THE SECONDING VALUE OF FAMILY BUSINESS IN CORPORATE BRANDING – A TENTATIVE MODEL

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Abstract

Why and under what circumstances can references to family business influence marketing outcomes? This paper suggests we view "family business" as a brand of its own. Through secondary brand associations, this brand can distinguish corporate as well as product brands. Tentative models present the function of family business references in relation to corporate and product communications, and firm performance. Propositions to aid further research are proposed.

Key words: family business, brand, brand management, image transfer, corporate communications

"From our family to yours… Buoun Appetito" - *www.sandhurstsfinefoods.com*
"SC Johnson - A Family Company" - *www.scjohnson.com*

Firms frequently disclose that they are family businesses. A simple Internet search and review of advertisements in daily press renders numerous examples of companies using the phrase family business as a main descriptor for their company. Similarly, firms allude to being a family business by including or referring to, for example, family names, specific family members, the number of generations in business, family traditions, anecdotes about the family in business, and/or photographs of the family. How these family business indicators are applied differs, though. Companies varyingly include one or several signs of family, for example, in company or product names, on product packages, in advertisements, in formal presentations, on homepages and in printed marketing material. In corporate presentations, the signal of being family business is sometimes positioned ahead of descriptions concerning the focus of business operations. In sum, family-owned and managed firms apply references to family business in a direct as well as indirect manner when presenting the company and its products.

From a brand management perspective, the use of references to family can be read as an attempt to distinguish the firm and what it offers. Likewise, the choice to not include such references, can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid being recognized as a family business. This paper argues that the communication practices of family firms, the media and, indeed, researchers, implies that we might interpret "family business" as a brand of its own.

Simply speaking, brand management has to do with communications and aims to affect the distinction of, associations and expectations connected to a specific entity; like a firm, product offer or individual (e.g. de Chernatony, 2001, Montaña, Guzman & Moll, 2007; Riezebos, 2003). Increasingly, researchers pay attention to the intersections between family, family business, brand management. Craig, Dibrell and Davis (2008) clarifies why it is of interest to further explore the meaning and impact of family business from a marketing and, specifically, brand management perspective. Leaning on the resource-based view of the firm, they propose that "family brand identity can be regarded as a rare, valuable, imperfectly imitable, nonsubstitutable resource" (Craig et al., 2008, p. 354). Research about the origin, nature, impact of this resource, and the conditions for its being of value, is of interest to improve our understanding of family businesses' competitiveness and performance. Moreover, such research will call attention to marketing management and investigate idiosyncratic opportunities therein for family business. Our understanding is still limited, though, in terms of whether, how, and when such references are significant for a firm’s brand or competitive position, and what function the family component has in relation to other brand elements. The purpose of the current paper is to address these issues. In essence; this paper asks and seeks to clarify *why and under what circumstances references to family business can influence the outcome of marketing practices*. Thus, the purpose goes beyond elaborating on whether family business references connote positive or negative associations among different stakeholders.

Employing theories of brand management, the paper first introduces “family firm” as a brand of its own, a brand that, through secondary brand associations, can add distinction to focal corporate or product brands. Following this, a tentative model for the function of family business references in relation to corporate and product branding, and company performance is presented. Propositions are outlined to guide further research on the subject. Family business, family firm and family company are used interchangeably throughout the text.

APPROACHING FAMILY BUSINESS AS A BRAND

Brands are here described as sets of meanings and beliefs that relate to an entity of some sort. They are seen as existing in a “discursive space of meaning rather than the physical space of objects” (Leitch & Motion, 2007, p. 72). Brand management, or branding, comprises the effort to identify core characteristics of an entity (that which is branded) and, in the light of these, enable stakeholders to form brand images that distinguish the entity from similar others (Garrity, 2001, Grace & O’Cass, 2002, Simões & Dibb, 2001). An actor that holds a positive image is more likely to favor a brand and the entity that it represents. Connections between attitude and behavior are thus important for the values ascribed to brand management, although the competition and information flow on current markets also stress its importance in terms of distinction.

In the process of branding, brand owners make use of brand elements. These include things that surround or connect to the entity indicated by the brand; like brand name, logotype or other symbols, product design, website, web-address, characters and spokespersons, slogans, jingles, and packaging (Keller et al., 2008). Brand elements are important as they can establish and conjure recognition for a branded entity. Furthermore, they add to the meaning of the brand in audiences’ minds. Decisions regarding brand elements are therefore essential in branding. The contemporary brand discourse comprises all types of offers; including goods, services, experiences, destinations, people, corporations and ideas. Depending on the entity considered, the range and nature of significant elements vary.

The explicit choice to present family involvement as a business feature can be compared to other signals about the firm. Comparisons can be made to geographical origin (“we are a Swedish company”), references to company philosophy (“we are a socially responsible company”), age (“we are an 80-year old company”) or, indeed, indications of the firm’s primary operations (“we are a furniture manufacturer”). From a marketing communications or brand management perspective, the choice to add references to family in planned communications suggests that they are thought to reveal important information about the business to its audiences (c.f. Blombäck & Ramirez-Pasillas, 2009).

The following quotes, from a family business CEO confirms that this can indeed be the case (from an interview aimed at understanding why the firm uses family business as a main descriptor on their webpage). He says, “We want to project that we are a small company. And close to our customers […] This is what I believe, you know, and also what we might write to attract a customer.” Elaborating further he says, “[…] the most important is perhaps that everyone wants to create security for the customer. But how you create that, it’s really an adaptation towards who you are. We are a family firm and we are a small firm; and yes, we exploit that.”

Taking a brand perspective on family business implies a number of possible research questions. One is the elaboration of whether the family business brand primarily denotes positive or negative associations. The current paper, however, deals with understanding the brand-added value of family business. That is, whether, when and how the family business brand adds value to or influence target audiences during their search and selection of a company and/or product offer.

Previous research on family business and branding

While not necessarily concentrating on the brand discourse, a number of researchers have shown an interest for the phenomenon of firms communicating their family firm status (Blombäck & Ramirez-Pasillas, 2009), the perception of family businesses among consumers (Carrigan & Buckley, 2008; Okoroafo & Koh, 2009) and potential employees (Covin, 1994), and the influence on firms’ performance when recognized as being family businesses (Craig et al., 2008). In summary, the research points at a topic under development and reveals ambiguity as concerns the image of family business among audiences.

Several studies focus on family firms as employers. An early study, by Covin (1994), indicates that the attitudes towards family business affect individuals’ willingness to work in family firms. Following a study on US undergraduate and graduate students preferences for working in a family business owned by another family, Covin (1994) concludes that family firms need to reflect on how they communicate when looking for personnel. She calls for more research to understand why students appear negative towards working in such firms. In line with this request, Botero, McKenna, Morgan, Zartman, Fediuk, and Faber (2009) investigate the influence of communicating family business on a company's perceived attractiveness among non-family employees (students and business professionals). They find that presenting a company as family-owned is not a factor that significantly influences the attitude towards the firm as a potential employer.

In research focused on consumers, Carrigan and Buckley (2008) reports on a study of 19 Irish and UK women. Their study extends our insights of whether consumers perceive family firms as distinct from other firms, whether the knowledge of a company being family business instigates higher levels of trust and loyalty, and whether consumers form more close relationships with family businesses. The study reveals a distinction of family business from other types of companies, primarily in the sense of being small and local stores with close and straightforward customer relationships. In a similar vein, Okoroafo and Koh (2009) investigate the importance of being family business on consumers' purchase intention. The results indicate that consumers' expectations on family firms differ from those that exist for non-family firms. With particular focus on the effects of communicating that a firm is family business, Craig et al. (2008) introduce the notion of family-based brand identity. Their research implies that maintaining a family-based brand identity (operationalized by references to family involvement in planned communications) can render positive effects in terms of financial performance.

All in all, these research efforts indicates that communicating family-ownership has a potential to influence the expectations and behavior from external stakeholders.

Family business - supplementing corporate distinction

Family business by definition concerns the characteristics of a company, which means that references to family business bears a clear connection to corporate brand management. Special attention has been paid to corporate brands since the 1990s (e.g. Balmer, 2001; Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Schultz et al., 2005; Hatch and Schultz, 2008). Increasing homogenization and shorter lifecycles of products, increasing visibility of corporations, focus on ethics, and the recognition of brands in service and industrial markets take part in explaining the accentuation of corporate branding. Current markets support Hatch and Schultz (2003, p. 1041) suggestion that: "Differentiation requires positioning, not products, but the whole corporation. Accordingly, the values and emotions symbolised by the organisation become key elements of differentiation strategies, and the corporation itself moves center stage." Corporate level brand management concerns the management of all associations related to a specific company and, thus, the sum total of corporate communications (e.g. Balmer & Gray, 2003; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). Owing to this complexity, to make corporate brand management possible in practice, companies must focus on a limited set of features or corporate brand elements.

De Chernatony's (2001, p. 42) automic model of the brand presents "sign of ownership" as one piece of brand essence. References to family business could also be interpreted from this model. Given the attention paid to the phenomenon of family business per se, it decidedly can function as more than mere information of ownership. The reference more likely is meant to signal the outcome of such ownership. Consequently, in some contrast to the elaborations on a family-based brand identity (Craig et al., 2008), this paper proposes that we think of family business as a stand-alone brand. Applying a brand perspective on family business clarifies that it is an option and a potential addition to other elements that make up the corporate brand.

We should consider here how companies remove or add references to family business on account of current ownership or market situations. Given that corporate identity is comprehensive, corresponding to questions such as "what are we?", "who are we?", and "what do we want to be?" (e.g. Balmer & Greyser, 2003), the recognition of family business can potentially shift corporate brand image but not completely erase or generate it. A firm will have a hard time reaching its audiences if the only communicated and distinguishing characteristic is that it is a family business. To reach and gain the attention of suitable target audiences, companies need primarily to communicate their line of business and their market offer. In contrast, references to family business concerns what kind of organization the company is. When firms, for example, communicate their primary product offer, they send a signal to stakeholders about what they can purchase from the company. Product information is important since if can distinguish a firm from those that sell other types of goods or services. Adding the epithet "family business" to ones corporate identity implies a way to reach further corporate distinction also among direct competitors (see figure 1). Thinking about family business as a brand, thus, enables a distinction of an additional level of corporate branding; a level that takes effect only after the basic offer has been established. The argument resembles the concentric values model (de Chernatony, 2001, p.36), that distinguish between brand values that achieve distinction and category values that create a competitive edge. The potential value of a family business brand is that it provides companies with an opportunity to give stakeholders a more extensive picture of the firm and, thereby, augment the perceived value proposition.

Insert figure 1 about here

To understand specifically the function of family business in marketing, this paper suggests that it is useful to isolate the family brand as one element. By doing this, we can research the relative importance of family business for the stakeholders' corporate image and behavior.

THE VALUE OF FAMILY BUSINESS AS A SECONDING BRAND

Recognizing family business related to marketing values provides an opportunity to further research the unique resources of family firms. The family business brand presents a potential effect on performance. While Craig et al. (2008) successfully show a positive correlation between references to family business and performance, they do not reveal the function of such references, leading up to the positive performance. The following section presents one way forward on this matter.

The value of family business reference on a corporate level

In the below, a tentative model is outlined which projects that the effect of references to family business on performance will be moderated by three independent variables (see figure 4). First, the existence of a family business image among considered stakeholders. Second, the stakeholders' position relative the company in question. Third, the frequency of family business references among competing companies.

The mediating role of a clear family business image

An important aspect of brand management is the theory on image transfer (Gwinner, 1997, Riezebos, 2003), or use of secondary brand associations (Keller, 1993; Keller et al. 2008). The basic idea for both, is that "an entity with a strong image and high level of added value can contribute to the forming of the image of another entity" (Riezebos, 2003, p. 77). By bringing the entities together somehow, the associations of one entity, the source, can be transferred to another entity, the target. Through this process, the target's image can be altered, strengthened or clarified. The expression "secondary" in this case denotes that the associations are supportive (seconding) from the focal brand's point of view; as opposed to minor when viewed separately. As portrayed in figure 2, we might say that one brand (S) is used as an element in the management of another brand (T).

One important condition for successful image transfer is that the source holds a distinct position in the targeted audiences minds and that it has leverage to influence their behavior. In figure 2, this translates to perceived performance, psychosocial meaning, and brand-name awareness. Another condition thought to affect image transfer is the fit of entities that the brands in question represent. In figure 2 this translates to product relatedness, target group similarities and family resemblance. Given that these conditions are fulfilled, brand managers can take a shortcut to branding by collaborating with other brands, that is, employing secondary brand associations.

Insert figure 2 about here

Applying secondary brand associations to corporate brands, Uggla (2006) posits that the corporate brand image derives from an association base, fueled from two directions. First, the corporate identity and associations to the corporate brand. Second, by images held of associated partner entities, including related institutions. Examples of associated partners are firms or individuals that the focal firm has an exchange or collaboration with. Related institutions indicate, for example, that the firm makes references to academia. Strategic alliances or co-branding, indications of geographical origin or certificates on a corporate level, and reference to product categories are all examples of sources. In another wording, these sources exemplify how supportive brands are employed to clarify or establish abilities and characteristics of a focal (corporate) brand.

Given that “family business” alone is not enough to market an offer, the idea of seconding brands is highly suitable. The way firms make use of references to family business resembles the use of an extra brand to support the association base of a focal, corporate brand. In reference to Ugglas’s model, one interpretation is that the corporate description family business represents an institution, which bears “deep societal and cultural meaning” (Uggla, 2006, p. 793). Assuming that this is the case, the notion of family business represents associations which add to the corporate brand association base and influence the attitude and behavior towards a company that adheres to this description. Family business enables an additional means of distinction. A parallel to ingredient branding also seems appropriate. Ingredient branding is the approach to image transfer where a component, or ingredient, of the branded offer is revealed to audiences via marketing communications. The ingredient brand can never be purchased alone, but is always tied to another branded offer (e.g. Intel, GoreTex).

Then again, an essential prerequisite for the use and function of secondary brand associations is that the audience has a clear notion of the source and that it implies value for the consumer (c.f. Keller, 1993). If this is not the case, the stakeholder has no association to add to the focal brand and image transfer cannot occur. Thus, the existence of a family business image among stakeholders is essential for the existence of a family business effect on corporate image, stakeholder behavior and, consequently, corporate performance. Having an image of family business implies that one perceives of family firms as a distinct type of business entity (as opposed to non-family firms), which represent certain traits or characteristics in regards to organization and/or management. The question is whether these traits or characteristics are attributed to the company on account of its communicating that it is a family business. The following proposition is derived:

Proposition 1: The impact of family firm references on corporate brand image depends on whether the stakeholder has an image of family business as a distinct type of firm, apart from the company in question.

The mediating role of situation

The theory of image transfer emphasizes fit between brands to predict the likelihood of image transfer (i.e. whether corporate brand image is affected by references to family business) (see figure 2***)***. This theory, however, does not project behavior. Basic theory proposes that attitudes, mediated by values and norms, predict behavior (c.f. Ajzen and Fishbein (1975;1980)). For complex entities, though, individuals are likely to maintain a range of associations that apply differently depending on situation; affecting attitudes and, consequently, behavior. In the event of secondary brand associations, proposition 2 and 3 suggest that the relevance of family business as a seconding brand for stakeholder response (i.e. if the inclusion of family business associations to corporate brand image influences stakeholders' behavior towards the firm) will vary depending on the circumstances at hand.

Signaling theory (Spence, 1973, Spence 2002) purports that in consequence of information asymmetry, actors will send and interpret signals to assess each other's attractiveness. A company's commitment to social issues can function as a signal to potential employees about the company's working climate, thus affecting the company's attractiveness as employer (Backhaus, Stone & Heiner, 2002; Greening & Turban, 2000; Williams and Bauer, 1994). Industrial buyers can interpret the orderliness of a manufacturing site as a signal of the subcontractor's ability to meet with delivery deadlines (Blombäck & Axelsson, 2007). We might assume that actors will consider different signals depending on the objective of assessment. That is, depending on what type of interaction an actor seeks with another actor, different signals will be used for analysis. References to family business might be more or less important depending on why an individual considers to interact with the company (e.g. as prospective employee, investor, or customer). The following proposition is derived:

Proposition 2: The impact of family firm references on a stakeholder's response to corporate communications depends on what type of interaction the stakeholder seeks with the company.

At the very root of brand strategy lies the parameters differentiation and added value (Riezebos, 2003). These parameters reflect the underlying motives of branding and the basic prerequisites for the existence of a brand value to the firm. A brand will only grant competitive advantages if it is able to distinguish a branded entity from its competitors and offer an added value to customers beyond the core offer. What if all firms in a certain industry proclaim that they are family businesses? The following proposition is suggested:

Proposition 3: The impact of family firm references on a stakeholder's response to communication depends on the frequency and status of the family business brand among competitors.

An overview of propositions 1-3, indicating the function of family business references in corporate-level marketing, is illustrated in figure 3.

Insert figure 3 about here

The value of family business reference on a product level

Companies commonly use references to the company when marketing product offers. The corporate name (and thus brand) is added in product-focused communications to support the product; to gain recognition or quality associations based on the firm's previous track record. Research shows that corporate image affects consumer response to products (e.g. Berens, van Riel & van Bruggen, 2005; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Gürhan-Canli and Batra, 2004). In view of this, it is necessary to also consider the influence of references to family business not only on the corporate, but also the product level. If there is a transfer of corporate image to product level, the family business identity can influence the company's performance on product sales.

A family business can reveal and attach their family business status to products in two ways, which is illustrated in figure 4. First, the product brand can include references to family. For example, the product name or packaging can include references to family names or photographs (e.g. The Brown brothers' original shoe shine"). Second, the family business origin can be indicated through corporate endorsement; indicating that the corporate brand/name with explicit reference to family business is used in marketing communications (e.g. "…a product from the family business XYZ").

Insert figure 4 about here

Below, a tentative model is outlined, which projects that the effect of references to family business on product sales will be moderated by three independent variables (see figure 5). First, the existence of a family business image among considered stakeholders. Second, the type of product in question. Third, the frequency of family firm references in the product category.

The mediating role of a clear family business image

Alike the above elaboration on how a family business image can add to the corporate brand, the impact of family business reference in product level marketing depends on whether the audience distinguishes family business. The following proposition is suggested:

Proposition 4: The impact of family firm references on product brand image depends on whether the stakeholder has an image of family business as a distinct type of firm, apart from the product and company in question.

The mediating role of situation

Research shows that the influence of brands and consumer's brand commitment varies depending on the product. A certain product's brand sensitivity can depend on the ability for customers to evaluate the product before purchase, the product's ability to influence customers' identity, and whether the product has primarily hedonic or utilitarian values for users (e.g. Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002; Riezebos, 2003).

In the case of secondary brand associations, impact on behavior should depend on the perceived relevance of the source brand to the product at hand. A parallel can be drawn to country image effects, which vary depending on product category (Hsieh et al., 2004). In general, durable goods are more sensitive to country image than nondurable goods (i.e. magnitude of purchase to user). However, the country effect can also vary depending on where the label is used (c.f. Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998) (i.e. fit of country image to product). Consider Germany as a case in point. In view of its reputation on automotive technologies, a German image effect is more likely for cars than for chocolate bars. Similarly, a family business image might be more or less influential depending on what is being sold (e.g. cars, clothing, legal advice services, or food). Carrigan and Buckley (2008) finds support that family businesses are perceived as (positively) different. Their research, however, primarily reflects consumers' ideas related to small food dealers. Questions remain concerning the outcome of family business perceptions in other industries and product segments. Based on the above, the following proposition is derived:

Proposition 5: The impact of family firm references on a stakeholder's response to communication depends on the product in question.

Following the basic outline of brand strategy as a means to achieve added value through differentiation, alike the corporate level discussion above, a family business brand should only add value if it can distinguish one offer from another. If all competitors in a certain product category reveals that they are a family business, the influence of the reference for differentiation and, thus, its impact on behavior should decrease. The following proposition is suggested:

Proposition 6: The impact of family firm references on a stakeholder's response to product communications depends on the frequency of the family business brand in the product category.

An overview of propositions 4-6, indicating the function of family business references in product-level marketing, is illustrated in figure 5.

Insert figure 5 about here

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A baseline argument for family business research is the aim to inform and assist practitioners (Zahra and Sharma, 2004; Sharma, 2004). This ambition is mirrored in researchers' choice to target topics where family businesses either experience a special situation, or demonstrate particular behavior. The exploring of succession, governance and strategic management issues are working examples. Only recently, researchers have begun to investigate the fact that numerous companies make explicit references to being family business in their corporate and product communications. Also the media and, indeed, academia, use the description family firm to signify certain companies although the meaning of the phrase is ambiguous. Our knowledge is scarce about what associations and attitudes exist toward the notion of family business, and whether they influence stakeholder's behavior towards firms proclaiming that they are family businesses (Carrigan & Buckley, 2008). We still know little about whether being a family firm implies a unique resource in terms of marketing and communications. Given this and the propositions presented in the current paper, this section continues with concluding thoughts and proposition for further research.

The potential and particularity of family business in communications

Any description or mark connected to a brand represents a potential source of competitive advantage. Depending on its perceived content, brands used with the intention of image transfer can result in beneficial, damaging or even neutral image changes for the target brand. The choice of using a secondary brand should depend on whether it is well recognized and which connotations, positive or negative, are attributed to it. Accordingly, corporate descriptions should primarily be advantageous if they are consistently recognized as signifying particular and positive company features. A major constraint in the thought of family business as endorser corporate or product image is that there are no straightforward, unanimous explanations for what it represents. Brand images by definition reside with the beholders and a company can therefore never completely manage it. However, in the case of an exclusive brand comprising a set of registered trademarks, organizations can to large extents control brand communications. Since family business essentially is a generic corporate description, its image should be hard to manage from one firm's point of view. Although the phrase potentially communicates important and distinguishing company characteristics, to date, there is no common understanding for which firms are considered or a set of common associations to this business type.

Moreover, a person's corporate image can be multifaceted as it is formed through interaction with various sources, organizational, personal and social in kind (Moffitt, 1994; Kazoleas, Kim & Moffitt, 2001; Williams and Moffitt, 1997). One part of the image might be based on the firm's sponsorship of local sports while another comes from the knowledge of a friend being mistreated as a customer. Due to these different elements, a persons' image of a certain company can either shift depending on situation or simply be blurred. The challenge for organizations is to acknowledge the multidirectional nature of corporate image and plan its communications accordingly.

Previous research has introduced a number of resources, seemingly unique to family businesses (e.g. Sirmon and Hitt; 2003). They mainly reflect intra-organizational features resulting from the interaction of family and business, that is the firm's familiness (Habbershon and Williams, 1999). Employing a brand perspective to the above described phenomenon, the current paper propose that we understand family business as brand, which can be used for secondary brand associations. This perspective implies that the ability to describe a firm as family business in a trustworthy way represents an additional type of resource (c.f. Craig et al., 2008). The point this paper wishes to make, though, is not primarily that family businesses are different. Instead, focus lies on the notion of family business, whether and how this can affect marketing outcomes in a firm. Other firms might attempt to use the brand “family business” even if they are not by definition a family business. Similarly, companies that are not from a certain country sometimes construct corporate or product brand identities that make references to that country because they aspire to obtain the associations of the country. For example, clothing companies can make references to the east coast of USA, through colors, pictures and names, even though the company is situated in Asia or Europe. They aspire to attach the associations of the USA, of college atmosphere, and high-end clothing. This is also part of the point in distinguishing family business as a stand-alone brand. The phrase cannot be registered and is therefore available to any company. Nevertheless, we might assume that it is easier for a “true” family business to present themselves as a family business than a non-family business.

In a market where distinction becomes tougher by the day, any corporate feature that separates a firm from the whole population is valuable. This is true not only in regards to customers and other external actors, but also in regards to the internal stakeholders. Although family business represents a descriptive brand it might be able to offer distinction. If the thought of family business conjures generally positive and unambiguous associations, references to family business in planned communications can be valuable for the company in terms of brand awareness and building, employee recruitment, market positioning, and management of corporate culture or identity. If, on the other hand, there are strong negative or ambiguous associations to the notion of family business, including it in communications might hurt the corporate brand. Similarly, if the notion of family business carries very weak images among most audiences, alluding to it in corporate communications might be counteractive, serving to reduce the clarity and strength of the corporate brand association base. The fact that many companies still make an active choice to portray themselves as family firms suggests that the there is a notion of a family business brand. The current paper proposes that it can be fruitful to approach family business as a brand since it triggers questions concerning why, how, where and when references to family business are used. It does not imply, though, that the family business brand is suitable for all companies’, or valuable regardless of the market situation. The theory of image transfer and secondary brand associations explain the logic of using references to family involvement and business in corporate communications. Critical questions remain, though, concerning whether and how such references influence the performance of the company using them.

Zahra and Sharma (2004, p. 331) suggest that the family business field has “had a tendency to borrow heavily from other disciplines without giving back to these fields”. Consequently, they encourage researchers to use insights in the family business milieu to contribute to general theory. Likewise, requests are made for improving the theoretical width in family business research. By treating family business as a brand the current paper responds to both appeals. Firstly, corporate-level marketing continuously gains in importance as the battle for attention and preference among publics escalates. Thus, the recognition of corporate descriptions as secondary brands is by no means bounded to family businesses. Rather, it is a general phenomenon where family business serves as a lucid example. Secondly, the paper adds to the establishment of marketing in the family business field; a subject which is largely missing. Available studies relate to the particularities of marketing *in* family businesses (e.g. Craig et al, 2008; Lyman, 1991; Post, 1993; Teal, Upton and Seaman, 2003) and marketing *to* family businesses (File, Mack & Prince, 1994). Little, though, is said about the specific marketing *of* family businesses. The current paper has no intention of claiming that one should or should not use the family business description in communication. The conclusions are, though, that organizations should carefully consider why, how and when they are applied. It is necessary to further consider how references to family business are significant in corporate and product branding.

Further research

The current paper has apparent limitations both in terms of empirical depth and theoretical scope. Using the propositions laid out above as direction, additional research should apply both empirical data and specific theory to identify further complexities and nuances of the matter. Research should primarily investigate the nature of family business brand associations (c.f. Craig et al. 2008) and whether and how the use of family business as a seconding brand affects corporate and/or product brand image, and audiences’ behavior. The proposition that companies, when making claims to be family businesses, simultaneously make the claim of not being something else, adds another dimension to this question. Could it be the case that we cannot understand fully the meaning and nature of the family business brand unless we investigate the meanings attributed to non-family businesses? That is, researchers need not necessarily focus simply on family firms when investigating this issue. Mirroring the family business in what is perceived to be non-family business could prove to be as useful.

Empirical research with focus on the questions why as well as why not and how companies make reference to family business in marketing is also of interest. While the current paper takes a rather functional approach to the phenomenon at hand, drawing on brand management as a deliberate process to clearly make the point of family business as a supporting brand (c.f. Balmer, 2001), such research could extend the topic by revealing, for example, the complexity of communication practices and dynamics of organizational identity

The basic idea of using secondary brand associations in planned communications is that they contribute to the platform of associations distinguishing an entity's uniqueness. Contrary to corporate or product brands involving registered trademarks, family business can never be registered by a single firm. Stakeholder's associations to family business can be influenced by any and all firms that correspond to the description. While it is possible to identify some features that are repeatedly coupled with family business (e.g. small, unprofessional, flexible), the phrase is neither applied in a consistent manner nor defined in use. Bearing in mind that descriptions of successful brand management frequently refer to consistency and clarity of communications (e.g. De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003; Keller et al. 2008; Reid, Luxton & Mavondo, 2005), a valid question is whether alluding to family business can benefit corporate and product brand image. Exploratory research finds that people's image of family business vary. In light of this, the current paper extends the discussion about family business in marketing from the basic questions of whether there is a stereotypical image of family businesses, to one that concentrates on our understanding of the function of references to family business. That is, researching how, when and why such images might be hurtful or useful for an organization.

In brand management, image transfer implies that two brands affect each other. The brand image of the target is formed through deductive inference. However, the discussion also relates to the matter of halo effects (Thorndike, 1920), which indicates that the awareness of one brand attribute can influence the consumer's beliefs about the general quality of the branded offer (c.f. Han, 1989; Kohli et al., 2005). For further discussions, it is important to note that the models outlined above seek to capture the basic function of a family business, from a secondary brand association perspective. In terms of the image of family business (proposition 1 & 4), the model can be further conceptualized. We might, for example, elaborate on whether the existence of such an image is related to cultural context (e.g. the meaning of family, the history of or familiarity with family business), and the individual's relation to and experience of family business (c.f. Han, 1989; how country effects on brand image depend on experience with other products from the country).

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FIGURE 1
The potential strength of a family business brand

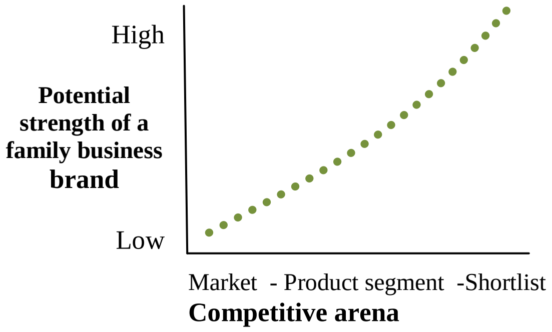

FIGURE 2
The model for image transfer (Riezebos, 2003, p. 74)

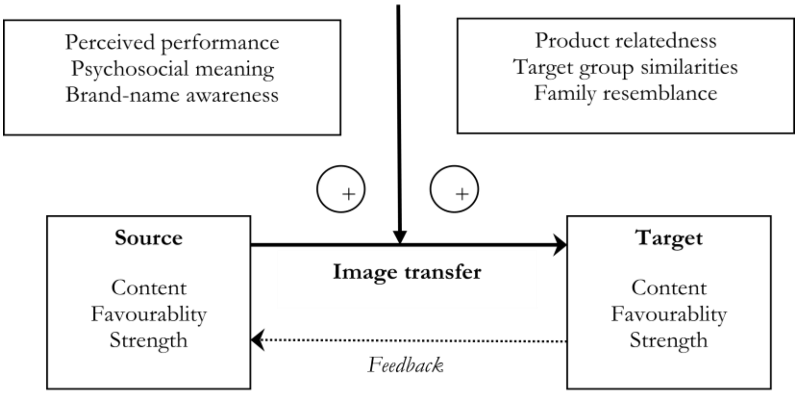

FIGURE 3
The function of family business references in corporate level marketing

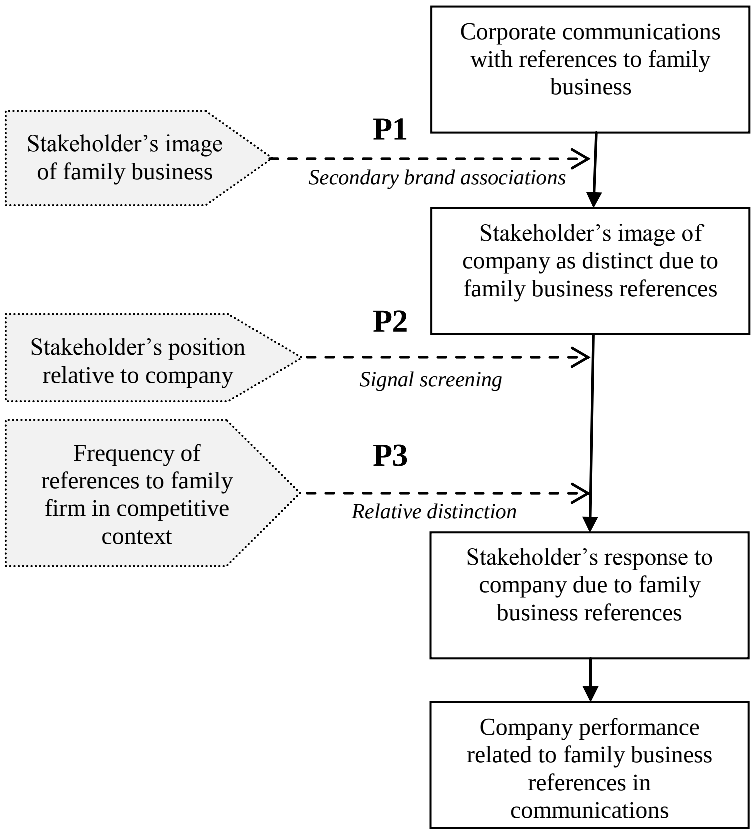

FIGURE 4

How the family business brand can affect product brand image

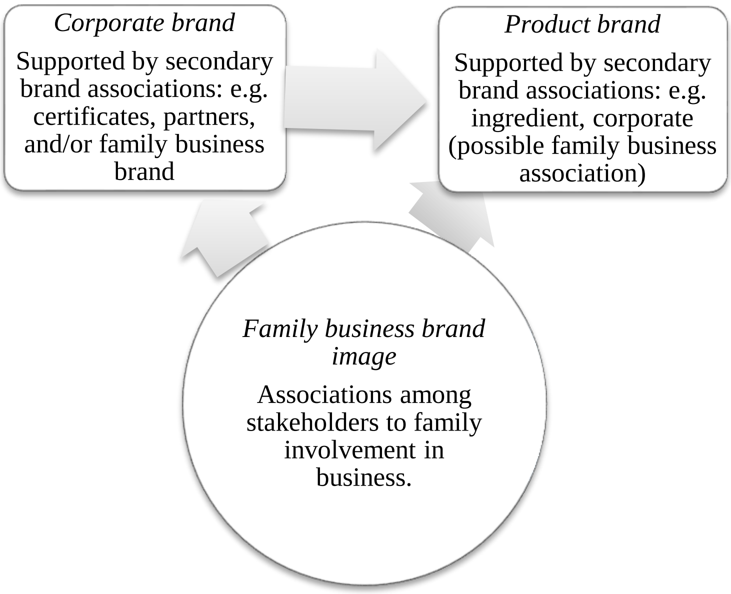

FIGURE 5

The function of family business references in product level marketing