CORPORATE BRANDING IN THE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY

by

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Abstract

This project identifies the key elements of the corporate brand specific to a business-to-business services environment. As the key customer, the buyer is defined. Brand messaging, in relation to the role of this buyer, and the major criteria in decision-making when selecting a consultant for I.T. Security is explored. iON Secured Networks' current brand strategy in relation to competitors is assessed. Suggestions as to how iON might achieve a new, more effective brand strategy conclude the paper.

Keywords: branding; information technology marketing; corporate branding; branding strategy; corporate buyer; marketing strategy
Executive Summary

Recently, branding methodologies and concepts have been extensively developed. Companies understand the importance of their brand and realize it is essential that considerable emphasis be placed on creating a brand. The key elements of a brand should be examined to allow managers to focus on aspects important to buyers. As well, each corporation needs easy guidelines to enable the development of a brand most attractive for buyers.

The corporate brand can be delineated by key elements. Almost everyone in the organization needs to be involved in brand development decisions, including varying departments, key stakeholders, salespeople, and most importantly, the buyer. A brand is more than just a name. A brand encompasses many fundamental elements. Personalities, symbols, reputation, goodwill, relationships, partnerships, and culture adjoin the name as the features of a meaningful corporate brand. Time and effort needs to be spent on each of these factors.

Additionally, to go above and beyond competing brands, managers need to be cognizant that there are many different ways to strengthen the brand for buyers. Forming brand values, differentiations, audience consideration, focus on core competencies, communication, technology, and integration all have demonstrated ability to create an edge in the competitive workspace.

When targeting buyers in relation to corporate branding, managers need to consider many essential elements. First is to consider the issues buyers have when making purchasing decisions. Corporate buyers struggle with switching costs, uncertainty, experience, timing, information gathering, centralization of processes, importance of decision, and complexity of the problem. If
the corporate brand can mitigate these problem areas, the buyer will surely be more comfortable with the brand and form a long lasting relationship that will lead to continual buying. The buyer will understand the company if the buyer forms a relationship with the brand, the problems are solved, and the needs are taken care of proactively. All of this can be achieved through an excellent corporate brand that is promoted and communicated well.

Using the key elements for branding, iON Secured Networks current branding is assessed. After interviews and researching the brand, it is clear iON’s brand strategy has shortcomings. Recommendations include an emphasis on personnel experience to offset the short history of the company, revising slogans, involvement in standards bodies, strengthening electronic communications, leveraging partnerships, emphasizing differentiation competencies and improved marketing material, among others.
Dedicated to K, Manchester for the support and encouragement starting with the first university course to graduate project completion.
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1 CORPORATE BRANDING

1.1 Introduction

Branding has become a common term used in marketing to address identifiable messages that a business wishes to portray with its product or service. Although branding is most often associated with consumer related goods, many other industries benefit from branding. Initially, I will identify the elements of the corporate brand specific to the business-to-business services environment. The next step is to understand the key customer, the corporate buyer. By defining the role of the buyer and addressing the major criteria in the decision-making process, I can draw conclusions as to how the best brand message directed towards buyers can be created.

After the research on branding and corporate purchasing is explored, I describe one specific client's environment. iON Secured Networks is an information technology consulting company seeking a formalized brand strategy. From a review of its current brand strategy and an analysis of key competitors, I make suggestions for reaching the goals of the new brand strategy.

A formalized brand strategy is important to iON and other small consulting companies. Corporate branding is often overlooked when, as is often the case in small consulting companies, individual consultants, often working on contract, focus intensely on separate client's projects. The projects are perceived as discrete and often unrelated. Corporate brand messages are not clearly defined or communicated and therefore larger companies with formalized brand strategies have a competitive edge.

A formalized brand strategy would help iON evolve from a group of self-employed contractors to a respected corporation. Given the company's rapid growth, it is becoming
apparent that an effective brand strategy, and more effective marketing material is needed to take the company to the next level. For example, when competing for an international contract, a third-party audit was utilized for due diligence to prove iON was a viable company. It is possible that effective, established branding would have mitigated doubts about iON’s size and stature and the expensive audit process could have been avoided.

A brand strategy is an important part of the new marketing plan to which the iON team has committed to build for increased credibility in winning new business. A clear vision of the iON brand is vital in order to compete with larger businesses in the same space that already benefit from strong brand recognition.

To summarize, the final result of the project is a complete roadmap to realize the importance of branding, to understand the company’s key clients perspective in their decision making process, and to outline the strategy for the company to move forward. Once these objectives are met, the current iON brand is examined. In order to recommend the best corporate brand strategy for iON, a checklist for building the best brand is systematically addressed.

1.2 Methodology

It is important to have a good understanding of branding and the most current criteria used in branding assessments before analysing a company’s brand. Therefore a review of relevant secondary research is undertaken. Once sufficient secondary research is collected and summarized for a complete checklist to build a strong brand, the company can be assessed. To complete this step, informal interviews with the Director of Operations for iON clarifies its present brand strategy. Communication with the company through these informal interviews is effective for my tailored recommendations specific to the company.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Branding methodologies have been extensively developed to improve and increase the effective representation of an image. Companies understand the importance of their brand and realize it is essential to commit resources to create and communicate the brand. Most research on brands is focused on retail, consumer-based environments. Unfortunately, the lucrative world of business-to-business marketing has not been explored as extensively. More specifically, I find the relationship between the brand and the corporate buyer has not been discussed in detail. In my opinion, when the buyer represents a corporation and is acting in the best interests of that business, branding takes on different meanings compared to a typical consumer atmosphere. The key elements of a brand should be addressed to give managers the ability to focus on the aspects of branding that are important to buyers. Additionally, each corporation requires easy guidelines to develop a brand most attractive to buyers.

The literature review focuses on defining a corporate brand, as opposed to a service, product, or knowledge brand. A justification for the corporate brand focus is provided. As well, the roles and motivations of a corporate buyer are explored. Lastly, the corporate brand and the corporate buyer concepts are summarized to create a guide for managers eager to achieve the best brand strategy.

2.2 The Brand

I found four different streams of branding most commonly addressed in the literature. Service, product, corporate and knowledge brands are the principal brand concepts. The concept
emphasized in a branding strategy depends on the core business focus. To better understand why the corporate brand is most important for a business-to-business buyer, it is necessary to briefly describe each of these brand concepts.

2.2.1 The Product Brand

The most commonly referred concept of a brand is associated with products and product lines. Tangible products in the consumer retail market are the easiest to analyse and research. Branding researchers can quickly track sales and interview consumers to document consumer behaviour findings. Product brands are linked to almost all products. Grocery items, clothing, electronics, automobiles -- virtually everything we own has a name and therefore is part of product brands.

The majority of the literature is focused on discussing products and brands. Branded products control consumer-purchasing behaviour and, at some level, also assist corporate buyers with their decisions. However, product lines, product mixes, and product brands are outside the scope of this project and will not be the major focus when relating brands to corporations.

2.2.2 The Service Brand

Service brands focus on specific services offered by an organization. Services deliver a bundle of benefits to the consumer through the experience that is created for that customer (Kotler, 2000). More importantly, for the branding of services, marketers focus on differentiation, quality, and productivity to win customers (Eppler and Will, 2001). Of these three areas, differentiation is viewed as the most vital. It has been stated that service brands are a direct consequence of the strategy of differentiation (Kapferer, 1998). Although elements, like differentiation, in service brands are important to the bigger picture of corporate brands, the service brand is considered secondary for the purposes of this paper.
2.2.3 The Knowledge Brand

Recently, a new level of branding has been introduced. As companies continue to grow and form intellectual capital, the increased level of knowledge is valued as a commodity. In the context of branding, knowledge is a strategic resource that consists of the skills and capabilities that individuals, teams, and organizations use in problem solving. Companies compete on knowledge, and the awareness of corporate knowledge through branding becomes a critical strategic marketing move (Eppler and Will, 2001). This is especially true in the selling of products and services.

The knowledge brand provides information for customers about the company and the company’s competitive position, and can also indicate future trends. It is important to note that a knowledge brand requires an established corporate brand in order to draw on opinions from clients, partnership companies, and the executive to transfer knowledge (Eppler and Will, 2001). Although it is important to be aware of the knowledge brand, the corporate brand concept is the most fundamental type of brand for a business-to-business company.

2.2.4 The Corporate Brand

The following section explains the importance of corporate brands, specifically to help managers develop a qualified opinion on the relationship between brands and corporate buyers.

Corporate brands were originally viewed as essentially one-way communication. Corporate brands were the symbols and names created by the corporation and used to influence the consumer. Now, branding is more closely associated with corporate image building, thus requiring much more consideration of the consumer (Balmer and Gray, 2003). In the context of this paper, the corporate buyers are the people involved in the purchases that need to be accounted for. If a company understands this concept, and markets the company as a brand, they are engaging in corporate branding (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004).
To clarify, although a vision needs to be recognized when forming the brand, vision is not the same as the corporate brand. A vision includes a considerable degree of aspiration whereas a brand primarily reflects elements the company has in place. There are opportunities to connect the strategy and vision of a firm to its corporate brand to offer significant gains in ranking for buyers (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004).

Note that one principal difference between product/service brands and corporate brands is more emphasis on tangible values in personnel for the corporate brand. Product and service brands create this value through creative advertising initiatives (Balmer and Gray, 2003). Corporate brands need to focus on areas such as building tangible staff values; therefore the level of effort needed in creating the corporate brand is often higher than product or service brands.

2.3 Benefits of the Corporate Brand

The clearest and most tangible benefit of the corporate brand is valuation of the company. Corporate brands are major assets that may contribute billions of dollars to the balance sheet (Aaker, 1996). Generally, all major shareholders of the company understand benefits of branding.

Furthermore, corporate brands enhance esteem and loyalty for stakeholder groups (Balmer, 2001). As a key stakeholder group, buyers maintain confidence in products and services by understanding the brand. When quick and relatively uninformed decisions must be made, the buyer is more loyal to a familiar brand.

Additionally, the corporate brand has a humanizing effect. It turns the business strategy into more of an experience for the buyer (Ackerman, 1998). This personalization is important to building relationships and creating loyalty which increases the competitive advantage over
companies that may have similar products/services but where the transaction seems cold and impersonal.

To summarize the benefits, a corporate brand has two major roles. The brand represents both authority and assurance (Adamson, 2002). The company seeks to be an authority figure by being recognized as experts in a particular category. For a corporate buyer, an authority figure gives a performance-related leadership position that can be justified as smart decision-making. This assurance increases the confidence the buyer feels when the corporate brand stands for quality and reliability. Concerns with unstable products or services are mitigated.

Assurance is significant with the rising trend of changing dynamics in the work place. There is a need to introduce new products and services faster. The new categories and extensions must borrow equity from the corporate brand to provide credibility and a successful product or service launch (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004).

Also, increasing pressure for demonstrated social responsibility is a minor benefit of the corporate brand that should be addressed. Some buyers have policies that give preference to companies that contribute to specific causes important to the industry. A corporate brand can reflect the corporations' attitude and activities related to social responsibility (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004).

2.4 Elements of the Corporate Brand

There is more to the creation of a corporate brand than the obvious valuation criteria of size, and the length of operation. Size and history assist in brand awareness, but numerous other factors build the corporate brand. The most prominent are outlined below.
2.4.1 Personalities

There is no denying the power of a reputable CEO and executive. Many companies have built a brand solely through the lead figure of the company. A colourful CEO who represents the values of the brand makes for an excellent spokesman. Consider Donald Trump and his empire of prestigious buildings throughout the world. Simply placing the Trump name on a building guarantees an additional value of $5 million. Also, when dealing with vendors, Trump has stated he can start a project in no time, whereas an unknown developer may take months or even years to accomplish the same tasks with contractors (Trump, 2004).

However, it takes more than a reputable leader to maintain a strong corporate brand. In terms of the entire organization, a brand community must be formed that encompasses employees in all divisions. There must be a degree of ownership for the CEO, as well as in advertising, marketing, communications and all other departments. The brand is created through all of these areas (Ackerman, 1998). The success of a brand depends on the harmony between these different groups, and their defined values of the brand (Chernatony, 2002).

More specifically, salespeople are a fundamental group representing the corporation with buyers. In this age of innovation and fast birth-to-death cycles of new products, the branded salesperson is the best communication device (Miller and Sinkovitz, 2005). Innovation leads to new products and services, and there is no brand momentum without strong coupling of corporate branding and salesperson branding.

Any employee the buyer has contact with is important to the brand. Individuals who embody appropriate skills and talent and communicate corporate brand values effectively are crucial to brand development. Each employee needs complete buy in. To properly represent the company, they must live and breathe the brand.
2.4.2 Name

 Corporations typically place the most emphasis on their name and managing the name as the brand. Although name recognition remains important, current trends of frequent mergers and acquisitions, with resulting name changes, has resulted in somewhat less emphasis on the corporate name in branding. With respect to names, a corporate brand can easily be adjusted to place meaning on the elements the current company wants to promote. For example, when British Petroleum merged with Amoco and then ARCO, it branded itself as BP and launched an internal and external branding campaign. The merged entity was now going ‘Beyond Petroleum’. The campaign reinforced the rebirth of an oil company into an energy company with a collaborative culture (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004). Creative marketing campaigns can adjust most names to contain favourable associations.

 To expand on this point, names rarely mean anything unless properly marketed and advertised with an appropriate branding strategy. The obviously meaningful names in the world are largely accounted for and companies have moved to names that are word combinations and jumbles that contain no associations before branding.

2.4.3 Symbols/Slogans/Artifacts

 Powerful slogans, artifacts (i.e. knowledge creation through surveys and studies), and logos all strengthen the brand name. One example is Accenture’s logo, which presents the company name with a ‘greater than’ symbol above the ‘t’, indicating the firm’s goal of pointing the way forward and to exceed clients’ expectations (Guy, 2000). There is strength and deep, recognizable meaning in this symbolism.

2.4.4 Reputation

 A corporation’s reputation is often the most valuable corporate brand element (Mottram, 1998). Buyers make decisions based on hearsay in the industry from both internal and external
sources. Perhaps the best method of acquiring a positive reputation is through strategic partnerships. In order to add real value to reputation, outsourcing to partners is an important and necessary part of the business (Mullins and Steele, 2005). The partnering company must be assessed to qualify as a good fit with the brand and will be judged in terms of its current reputation.

2.4.5 Goodwill

The value of goodwill cannot be denied. Corporate buyers may analyse goodwill as the book value of the brand. From the branding perspective, it is possible to create goodwill with easily identifiable ‘wins’ in the industry. For example, a publicly praised government contract easily transfers to increased goodwill in the future. Another source of goodwill are the employees and their relationships with clients (Kapferer, 1998). As key communicators, employees represent the company.

2.4.6 Relationships

Often, durable and broadly beneficial relationships develop between the buyer and the seller. Because all relationships are at some level personal and potentially fragile, emotions and trust are involved in every business deal. Forrester Research’s 2005 Technology Brand Scorecard explains the importance of trust in each transaction. “Trust is a powerful way to measure a brand’s value and its ability to command a premium price or drive consumers into a higher profit…” (Greiner, 2006, p. 16). The best way to establish trust is through a strong relationship. Therefore, positive relationship management will result in increased awareness of the brand.

2.4.7 Partnerships

Branded companies have an edge if they choose venture partners with good reputations. If you have similar colleagues associated with the company, usually for outsourcing areas that are
not your core competencies, you will have a stronger brand, as a result of linking yourself to other reputable brands.

Alliances and networks are involved in both vertical and horizontal relationships. Success is experienced in the quality of the relationships over the competitors (Leitch and Richardson, 2003). If a competitor is locked out of an alliance structure, this is a huge advantage and should be effectively communicated within the brand.

2.4.8 Culture

The importance of culture and subcultures has been recognized (Abratt, 1989). A clear cultural direction assists the brand in creating a link between the company and the buyer. Culture is a positive differentiation strategy as no two brands can be identical with respect to the culture composed in the organization. The distinctive culture can be promoted through the marketing mix of the company.

2.4.9 Brand Values

Formally, a value is defined as an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct is preferable to an opposite mode of conduct (Rokeach, 1973). Management must combine functional values with emotional values for the strongest bond. After the values are identified, the staff within the company needs to appreciate their relevance and meaning. Once employees understand the values, they recognize their roles more easily and have increased commitment to the brand promise. As a result of the commitment, brand performance increases when the brand values guide employees' behaviour (Chernatony, 2002).

2.4.10 Differentiation

A brand must have differentiation to rise above other brands (Keller, 2003). The corporate brand should be difficult to imitate and be unique in the eyes of the buyer. For
example, Apple has created a unique brand of personal listening devices with the Apple iPOD. Although there are many other players with equivalent features, Apple has created a strong brand of perceived quality and character that all other electronics companies are having trouble replicating. An iPOD owner is viewed as trendy and knowledgeable about music when others see them using this Apple product.

2.4.11 Target Market

Every company targets a key audience for the majority of their business. When forming the corporate brand, information should be drawn from consumer research to best determine the market (Chernatony, 2002). For a corporate buying environment, the buyers need to be surveyed for feedback. The buyer stakeholder group cannot be forgotten in the decision making process of brand development.

2.4.12 Core Competencies

It is important to look at the company’s core competencies (Ackerman, 1994). Corporate buyers need to know about the best features and abilities of the corporation, and relate these competencies to the brand. Focussing on strengths and what the company does better among all other competitors is the preferred method for building a unique brand that cannot be replicated.

2.4.13 Communication

Outstanding communication is the essence of transmitting the value of the brand. There are many diversified communication channels and the corporate brand’s position must be uniform throughout.

In large, complex business-to-business environments, the impact of the salesperson on the brand and their responsibility in properly transmitting the message are vital and directly determines the buyer’s experience (Miller and Sinkovitz, 2005). In many cases, the brand
experience for the buyer is exclusively with the salesperson. Therefore, the salesperson's brand is an important component of the total brand and often the most cost-effective component to strengthen (Miller and Sinkovitz, 2005). Once again, individuals in the corporate environment are shown to be key builders of the brand. Personnel have a crucial role in properly representing the brand values. They are the heart of the corporate branding process. Staff builds the corporate brand in the buying situation as the interface between the company and the buyer (Balmer and Gray, 2003).

Many corporations recognize the importance of staff's role in integrating the brand. Staff is not only recruited based on skills and functional knowledge but also for the extent their values match the brand's. It is more expensive to change and control employees who do not have the same values than it is to hire new people who already believe in the message of the company (Chernatony, 2002).

Advertising is another key channel of communication for reinforcing the corporate brand. It is the lead discipline in a fully-integrated communications program. A discrete advertising message needs to be creative and maintain alignment with the overall message of the brand.

2.4.14 Technology

Increasingly, use of new technology is becoming a popular method to support the brand. One example of emerging use of technology is the Weblog. A Weblog is a personal website where an individual can freely post text, pictures, and various other files. These sites are viewed as a cross between a personal diary and an opportunity to post your opinions in a public forum. 'Bloggers' often update their sites daily. From the branding perspective, personalizing the brand through Weblogs, maintained by key employees, is a useful communication device (Gilbert, 2003). The philosophy is that employees are more trusted and their opinions are more valued at a personal and individual level. The key is to pick the most colourful and flamboyant, but also
credible, representative for the Weblog. Also, it is important that only opinions are shared on the Weblog and that there are no overt sales’ pitches for products. If used as a vehicle for communicating sales efforts, credibility will instantly be lost. As well, the company itself should not make contributions to the Weblog or the personalization is lost. Lastly, as a cautionary note, because Weblogs can only be loosely, or after-the-fact, controlled by the corporation, the individuals posting comments must be trusted to not slander or say anything that is damaging to the brand.

2.4.15 Integration

Branding must not only focus on advertising, sponsorship, and design, but also on the media, lobbyists, and employees (Eppler and Will, 2001). The integration of all the communication devices with every department in the corporation forms a unified and dedicated corporate brand.

2.5 The Corporate Buyer

The corporate buyer is a major stakeholder for a business-to-business focused organization. A company must be reputable in the mind of the buyer before the deals occur. To clearly understand the buyer’s purchasing behaviour, it is important to review the factors most likely to affect their decisions.

Vendor choices for the buyer can be very tricky and numerous elements are involved with each decision. Choices may be overwhelming and there is almost always personal and organizational pressure to make the most qualified decision.

As a result of earlier commitments to particular vendors, buyers frequently face high switching costs. Moving to a new vendor may not be viewed favourably because of those costs. However, studies have shown that a buyer may be willing to pay more and consider a new vendor
if the potential long-term benefits are greater (Moriaty and Kosnik, 1989). A well-established company will leverage the advantage presented by a buyer’s high switching cost. A new competitor needs to have a strong brand and product to overpower the switching costs.

Another factor in purchasing decisions is the level of uncertainty. Normally, when faced with uncertainty in a purchase decision, individuals in the decision-making unit seek more information to reduce that uncertainty (Anderson, 1982). Uncertainty is increasingly prevalent with the quickening pace of change in society. New problems and ambiguity are by-products of societal and technological change. To overcome uncertainty, additional information needs to be acquired. The new information provided should be strongly branded to ease uncertainty for a corporate brand. The more information and the greater confidence a company can achieve with its relationship with the buyer, the less uncertainty there will be to make the final purchase.

Also, buyers frequently lack relevant prior experience required to make new purchases (von Hippel, 1986). Furthermore, although they may have many years of purchasing experience, it is frequently inapplicable to the new buying decision at hand. Experienced buyers will be more likely than inexperienced buyers to stay with existing vendors (Heide and Weiss, 1995). The supplier needs to appreciate the nature of long term relationships with experienced buyers and keep them informed of the brand, as well as addressing new situations and ensuring that inexperienced buyers have comprehensive information on their brand.

Information requirements vary according to the size of the purchase and other factors such as importance and switching costs. The greater an organization’s experience, the more developed its organizational memory will be (Walsh and Ungson, 1991). The amount of information needed is lower with a well-informed buying company with a long history of purchases.
The fact that information may not remain relevant for long presents additional challenges. Information gathered for one client in one sales transaction may become stale-dated very quickly. Obsolete or irrelevant information decreases confidence, and increases ambiguity and the problems associated with making a buying decision from a new and relatively unknown vendor (Eisenhardt, 1989). The potential problems and increased risks because of irrelevant information are steep.

Time sensitivity is often a huge problem for the buyer. Buying often needs to be accomplished in a short period of time. Corporate branding greatly assists with these hasty decisions. Any short cut that supports a perceived ‘qualified’ decision greatly helps a buyer.

The structural arrangements in place within the organization directly change the purchasing behaviour. A high degree of buying process formalization means the tasks in decision-making are subject to fixed rules and procedures (Heide and Weiss, 1995). The centralization increases issues of time sensitivity and information needed before a decision is made.

A familiar corporate brand is often an advantage in new situations where the buyer’s ability to employ a fixed set of decision criteria is reduced. In both time sensitive and unfamiliar situations, the likelihood that familiarity will be used as the decision heuristic is increased (Pfeffer, 1981). A strong brand can assist the buyer to easily recognize advantage in the unclear environment.

Degree of importance also affects buying decisions. Purchase importance has been defined conceptually in terms of the impact of a purchase on organizational profitability and productivity (McQuiston 1989). When the potential impact of the purchase is perceived to be significant, the perceived risk to the organization is increased. Arguably, a more important factor is the individual buyer’s personal agenda. Combining the impact on the organization and the
individual, the buyer will place different degrees of importance on each decision. Note that buyers will tend to protect themselves by staying with an existing vendor (Heide and Weiss, 1995). For the buyer, a proven vendor is easier to justify and utilize as a scapegoat if the product or service fails.

Finally, the amount of information needed to make an accurate evaluation is elevated in some instances. In many industries, such as technology, the complexity of the problem is more of an issue than the quality of the vendor. The buyer is seeking assistance in solving the problem as well as delivery of a solution.

2.6 Literature Review Summary

Managers need to realize the importance of a corporate brand. More specifically, the importance of the brand for the corporate buyer needs to be addressed. For the buyer, the brand is the company.

The corporate brand can be summarized into key elements. Everyone needs to be involved in the decisions, including varying departments, key stakeholders, salespeople, and most importantly, the buyer. A brand is more than just a name; it includes many elements. Personalities, symbols, reputation, goodwill, relationships, partnerships, and culture adjoin the name as features of a meaningful corporate brand. Time needs to be spent on each of these factors.

Additionally, to go above and beyond competing brands, managers need to keep in mind many different methods to strengthen the brand for buyers. Forming brand values, differentiation, audience consideration, core competencies, communication, technology, and integration are all important factors that combine to create an edge in the competitive workspace.
Corporate branding strategy must include an assessment of the corporate buyer. Managers need to focus on several different elements when considering corporate branding in relation to the corporate buyer. First is to consider the issues buyers have when making their decisions. Realizing the buyers' problems and addressing them in the corporate brand is an excellent strategy to align and assure the customer. Corporate buyers struggle with switching costs, uncertainty, experience, timing, information gathering, centralization processes, as well as the importance of the decision and the complexity of the problem. If the corporate brand can mitigate these problem areas, the buyer will surely be more comfortable and form a long lasting relationship that will lead to continual buying. The buyer will understand the company if they form a relationship, get their problems solved, and their needs proactively looked after. All of this can be achieved through an excellent corporate brand that is promoted and communicated effectively.

As a means of merging the corporate brand theories with corporate buyer purchasing behaviour, a checklist of key factors will assist a manager to develop an effective corporate brand strategy (See Table 2.1). Although the checklist does not form a clear marriage between the buyer and the brand, it does help increase awareness of all the concepts, and can be used to make the corporate brand more effective when targeting the corporate buyer.
Table 2.1 Checklist for Building the Best Brand

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3 ION SECURED NETWORKS

With the complete overview of the corporate brand and corporate buyer finished, the next step is to summarize the current brand strategy within iON. After assessing the current strategy, the goals for the new brand, along with the key messages the iON team wishes to portray, is described.

Using the checklist (Table 2.1) for building the best brand as a guide, Robert Zagorsky, Director of Operations and co-founder of Ion Secured Networks, was interviewed to get his perception of the current brand. iON provided all current marketing material to allow for a complete analysis. The company information is summarized and considered throughout the following sections.

3.1 Elements of iON’s Corporate Brand

The most prominent elements of a corporate brand were discussed in the literature review section. The current status of iON’s brand, along with recommendations to help the company to get to where they hope to be in the future follows. For optimal brand awareness, each element needs careful attention.

iON has defined some of their core values on the home page of their website. (www.ionsecurednetworks.com)

- Preserve & Protect our clients’ IT security at all costs.

- Customize solutions that meet our clients’ demands.

- Transfer and share our IT Security knowledge with our clients.
• Attract and retain the best IT Security professionals.

• Remain profitable while continuing to adhere to our core values.

iON has taken appropriate steps toward addressing the elements of their brand with these statements. The first four points explain that they are in the IT Security business, that their clients are important, and that professionalism and knowledge transfer is important. These are valid elements of a corporate brand. However, including the goal of remaining profitable while adhering to core values is not consistent with corporate branding and is not an essential point. All customers understand that a private company needs to stay profitable. The initial four statements are an excellent start to building the brand. The points from the website will be kept in mind throughout the rest of this section on key elements of the iON brand.

3.1.1 Personalities

The literature review recognized the importance of strong leadership, but also recognized other members of the team as key elements of a successful brand. Salespeople, in particular, are a fundamental group representing the company. Each salesperson must believe in the brand and have the ability to communicate the message to the appropriate audience.

Zagorsky believes the personalities of the iON staff are consistent and uniform. He states the group is composed of “very hard working guys primarily from rural/farm/small town backgrounds. No flashy, flamboyant, personalities. We are all spendthrift individuals who do not believe in showing off or playing the role.” From the brand perspective, the work ethic and focus on cost savings are both admirable elements that need to be reflected in staff communications and all other marketing efforts.
3.1.2 Name

The company name, iON Secured Networks (see Appendix A for logo) is a play on words with respect to the company’s main function. Zagorsky explained: “In security it is someone’s job to keep an eye on things…. in the I.T. Security industry the eye on things is happening at an intricate level not understood or not seen by the average person or the untrained eye. The remainder of the name is for explanatory purposes.” The founders agreed that it was important to include the words “Secured Networks” to clearly define the services provided.

As stated earlier in the literature review, names rarely mean anything unless properly marketed and advertised with an appropriate branding strategy. The name iON is not necessarily intuitively understood as the security company keeping ‘an eye on things’. Therefore, the name should be explained in marketing material.

3.1.3 Symbols/Slogans

Powerful slogans that can be easily recognized are vital for a strong brand. iON has a firm grasp of this concept through their slogan, Essential Elements of Defense. This phrase clearly defines the strength iON represents in providing defensive security measures. Another slogan appears on the iON website to help define the brand. The company ‘offers peace of mind ensuring every part of your network is secured’. (www.iONsecurednetworks.com) While descriptive, it is too long to be an easily recognizable tagline to insert routinely into marketing material. An abbreviated version that the entire company adopts in their correspondence would be preferred. iON needs to combine both the “essential elements of defense” and the “peace of mind” slogans into one short, descriptive explanation of the company that clients can easily remember.

Other naming conventions within the company are well formed. Different product offerings include the complete iSolutions line, with sub-categories of iLEARN, iMONITOR,
iSENSE, and iTRUST (as shown in Appendix A-2, A-3, A-4 and A-5, respectively). The brand awareness is built by using an initial ‘i’ in all product names, linking back to the company name and enhancing ease of recognition. Zagorsky states that these products, developed by iON engineers, are profitable and set iON apart from its competition. The emphasis on unique naming has already proven beneficial to iON’s current branding.

3.1.4 Reputation

Reputation of the company is a valuable corporate brand element. Hearsay within the industry is the best method for building reputation. Zagorsky admitted iON is not easily recognized by potential clients. However, the core clients understand that if there is a need to securely connect to other partners, iON will ensure the connections are seamless and secure. Word-of-mouth is a key factor in building reputation.

To improve awareness and build a stronger reputation, iON has chosen to hold free seminars as well as chargeable training seminars across Western Canada. Attendance is well over 50 at every event. Additionally, Zagorsky explained the importance of quality food at the venue. “We have a great reputation with the food served. While huge IT Corporations (Sun, Microsoft, Telus, etc) are serving continental breakfasts, iON is known for serving huge buffet breakfasts. We often tell clients to come for the extraordinary breakfast and stay for the seminar. This attracts new clients and continually educates our existing clients.” The knowledge transfer at the seminars receives rave reviews and is definitely a great step towards improving reputation.

iON can further build on reputation by being more involved in user groups and other associations within the industry. Members of the iON team should be involved in the improvement of security standards in the community bodies that have influence in governance. Information technology security is a major area of concern for all corporations and the credibility gained from participation in developing regulations and standards is invaluable.
3.1.5 Goodwill

From a branding perspective, goodwill is acquired through easily identifiable ‘wins’ in the industry. For example, iON’s involvement in a highly visible oil company that is publicly praised could easily be transferred to increased goodwill in the future. To increase goodwill, iON should consider bidding lower in certain situations. Specifically, a lower bid should be considered in instances where the client may not increase revenue a great deal but will increase the amount of goodwill significantly. Assessment of the visibility of the client company and their public policy on discussing operational activities will determine the margin of revenue loss iON is willing to take.

Goodwill is also created by the company’s employees. The three managing partners have combined industry experience of 32 years. Communicating this fact effectively to clients is recommended to increase goodwill.

3.1.6 Relationships

Being genuine and trusting are the fundamental building blocks for a good relationship. iON excels with this concept in their core value “to preserve our client relationships”. Zagorsky explained, “For key clients, we take key decision makers out for an iON-Fun Day. We ask them what they would like to do for fun (within reason), and we do it. We took one client to the gun range. We are planning a professional golf training day with a certified golf instructor for another client.” As a small company, iON has the ability to be flexible. Customized appreciation events are possible for each client. As a result of these events and excellent communication among staff and clients, iON has a 100% client retention rate.

As iON grows, appreciation days and other customer events will need to be more standardized to take advantage of economies of scale. Although the personal customisation will
be lacking, it still shows customers the value of the relationship. Also, when considering public
relations, group events will be easier to advertise and promote to future clientele.

3.1.7 Partnerships

Branded companies choose partners with similar values and strong reputations. Quality
through association is achieved. Computer Dealer News describes the brand trust partnerships in
the Canadian I.T. industry. “If a customer has faith in a vendor, and that vendor recommends a
particular brand, the customer is apt to buy it and be firmly convinced it’s the best product
available, because a trusted partner recommended it.” (Greiner, 2006, p. 16)

ION has linked with numerous companies in order to deliver the best solutions for their
clients. The partners include: Check Point, Cisco, F-Secure, Juniper Networks, RSA, Secure
Computing, Tripwire, Nokia, and SPLAT. As explained on their website “ION Secured
Networks provides turn-key integration of best of breed products from top manufacturers”.
(www.ionsecurednetworks.com/checkpoint.html) ION clearly understands the importance of
these partners and works closely with members of companies such as Check Point and Secure
Computing.

As ION grows, the next step in building the brand is to have closer links to the partners.
Involvement in partner events, teamwork with partners in providing solutions, and mention of
ION within partner advertising are all suggested strategies that will strengthen the brand through
association.

3.1.8 Culture

A clear cultural direction assists the brand in creating a link between the company and the
buyer. Culture is a differentiation strategy as no two brands can be identical with respect to the
culture composed in the organization.
After conversations with Robert Zagorsky, it was evident that iON has a clear and relatively distinct corporate culture. iON employees are competitive and driven to win. Competing against the best in the industry, the team is confident in their abilities. Losses strengthen the team and they learn from those mistakes. Additional learning is through benchmarking of top companies (industry and non-industry related). This desire to learn and improve is exemplified by the swapping of CD Audio books that pertain to business. These books are continually exchanged and discussed among employees.

Also, the team is tight-knit, representing a unified group whose members are all striving for excellence. There is open communication. Employees are not afraid to make suggestions or to address another member of the staff if a mistake has been made. This openness, along with competitiveness and continual learning, are all strong cultural distinctions the company can be proud of.

To improve, iON needs to document their culture for future reference and to strengthen the corporate memory. All staff should participate in the exercise of defining their culture. This will continually remind the group that what they believe in is important, and ensures a strong cultural fit when hiring new employees.

3.1.9 Brand Values

iON must combine functional values with emotional values to establish and enhance the best brand presentation. After the values are identified, the staff needs to appreciate both relevance and meaning. When employees understand the values, they are better guided to make future decisions.

Although it is difficult to summarize the brand values iON wants formed, a few are apparent. First, iON values the bond between themselves and the customer. They view
themselves as equals on the same team, as opposed to the typical hierarchical and more structured client relationship experienced in large companies. Also, iON values the idea of making a client’s tasks easier. Customisation and flexibility are emphasized. On their website, iON lists a core value as 'customize solutions that meet our clients demands.’”

(www.ionsecurednetworks.com) The iON team should form additional brand values and concepts to help guide future decisions.

3.1.10 Differentiation

To have differentiation in the eyes of buyers, the corporate brand should be valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and difficult to substitute. If a brand is highly differentiated, other companies will be unable to replicate or easily compare themselves to the unique brand. Zagorsky identified six key competitors: Compugen, IST: Information Security Technology, Telus, Bell, DTM Systems Corp., and Graycon Group. Zagorsky also provided his thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of each competitor. In order to come up with an appropriate differentiation strategy, a brief description, reflecting Zagorsky’s opinion, of each key competitor is provided.

Compugen has established its core business as ‘IT Infrastructure and Lifecycle Management’ (www.compu~en.com). As a strong IT solutions integrator and services provider operating nationally through 13 locations, Compugen is a powerful competitor, concentrating on best practices and complete solutions. Although Compugen is reputable, its major weakness is lack of focus. To iON’s benefit, security solutions are only one small component of Compugen’s offerings. Customers believe this brand is strong because the company has been around for a long time (since 1981) and they have many partners (43 partners and alliances).

Information Security Technology (IST) is a leading national provider of enterprise-class information and network security solutions and is focused exclusively on security for business,
non-profits and all levels of government (www.istsecure.com). IST’s presence is solid throughout the Eastern U.S., as well as within iON’s key area of Western Canada. However, IST is not the preferred choice in Calgary where iON’s head office is located. However, IST recently opened an office in Calgary to address this issue. IST has strong partnerships with vendors and is known for high product sales volume. This focus may be a downfall as they may direct more attention to product sales instead of the services arm. Another weakness for IST is the generic name. IST has no distinct meaning associated with it. The abbreviation may have numerous meanings. For example, the Information and Technology department at the University of Waterloo is also known as IST.

Telus is a well-recognized Canadian brand with excellence coverage in all geographic regions (www.telus.com). As a provider of data connections, Telus can easily be viewed as the logical vendor for security solutions. Telus has the ability to influence the end-users’ choices because they typically control the entire communication infrastructure within a company. Also, Telus’ security support is excellent with the employee resources readily at hand. One weakness for Telus is its lack of focus on security services. As a result, it does not excel at integrated security service development and support. Additionally, solution sales training is poor at Telus. A security solution is not typically well articulated to clients when speaking to a salesperson. Brand awareness is the biggest issue for iON when competing with Telus.

Bell is the other major telecommunications powerhouse in Canada with which iON competes (www.bell.ca). Although stronger in Eastern Canada, Bell still enjoys success in Western Canada, iON’s key market area. Bell has the same strength in brand awareness and, by comparison with small companies, endless resources that Telus does, and the same issues with integration are present. Bell also has questionable sales teams with limited experience in delivering a quality solution to the client.
DTM Systems Corp. is labelled as a technology solutions provider of 'Systems Beyond the Box' (www.dtm.ca). This catchy tagline nicely summarizes the brand. With a strong presence in IT security and a solid team in British Columbia, DTM is a big threat to iON. Additionally, like IST, DTM recently opened a Calgary office that will surely be bidding against iON for many local contracts. DTM has been criticized for their professional services, but regardless, it is a larger company than iON with broader coverage.

Graycon Group's focus is network infrastructure in Western Canada, providing services that range from strategies to technical development, to maintenance and support (www.graycon.com). Self-described as a complete IT management services company, Graycon has an exceptional technical team and a good reputation in Calgary. Also, it is known for excellent retail (point of sale) security, an area in which iON does not have expertise. Graycon's brand is well known in Calgary and criticisms are difficult to find. However, even with a relatively large staff of 70 employees, Graycon does not place a lot of emphasis on the sales team. Clients within the industry have stated that Graycon's salespeople are not trained at a sufficiently high level to address the concerns of the client satisfactorily.

Given the placement of competitors, iON has several critical areas on which to focus when placing its brand in order to be differentiated. iON has the distinct advantage of being part of a select number of companies in a niche area, working only with IT security and providing no other networking solutions. The brand should place emphasis on this.

Although iON sells a fair amount of vendor products, they do not compete with larger companies with greater coverage and traction. iON needs to clearly let clients know that they can support products purchased from other vendors. All marketing material should reflect iON's ability to provide third-party solutions and support as well as products developed in-house.
To further differentiate recognition in the market, iON needs to enhance the associations with its unique, but not clearly defined, name. As stated at 3.1.2, more energy needs to be spent defining the name and marketing it for easy recall.

The main difference between iON and most competitors is their sales peoples’ ability to help the client select the correct solution directly. Most sales departments are more gatekeepers that transfer leads to more technical departments. Because of its small size and efficient communications amongst staff, iON has very knowledgeable sales people. This makes the client’s decision-making process easier. The brand needs to reflect this.

For additional differentiation, iON’s expert ability in integration needs to be stated through marketing and sales communications. Its flexibility and the ease of access to expertise are stronger than large companies like Bell and Telus. Clients should be aware of this valuable attribute.

iON is weak if a customer is assessing the number of years it has been in business. Many of the competitors have been around longer. Therefore, to enhance its credibility, focus should be on the staff’s cumulative experience and the successful solutions that have been provided.

Zagorsky explained that iON is particularly proud of its ability to provide support and solutions to locations outside of the local market. Recent clients in the Cayman Islands, British Columbia, and various locations in the U.S. have all been satisfactorily serviced from iON’s headquarters in Calgary, Alberta. Although competition may have the ability to utilize technology in varying geographic areas, iON has the proven expertise to be a global I.T. security provider. This is an important point that needs to be conveyed for the brand given that competitive providers such as IST and DTM have recently opened offices in Calgary. iON needs to continue with existing relationships and get as much local coverage as possible (capitalizing on being local) while placing secondary emphasis on exploring global opportunities.
3.1.11 Target Market

iON needs to consider its target market when forming the corporate brand. Market research should be done to fully understand clients and to receive their feedback. iON is a small company with close relationships to the buyers. One-on-one conversations will provide excellent feedback. Major talking points should be centred around open-ended questions such as “What does iON mean to your organization?” and “If your superior or a colleague asked why you chose iON, what would you say?” This will give iON the insight needed to improve the brand. The comments will reveal the discrepancies between the brand iON perceives and the brand the client perceives. Discrepancies indicate a problem with brand communication.

3.1.12 Core Competencies

Buyers need to know most about the best features and abilities of the potential services company; therefore, the brand must reflect those competencies. iON’s engineers are exceptional at creating the best solutions and troubleshooting when support is needed. As well, iON’s superior customisation abilities ensure customer satisfaction as reflected in a client retention rate of 100%. This needs to be reinforced in the brand.

3.1.13 Communication

Personnel have a crucial role in properly representing the brand values. They are the heart of the corporate branding process. Mostly importantly, the salesperson with the initial client contact needs to properly represent the company. iON has the advantage of being a small company with a uniform culture and values. However, it is important to continually discuss the iON brand, and to have a brand strategy formally documented for constant reference. This ensures that the team stays aligned with the vision of the brand.

An effective communication method is virtual, through email correspondence and a website. iON has recently updated its website with core values stated on the home page. This is
an excellent way to represent the brand to potential customers. iON also takes advantage of electronic communication to distribute a monthly newsletter, describing current news and events within the company. The newsletters need to continue to be distributed to all clients, and the writers must ensure the brand is properly represented in this effective correspondence.

3.1.14 Technology

Embracing technology refers to the idea of adopting any possible technology solution that will further increase the awareness of the brand. One example is a weblog, where a member of iON is active in posting messages about security in a personalized fashion while properly representing the brand.

iON has recently increased emphasis on its website, an important component of marketing and the brand in general. The new website is nicely designed, using its company colours of grey and yellow which are inviting and non-threatening tones. Continual attention to updating this site is necessary to keep the message fresh but consistent. (See Appendix B for picture of home page).

iON has the advantage of being a technology company, putting it in a good position to assesses appropriate new devices or methods that could be used to increase brand communication. Open communication amongst the staff makes it less likely that inappropriate strategies will be adopted. Zagorsky explained, "if an iON staffer does not agree with the process, it is always open for discussion on how to make it better.” The culture of open communication also makes it less likely that iON will adopt inappropriate technology.

In relation to branding, as well as other initiatives, early adopters often run into problems when new technologies are not correctly and cautiously assessed. As Jim Collins has explained in his best selling business book, Good to Great, technology is an accelerator (Collins, 2001).
However, good-to-great companies do not jump on technological bandwagons. They determine the technology that makes the most sense and then aggressively apply solutions. iON is unlikely to fall into the trap that plagues many companies, often technology companies, of chasing cutting-edge fads that are not effective or do not effectively build their brand. The focus should be on technology that can create direct improvements.

3.1.15 Integration

Branding must have a uniform message with advertising, sponsorship, media, lobbyists, employees, and most importantly – clients. The integration of all communication devices with all departments in the corporation forms a unified and dedicated corporate brand. Fortunately, iON is a small company, with managers who are involved in all major communications. This allows for an easy integration and no formal strategy is needed to address this issue.

3.2 Elements of iON's Corporate Buying Environment

The corporate buyer specific to the information technology industry is unique when compared to other business-business industries. The elements listed under Corporate Buyer in Checklist for Building the Best Brand (see Table 2.1) can be used to elaborate a profile of the buyer's situation.

3.2.1 High-Switching Costs

I.T. personnel making decisions about security consulting services will predictably take the high switching costs associated with selecting a new vendor into consideration. Specific licensing fees, changing business processes, and staff re-training are all cost-related issues the buyer will assess. In order to win the business over a competitor, the potential long-term benefits must be clear and significant. To succeed in winning new clients with established security systems, iON must generate the highest level of confidence possible through a strong brand
recognized in the industry. If clients have not heard of iON and what they represent, it is likely that switching costs will overpower their decision and the buyer will continue with the companies they worked with in the past.

3.2.2 Uncertainty

Simply stated, uncertainty in a purchase decision is mitigated through qualified information. Buyers will always seek more information for reassurance. For iON, the information on the brand must be clear and succinct. Additionally, formal marketing material needs to be created that can be readily sent to potential clients to provide all the information required for the buyer to feel confident in their decisions.

3.2.3 Level of Experience

New buyers lack the experience needed to make qualified purchasing decisions. Also, in the ever-changing world of information technology security, even experienced buyers often do not have complete or confident knowledge of recent trends. iON needs to appreciate long term relationships with the experienced buyers and keep them informed of the current brand while attending to inexperienced buyers who need further information on their brand. The expertise iON has in past dealings needs to be recognized in some form with buyers. Once again, a brand that represents confidence and experience needs to be prevalent to win the business of the buyers.

3.2.4 Time Sensitivity

Time is definitely an issue in the information technology industry, especially when security is involved. Given the new organizational pressures and the legal requirements of the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act, buying a consulting solution must occur in a limited amount of time. Corporate branding greatly assists with these time-pressed decisions. iON’s brand message needs to reflect reliability and awareness of the most current trends. This will once again give the
buyer confidence in making the best choice without undertaking a deep, costly, and time-consuming investigation of iON.

Continual assessment and review of the corporate brand ensure a timely and relevant representation of the company. This allows the corporation to stay on track with its strategic decisions, confirming it is remaining true to its stated brand. As a component of assessment, buyer feedback will improve the brand. When the buyers get consistent results time and time again, the reputation is strengthened (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004). Dependability is a core brand value.

3.2.5 Amount of Information

Information requirements vary according to the value and importance of the purchase as well as past dealings with a customer. Clearly, a low value purchase requires less information; therefore, a clearly represented brand will allow for a quick sale. With higher value, more important sales, buyers may require vast amounts of information for due diligence. Considering the fast-pace industry, iON will have large amounts of information requested by a client that can quickly become irrelevant. This justifies and reinforces the high value of effective branding. Although information varies and changes, the brand message will not. Buyers will value updated information from iON through the buying cycle if they understand that the iON team has their best interests at heart.

As iON Secured Networks is a relatively new organization with short or no history with a client, credibility needs to be shown in the brand. If the values a buyer holds are aligned with iON’s brand values, working with iON is an easier business decision.
3.2.6 Process Centralization

Information technology departments typically lack centralization with their buying processes. I.T. personnel who have been assigned security duties are the buyers. This empowerment exists simply because the rest of the organization is not capable of making educated decisions within the technology arena. The low degree of fixed rules and procedures for buying helps small companies build personal relationships that can increase sales. From a branding perspective, an easily communicated message is beneficial to target the numerous buyers (as opposed to a centralized system with only one buyer). iON can mass market material and build personal relationships more easily if all internal staff has the same branded message when dealing with clients.

3.2.7 Purchase Importance

Purchase importance relates to the degree to which the purchase is mission critical to the business. A mission critical purchase requires a large amount of information in a short amount of time. Information technology often requires that important purchases be made within a set timeframe. Once again, a clear brand assists the buyer in making a quick decision. The iON brand can reflect speed and flexibility in its solutions to satisfy all customers requiring fast purchasing and delivery.

3.2.8 Complexity

Complexity refers to the amount of information needed to make an accurate evaluation. In the information technology marketplace, the complexity of the problem is often as much or more of an issue than the quality of the vendor. The buyer is seeking assistance in solving the problem along with delivery of a solution. iON's brand should exemplify its skill level in problem solving and its dedication to custom service.
4 CONCLUSIONS

Branding is important for all companies wishing to enhance their business activity. The corporate brand has two major roles. The brand represents both authority and assurance. The company seeks to be an authority figure, demonstrated experts in a particular category. For a corporate buyer, an authority figure gives a performance-related leadership position that can be justified as smart decision-making. This assurance is the warm feeling of confidence the buyer feels when the corporate brand stands for quality and reliability. Concerns with unstable products or services are mitigated.

As stated in the literature review summary from past studies, the corporate brand can be summarized into major elements. Personalities, symbols, reputation, goodwill, relationships, partnerships, and culture adjoin the corporate name as the major features of a meaningful corporate brand. Time needs to be spent on each of these elements, along with emphasis on brand values, differentiation, target markets, core competencies, communication, and integration before a strong brand is present.

To go above and beyond competing brands, managers need to keep in mind many different ways to strengthen the brand for buyers. Perhaps most important is to consider the issues buyers have when making their decisions. To reiterate, realize the buyers’ problems, and address them in the corporate brand is an excellent strategy to align and assure the customer. Corporate buyers struggle with switching costs, uncertainty, experience, timing, information gathering, centralization processes, importance of decision, and complexity of the problem. If the corporate brand can mitigate these problem areas, the buyer will surely be more comfortable with the brand and be more likely to form a long lasting relationship. The buyer will develop loyalty
to the company if they form a relationship, get their problems solved, and their needs are proactively looked after. All of this can be achieved through an excellent corporate brand that is promoted and communicated well.

With clear definitions and objectives to keep in mind, the current status of the iON brand is easily assessed. iON is currently at a good starting point to begin developing an on-going brand strategy. Management understands the importance, and emphasis is being placed on marketing. However, after reviewing iON and the competitor’s brands, many aspects of the iON brand could be improved. The recommendations address improvements that will enable the iON brand to reach a level where clients in their market easily recall what the brand represents.

4.1 Key Messages for the iON Brand

Summarizing the most important components relevant for the iON brand provides a quick snapshot of what iON truly represents as a brand. iON is a company of knowledgeable staff with years of expertise. It has performed many successful solutions as a company focussed solely on I.T. security. A buyer can be assured quick access to solutions from both technical and sales staff. This speed of delivery is emphasized for all solutions. Additionally, iON is dedicated to customer service through customisation, flexibility, and support. iON can even assist companies in remote locations if necessary.

4.2 In-Depth Recommendations

The detailed recommendations explained below for the iON brand will allow the company to have a uniform and effective brand strategy. As a general brand concept, iON is a company composed of hard working individuals with experience in the industry. The work ethic and focus on cost savings are both admirable elements that need to come across in staff communication and all other marketing efforts. Also, as the three managing partners have
combined industry experience of 32 years, focus should be on the years of experience and the successful solutions that have been performed in order to enhance their credibility.

As for names and slogans, some changes can be made. The name iON is not necessarily self-evident as a security company keeping ‘an eye on things’. Although the iON name is unique, it would benefit from marketing initiatives that would development stronger associations and easy recall. The company's slogans include both *Essential Elements of Defence* and *peace of mind ensuring every part of your network is secured*. Essential Elements of Defence defines the strength iON represents in providing defensive security measures. “Peace of mind ensuring every part of your network is secured” is a descriptive slogan, but it is too long. An abbreviated version that the entire company adopts in its correspondence and marketing material is preferred. iON needs to combine both slogans into one short and descriptive explanation of the company that clients can easily remember. For example, the slogan could simply be: *Essential Elements for Network Security Defence*.

iON can further build on reputation by being more involved in user groups and other associations within the industry. Members of the iON team should be involved in the improvement of security standards, particularly those that have influence in governance. I.T. security is a major area of concern for all corporations, and the credibility gained from participation in developing the regulations is invaluable.

As iON grows, appreciation days and other customer events will need to be more standardized to take advantage of economies of scale. Although the personal touch may diminish, appreciation days will still demonstrate to customers that iON values the relationship. In the consideration of the aspect of public relations, events formed for larger groups will be easier to advertise and promote to future clientele.
Improved links with partners is another next step in building the brand. Involvement in partner events, teamwork with partners in providing solutions, and mention of iON in partner advertising are all initiatives that will strengthen the brand through association.

iON needs to clearly let clients know that even though a product may be purchased from a different vendor, they still have the ability to support the product. All marketing material should reflect this focus on solutions and support expertise.

To strengthen the corporate culture, all staff should participate in an ongoing exercise to define culture and values. Further, iON needs to document its culture for future reference. This will provide a mechanism for continually reminding the group that what they believe is important and will ensure a strong cultural fit when hiring new employees.

Several brand values to which iON aspires are apparent. First, iON values the bond between themselves and the customer. They view themselves as equals on the same team, as opposed to the client-vendor relationship typically experienced in large companies. iON also values the idea of making client's tasks easier. Customisation and flexibility should be emphasized.

Given the placement of the key competitors, iON has several opportunities to increase brand recognition through differentiation. iON has the distinct advantage of being a part of a select number of companies in a niche area. iON only works with I.T. security and does not provide other networking solutions. The brand should place emphasis on this.

The key difference between iON and most competitors is the ability of their sales staff to help the client select the correct solution directly. Sales departments are often qualifiers and gatekeepers. Then, the opportunity is passed to more technical departments to manage the details of the transaction. Because of its small size and the ability to communicate quickly, iON has
extremely knowledgeable sales people. This makes the client’s role easier when making decisions. The brand needs to reflect this through their marketing material.

For even more differentiation, iON’s expert ability in integration needs to be emphasized through marketing and sales communications. iON’s flexibility and its ability to give clients’ quick access to expertise is stronger than large companies like Bell and Telus. Clients should be aware of this valuable attribute.

iON is particularly proud of its ability to provide support and solutions to remote locations. Although competition may have the ability to utilize technology in varying geographic areas, iON has the proven expertise to be a global I.T. security provider. This is an important point that needs to be conveyed for the brand given that competitive providers such as IST and DTM have recently opened offices in Calgary. iON needs to continue with existing relationships and capitalize on being local as much as possible, while placing secondary emphasis on exploring global opportunities.

To appropriately realize iON’s target market, research should be implemented to fully understand clients and to solicit their feedback. This will allow for a greater understanding of whom to target as future clients.

If clients have not heard of iON and what they represent, it is likely that the switching costs will overpower their decision and the buyers will continue with the companies they worked with in the past.

Buyers need to know most about the best features and abilities of the potential services company; therefore the brand must reflect those competencies. iON’s engineers are exceptional at creating the best solutions and troubleshooting when support is needed. This has resulted in a client retention rate of 100%. For buyers, this is a very reassuring statistic.
For iON, the information on the brand must be clear and succinct. Additionally, formal marketing material needs to be created that can readily be sent to potential clients to provide all of the information required for the buyer to feel confident in his/her decisions.

iON needs to appreciate long term relationships with the experienced buyers and keep them informed of the current brand while attending to inexperienced buyers needing further information on its brand. The expertise iON has in past dealings needs to be recognized. Once again, a brand that represents confidence and experience needs to be prevalent to win the business of the buyers.

iON Secured Networks is a relatively new organization; consequently, a lengthy history with a customer is rare. Credibility needs to be shown in the brand. If the values of the buyer are aligned with iON’s brand values, working with iON is an easy business decision.

From a branding perspective, an easily communicated message is beneficial to target the numerous buyers that characterized technology security purchases (as opposed to a centralized system with only one buyer). iON can mass market material and build personal relationships more easily if all internal staff has the same branded message when dealing with clients.

The iON brand should reflect the flexibility of their solutions and speed of delivery to satisfy all customers requiring custom solutions, fast purchasing, and time-sensitive delivery.

iON’s brand should represent its skill level in problem solving and its dedication to custom service. This can be communicated through the sales staff when interacting with buyers, and through marketing material (i.e. web site and brochures).

Personnel have a crucial role in properly representing the brand values. The salesperson with the initial contact needs to properly represent the company. iON has the advantage of being a small company with a uniform culture and values. However, it is important to continually
discuss the iON brand, and to have a formal brand strategy on paper for constant reference to ensure the team stays aligned with the vision of the brand. Through following this paper’s suggestions of areas to focus on when building the best brand, the formal brand strategy is completed.

Electronic communication is an affordable and effective way to reinforce the iON brand, typically through email and a corporate website. iON has recently included a statement of core values on its home page. This is an excellent way to represent the brand to potential customers. iON also distributes a monthly newsletter to all clients, describing current news and events within the company. Contributors to the newsletter must ensure the brand is properly represented in this effective correspondence.

Constantly updating the website is another important way to keep brand awareness high through refreshing new angles with an emphasis on the correct brand message.

Continual assessment and review of the corporate brand to ensure it is still a timely and relevant representation of the company is important. As a means of measurement, corporate brand equity may be analysed. Brand equity exists when the client holds strong, favourable, and unique associations about the corporate brand in memory (Keller, 2003). In the context of this article, the corporate buyer is the client valuating the brand. Management should be determining if the buyer has strong emotions towards the brand, if they view the product or service as favourable, and if they believe the company is uniquely differentiated in some way.

4.3 Assumptions

Many assumptions were made throughout the literature review and the analysis of the iON brand. First and foremost, I assumed branding is an important part of business with buyers. It is naïve to believe that all purchasing decisions are educated and well informed choices.
Rather, buyers make selections based on personal factors that are outside the scope of strong branding. For example, a buyer may select a company because they were rushed with a decision and did not have time to review any other selections, simply choosing the first service found. At this point, branding fails us.

Another assumption made throughout the iON analysis is the belief that the company places emphasis on branding. Without buy-in from all employees, it will be difficult to build a strong brand or to incorporate any of the recommendations listed. Strong support from Zagorsky has already been shown.

4.4 Limitations and Future Direction

This study was exploratory in nature and further research and analysis is beneficial. Major studies and methodologies may be absent from the literature review. It is by no means all encompassing in the field of branding or of purchasing.

To accompany the secondary research, primary research with buyers and strategic brand managers would have been particularly useful. Focus groups and surveys may have revealed issues and challenges in the industry that I am unaware of.

To build on the findings of this project, research showing the importance of corporate branding through in-depth case studies for specific companies with strong brands compared to companies that place little emphasis on this marketing aspect would undoubtedly be instructive.

For iON's future direction, the best way to determine buyers' values is through research with existing clients. Questionnaires or personal interviews would assist iON to create a list of important factors to address in their brand strategy.
Once a brand strategy is put in place and has been launched in the market for a period of time, iON should assess the brand to ensure it is strong. Young & Rubican have a brand asset valuator that focuses on four measurement pillars. Differentiation, relevance, esteem, and knowledge are all leading indicators of brand strength in this model (Keller, 2003). This brand equity research tool was not useful in the initial stages for iON's brand in this study, but should be relied on for future review as the brand matures.
Appendices

Appendix A-1 iON Secured Networks Logo

© iON Secured Networks, 2006, by permission
Appendix A-2 iLEARN Security Class Logo

© iON Secured Networks, 2006, by permission
Appendix A-4 iSENSE Intrusion Detection System Logo

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Appendix A-5 iTRUST Web Proxy System Logo

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Appendix B iON Secured Networks Home Page

ION Secured Networks Inc.

CORE VALUES

#1 Preserve & Protect our clients' IT security at all costs.
#2 Customize solutions that meet our clients' demands.
#3 Transfer and share our IT Security knowledge with our clients.
#4 Attract and retain the best IT Security professionals.
#5 Remain profitable while continuing to adhere to our core values.

NORTH AMERICAN PRESENCE

Our international reach and reputation in IT security and infrastructure technologies is based on integrating secure, complex solutions efficiently and seamlessly. Our process-driven approach with premier security products simply begins with discussions between our clients key IT Decision makers and iON's top engineers.

There is zero room for inefficiencies in discussion, design, implementation, integration support and management. We choose clients who adhere to the same philosophy so new, referred clients, choose iON Secured Networks.

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Reference List


