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### Identify the Factors Affecting Brand Image for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

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**Abstract:** Corporate brand image is the views of the interest groups of the organization. In large organizations, brand image has become as a source to gain competitive advantage, so they strategically build their brand image. With increasing global competition and the complexity and dynamics in this environment, this topic in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has recently become so significant. This paper identifies factors affecting brand image for food SMEs in the industrial town of Amol city, Iran. In this research, data gathering is done by semi-structured and face to face interviews with nine experts in the field of corporate branding of food SMEs in Amol. Systematic analysis of data suggests that the factors affecting brand image consists of two main factors which are communication factors that include primary, secondary and third communication; and the second set is direct factors. Initial communications contains products and services, market behavior, firm behavior toward employees, employee attitudes and behaviors toward other stakeholders and non-market behaviors. Secondary communications includes formal corporate communications like advertising and public relations. Third communication includes word of mouth, interpretation and tone of media and communication with competitors. Independent factors include image and reputation of industry and country of origin, and image of allied laws, partners, and NGOs.

**Keywords:** Brand Image, Small and medium-sized enterprises, Corporate branding, Food industry.

#### I. Introduction

Based on Einwiller and Will (2002) corporate branding is the process that is systematically designed and implemented with the aim of creating and maintaining a positive image and reputation of the entire organization. The positive image is possible by sending signs and symptoms to all interest groups with behavior management and communications [18]. In large organization when brand image of the organization has become as a source to gain competitive advantages, they will strategically build their brand image. Many companies have changed their names to redefine their brand image. With increasing global competition and the complexity and dynamics of business environment, this topic has become so important. SMEs are different from large corporation in many ways like size, available resources, number of staff, organizational structure and so forth. Therefore, Building brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises are different from large corporations [22]. On the other hand, in many cases due to improper transfer of brand identity, there is a gap between the image that the company plans to transfer and the image that the stakeholders have desired. Such a gap in the current competitive environment of the industry will have heavy consequences for companies and will lead to loss of economic opportunities and benefits from the companies. The main factors that cause this condition are: not following certain principles to shape company's image; the lack of knowledge of the factors affecting on creating brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises.

#### II. Literature Review

**Corporate Brand:** Many researchers have noticed a change in the way of interests in products and services branding to corporate branding. Change due to information era in the 1990s and 2000s led to emphasize on ideas, knowledge, and information. In industrial age the emphasis was on intangible things rather than tangible ones. Instead of benefit from being known as a commodity or product, they benefit more from corporate reputation. Corporate branding instead of interacting with customers is related to interaction with various stakeholders. Corporate brand can be seen as the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. Therefore, corporate brand includes both internal and external parts of the company [18]. According to Balmer and Gray (2003) corporate branding is not just a task of marketing department, but each part of the organization is responsible for it. When we are building a corporate brand it is necessary to think about larger dimensions of a brand. Hatch and Schultz (2003) believed that to build a successful brand, various aspects of organization must be taken into account [18].

**Corporate brand image:** Keller (1993) defines brand image as "the collection of perceptions about a brand which is reflected through maintaining a link with the brand in the minds of consumers". In other words, brand image is reminiscent of brand's name comes to consumer minds. The link to brand is formed in one of the following categories: product features, benefits derived from the product or brand attitudes. Some marketing

tool that is used to create a brand image are: product, packaging /labeling, brand name, logo, colors, retailers, advertising and other development tools such as price, brand owner, country of origin, target market and consumers of goods and services [3]. Aaker had a same idea to Balmer; he believed that brand image is defined as experiences, perceptions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge that people have in relation to the organization. Nandan (2005) posited that brand image is the result of customer perception of brand [16]. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2004) brand image is created based on two variables; first, personal experience and second indirect experience. Personal experience is created through direct contact with the company; while indirect experience comes through a relationship with the environment. For direct communication, selected perception plays an important role. Selected perception refers to this point that any person will select and interpret specific information to create brand. In other words, we choose whatever we want to see and hear. Marteson (2007) believed that brand image is created from other compounds. The most important and powerful is media like TV, radio, and magazines. Other factors that influence brand image are employees, events, and product design.

**Influential activists on creating brand image of SMEs:** According to Ahonen et al (2008), corporate branding for small and medium-sized enterprises, as an activity that is integrated with the company and its audience, may be useful. In fact, corporate brand should be transferred effectively to all stakeholders such as customers, distributors and investors.

**Role of manager:** Based on Crick (2005) SMEs do not think of themselves as a brand, and brand management is not used in their daily activities. According to Aaker (1996), manager or owner of an organization can be used as an incarnation of organization character that in fact personifies the organization. For example, he believes that it may be grounds for building relationships with customers. Crick (2005) posited that in SMEs there is a specific relationship between entrepreneur or leader characters and brand [18].

**The role of employee:** Balmer and Gary (2003) believed that to successfully build a company's brand, the commitment of all employees is required. If the employees were aware of company's target brand, they will be able to understand themselves in the organization and will realize how to relate their role with the brand. King et al (1991) mentioned that brand should be explained to entire organization, all staff members, during creation and maintenance of the brand, the personnel responses should be considered [18].

**The role of stakeholders, communication, and networks:** In small and medium-sized enterprises communication and cooperation are important parts in relation to brand creation. Brands by communicating and collaborating with larger, more well-known actors in the market will become stronger. For example, collaborating with larger, more well-known actors can serve as a reference for the organization. According to Ojasalo et al (2008) communication with media is seen an important factor in making brand image. Communications in small and medium-sized enterprises are often personal. Organization through the relationship with customers can build their own brand and can use customers as a source of strength and brand equity. Gilmore et al (2006) posited that on small and medium-sized enterprises managers often try to establish communication with current and potential customers. Networking for owners and managers of small and medium-sized enterprises often seems normal and they usually base their decision on their networks. Marketing is done through networking; in other words, this means that manager is to communicate in different ways. From small and medium-sized enterprises' perspective, networking can be seen as a capability of manager which is able to be learnt and developed [18].

**The role of corporate identity in the company's brand image:** According to Aaker (1991) one of the most important considerations in building a strong corporate brand is that the company needs to have a clear identity. Corporate identity provides the inner part of company's brand. Corporate image refers to the visual identity of the company which signifies external stakeholders. Rode and Vallaster (2005) mentioned that it is necessary that corporate identity and corporate image integrate together to create a strong corporate brand [12].

### III. Methodology

The main categories of factors affecting brand image is based on a model that is presented by Balmer and Gray (2003) in which the transfer of brand identity and building brand image are based on communication and independent factors. In this framework, communication factors including initial communication comprises product, service, market behavior, non-market behavior, employee behavior and company behavior. Secondary communication includes advertising and public relations. Third communication includes competitors, media commentary, rumor, and word of mouth. Furthermore, third communication links with competitors, media commentary, rumor, and word of mouth. In addition to communication factors, there are other factors which contain partner image, reputation of industry and NGOs.

The main research question is: "*identify the factors affecting brand image in the small and medium-sized enterprises in food industry*".

To achieve this aim, we conducted the semi-structured interview with nine specialists in this field. Before starting the main interview, the four companies were tentatively interviewed to examine that questions are clear and meaningful and the main interview period was estimated. Then, questions were reviewed based on test interviews and necessary changes were made in them. For further validate, we did not rely solely on interviews;

so, secondary sources such as literature, website and catalog were also used. Data were collected in about a month. Approximately 10 hours of interviews were recorded and the researcher took notes according to interviews. In this research, qualitative content analysis was used for data analysis. The purpose of this step is to confirm or reject the components that are listed in conceptual model and identify new components which are related to this research.

#### IV. Analysis of findings

Our findings are divided into two parts. In the first part, the demographic characteristics of individuals whom have been interviewed are presented. In qualitative part, we interviewed with nine experts. These individuals were familiar with their own brand activities.

**Table 1: The characteristics of interviewees**

Company Code	Age	Education	Gender	Interviewees' position	Experience in food industry
F1	45	M.A. in industrial Engineering	Male	CEO	10 years
F2	42	B.A. in industrial Engineering	Male	CEO	8 years
F3	29	B.A. in business management	Female	Marketing Manager	4 years
F4	30	Ph.D. in industrial Engineering	Male	Director of Planning	3 years
F5	48	Vet	Male	Director of Planning	17 years
F6	30	B.A. in computer engineering	Male	Director of Logistics	3 years
F7	35	B.A. in computer engineering	Male	Business Manager	5 years
F8	29	M.A. in business management	Female	Business Manager	5 years
F9	32	B.A. in business management	Male	Director of public relations	8 years

In the second part, the analysis of semi-structured interviews with these individuals is presented. The results of data analysis indicate that the factors affecting making brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises of Amol city consists of 2 main categories, 15 sub-categories and 43 items. Two main categories include independent factors and communication factors. Communication factors are divided into three main categories such as initial communications, secondary communications, and third communications. Initial communications contain product, service, market behavior, non-market behavior, employee behavior, and company behavior. Secondary communications comprise advertising and public relations. Third communications include communication with competitors, media commentary, rumor and word of mouth. In addition to communication factors, there are independent factors that include image of partners, industry reputation, and NGOs.

**Table 2: Data summarization of research model**

Items	Axial Coding Concepts	Open Coding Concepts	Verbal Statements	Code of Interviewee	Frequency
Initial Communication	Product	Credit of Product Brand	High credit of company cheese brand has affected the sale of ice-cream and other products	f2,f3,f4 ,f5,f6,f7	6
		Physical Characteristic of the product (packaging, color, and product design)	Inside the company, we have a unit of packaging, design and color, because consumers are looking for stylish products	F1,f2,f3,f4 ,f5,f6,f9	7
		Production according to the needs and expectations of consumers	We produced affordable sauce for Hamadan market	F1,f2,f3,f4 ,f5,f6,f9	7
	Service	Reclaiming expired and returned goods	Outdates or broken goods were reclaimed at the expense of the company	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5, f6,f7, f9	8
		Special discount	In autumn and winter the ice cream is sold at a discount of 15 percent	F1,f2,f3,f4 ,f5,f6,f9	7
	Corporate behavior towards employees	Payroll and employee benefits	The payment is on time, or by two or three day delay	f2,f3, f4 ,f5,f6,f7f8 ,f9	7
		Respect for the beliefs and values of employees	In the company people have different beliefs	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5, f6,f7, f9	8
		Create a safe and comfortable working environment for employees	Most of employees have good relations with each others	F3, f4, f5, f6,f7,f9	6
		Behavior of owners/managers with employees	The staff is very respected as a human resources of the company	F2, F3, f4, f5, f6,f7,f9	7

**Initial communication:** The first category of communication based on the theoretical framework is primary or initial communication. Initial communication has 6 dimensions. Based on conceptual framework, 5 factors are related to product dimension that were asked from respondents as an influential factors on building brand image.

Logo of goods, packaging, product design, quality products are related to product features that have an impact on the brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises.

**Service:** is another dimension of initial communication. Based on the results of interviews, special discount to retailers, as a stakeholder plays an important role in creating a brand image, because they directly deal with the customers. Reclaiming the returned goods is the second important factor that plays an important role on building brand image.

**Corporate behavior towards employees:** is another dimension of initial communication. Companies are trying by paying salaries and employee benefits on time, creating healthy workplace, and respecting employee beliefs and values make an environment to satisfy employees; because they are one of the important factors on building brand image and they are connected with the main stakeholders and their behavior has an impact on the brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises.

**Table 3: Data summarization of research model**

Item	Axial Coding Concepts	Open Coding Concepts	Verbal Statement	Interviewee Code	Frequency
Initial Communication	Employee behavior towards other stakeholders (Corporate culture)	The tone of the staff dealing with major stakeholders	The staff are trained and stressed to talk with suppliers in a convenient way	F2,f3,f4,f5,f6,f7, f9	7
		Pursue complaints and suggestions	A customer called and complaint about the quality of new product, we comforted him by sending the package of ten cheeses	F2,f3,f4,f5,f6,f7, f8, f9	8
		Training security companies with clients	Guests are escorted to the guest room	F2,f3,f4,f5,f6,f7, f8, f9	8
		Collaboration with student projects	Many students come to us to do their projects and we collaborate with them	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f7, f9	8
		Training company distributors as a leader of the company	Distributor for inappropriate behavior with client, even when he was right, was fired	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, , f7,f8, f9	9
	Non-market behavior	The use of political lobbies	To get a loan, we are relevant to Mr. X	Y, Z	2
	Market behavior towards company	Retailers rely on the company's products	Although prices rose relative to other similar products, but because of proven quality of our products, our customers continue to demand high	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, ,f7	7
		Positive word of mouth advertising for the company	Product experience, good behavior with customers and support them as well as the credibility of the company owner has caused high demand products	f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6,f7, f9	7
		Loyalty and support of company retailers	When the company was in crisis for a long time, they put money into our account	F1,f2,f4,f5,f6, f7	6

**Employee behavior towards other stakeholders:** is another aspect of initial communication. Since employees are the interface to the outside, their behaviors with other stakeholders play an important role in creating a positive image of the company. Hence, many companies have training programs for their employees like their security and their distributors, especially their distributors, because they deal with company retailers.

**Non-market behavior:** can also alter the market towards you. The use of political lobby or non-market behavior can influence a company's image.

**Market behavior towards company:** customer behavior towards company's products, and their welcome to company's products and services means positive mentality and attitude towards company. Welcome of the retailers, recognized as one of the main pillars of the market, to our products and services play an important role on the attitude of consumers.

**Table 4: Data summarization of research model**

Item	Axial Coding Concepts	Open Coding Concepts	Verbal Statement	Interviewee Code	Frequency
	Advertisement	Billboards and banners in the streets	Most of our advertisements are using banners and billboards in the streets and shop entrance	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f7,f8, f9	9
		Participation in exhibitions	To introduce the company's products and as a branding tool, we attend in exhibition	F1,f2,,f3,f5,f6, f7,f8, f9	8
		Advertising in the media	The main feature of our company was presented to people by advertising	F5, f9	2
		Consider benefits and	Retailers can get the brand to heights or	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6,	

Secondary Communication	Public Relations	discounts for retailers	simply destroy it	f7,f8, f9	9
		Participate in different events	We paid family health walk program prizes	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f7 , f9	8
		CRM	We designed CRM unit to refer the complaints and suggestions of stakeholders	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f9	7
		Participate in specialized exhibitions	By attending in the Babol exhibition in 2011, the company planned to introduce itself	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f7 , f9	8
		Using the credit of the company's owner or founder in introducing the company	To my credit, many famous brand of our country, operating in the dairy industry, is produced by our company	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f7, f9	8
		Surveys and feedback forms	The survey forms were used in the shops and consumers' houses, with free postage	F1,f2,f3, f4,f5,f6, f9	7
		Positive fiction about the company	Our company discards expired products	F1,f3,f4, f6, f9	5

**Secondary communications:** in the company include official communications which comprise advertisement and public relations.

**Advertisement:** On most small and medium-sized enterprises includes billboards and banners in the streets, participating in exhibitions, and benefits and discounts for retailers.

**Public relations:** include participation in various occasions, launch CRM unit, attending fairs and specialized exhibitions, using the credit of company's owner and founder and receive feedback to create brand image.

**Table 5: Data summarization of research model**

Item	Axial Coding Concepts	Open Coding Concepts	Verbal Statement	Interviewee Code	Frequency
Third Communication	Word of mouth	Explain distributors the true behavior with retailers	Distributor for inappropriate behavior with client, even when he was right, was fired	f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f7,f8, f9	8
		Attention to customer suggestions and complaints	The customer had complained about loose cheese, we sent a package of new products to appease	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f7, f9	8
		Stability in quality	Because our products have high quality and profitable, the retailers advertised them	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f9	7
		Considering benefits for retailers	If a dealer sells a package, we will give them a great discount for the next ten packages	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6,f7, f9	8
	Language interpretation and media	Emphasis on the company slogan	By changing media advertising from quality to health, we shifted consumers towards healthier food	F1,f2,f3,f4,f5,f6,f7, f9	6
	Relationship with competitors	Entry to the market of competitors	Entering the dairy product market, at the beginning of market entry, lead to competitors reaction and lower the price of products by competitors finally caused to our disadvantages	f2,,f3,f4,f6, f9	5
		Cooperation with competitors	Many other products of famous brands are produced by our company	f2,,f3,f4f5,f6, f9	6
	Rumor	Fiction about the company	Because of attention to customer health, the company discards all return loads	F2,f6 f9	3
		Rivals rumor for our company	Spreading the rumor that the company is bankrupt, causing anxiety to our customers to pay all demands on time	f2, f3, f4, f6, f9	5

Because the third communication is exterior, plays an important role in creating positive brand image. Word of mouth advertising is one of the influential factors in creating a brand image of the company. Companies by justifying distributors to behave appropriately with retailers (significant source of word of mouth), attention to the complaints and suggestions of customers (customers as the most important source of word of mouth), stability in quality and considering advantages for retailers are trying to create positive word of mouth.



Also, interpretation and tone of media in expressing company identity plays an important role in creating positive brand image. Relation to competitors, especially strong competitors that have a positive image and reputation, can have an influence on confirming or destruction of brand image.

**Table 6: Data summarization of research model**

Item	Axial Coding Concepts	Open Coding Concepts	Verbal Statement	Interviewee Code	Frequency
Independent external factors	NGOs	Welcome of religious organization from our products	Many religious companies use our sauce	f2,f3,f4,f6, f7, f9	6
		Welcome of cruise companies from our products	Raja, Iran Air and Royal airlines use our products	f2,f3,f4,f6, f7, f9	6
	Image and laws of allies and partners	Credit of outside investors	We agreed to Parsian Bank to invest in our company	F1,f2, f7,f8, f9	5
		Credit of agencies and eternal consultants	Due to the partnership with a prestigious individual in consulting, company reputation and thus its sale went up considerably	F1,f2,f4,f5,f6	5
	The image and reputation of company industry	There are reputable companies in the industry operate	Due to the culture of using this product, no longer the company needs to invest new demand for their products	F1,f2,,f3,f4,f5,f6, f7 , f9	8

Independent and external factors refer to factors that have a direct impact on company's brand image and the company has no control on them. Those NGOs that have high self image and reputation can have a positive impact on the company's image. Image and allied laws and partners, and their performance can have a direct impact on corporate image. Image and reputation of company industry can also be useful in creating a positive image of the company. Positive image of the industry can have a positive impact on the image of whole company and vice versa.

## V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Factors affecting brand image for small and medium-sized enterprises in the food industry consists of two main factors that include communication factors and independent factors. Communication factors comprise initial communication, secondary communication, and third communication. Initial communication includes five sub-categories such as products, services, market behavior, non-market behavior, attitudes and behavior of employees and company behavior. Secondary communication includes two sub-components such as advertising and public relations. Third communication includes four components such as relationship with competitors, media commentary, rumor, and word of mouth. In addition to communication factors, there are independent factors that include three sub categories such as image of partners, industry reputation, and NGOs. According to the research findings and the results of interviews, no new categories have been added to these factors. Furthermore, the findings of this study confirm the factors that affect the brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises in various models, especially conceptual framework based on Balmer and Gray's model (2003). To enhance and develop knowledge in the area of corporate branding and building brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises in food industry, we propose that: (1) process of building corporate brand in small and medium-sized enterprises; (2) the role of network activists in building brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises. Researchers propose the following applications: (1) SMEs in food industry pay attention to above-mentioned factors in making their brand image; (2) use clear pattern in the construction of brand image; (3) attention to factors that have high priorities and importance than to other ones, and it has been particularly emphasized in the results of findings.

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