GLOBAL BRAND MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF KIMBERLY CLARK’S UNIFIED GLOBAL IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION:

As a result of intensifying competition in their respective local markets, many organizations are increasing their exposure to global markets in an effort to build scale, enhance performance and ensure survival. For these organizations, such as Kimberly Clark, global branding has emerged as a key tool for enhancing competitiveness across global markets. Where the value of other sources of competitive advantage can be dependent on local market characteristics, it is becoming clear that strong brand equity remains a powerful source of competitive advantage across global markets (Gelder, 2005). For organizations to attain a competitive advantage on a global scale they are being urged to recognize that there is no competitive advantage that is more powerful than that of a compelling brand (Gelder, 2005). In the past two decades globalization has allowed for the increased convergence of consumer tastes and values, thereby creating global markets that can be effectively targeted using a global branding strategy (Wang et al., 2008). According to Townsend et al., (2009) global brands may be the most readily observable outcome of an organizations' attempt to adjust to the globalization process. Global branding has thus become more predominant as organizations are increasingly focusing on implementing unambiguous and globally consistent brand architectures as a way to enhance brand equity (Douglas, Craig and Nijssen, 2001).

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the development of theory by examining the experience of a particular multinational organization in its search for an effective global branding strategy. In addition, the practical experience of this case study organization will help frame a critical analysis of the current theoretical concepts of global branding. This paper also intends to investigate theoretical ideologies behind the global brand management process. To meet these objectives specific propositions will be formulated based on the key constructs of global branding.

Whilst extensive empirical research has focused on the ways organizations can exploit global branding opportunities, limited attention has been paid to branding in a global context (Cayla and Arnould,
2008). Cayla (2008) stated that marketers should consider the role and importance of brands in a globalizing world, as well as the evaluation of branding issues from more than just a managerial perspective. To enhance managers and researchers understanding of the global brand management process, there is need for more empirical work to explain how brands become global (Townsend et al., 2009). Additionally, there is need for research to determine under which conditions and to what extent the standardization and adaptation of international marketing strategies needs to occur (Cervino and Cubillo, 2004). Thus, this research will attempt to address some of the gaps identified above by undertaking empirical research to understand the global branding process at organizational level.

This paper will begin by exploring some of the theories that have been used in prior research to explain the global branding process and provide a theoretical grounding for the research. This will be followed by a literature review and development of the research propositions. The methodology to be implemented will then be discussed. A qualitative research design using a single case study approach will be utilized. Semi-structured in depth interviews with 10 managers of a single multinational cooperation, currently implementing a global branding strategy, will be undertaken in two countries. In the complete report a detailed interpretation of the results of the research conducted will be included. A discussion and implications for both marketers and managers will also be provided.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Global branding and the management of global brands has been increasingly studied in the academic marketing literature since some theories behind globalization where explored by Lewitt (1987). Organizations are focusing on leveraging global brands as a way to enhance global reach and enhance competitive advantage. The adoption of global branding instead of single branding strategies has also enabled organizations to improve inter-organizational coordination and lower administrative complexity (Quelch 1999). Global branding strategies are often focused on providing direction, structure, inspiration and opportunity for the managers that control the brand in various places around the world (Van Gelder, 2008). Furthermore, global branding also enables organizations to the increased market potential through the creation of economies of scale and the capitalization on consumer preferences (Pitta and Franzak, 2008).

The global branding process involves developing of goods or services that can be sold in three major industrialized continents and across multiple country markets (Chernatony, et al, 1995). Success across these multiple countries and within internationally interconnected markets therefore calls for the
creation of globally standardized products and brands (Levitt, 1983). Organizations are attempting to improve growth and survival prospects by moving into more diverse markets and diversifying their competitive landscape (Townsend et al, 2009). Global branding can thus be used as a tool to enable organizations to portray a consistent corporate image (Townsend, et al, 2009) and manage brand consistency across a more diverse customer base (Douglas et all, 2001). According to Interbrand (Cayla and Arnould, 2008) the best brands maintain a high degree of consistency in visual, verbal, auditory, and tactile identity across their global markets. This suggests that organizations need to put effort and resources into developing an effective global branding strategy. Organizations need to nurture their global identities as successful maintenance of a global image and recognition translates into hard currency in international business (Motameni and Shahrokhi, 1998). Brand consistency across global markets can only be achieved through the implementation of well established brand architectures (Douglas et al., 2001).

**STUDY CONTEXT**

This paper will therefore explore how global brands are managed by focusing on a single multinational corporation that has recently adopted a ‘distinct’ global branding strategy. The multinational company chosen to investigate the global branding process through an in-depth case study is Kimberly Clark, one of the worlds leading brands for health and hygiene solutions. Kimberly Clark is organized into operating segments based on product groups. These operating segments have been aggregated into four reportable global business segments: Personal Care; Consumer Tissue; K-C Professional and Other; and Health Care. The company has manufacturing facilities in over 36 countries and its products are marketed in more than 150 countries. Kimberly Clark’s strategy focuses on improving their capabilities in three critical areas; driving innovation, marketing their brands and strengthening customer relationships. In 2007, the company launched a global re-branding strategy or global identity strategy aimed at delivering a unified branding. According to the Industrial Safety & Hygiene News (2008), Kimberly Clark’s global president Jan Spencer stated that the company's initiative is part of its objective and strategy to gain advantage position in the market as well as leverage its business operations. Based on this recent global brand unification strategies, Kimberly Clarke offers a good case to investigate a global branding processes.
METHODOLOGY

To gain an in-depth understanding of the global branding process a qualitative research design will be utilized (Aaker, Kumar and Day, 2004). Qualitative research focuses on qualities of entities, the processes and meanings in the environments in which they naturally occur (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). This approach will enable us to explore and gain insight (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007) on the global branding process and facilitate our understanding and interpretation of the observed phenomenon. A single-case study approach focusing on one organization that uses a global brand will be used as the study context. According to Hanson and Grimmer (2007), a single case study approach produces insights into the way an organization, and possibly how other similar organizations function. As the study is exploratory in nature, semi-structured in-depth interviews will be used as this approach is more flexible and allows probing (Dearnley, 2005).

In-depth interviews will be held with senior managers who are involved in the planning and implementation of the branding strategy. These managers will be interview in different countries or subsidiaries where the company operates, to get a detailed understanding of how the managers articulate and implement the global branding strategy. A protocol will be developed and used in all the interviews to facilitate analysis (Audet and Amboise, 2001).
References

- Lewitt (1987)
- Pitta and Franzak, 2008