, putty, and printing. The field research uses purposely random sampling techniques. A total of 124 samples are administered, however only 90 samples are completed, providing a response rate of 72.58%. The response rate is still within the acceptable rates of research (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Every company (unit analysis) contributes with two to four questionnaires because every company has two to four chemical suppliers. The emulsion chemical is a complex product in terms of quality and production. Target informants are technicians in the companies who understand, are familiar with, and interact with chemical sellers. The field research was conducted from 7 January 2019 to 30 April 2019. The field research is conducted through face-to-face interviews guided by a questionnaire. The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale.

6. Measurement – Assessment of Validity

The PLS – SEM (Partial Least Square – Structural Equation Model) is employed to confirm the model and simultaneously estimate a hypothesis. The author uses PLS because of the limited sample size; PLS produces reliable results for limited sample sizes as low as 20 (Chin, 1998). In order to achieve and ensure validity, the authors perform two necessary kinds of validity tests: convergent validity and discriminant validity. There are two general measures of a construct's reliability in PLS: composite reliability value is minimum 0.60 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) and Cronbach alpha value is minimum 0.7 (Pallant, 2001). Meanwhile, the rule of thumb for average variance extracted is min 0.50 (Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017). All parameter results are valid and pass the minimum threshold as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Reflective Measurement Models – Internal Consistency Reliability and Convergent Validity

No	Latent Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
1	Brand Image	0.875	0.916	0.875
2	Salesman Personality	0.945	0.960	0.945
3	Emotional Brand Association	0.929	0.942	0.929
4	Perceived Value	0.883	0.919	0.883
5	Customer Satisfaction	0.931	0.948	0.931

Note: CR ≥ 0.70 is satisfactory, AVE ≥ 0.50 is satisfactory (Hair, et al. 2017)

Every indicator is measured with a minimum threshold of 0.50 and *t-value* of >1.96 (Igarria, Zinatelli, Cragg, & Cavaye, 1997).

Table 5. Reflective Measurement Models – Indicator Reliability: Outer Loadings and t-value

Variable	Indicator		Loadings	t-value	Remark
Brand Image (BI)	BI1	Brand familiarity	0.889	83.676	Valid
	BI2	Company image	0.899	84.659	Valid
	BI3	Company reputation	0.899	94.549	Valid
	BI4	Company knowledge	0.724	32.116	Valid
Salesman Personality (SP)	SP1	Expertise person	0.890	55.325	Valid
	SP2	Knowledgeable person	0.957	206.554	Valid
	SP3	Empathy person	0.940	123.703	Valid
	SP4	A good communicator	0.918	103.598	Valid
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	CS1	Excellent quality	0.831	41.464	Valid
	CS2	Excellent service	0.898	97.216	Valid
	CS3	Fairness	0.910	91.327	Valid
	CS4	A good company	0.872	69.622	Valid
	CS5	Brand integrity	0.912	114.325	Valid
Perceived Value (PV)	PV1	Fair value	0.874	78.595	Valid
	PV2	Competitive value	0.830	52.428	Valid
	PV3	Priceless	0.832	35.748	Valid
	PV4	Worth and useful value	0.901	88.782	Valid

Note: All items are collected and bundled using top and bottom two boxes first. The cluster data are measured by using 5-point Likert scale, which is the anchors 1=fully disagree and 5=fully agree.

The second validity test is discriminant validity which concerns the uniqueness of the construct, whether the phenomenon captured is unique and not represented by the other constructs in the model (Hair Jr et. al., 2017). The cross-loadings must be high in itself and low on other constructs (Vinzi, Trinchera, & Amato, 2010).

Table 6. Reflective Measurement Models – Discriminant Validity: Cross Loadings

	BI	CS	EBA	PV	SP
BI1	0.888729	0.772043	0.813677	0.601264	0.627696
BI2	0.898565	0.703377	0.802467	0.525135	0.601321
BI3	0.898900	0.707165	0.800697	0.650725	0.598369
BI4	0.723798	0.590173	0.674680	0.516893	0.533962

CS1	0.685397	0.830975	0.683510	0.512070	0.580159
CS2	0.761541	0.898239	0.822047	0.573546	0.751615
CS3	0.701036	0.909972	0.818538	0.751717	0.796956
CS4	0.752637	0.871944	0.792343	0.660141	0.708609
CS5	0.699037	0.912201	0.754931	0.681385	0.690542
PV1	0.629723	0.707941	0.630584	0.873932	0.537508
PV2	0.468855	0.504215	0.489060	0.830037	0.433923
PV3	0.586928	0.625455	0.643934	0.831955	0.596992
PV4	0.598777	0.617447	0.570779	0.901068	0.462123
SP1	0.591388	0.682654	0.817669	0.486045	0.890301
SP1	0.591388	0.682654	0.817669	0.486045	0.890301
SP2	0.708747	0.794792	0.916081	0.561306	0.957175
SP3	0.608313	0.732622	0.855457	0.554707	0.939828
SP4	0.647185	0.756967	0.862459	0.601170	0.917850

Note: Indicator's outer loadings on a construct are higher than all its cross-loadings with other constructs: valid

7. Results, Discussion and Implications

This empirical study is triggered by the question, 'Which factor has a stronger influence on customer satisfaction in the chemical market, brand association or perceived value?'

Table 7. Structural Model Coefficient and t-value

No	Path line	Hypothesis	Coefficient	t-value	Conclusion
1	Emotional Brand Association → Customer Satisfaction	H1	0.720	17.970	Supported
2	Perceived Value → Customer Satisfaction	H2	0.229	4.808	Supported

Note: Coefficient that are significant at the .05 or lower level (one-tailed) are in bold

To answer the research question, the authors conduct an investigation of path correlation. From the model, the path coefficient of brand image – brand association - (Coefficient: 0.906 and t-value 110.018), and the path coefficient of sales personality – brand association - (Coefficient: 0.932 and t-value 157.111). The path indicates that brand association is reflected stronger by sales personality than brand image; this is the first contribution of the study. The personality of a brand's salesmen influences brand association from the customer's perspective. In other words, the salesmen act as the company's brand ambassador. It is therefore important that salesmen understand the organization's values, missions, and goals. Hence, employees are willing to behave in a way that supports the brand and in line with the company's values (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009).

The implication focuses on proper recruitment and placement of a salesman; a company must enhance salesmen performance in terms of technical competency and communication skills. Every step and decision made by a salesman is associated by the customer with the company brand. It is necessary to understand the brand's customers and target market, and develop a relationship with the customers; this influences a customer to remain loyal to the brand. Customer satisfaction is the result of positive experiences during the relationship with the salesmen. From the customer's perspective, brand image refers to the associations and beliefs consumers have about the brand (Feldwick, 1996). In the chemical emulsion industry, the image elements include the age of the brand, users particular to the brand, the leading brand, and every positive experience that customers have while consuming the product and/or services.

Although brand association is reflected by brand image more than the personality of the salesmen, with the path coefficient 0.906 at a significant level (t-value 110.018), it is still relatively robust as a contributor to brand association. In the chemical industry, people will respond unfavourably to a brand being associated with any accident, safety, or negative news. This is mainly the world-class brand products. The

implications of this finding is that it is necessary to make safety a top priority and put it down as a mandatory regulation for all stakeholders. Another critical issue is to ensure optimum product and service performance as a market leader among the competition. A company needs to allocate a proper budget to their R&D department to ensure the brand is continuously ahead of the market in terms of product quality.

The second contribution of this study is the finding that, from a customer's perspective, brand association (coefficient 0.720 and t-value 17.970) influences satisfaction more strongly than perceived value (coefficient 0.229 and t-value 4.808). This means that all positive news associated to the brand becomes a credit to the company's value in the customer's mind. Customer satisfaction is based more on whatever positive-brand experience is on their mind than perceived value. In other words, customer satisfaction is based on positive experience with the brand or the salesperson. Hence, price becomes a second priority.

This finding demonstrates the importance of the right strategy to achieve customer satisfaction and remain sustainable in the competition. A company should put more effort into the training of salespersons and the development of products and services. The additional budget or cost related to this strategy will necessarily be covered by the proper pricing since perceived value is not a priority for the customer. The other implications of this finding is the proper pricing strategy. The proper pricing should be addressed based on the point of differentiation and market segments. It is not suggested to use price penetration to purposely increase market share. This may even contradict the brand image and brand value. Sellers intend to gain additional value by enhancing brand image or brand association.

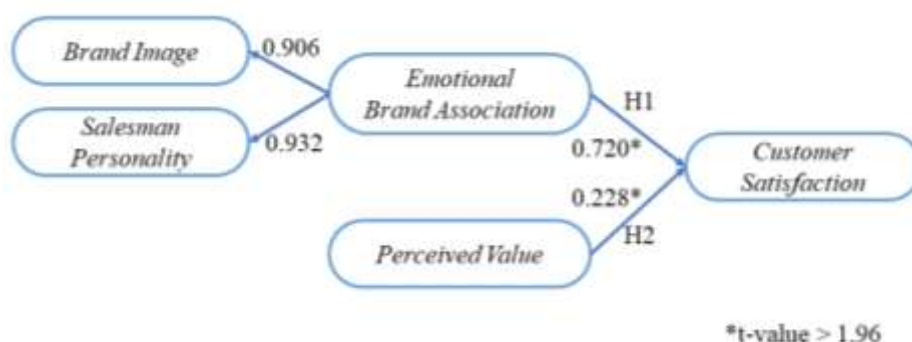


Figure 2. Final Model and Path Coefficient

8. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the author identifies some critical findings. First, the chemical market is influenced more by brand association than perceived value. Hence, a company must keep delivering positive value to their customers as anything related to their brand will contribute either positively or negatively to their brand image. As brand ambassadors, salespersons contribute critical messages, experiences, and company image to the customers. A chemical company must monitor and deliver proper policies and training to all stakeholders; every activity and everything related with the product, services, company or other stakeholders are associated with the company's brand.

Second, a proper pricing strategy should be implemented to support brand value. In the chemical market, price is a secondary consideration. The right pricing strategy will add value to the brand since it relates to the point of differentiation for products and services. This empirical study concludes that positive perceived brand quality shall influence customers to pay a higher price.

This study confirms that emotional brand associations have a stronger influence on customer satisfaction than perceived value. This finding may serve as a starting point for further research. Due to the simplicity of the model used in this study, future research should use other constructs to measure perceived quality, brand loyalty or even social bonds. Authors also recommend replication of the studies in other contexts to confirm the applicability of the findings in other industries.

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