CYBER BRANDING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF VIRTUAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Virtual organizations are those that do not have any brick-and-mortar structure, thus enhancing the need of physical evidences. In this case, branding takes the front seat to successfully pose the site on the Internet. The present study was undertaken to understand and analyze the factors affecting e-branding. It has been observed that ? Downloading Speed? and ?Logo & Punch Line? are most preferred attributes for branding on Internet.

Keywords: Cyber branding, positioning, customer value, brand personality

Introduction

The omni-presence of brands has not left even the Web untouched. Adding to the unending list of brands is a the new genre of web-based brands like Yahoo, Hotmail, Rediff, Indiatimes, Amazon, etc. Everyday these cyber brands are growing in number, in value and in dominance. And as more and more companies begin to utilize the web for commerce, web based brands are turning into hot properties

Cyber branding becomes an important business decision as the Internet continues to grow at phenomenal rate with more than 600-billion web pages in existence. More-over, B2B e-commerce revenues reached US$433-billion in the year 2001 alone, an increase of 189% on 1999. Research agency Gartner predicts B2B revenues will reach US$919-billion, growing to US$1,9-trillion (Jacobsohn 2002). Even in India, the last couple of months have witnessed increasing pattern of ad spend among dot.com companies, though actual expenses are not known.

In this new world of e-branding, Internet can a play a pivotal role in enhancing brand relationships and corporate reputations. It offers a huge advantage over traditional mass media. The speed at which people can move from awareness to action on the Internet is a true differentiator and challenge for e-marketers. This requires a new way of thinking about how to design websites and related marketing communications. A major difference between building an Internet brand and a traditional brand will be the speed at which a brand can transition prospects to customers.

Building a Cyber brand requires a two-part strategy. One focuses on the business process that is, how a company finds, serves, and satisfies its customers. The other targets the branding process in terms of how a company manages media and positions messages in competitive and confusing markets. The website is the number one brand builder in the Cyberspace, its development and operation should be considered as a group effort of the technical staff for providing technical knowledge; marketing people for marketing strategy; and the artwork designer team who can successfully create something which can easily catch people to buy that product. Also, an astute brand manager will be concerned about changes in consumer and customer behaviors and will reposition his brand accordingly. An astute e-brand manager must also anticipate changes in the cyberspace environment to make sure the e-brand's direction is right on target. The Internet as we know is bound to change because of the advent of wireless devices. In order to build an e-brand that will survive change and allow company to reap the benefits of this new wave of web surfers, one will have to anticipate and make the right investments today. Therefore, cyber-brand management is an important issue to become a key player in the virtual web environment.

Creating A Powerful E-Brand

In order to create a powerful e-brand it is important to compare the impact of various factors such as web-design, promotion, positioning, security, name, information and service delivery in different market environments. Virtual branding is an activity that is linked to both traditional and online marketing. It refers to the use of the Internet as a supplement to general branding strategies in non e-commerce markets as well as its use to attract customers and increase the acceptance of new online services and products. In either geographic or virtual markets, successful brand development hinges on customers' recognition of and support for the products and services linked to a particular organization (Clark, 1997; Neuborne and Hof, 1998; Werne, 1998)

As the Internet expands and websites proliferate, more systematic approaches to web site assessment are necessary (Booker, 1995; Angerhrn, 1997; Riedman, 1997). In analyzing web content, some researchers have also evaluated the quality of online information, the effective display of information on government/public websites, and the need for site quality certification logos (Baranoff et al., 1997; Radcliff, 1997; Urgo, 1997; Dryden, 1998; Kirkwood, 1998; Roed and O'Connor, 1998; Stowers, 1998). For consultants, managers, or researchers interested in outcomes, there are many studies of Web design, presentation, and the level of incoming (hits, feedback) and outgoing information (downloads etc.). A few investigators have also looked at the reliability of service delivery and the level of customer feedback (Kelly, 1995; Fontana, 1996; Babcock, 1997; Metcalfe, 1997; Rosen, 1997).

Javed (2002) warns not to copy, not get too creative, and suggests selecting brand names that

have global appeal. In addition, Ries & Ries (2000) suggest that brand names should be short, simple, suggestive of the category, unique, alliterative, speakable, shocking and personalized. They are also against the use of common names such as art.com etc. If the brand name is too difficult to remember or type, prospects may never find its web site or come back to the site once visited.

Website, at the end of the day, is the ultimate one-to-one communication channel, second only to human interface. A well designed website can be a superb brand extension and sales executive for any company: always on duty, always accurate, always up-to-date (as long as it is maintained) and utterly consistent. Of course, the web is no replacement for the human intelligence but it is a powerful weapon to extend a brand into the wide world, 24-hours a day (Jacobsohn, 2002).

One of the primary objectives of a new website is to attract a variety of interested parties to visit the company's online presence. This is being done in a variety of ways. For well-known firms and organizations, it may simply be a matter of mentioning the URL. In this case, the web site serves primarily as a complement to business or social activity occurring in the non-virtual environment. For lesser-known organizations and those having solely an Internet presence, more intensive methods have to be used. Some of the most popular techniques include registration with search engines, providing free software, locating entertaining activities on the site, developing advertising campaigns, or establishing general information and service portals (e.g. Yahoo, Infoseek, Netscape). The less coordinated websites often do this in a haphazard manner. The more strategic websites use intensive marketing campaigns to contact and attract important stakeholders.

Internet advertising is one of the often-used approaches. Recent times have seen a flood of non-Internet media advertising of website activities (Pardun and Lamb, 1999), to the extent that an organization is able to ?increase the traffic? to its site, while increasing the chances that commercial interactions can take place. A clear objective and a set of techniques to attract a variety of important market and institutional stakeholders is what distinguishes the highly strategic website (Webcmo, 1998). Ries & Ries (2000) suggest having much bigger off the net advertising than on the net. Even in India, the last couple of months have witnessed increasing pattern of ad spend among dot.com companies, though actual expenses are not known.

Positioning is the strategic function that relates to the ways in which the services that an organization provides help create an image or market position. The extent and type of services provided are usually the key factors determining the firm's positioning strategy. Factors that can be used to examine this strategy include an analysis of website design, transaction types, market targeting, community relations, and links to domestic and international activities (Simeon,1999). According to Ries & Ries (2000) too, the brand that is first in the prospect?s mind has the advantage, not necessarily the first into the market place.

The extent, to which the web technology provides for interactivity, reliability, security, and speed, helps to determine the strategic potential of the site. Because of its inherent speed, global reach, and constant accessibility, the Internet provides unparalleled delivery flexibility. The possibility of getting information from and providing services to stakeholders around the clock is a development that has obliterated the traditional transaction (Thinakal, 1996; Zuckerman, 1996; Schaich,1998).

Davis (1997), Green (1998) and Hof and Saveri (1998) all speak of the importance of a dynamic content Internet environment in boosting the satisfaction of users' online experience. Dynamic content environments are now being linked to customer attraction, satisfaction, retention and profitability.

High level presentation reflects the combination of good web design and the complexity of the site's presentation. It is a perception by the user that the site has rich content and makes use of advanced techniques to present information. Overall site attractiveness reflects the user's perception that content, graphics, and delivery mechanisms have been arranged in such an appealing manner that the online experience is a positive one. Customer site recommendation is the willingness of the user to introduce this particular site to acquaintances or business concerns. This is recognition of the power of word-of-mouth advertising as a strategic weapon in the competition to increase customer attraction and loyalty. Consequently, in the same way that customers can become loyal users of products or services, it is expected that certain web sites will develop strong name recognition and be linked in users' minds to a clear set of services. At that stage, virtual brand equity becomes a competitive advantage in the business environment (McCoy, 1996; Oliva, 1998; Walid, 1998).

Other aspects specific to e-branding include dealing with the issues of trust and privacy. With privacy and security rating high on the list of concerns of cybershoppers, companies must clearly indicate, through their e-brands, their position on these issues. This way, all the products and services offered under the brand name will inherit its reputation. As new concerns or values emerge in the emarketplace, e-brand managers must reposition their brand to meet their audience?s expectations, needs or wants

Many related studies in the past have discussed the important factors for a good web-site but none has specifically found out the order of importance of different major attributes in comparison to each other. This study attempts to list out factors in accordance of their significance that are essential for branding on the Internet.

Along with an exploratory study which was undertaken to list out factors in accordance of their significance to branding on the Internet a study of nine popular sites on these factors was also done.

METHODOLOGY

The Study: The study is to understand the factors affecting e-branding. It is exploratory in nature. The research approach used in this study was survey based with the primary data collected for the study.

The Sample: The Sample was identified on the basis of judgmental sampling technique. A sample survey of 100 respondents, with an average age of 28 years, was done. The respondents include a mix of each gender (Male: Female=70:30). It was taken into consideration that all the respondents were very clear about the concept of branding and virtual organizations. The respondents represented cross-section of the society.

The Tools

 a) **Data Collection**: As there was no standardized scale available, so a scale was specially developed for the study. Review of the literature threw up some factors, which are commonly considered while branding on the Net. These factors were tabulated and further a set of judges confirmed them. These factors were formulated into a questionnaire, which was administered on the respondents in two parts:

Part A of the questionnaire required the respondents to rank the 12 important factors mentioned in the questionnaire on the basis of their significance in branding on net.

Part B of the questionnaire required the respondents to rate nine different sites on a scale of one-five, where one-stood for Inappropriate and five for Most Appropriate for each of the selected

factors on an individual basis for all the sites.

 b) **Data Analysis**: The data collected was analyzed and validated by using statistical distribution tests. To validate the results for individual ranking, computed by Weighted Average Mean Method of the data collected for Part-A of the questionnaire, Chi-square distribution test was conducted. To validate the results of the data collected for Part-B, Fisher?s Z-distribution test was conducted.

RESULTS

The findings of the study are as follows: -
For Part A: The respondents in this part ranked the various factors (table 1.1). These ranks were validated using chi-square test. The result of chi-square test (19.675 significant at 0.0.5 level of significance) confirmed the sanctity of ranking given by the respondents.

For Part B: After the factors for Cyber branding had been ranked, the 9 selected sites were compared on each factor to evaluate whether these sites were appropriate on each of these factors with relation to each other. Fisher?s Z-distribution test was conducted to identify differences of respondents on these factors for each site.

Z-test values for each site on each attribute

To apply the Z-test, firstly all the sites were arranged in a table in descending order of their mean values. Then, the site with highest mean value was assigned Rank 1 and its mean value was compared with the mean value of other site having the next highest mean value by applying Z-test between these values. If the Z-test value was significant, then this next site was assigned Rank 2 and so on. If, on the other hand, the Z-test value was insignificant than this site was also assigned Rank 1 and computing of values is done between the first and the third highest mean value sites and so on.

As the Z-distribution test did not show significant difference for most sites. Thus the hypothesis is generally accepted.

DISCUSSIONS

As already mentioned, there are many related studies done in the past on this subject but none has specifically found out the order of importance of different major attributes in comparison to each other. However, the attributes taken have got ample support from the various researchers in the past and present times.

For Part-A : Rank one was given to ?Downloading Speed?. This has been supported by Singhvi and Sachin (2000). Who assert that Internet could prove to be a powerful branding & sales medium provided online presence has minimum downloading time as a constituent of basic infrastructure. Manning (2000) further adds that Every company seeking to use the Internet to further establish brand equity should focus on offering utility that is not found in the physical world such as downloading speed, while guaranteeing key functionality. Ramamoorthy (2000) suggests that the web presents new elements such as site?s downloading time that are important influencers in building brand. Shah (2000) is of opinion that Cyber brand is the sound of a Website, the tone of its voice is in its downloading speed.

Rank two was given to ?Logo & Punch line?. Manning (2000) says that Internet branding is an online experience that includes and goes beyond logo & tagline. Shah (2000) further adds that after repetitive reinforcement of the brand?s name and logo, people are likely to accept and become more familiar with the brand.

Rank three was given to ? Range of Services provided?. This is an important attribute and has been supported by Ries & Ries (2000) who point that Internet brands built on you can get it all done here at this single site, all-in-one services. Manning (2000) also asserts that every company seeking to use the Internet to further establish brand equity should focus on offering utility that is not found in the physical world such as range of customer services, while guaranteeing key functionality. Singhvi and Sachin (2000) believe that internet can prove to be a powerful branding & sales medium provided online presence has range of customer services as a constituent of basic infrastructure.

Rank four was given to ?User Friendliness?. This again is an important attribute and has been supported by Ries & Ries (2000) who say that a website must be interactive in order to succeed. That interactivity is not just selecting from a menu, but typing in instructions and having the site deliver the information in the form you requested it. Manning (2000) also support that every company seeking to use the Internet to further establish brand equity should focus on offering utility that is not found in the physical world such as ease of use, while guaranteeing key functionality. Singhvi and Sachin (2000) further confirm that Internet can prove to be a powerful branding & sales medium provided online presence has easy navigation as a constituent of basic infrastructure. Shah (2000) adds that cyber brand is the sound of a website, the tone of its voice is in the ease of navigation. Ramamoorthy (2000) says that the Web presents new elements such as site?s ease of navigation that are important influencers in building brand. Davis (1997), Green (1998) and Hof & Saveri (1998) advise dynamic content internet environment for greater customer satisfaction

Rank five was given to ?Layout of the site?. This, although being a very important attribute in brand building on Internet, hasn?t been specifically mentioned by researchers in their articles or studies. Though implications are evident in every study. Most authors have indicated layout as outcome of an appropriate positioning strategy having the right personality, logo and punch line and brand image.

Rank six was given to ?Positioning the site in the market? This again is an important attribute and has been supported by Clot (2000). She suggests that an appropriate positioning strategy, which indicates a differential position for the brand and in turn the organization, can carve out a share in the market for the brand.

Rank seven was given to ?Image of the Site in User?s Mind?. The image of the site develops in the user?s mind through all the experiences he gets while working on Net. This has been supported also by Clot (2000) while she says that the ultimate goal of e-branding is to secure a portion of your target market?s mind share.

Rank eight was given to ?Security Policy adopted?. This is supported by Ramamoorthy (2000) who says that the Web presents new elements, such as site?s security policy, that are important influencers in building brand. Shah (2000) also adds cyber brand is the sound of a Website, the tone of its voice is in the security policy. Clot (2000) further asserts that with privacy and security rating high on the list of concerns of cybershoppers, companies must clearly indicate, through their e-brands, their position on these issues. This way, all products and services offered under the brand name will inherit its reputation. Manning (2000) asserts that for the establishment of brand equity on the internet, security and privacy issues are the prime-most concern for the users. Security terms are essential as the user is sharing personal information with the brand owner and expects this information to remain confidential. Singhvi and Sachin (2000) suggests Internet can prove to be a powerful branding & sales medium provided online presence has a good security policy as a constituent of basic infrastructure.

Rank nine was given to ?Brand Personality Emerging?. While considering this factor Manning (2000) says that organizations in pursuit of establishing brand equity should focus on building

brand personality as per the functionality of the brand. As many tangible cues are not available for virtual brands, brand personality takes the front seat that relates the brand to the consumer.

Rank ten was given to ?Name relevance with the site? Although this attribute is considered to be very important for successful branding on the Internet, the respondents have contradictory views on this point with others. This attribute is firmly supported by Clot (2000) when she asserted that one has to pay close attention to the words or names used in the brand name itself. Ries & Ries (2000) assert that the proper name is one which is small, simple, intuitive & has some relevance with the site?s content

Rank eleven was given to ?Online Promotions? This attribute was rated very low in comparison with the others and contradicts with the views of different companies that are investing their 65-70% of the budget on advertising only. Although this attribute is supported by Ries & Ries (2000) who say that online promotions are very much important in successful branding on the Internet.

Rank twelve was given to ?Offline Promotions? This attribute was rated lowest in comparison with the others and contradicts with the views of different companies that are investing their 65-70% of the budget on advertising only. This attribute is supported by Ries & Ries (2000) who say that advertising off the Net will be a lot bigger than advertising on the Net.

For Part-B : Factor one- Logo & Punch line: On this factor, the respondents have rated most of the sites such as Rediff.com, Yahoo.com, Hotmail.com, Amazon.com, Sify.com, & Indiatimes.com as the highest. This may be due to the fact that all these sites have branded themselves very distinctly in comparison to each other. espnstar.com, JobsAhead.com & Naukri.com, though have branded them very distinctly but have very specified area of operation such as sports, jobs etc. and also do not have much awareness. Therefore, they are rated lower in comparison to other sites

Factor two- Downloading Speed: On this factor, the respondents have rated Rediff.com, Yahoo.com, and Amazon.com above the other sites. This is confirming Rediff.com?s successful positioning as being electrifying fast.

Factor three- Range of Services: On this factor, sites like Rediff.com, Indiatimes.com, Yahoo.com and Amazon.com have been rated highest. This confirms the wide range of services these sites are providing for the users. Sify.com and Hotmail.com, although provides a wide range of services, are rated lower than the others which is a contradiction. Naukri.com, espnstar.com and JobsAhead.com have been rated the lowest as these sites are confined to provide services in specific areas of jobs or sports activities etc.

Factor four- The Layout of the Site: Although all the selected sites have a good layout, the respondents have rated Sify.com, Amazon.com, Rediff.com, Indiatimes.com and Yahoo.com as highest on this factor. The respondents may have found everything perfectly placed and easily accessible on the web page itself.

Factor five- Site?s positioning: On this factor, the respondents have rated all the sites on an equal basis. This is confirming the fact that each site has branded itself distinctly in comparison to the others

Factor six- User Friendliness: Rediff.com has been found as the friendliest to the users and has been rated the highest. This is confirming the ease of use one gets while working on Rediff.com. Yahoo.com has been rated second to it followed by others.

Factor seven- Security Policy: As all the respondents have found ease in maintaining their accounts and transactions on one or other site, almost all the sites have been rated equally on this

factor. espnstar.com is found to be an exception in this case as it is being rated lower than others.

Factor eight- Brand Personality Emerging: As Amazon.com, Rediff.com, Naukri.com, Indiatimes.com and JobsAhead.com have positioned themselves very well in the market and have created a distinct brand image of their own. They have a distinctive brand personality emerging and thus they are rated highest in comparison to others. Amazon.com is known for its collection of books, Rediff.com for its extraordinary speed, Indiatimes.com for being an Indian site having all information pertaining to India and Naukri.com & JobsAhead.com for its specific services regarding jobs etc.

Factor nine- Name Relevance with the Site: As names such as Naukri.com, JobsAhead.com and Indiatimes.com clearly suggests the kind of services they should be providing, these sites have been rated highest in comparison to others. espnstar.com, Amazon.com etc., although being very specific sites, do not clearly mention the kind of services they would provide, so they are rated lower in comparison to others.

Factor ten- Image of the Site in User?s mind: All the selected sites have successfully build a distinct brand image of itself in user?s mind. So the respondents have rate these sites equally. The only exception is in the case of espnstar.com, which is rated lower than others.

Factor eleven- Offline Promotion of the Site: On this factor, the high rating given to Rediff.com, JobsAhead.com, Amazon.com and Indiatimes.com confirms the efforts made by these sites on promoting themselves through T.V., newspapers, magazines etc. Sify.com and espnstar.com, although have made efforts to promote themselves by these media, have failed somewhat in creating an awareness in the market. This has been implicit by their lower rating by the respondents in comparison to other sites.

Factor twelve- Online Promotion of the Site: On this factor, Rediff.com, JobsAhead.com, Amazon.com, Indiatimes.com, Sify.com, and espnstar.com have been rated highest, confirming their extensive online promotion on the Internet

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

For e-marketers
The organizations that have been striving to have good brand image in the real world can build a powerful brand image through Internet. For e-commerce to survive in the future, successful e-branding strategy is very much necessary. Rating of these factors would assist e-marketers assess the importance of various aspects of branding on the Internet. Since e-branding would not be able to communicate many tangible aspects, which other brick-and-mortar tangible brands can successfully do, a little mistake could push away the customers and tarnish the brands. Thus, e-marketers should build brands considering these basic branding factors. At the very onset of the e-brands, an appropriate logo & punch line can be developed. Customers can be focused on a range of services related to the site. Usage can be made accessible and easy to operate. Another important concern for the customers is the Security Policy. If customers feel that their information is not safe with the organization, it is enough to push them away from the brand.

Competition is building up on the Internet. Brands are pushing in & out to get a click from the competitors. To stay in this competition means excelling on all facts. E-branding though follows the same traditional roles of branding, their expression on the net changes. So organizations should stick on to the traditional rules of branding to effectively brand on the Internet. For those e-brands that already exist, corrections can be made but this study is specifically helpful for those marketers who are planning e-brands or planning to duplicate their brick and mortar organizations on the Internet.
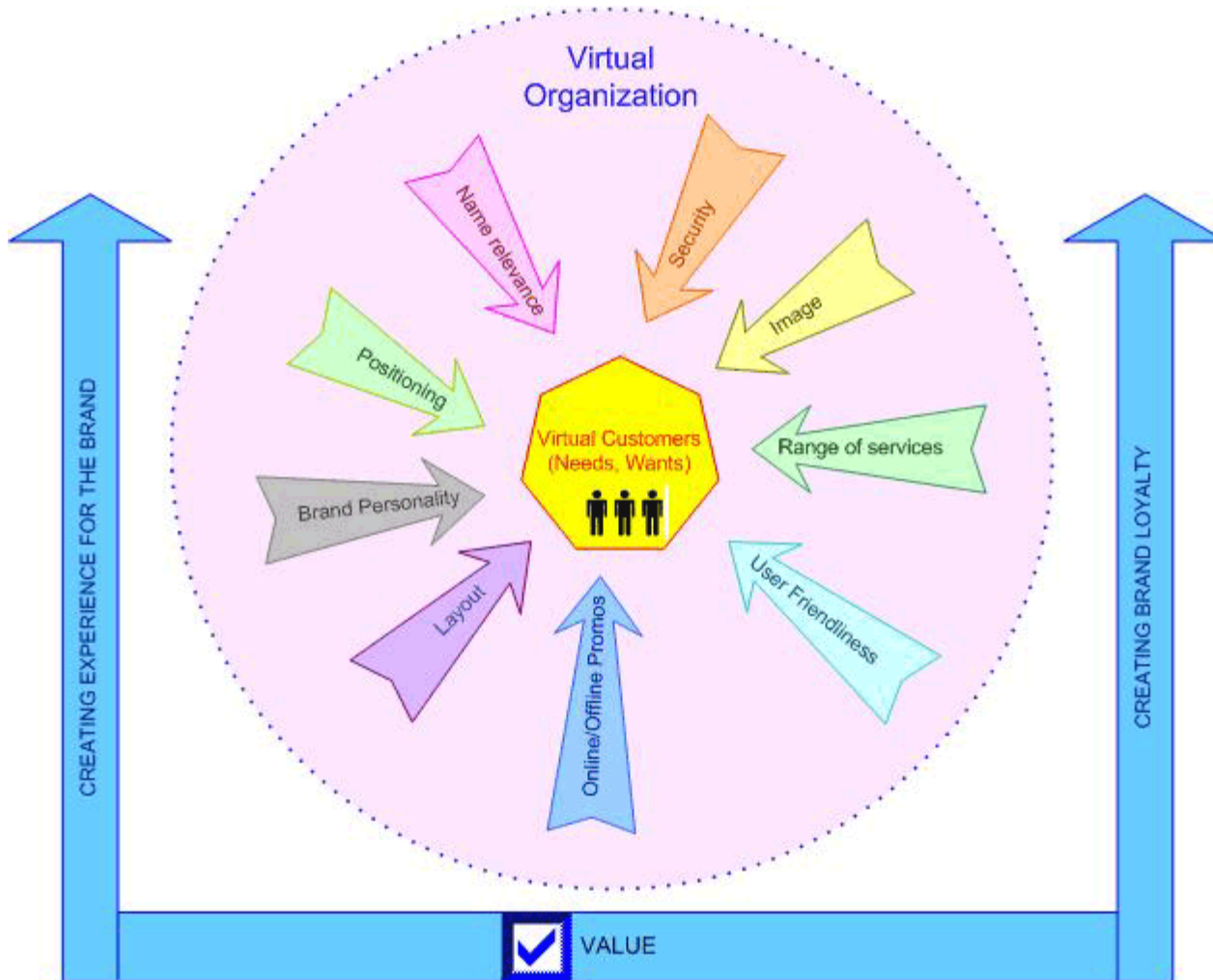
For Virtual Organizations

The concept of a virtual organization - a network of individuals coupled together by advanced communications technologies - continues to grow. However, a lack of real-world cases poses a significant problem, particularly within the small business sector. Organisations are continually looking for means to stimulate innovation and creativity, within and across working groups, functions and geographical boundaries. One way to achieve this is through tacit knowledge exchange. Virtual organizations always have a challenge of introducing new strategic moves without being able to substantiate for their physical presence. Branding which in itself is a psychological exercise wherein more is done to the attitudes of individuals than to the product itself, becomes even more challenging. Individuals at various levels of the organization have to contribute to branding of virtual organizations to give it a comprehensive look, though the contribution at each level is significantly different.

Table: Showing roles of the three levels of management in developing e-brands

Factor	Top Management	Middle Management	Lower Management
Downloading speed	Norms	Technical strategy	Implementation techniques
Logo and Punch line	Mission, vision and objective statements	Communication objectives	Advertising Campaign
Range of Services	Defining market orientation	Developing strategic gamut of the services	Synergizing the various services under a single umbrella
User Friendliness	Consumer orientation	Research input and strategy for prioritizing consumer concerns.	Technical support
Layout of the site	Organizational structure and strategic framework	Aligning technical support with marketing objectives	Technical layout, testing and implementation
Site?s Positioning	Corporate strategy with hints of Marketing strategy	Marketing objectives and related positioning strategy	SCommunicating the positioning strategy
Image of the site	Corporate image	Brand image	Communicating image related facts
Security policy	Factors of Security considered	Technical aspects of security policy	Implementation and communication of the same to the consumers
Brand Personality	Corporate personality statement	Brand personality statement	Communication tactics related to brand personality
Name relevance	Branding strategy	Brand taxonomy	Creating awareness of brand name
Online promotion	Corporate promotion strategy	Brand promotion strategy	Creative communication tactics
Offline promotion	Corporate promotion strategy	Brand promotion strategy	Creative communication tactics

Creating consumer value for virtual consumers who cannot be picturized in terms of

demographics, psychographics, geographical location or social systems is the most challenging task for the e-marketers. They do not have with them clues related to consumer?s origin or background. This forces e-marketers to rely completely on cues that may stimulate the e-consumer to explore their brands. The present study offers such cues that shall help e-marketers in getting a better insight into the virtual consumer behavior.

E-Branding: Creating Value to Customers & Organizations

The virtual consumer stands in the core of the virtual organization. All revenues in these organizations are generated solely from these consumers being the users or the target for other spiral branding exercises. Thus, creating value and delight for the consumer become mandatory in order to develop value for the virtual organization. The marketers are required to understand not only the needs and wants of the consumer (both latent and overt) but also create a congenial experience of the consumer with the brand. This experience adds to the profits of the company along with enriching the customer base by inducing strong customer loyalty.

For Researchers
Cyber branding has opened the door to duplication of all studies done traditionally on tangible brands. Factors affecting brand personality, equity, identity, image, character, positioning can further be developed for Cyber branding

This study conveyed the customer?s view; the view of the brand managers could also be studied. Also the list of factors could be elongated for consideration.

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