Dealing with discrepancies of a brand in change: recomposition of value and meanings in the network

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Abstract

Brands become shaped by interaction processes in the networks in which they are embedded. Research addressing this phenomenon has departed both from a co-creation angle, and to some extent by examining co-destruction. In this chapter, we adopt a process-oriented multiple stakeholder view to brands and explore the concept of brand discrepancies, i.e. inconsistencies and disruptions that can prompt brand co-destruction and lead to a reconfiguration of meanings and value in the brand’s ecosystem. The chapter presents a longitudinal case study from the context of food distribution to illustrate the ever-changing nature of brand reality. The findings add to the brand co-creation discussion by showing that brand co-destruction is not always negative, but the reconfiguration, recomposition, and reorchestration of brand meanings and value can also be seen as positive outcomes of brand discrepancies. These findings depict brand management as a process of orchestration in a multi-stakeholder setting, rather than as something conducted unilaterally by a brand governor.

Keywords

Brand discrepancies, co-destruction, brand meanings, brand value
Introduction

Research literature demonstrates that multiple actors participate in the co-creation of brands and therefore of brand meanings. Further, it is suggested that brands are created in networks (e.g. Mäläskä et al., 2011). The opposing process of co-destruction of brands from a multi-stakeholder perspective has also been addressed, but to a lesser degree, and in a more fragmented way. These prior studies mostly have the research streams of consumer activism or anti-branding as their departure point (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010), and look less at brands at the B2B interaction level. This raises the question of how brands become shaped – co-created, co-destroyed, or altered in other ways – by interaction processes in the multi-stakeholder network, in which they are embedded. There is a need to broaden the perspective on the implications of interaction that go beyond co-creation and examine the discrepancies in how brands are approached by diverse stakeholders, and what might be the consequences of such discrepancies. The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the co-destruction of brands in multi-stakeholder networks to acquire an understanding of the dynamic nature of brands and the changes in the value they provide.

This chapter examines co-destruction in a brand network from the food industry and shows how changes to end-customer needs trigger a re-evaluation of a supplier brand’s role, including its meanings and value, in the entire network. What may look like the destruction of the existing way of creating value in the network, may later lead to successful co-creation of the offering through changing interactions. We examine a case study featuring a vegetable wholesale intermediary and its process of turning the bulk produce it sells into a consumer brand. This strategically chosen case illuminates brand-related discrepancies and brand meaning co-destruction exposed in the process of branding, which constitutes a re-evaluation of the brand in the network by the stakeholders. We draw on in-depth personal interviews, observational data, and company documents, generated on several occasions between 2014 and 2020; an approach that enables a processual examination of the case brand and the development of the network relationships surrounding it.
The chapter contributes particularly to socioculturally informed literature (e.g. Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013) and also to process-oriented brand literature (e.g. Wider, von Wallpach & Mühlbacher, 2018) that each address interactive processes related to brands, while also in part touching upon other relevant marketing literature such as Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP), market studies, and practice theory. Within each of these streams of research, the concept of co-destruction has been considered in parallel with the notion of co-creation, as a dark side of it (see Michel, 2017). Echeverri and Skålen (2011) suggested duality in terms of value outcomes: meaning co-creation and co-destruction. Lessons from IMP literature (e.g. Norrgrann & Luokkanen-Rabetino, 2011) point to examining the relationship and network dynamics and the broader network effects of brands; if value becomes co-destructed in interaction, what can we learn of its implications for multi-stakeholder networks? We highlight that contradictions in business relationships need not necessarily have only negative implications but can later be reconfigured into more positive outcomes too. Further, this study addresses changes over time in the brand’s internal and external environment that create tensions in managing the brand, while also addressing the research gap highlighted by Melewar, Gotsi, and Andriopoulis (2012) regarding the need for a dynamic approach to managing corporate brands.

**Theoretical background**

Recent branding research has recognised brands as dynamic social processes that are not only identities embedded in products or firms but are also ongoing, social value co-creation processes (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Evans, Starr & Broderick, 2019). This understanding of brands and their value generated in complex stakeholder interactions (e.g. Brodie, Benson-Rea & Medlin, 2017) has inspired many important developments in research. Wider, von Wallpach, and Mühlbacher (2018), for example, refer to these brand-related interactions as a multiplicity of brands (or rhizomic brands) that occurs when stakeholders in a brand’s network are continuously and reciprocally interrelated, thus influencing one another. What is more, “changes to or additions or omission of any one element have an impact on all the other elements” in the brand’s network (Wider et al., 2018, pp.302).
Accordingly, we suggest that such a multiplicity results in possible discrepancies in the brand’s network, change being central not only to interactions but also with regard to revealing those discrepancies. Even if a focal firm pursues a shared understanding of its brand identity and image (e.g. Mäläskä et al., 2011), it is not possible to control all brand meanings in the network. In B2B settings, these interactions have been described as the brand’s activities as influenced by prevailing contextual factors such as responsiveness to markets (Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017) and stakeholder performance (Iglesias et al., 2020) both of which co-create corporate brand identity. The above-referenced studies illustrate the ongoing negotiation between a company and its stakeholders around corporate brand identity. They also show the processuality of the brand identity incorporating certain developmental phases (Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017) and recurring stakeholder performances (Iglesias et al., 2020). The particular focus in this chapter lies in the tensions between a company and its stakeholders as well as the disruptive changes that occur as stakeholders contest the corporate brand identity (see, e.g. Iglesias et al., 2020). The last referenced study demonstrates how tensions can arise when stakeholders see a contrast between the brand identity and their perceptions of the brand while management wishes to protect current brand meanings. That recurring process of adjusting and clarifying the brand identity (see Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017) is our focus because it reveals ongoing changes to brand meanings and value. The focus is valuable because existing literature does not expressly consider such changes from the perspective of discrepancies, that is, disruptive changes in a brand’s network.

Brand creation is a collaborative process with empowered stakeholders marked by the potential for brand co-creation to push brand meaning in an undesirable direction (see Ind, 2014). In the context of higher-education branding, Aspara et al. (2014) suggested that mutual value co-creation and interaction between stakeholders do not necessarily construct strong brands. Further, Onyas and Ryan (2015) highlighted that brand processes are likely to be characterised by disagreements between market actors.

Echeverri and Skålen (2011) define co-destruction of value as the collaborative destruction or diminution of value by providers and customers. Thus, co-destruction of value is part of that
interaction by those parties, just as the co-creation of value is (see also Plé & Chumpitaz, 2010). In line with that concept, Mäläskä et al. (2011) found that business partners can damage the brand, even if unintentionally, particularly if a business has not assigned the necessary resources and expertise for co-creation of the brand. Research has identified multiple reasons for value co-destruction. In a B2B setting, Vaefas et al., (2016) suggest reasons including the absence of trust, inadequate communication and coordination, inadequate human capital, and a power or dependence imbalance. Järvi, Kähkönen, and Torvinen (2018) conducted research spanning multiple sectors and found that a provider’s or customer’s inability to change, the absence of clear expectations on the part of the customer, misbehaviour, or assigning blame could cause value co-destruction in relationships. The reasons are often behavioural or caused by a failure to integrate resources between business partners.

Issues such as tensions and conflicts have been addressed in B2B marketing literature for instance in relation to technological embeddedness and co-opetition (see e.g. Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2001 and 2002; Mele, 2011; Tidström, 2014). That body of research reports that inconsistencies among actors do not necessarily only have negative consequences, but can be a source of dynamic progress and development. Different market actors’s disharmonious and contradicting interests related to a brand may lead to new, creative reinterpretations of the brand meanings. (Fyrberg Yngfalk 2013) Similarly, while the resource structure around a brand can be seen as inert and limiting for some relationships, it can provide new value when coupled to new relationships and resources (Norrgrann & Luokkanen-Rabetino, 2011; Gidhagen & Havila, 2016). Surprisingly, such discrepancies in networks and business relationships that relate to brands have remained rather unstudied.

Furthermore, Wider et al. (2018) suggest brands are “processes in constant flux [that] escape the control of managers”. Evidently, branding, even if referred to as a deliberate activity among multiple stakeholders, is not straightforward. Brands, in a traditional sense, may not be manageable, but branding entities do need goals, visions, or actions to ensure their stakeholders’ actions towards the brand are harmonised (see Wider et al., 2018). We see this orchestration as a
source of enduring corporate brand identity (see also Iglesias et al., 2020). It is suggested that firms should identify their key stakeholders and particularly those business partners with whom they co-create their brand meanings; something even more important for SMEs with limited resources (see Mäläskä et al., 2011; Törmälä & Saraniemi, 2018). Wider et al. (2018) among others suggest the term *orchestration* rather than *management* to capture the essence of this novel mindset of brand management. This argument is supported by Michel (2017) who uses the term *brand conductor* for a similar purpose. As tensions and discrepancies rise in parallel with brand co-creation, it is also important to find mechanisms to orchestrate the efforts of the brand’s network to address those challenges.

Combining the views discussed above prompted an exploration of the implications for brand-related discrepancies in networks. To reveal these discrepancies, we next scrutinise stakeholder relationships relating to a food industry brand and also discuss the mechanisms applied to turn the co-destruction of brand value and brand meanings into positive outcomes, in other words, to recompose the brand meanings. Although we focus on the implications for certain relationships, the sources of discrepancies may lie in multiple stakeholder relationships and their effects can produce broad impacts throughout the brand’s network.

**Discrepancies in brand co-creation: from generic produce to a consumer brand**

The following empirical case illustrates how brand discrepancies can manifest and how they can be overcome. In the case, the brand governor has the express aim of changing the brand significantly by making it recognisable as a consumer brand, rather than just a corporate brand known primarily by trade customers. The examined change process thus explicates how an existing brand identity is contested, and how various stakeholders adjust to the change, (cf. Iglesias et al, 2020; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017) involving the co-destruction of the old brand meanings and value and their recomposition into new forms.
The case study draws on multiple types of data, gathered between 2014 and 2020. In addition, one of the authors has background knowledge that helps contextualise the data, from having grown up in the area where the case company and its producer network operate, which gives rise to multiple personal touchpoints with both the case company itself and with other industry actors in the network. The data include extensive personal interviews with the case company’s sales and marketing director in 2014, 2015, and 2020, supplemented with company-generated documents such as company presentations and social media content. The final case description was also checked by the key informant to ensure the credibility and salience of the empirical accounts. Observational data from visits to the focal company’s packaging facilities, as well as following the brand’s visibility in retail environments from a consumer-observer’s viewpoint also helped corroborate the case. The timing of the interviews has provided a perspective on the brand at different points in time; from the early stages of the consumer branding efforts to six years later, thereby enabling a longitudinal view of brand-related changes and their network-level implications. While the first stages of data elicitation depicted the brand at the beginning of a change process and revealed discrepancies at the outset, the later interview, along with tracking the brand’s media presence, provided insight into how the focal company’s brand orchestration efforts turned out; the means through which new brand meanings and value were created, and how the initial discrepancies were addressed. The latter stage of data elicitation also enabled a broadening the brand’s stakeholder network to include new actors and their contributions to the brand, especially in terms of the communication of brand meanings.

The case description relies most significantly on interviews with the sales and marketing director of the focal firm – the person employed to implement the branding process – and hence the brand’s network is largely depicted from the perspective of that specific actor.

**Background: The need for a new brand strategy**

The focal actor in the case, Närpes Grönsaker is a Finnish farmer-owned vegetable wholesale cooperative that specialises in producing greenhouse-grown vegetables such as tomatoes and
cucumbers. It packages and sells vegetables to the big national food wholesale chains, and through them to supermarkets and other grocery stores, as well as food service suppliers throughout the country. It has a dominant market position, being the biggest supplier of tomatoes and the second-biggest supplier of cucumbers to the Finnish market. The name of the company (which translates as Närpes vegetables) reflects that the products are grown around the municipality of Närpes in Western Finland, which is the geographical area where about 70% of Finnish tomatoes are grown (Finnish Glasshouse Growers’ Association, 2020).

The customer market in Finland is highly concentrated and dominated by big chains like Kesko (a chain of entrepreneur-owned outlets ranging from hypermarkets to corner shops), SOK (a similar chain of regional cooperatives), and the German retailer, Lidl. The market is then completed with other smaller wholesale and retail actors and foodservice customers. The traditional role of the case company has been to distribute the crop of the owner-farmers to various customers. The role has therefore been a logistical one, characterised by transaction type of customer interactions where the contact points have concerned routine processes of handling orders and price negotiations, or evening out temporary excess supply through pricing campaigns. The exchange has concerned generic, bulk produce, where at best, only the domestic origin has functioned as a differentiating characteristic. Exposure to competition in such a market has been high.

The market situation had been changing owing to increasing competition from foreign and private-label products (creating co-opetition between buyer and seller) and the threat of the larger-scale farmers to develop their own packaging and direct sales routes – a new form of competition. Against this setting, the case company began a strategy process in 2012, involving, among other things, employing a sales and marketing director, and devoting resources to redirecting the offering of the company from a generic bulk to a more branded outward face in the hope that doing so would add value to the offering and shield the firm from price competition, thereby also helping to sustain profitability upstream among the farmers. Moreover, such a change from selling bulk products to becoming a recognised and appreciated brand among end-users was also expected to
change the nature of the business customer relationships and move them in a more co-creative direction.

Recomposing the brand

In their pursuit of developing a branded offering instead of being seen as only a provider of anonymous, bulk produce, Närpes Grönsaker focused on three main areas of development: changing the offering, developing its brand communications and relationships with consumers, and revising its sales strategy. These changes necessitated such major shifts in the resources it developed and acquired upstream and offered downstream to customers, that we choose to label the process recomposing the brand. Through this analogy with a musical term, we draw attention to a brand not only being adjusted or repositioned but rather being recreated as something significantly different from what went before. Moreover, just as a musical composition brings together various instruments and their melodies, brand recomposition, although being set in motion by one actor, similarly requires consideration of the stakeholders involved and the way their collective performance is coordinated, or reorchestrated.

The first type of tangible brand adjustment action in the case addressed product development. The aim was to move supply in a direction that had the consumer sphere and situations of use as its point of departure, rather than, for example, what was productive for the farmers to cultivate. This, in other words, implied a major perspective shift from a production orientation to a customer (use) orientation, as the following extract from an interview with the sales and marketing director exemplifies:

*We try to teach consumers to use the products in a different way. It supports the idea of a broader product assortment and different varieties for different use purposes, like some specifically for warm dishes and others to be eaten as snacks as such, because they are so tasty.*
While generic bulk tomatoes had previously been offered as a single solution, the focus on differentiated product usage (e.g. tomatoes to be eaten fresh, on the go, barbecued, or in slow-cooked dishes), meant more diversified product categories for the company, which in turn relied on changing the requirements of which varieties to cultivate to best suit each type of use set for the farmers. The sales and marketing director explains this as a supplier relationship issue between the cooperative and its farmer-owners:

_The producers are still individual entrepreneurs. Of course, they listen to us, and what we advise, but their investment decisions are always their own._

In other words, the brand recomposition in terms of new product development was reliant on and affected other stakeholders, as the existing brand identity became contested and recomposed. In this process, the new market-driven development directions identified by the case firm need to be sold to the farmer-owners, for instance through arguments related to the prices farmers could expect from switching to new varieties.

This branding aim has also created a need to make consumers more aware of and knowledgeable on, for example, which varieties of tomatoes to use for which purpose. Creating new use-based segments brought about changes to central brand meanings and the value that they provided. thereby Encouraging consumers to pay attention to new, qualitative characteristics as product choice criteria, also had implications for producers. . Taste, for example, was emphasised as a central appeal, as the sales and marketing director illustrates:

_We go taste first into all the product development processes. You can cultivate and aim for high crop levels and be interested in kg/m², but we think, in the long run, no one buys all those kilos if they don’t taste good._
Taste is also the title of one of the firm’s first promotional videos, depicting a farming family and their pursuit of good products, which also exemplifies the focal firm’s desire to shift brand meanings away from economic sales arguments, something that requires adjustment for other brand stakeholders, such as trade customers, and how they market and display tomatoes.

In addition to product development, the second area of development was to increase the share of products that are consumer packaged, rather than sold as generic *pick and weigh* commodities. Through increased use of product packaging, the corporate brand could be made visible and recognisable to consumers, and more marketing messages and information conveyed in the retail environments, as illustrated by Pictures 1 and 2. Moreover, packages enabled the more efficient display of more specialised, new products such as pearl tomatoes or cherry tomatoes on the vine. For the retail level stakeholders, the move meant exploring their ways of using shelf and floor space and thus required adjustment and negotiation.

![Supermarket display of consumer packaged tomatoes. Photo: Närpes Grönsaker.](image-url)
The sales and marketing director further describes the path to a more nuanced, packaged, and branded offering, and the implications of that offering for value across the network:

The goblet products [small tomatoes in plastic cups or “goblets”] are typical examples of successful product development and commercialisation....With that product, we have maintained a pull on the market, demand has exceeded supply. And this has enabled an acceptable price level, also for our producers. So, developing the market without ruining market prices.

Moreover, the brand strategy necessitated investments in marketing communication, from redesigning the logo and other visual materials, sales promotion activities, and establishing a presence in communication channels that enabled direct dialogue between the company and consumers. The communication strategy involved providing information and ideas related to product use but also promoting the transparency of the company’s operations, which is a significant factor in the food industry. Such transparency required the firm to show its brand audiences where the products come from and who grows them. Doing so lends familiarity and trustworthiness to the brand’s character and helps convey sustainability arguments. As the sales and marketing director expressed it:

One of our main aims is to increase the transparency of what we do. The farmers, what they do, how they do it. Nowadays the consumer is super interested in that in the food sector.

Communicating transparently about product origins also plays a role in meaning-making and building consumer–brand relationships, which constituted a broadening of the brand’s network compared to the earlier corporate brand that had little recognition beyond B2B relationships:
You get a different relationship with the end-user when production phases are shown transparently. It increases trust. Because there are still issues with consumer scepticism of the sustainability of Finnish greenhouse production. But there are still a lot of adjectives left to use, and claims we can make, that we can and want to use in marketing.

In its more tactical marketing communication efforts, Närpes Grönsaker has utilised input from several external advertising and media agencies and their sub-suppliers, thus orchestrating a set of meaning-creating resources related to commercialisation, creative and visual content production, and cooperation initiatives with social media influencers. Furthermore, within the organisation, marketing has gradually grown in terms of allocated budget, staffing, and use of market research. The different actors involved with the brand’s ecosystem are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

![Figure 1. The brand’s ecosystem.](image-url)
In addition to the visible aspects of recomposing the brand through product development, packaging, and communication efforts described above, a fourth, more strategic level change was a major shift in the sales strategy of the firm. That shift required the firm to move on from a customer-order handling stance to become more proactive in its attempts to maintain and develop true business customer relationships at different levels. The sales function was reconstructed to reflect the importance of key account management instead of order handling. An illustrative detail is also the job title of the informant, sales and marketing director, which highlights the integration of the sales and marketing functions in the case firm.

Gathering information on customer preferences through direct consumer communication channels in social media and conducting market research led to a change in the content of the case firm’s sales relationships, and enabled the sales negotiations to revolve around meanings and value, rather than generic products and prices. The sales and marketing director describes the current situation:

*Today, we can offer value through the brand, whose recognition has gone up from 6% to over 73% in six years. That’s a direct result of our marketing work. We have managed to create product-related values so that consumers tend to prefer our products to competitors if the alternatives are similar. That’s added value that those in the trade can’t ignore anymore.*

The informant perceived the firm’s marketing intelligence and branding efforts to have altered the division of work in the sales relationships, but states that “*we gladly do part of the intermediary’s job if it generates business for us*”. By possessing better knowledge of consumer behaviour and the sales potential of its products, the firm has also equipped itself to address customer relationships on the category management level, rather than only with the customer’s purchasing function.

**Brand discrepancies in the network**

When the company first launched its new branding strategy, the initiative was applauded by representatives of the major customer chains: One key customer told the sales and marketing
director, “Finally someone is doing something within the greenhouse segment”. The retail chains also appreciated having an active counterpart in the business relationship, in contrast to the previous routinised transactions. Nevertheless, the transition from the old role and position to the new was not entirely smooth and did involve tensions and inconsistencies, which are typical in change processes and dynamics that span organisational boundaries. Here we use the term brand discrepancies to describe issues experienced by the parties to the brand’s network during the process of reconfiguring the brand and its meanings, and the value it provided. In a sense, all parties were involved in co-destroying the old positions and reconfiguring them anew, even if the business relationships in which the changes took place remained the same. This reconfiguration meant a new role for the case firm in relation to its customers now being able to contribute with new types of resources (products, brand recognition, consumer insight) and the meanings and value they could provide.

When one relationship counterpart levels up in terms of its position and bargaining power – as Närpes Grönsaker did through the branding efforts described – the relationship dynamics change as well. Even if the related actors in principle agree on the new development direction, the pace at which they adapt can vary, and thus create tension that reveals brand discrepancies. This outcome is in line with the findings of prior research into value co-destruction in relation to the ability to integrate resources and adapt to change, for example (see also Järv et al., 2016.)

In the supply network, such a temporal discrepancy is identifiable in the interface between producers (farmers) and the focal firm. Product development cycles are long: When new product varieties are developed; it may take several growing seasons until supply and demand are correctly aligned. The asynchrony and uncertainty related to how demand develops in relation to allocated cultivation capacity pose challenges for the supply network, not least upstream. While producers supplying Närpes Grönsaker generally supported the redirection, the time horizon in which they anticipated it would yield benefits has been a cause of some tension and misaligned expectations.
On the customer relationship side, the major retail chains are characterised by a strong focus on logistical efficiency and cost considerations, which constitutes a kind of a counter-force to the aim to provide a more nuanced, branded offering; the same actor, who has an interest in providing value for its end-user can also hinder developments that will ultimately deliver such customer value. From the logistics-driven perspective, a simple bulk product is an easier resource to handle (compare and purchase) than a more complex, branded offering, that involves the purchasing department in more work. When Närpes Grönsaker’s position changed to being a firm possessing a consumer brand and new and enhanced knowledge of consumers and product use, it became a new type of negotiating partner, having previously been one where negotiations most revolved around price and delivery schedules. The new situation reflected changed power and dependence relations as sources of co-destruction (see Vaefas, et al., 2016), at the same time revealing a need for reorchestration.

When Närpes Grönsaker became a consumer brand, the firm had to pay attention to making the brand visible to consumers through its choice of packaging and display materials, such as the ones seen in Picture 2. This consideration meant issues such as shelf and floor space display choices became critical points of negotiation between seller and retailer. The retail chain customers initially mostly declined to use supplier-provided point of purchase displays “Not aligning with the store concept” being the response the sales and marketing director received from the chain customers. Similarly, as Närpes Grönsaker positioned some of the new products based on their use as snacks, rather than generally as vegetables, the sales, and marketing director would have liked to have seen them placed near the checkouts to encourage impulse buys; the supermarket chains, however, were not very keen to adopt this idea, despite the strategy of replacing confectionary with healthier products at the checkout being adopted in other countries.
While the main supermarket chains contested some ways of jointly conveying brand identity, the type and extent of discrepancies in transitioning to dealings with a branded supplier differ from one customer relationship to another. The change was more easily handled with customers with smaller and flatter organisations and where personal bonds between interacting parties extended over a longer period. In this case, Lidl is such an example.
There is a significant difference in the step from business opportunity to decision; there are fewer people to be in contact with and have relationships with. Others are bigger and heavier in their administration.

Thus, the speed of renewal was faster and the decision processes simpler in some smaller organisations than in the bigger ones, where multiple levels of decision-makers had to be identified and convinced, a situation that reverberates with Järvi et al.’s (2016) observation of the inability to change being a source of co-destruction. The different wholesale customers also vary in the volume of competing products they buy, and how well they can forecast the product volume demanded by individual stores. The sales and marketing director notes:

Lidl’s flow of goods is 100% centralised so they have a better grasp of what is sold where. But Kesko, for example, consists of independent shop owners so the local shops can buy in whatever they want, it’s the same in SOK’s regional cooperatives. So, the chains can estimate but don’t know for sure the flow of goods from one week to the next. This is much more straightforward with Lidl.

In this sense, the Lidl network offered a lower degree of complexity and thus fewer potential sources of discrepancy compared to the bigger chain customers.

A different type of discrepancy from those in the supply network can be seen among the stakeholders that are brand specialists (see Törmälä & Saraniemi, 2018), and directly connected to the branding process. As brand meanings had been articulated and visualised almost from scratch, the process also revealed the difficulty faced by external actors in understanding the essence of their client’s identity and the most appropriate means through which to express it. This learning process led to re-evaluating communication media and reassessing advertising agency cooperation during the brand development process. The sales and marketing director illuminates these challenges in the following way:
A problem has been that it’s too project-based, one campaign and activity at a time. The red thread has been missing and the messages have been unlinked. There is a focus on the artsy and visual but a business understanding of the customer is often poorer. We have ditched many agencies because of this.

Although the case firm’s idea to transform a relatively unbranded commodity into a consumer brand has been portrayed as a win-win situation at the idea level for the different stakeholders involved, the practical activities undertaken to this end exposed discrepancies among the stakeholders, as the prior substance of exchange, and negotiating positions were co-destructed to pave way for the new. The change created tensions; and required negotiation, clarification, and adjustment in orchestrating the brand across the different organisations involved. Below, we discuss how these discrepancies were dealt with.

**Overcoming discrepancies and reconfiguring meanings and value**

Six years after the launch of the brand strategy, Närpes Grönsaker had managed to raise its brand recognition from 6% to 73%, indicating the effectiveness of the changed brand identity from a B2B commodity supplier to become a consumer brand. The share of the bulk of the sold output has decreased markedly; measured in product units, the sale of packaged and branded products has gone up from 200,000 per year to almost 14 million, that is, a 70-fold increase. What has Närpes Grönsaker done to overcome the discrepancies among its stakeholders and achieve its new position as a modern, consumer-oriented food industry brand that is also valuable in a new way for its network?

The investments made, starting with market research and gaining an understanding of end-user needs, using that knowledge to drive product development processes, meaning-making, and devoting resources to brand development and recognition building among consumers, has over time accumulated a brand value that, in the words of the sales and marketing director “the trade actors can’t ignore anymore”. Compared to the beginning of the branding process, it has taken
time for the brand-related competence of the focal firm to become sufficiently convincing to affect consumer preferences for and recognition of the brand so that the firm could utilise its position as a resource in its interactions with business customers. In a successful product development project, the sales and marketing director says “we have done our homework and know what the consumer wants, what product characteristic this requires, what it can cost, and where they want to buy it. This is information that we can give to the customer”. Thus, the reconfiguration means that one party has new and useful resources to bring to the relationship. Even if those resources might initially be challenging to adjust to for the stakeholders, once aligned and reorchestrated, they can provide new kinds of meanings and value across the network.

Närpes Grönsaker has gradually also increased its understanding of the dynamics that drive the business customers as a whole, which aligns with Vaefas et al.’s (2016) considerations of human capital and adequacy of communication considerations and generally reflects the way in which actors’ resources become better aligned and integrated. While the discrepancy related to a focus on price and logistics versus qualitative brand characteristics and meanings can still be identified within interactions with the purchasing functions of the buyer organisations, Närpes Grönsaker has increasingly strengthened its ties with the customer through interactions with other functions within the wholesale and retail chains. “What we’ve changed, is that we work on several different levels today”, the sales and marketing director states. Discussing the brand’s retail presence increasingly with the category management and sales functions within the customer organisation has provided arenas to focus not only on price but on developing and utilising the sales potential of products. The focus in these interactions is directed more to generating revenue. In other words, understanding the customer’s decision-making structures, identifying and investing in relationships with the right internal stakeholders and gatekeepers to jointly be able to maximise the brand’s value potential, has been an important step in brand reconfiguration and a means of reducing brand discrepancies.

The issue of discrepancies related to retail space and brand visibility is partly a continuous negotiation, as Närpes Grönsaker remains keen to expand its presence from the fruit and vegetable
sections to other spaces that would encourage first-time trial purchases of new products or impulse buys of snacks, for instance. One avenue for enabling such a use purpose-centric path to a specific product is to consider new types of sales points that would provide a **brand presence in a specific consumption context**, such as gyms or cinemas. Another alternative pathway to product use is Närpes Grönsaker investigating brand cooperation with a company that makes tomato sauce from tomatoes that do not meet the EU directive appearance criteria to be sold in shops. While this customer relationship is still economically less significant than other sales channels, there is a goodwill value to being part of such a sustainability promotion and food waste utilisation venture. Moreover, other potential brand cooperation initiatives involving brand meanings relevant to Närpes Grönsaker could be reinforced through association with other parties are planned. Such efforts can be seen as examples of reconfiguration; challenging the idea of what type of distribution actors that are needed in the network in order for the brand to provide value and meanings for consumers.

In line with the suggestions in prior literature, relationship mechanisms in the form of increased **openness and communication** have also reduced the discrepancies between the company and its farmer-owners, as the following statement from the sales and marketing director illustrates:

*They are better at telling us things about the conditions of cultivation, and we provide continuous information about the market... We know much more than 5 or 6 years ago. And what we know, we also communicate to the producers. So they are aware of the market expectations.*

Better communication and thorough customer understanding are also central to the process of handling discrepancies in brand meaning-making that involve advertising content and media stakeholders. Currently, Närpes Grönsaker uses three different agencies as a kind of networked pool of external brand specialists. While the agencies have previously mainly viewed each other as competitors for the account, Närpes Grönsaker has instead sought to orchestrate (see Wider et al, 2018) the brand meaning-making inputs of the agencies and their sub-suppliers into a whole, where each actor contributes its particular strengths and competence. As the agencies have become
used to working together rather than competing their creative suggestions have also become aligned. The sales and marketing director explains:

_They all have their strengths, and we try to make a good team out of them._
_Previously they had very divergent ideas, but now the red thread and the key message is clearer...I take it as a sign of [the agencies] understanding the brand’s needs better._

In sum, while the customer chains have welcomed the idea of branded tomatoes, which retailers can use to provide more value for their customers, the change process also revealed tensions and required adjustment. A firm that has a consumer brand and new and enhanced knowledge of its target consumers and their product use, becomes a new type of negotiating partner, compared to one primarily concerned with negotiating price and delivery schedules. In this new situation, for instance, shelf and floor space and display choices – through which the brand is made visible to consumers through packaging and point of purchase display materials – became new critical points of negotiation between buyer and seller.

This case highlights the typical challenges of FMCG suppliers in their fight for a place on the shelves of a powerful distributor. What is particular, however, is that this food brand did not enter the network as a completely new one, but that the brand-related interactions lay on a foundation of existing business relationships together with an established familiarity with and trust in the focal actor. The introduction of new resources (products, brands, knowledge, meanings, etc.) and new management issues related to them temporarily changed the dynamics and roles of the parties, revealing brand discrepancies. Orchestrating the brand as a co-created effort has however helped overcome such discrepancies and recompose value and meanings. However, as market expectations and developments are ever-changing and business networks never stand still, the co-creation process related to brand meanings and value is also an ongoing negotiation, albeit one that is sometimes more disruptive and requiring of extensive reconfiguration and reorchestration.
Conclusions

The case depicted in this chapter illuminates the networked character of brands. The process involved defining brand discrepancies, that is, the inconsistencies and other triggering infractions in business relationships that can prompt a co-destruction of the brand and ultimately a reconfiguration of meanings and value in the brand’s ecosystem. Our findings show that the management of brands should be approached as a continuous process of orchestration in a multi-stakeholder setting, rather than as something conducted unilaterally by a brand governor. Our study contributes to the brand co-creation literature by explicating the concept of brand co-destruction and illustrating that it is not always the dark side of co-creation (see Michel, 2017). Brand co-destruction can have positive outcomes by spurring the reconfiguration, recomposition, and reorchestration of brand meanings and value in the ecosystem. While these terms may seem interchangeable, we make a small but significant semantic distinction between them to highlight the nuances of this phenomenon. Recomposition refers to creating meanings and value, possibly even with new actors, in a distinctly different way than before. Reconfiguration again refers to novel brand elements, resources, and actors that become integrated into the co-creation of brand meanings and value. Both recomposition and reconfiguration need reorchestration in the network. This term, in turn, has a more managerial angle, illustrating the process of for instance a brand governor in coordinating the different brand-related resources of interlinked stakeholders to the desired end, which is analogous to orchestrating a musical performance.

The longitudinal character of this case study exposed the process nature of brands, even in instances when the brand resides in a seemingly stable, long-term business relationship. We show that changes in a brand’s external and internal context (see Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Iglesias et al., 2020), for example, downstream in the network in consumer trends or valued product characteristics (such as the sustainability of production or the traceability of foods), may trigger a re-evaluation of the kind of value the brand can offer, thus causing the destruction of the existing value in some business relationships and reconfiguring the value proposition and meanings in the whole ecosystem. Accordingly, the company’s responsiveness to changes and co-creation of
offerings with stakeholders serves as an example of a triggering discrepancy prompting further discrepancies and dynamics in other stakeholder relationships. Time and the asynchrony of the parties’ adaptation to change is a central factor to consider in such dynamics. Even if stakeholders share similar ideas of the brand and its future development direction in principle, they move at different speeds. Some are more motivated than others, some limited by intra-organisational complexity and rigidity, some have different expectations of shorter-term activity or results than others. Asynchronous adjustments to a recomposed brand are something that needs to be acknowledged when the brand is orchestrated.

The Närpes Grönsaker case illustrates how the brand discrepancies and a following successful brand reconfiguration necessitates the activation of existing resources and capitalising on those relating to market intelligence, corporate reputation, and existing actor bonds, for example, in other words, the orchestration of the ecosystem. In addition to such positive network effects, the embeddedness of the brand in multi-stakeholder networks also exposed their downside, in that change was hindered by the differing aims of the various stakeholders, as illustrated by the negotiation between value, cost, and logistics considerations in the food distribution network.

In light of the findings, brand discrepancies can be viewed as forces for change of various character leading to the instability and inconsistency of the brand in a network. They challenge and even co-destruct the value and meanings of the brand on a given occasion, but their outcomes – particularly when considered in a more extended temporal horizon – may be positive for the brand, such as when the network effects offer a foundation for new forms of brand value. Accordingly, compared to for example, repositioning or rebranding (see, Koch & Gyrd-Jones, 2019), the brand discrepancies revealed in our case study cover a broader range of processuality and multiplicity (see also Wider et al., 2018) of brands’ reality. Ultimately, repositioning as such is a management process, but coupled with the discrepancies surrounding it externally and internally (see e.g. Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2019), reveals the ever-changing nature of the reality surrounding brands. In line with Wider et al. (2018), we suggest that for managers, adopting a dynamic and networked perspective to brands requires a different mindset; one of orchestration rather than control in the
context of a brand network, but also offers the promising possibility of creating an authentic brand that welcomes different voices in the network and draws upon diversities in the brand’s time and space.

In further studies, an interesting avenue would be to adopt a processual and interactional approach to brands as agentic assemblages with multiplicity (see Onyas & Ryan, 2015; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Wider et al., 2018), which could provide an even more detailed network-level understanding of how brand meanings and value emerge and develop, and also of how they can come to be contested or even fail to provide the value intended for them.

References


