



LUND UNIVERSITY

School of Economics and Management
Department of Business Administration

FEKN90

Business Administration-

Degree Project Master of Science in Business and Economics

Spring term of 2013

Branding of Knowledge Intensive Business Services

*- The meaning of the brand in a sector dependent on
individuals, trust and credibility*

Author:

Fanny Sandström

Jessica Follin

Supervisor:

Clara Gustafsson

Abstract

Title

Branding of Knowledge Intensive Business Services – The meaning of the brand in a sector dependent on individuals, trust and credibility

Seminar date

2013-05-29

Course

FEKN90, Degree Project Master of Science in Business and Economics

Authors

Jessica Follin and Fanny Sandström

Advisor

Clara Gustafsson

Five key words

Knowledge Intensive Business Services, Brand meaning, Brand creation, Brand function, Buying process

Aim

The aim of the thesis is to explore the meaning of the brand within the Knowledge Intensive Business Service (KIBS) sector, through the brand's construction and management, in order to contribute with insights into the interaction between branding theories and the sector.

Theoretical perspective

Theories collected and reviewed are focused on three main fields (I) characteristics of the KIBS sector (II) traditional (B2B) and more sector specific branding theories (III) theories from the strategic management field to further the understanding of branding within the KIBS sector.

Methodology

Following an Interpretivist Epistemological and a Constructionist Ontological approach we strive to gain better understanding of the social actors involved in constructing the brand. The qualitative empirical study consisted of interviews with employees of two KIBS firms, as well as client representatives.

Empirical foundation

From our empirical observations we describe how the KIBS sector characteristics have implications on the brand meaning within the KIBS sector and highlight the importance of those implications.

Conclusion

From the observations discussed we have identified three main themes that contribute with insights on characteristics of the KIBS sector that need to be regarded, and distinctions that need to be made, when discussing the meaning of the brand in the sector: (I) 'The power of the individual challenging the power of the brand', (II) 'KIBS, the need to run a credibility and trust firm', and (III) 'A strong brand means strong evaluation in the added post project pre-re-buy step'.

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
PROBLEM FORMULATION	1
RESEARCH INTEREST AND RELEVANCE	3
AIM	5
METHOD	6
RESEARCH APPROACH	6
RESEARCH METHOD	8
RESEARCH DESIGN	9
LITERARY REVIEW	10
EMPIRICAL STUDY.....	11
SEMI-STRUCTURED QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS.....	11
SAMPLING	12
THE STUDIED FIRMS.....	13
CONDUCTION OF THE INTERVIEWS	16
INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS.....	18
METHODOLOGY DISCUSSION	19
CREDIBILITY	19
TRANSFERABILITY.....	19
DEPENDABILITY.....	20
CONFIRMABILITY.....	20
THEORETICAL FRAME.....	21
THEORY OVERVIEW	21
SECTOR THEORIES.....	22
DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF KNOWLEDGE INTENSIVE BUSINESS SERVICES	22
KIBS SECTOR CHARACTERIZED BY IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS.....	22
BRANDING THEORIES.....	24
BRAND RELEVANCE BECOMING INCREASINGLY RELEVANT IN DIFFERENT INDUSTRY CONTEXTS	24
IMPORTANCE OF THE BUYING PROCESS.....	24
THE DEFINITION OF THE BRAND VARYING IN SCOPE AND FOCUS	25
BRANDING OF SERVICES	26
CONSTRUCTION OF A SERVICE BRAND	27

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONSTRUCTION OF SERVICE BRANDS AND CONSTRUCTION OF KIBS BRANDS	27
CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS OF A KNOWLEDGE BRAND	28
THE BRAND WITHIN KNOWLEDGE INTENSIVE BUSINESS SERVICE (KIBS) SECTOR	29
STRATEGY THEORIES	31
IMPORTANCE OF BRAND MANAGEMENT.....	31
IMPORTANCE OF BRAND MANAGEMENT LEADING TO FOCUS ON CAPABILITIES.....	31
UNDERSTANDING OF CAPABILITIES LEVERAGE THE UNDERSTANDING OF BRANDING	32
<u>ANALYSIS.....</u>	34
BACKGROUND TO THE ANALYSIS.....	34
THE FRAME AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE ANALYSIS	35
PRESENTATION OF ANALYSIS	37
STEP 4: SEARCH FOR AND EVALUATION OF POTENTIAL SUPPLIERS	37
KNOWLEDGEABLE CLIENTS IMPLYING KNOWLEDGEABLE BUYING CENTRES	37
FIRMS NEED TO BE DIFFERENTIATED BUT WHAT DO THEY NEED TO BE DIFFERENT FROM?	39
INADEQUATE PERCEPTION OF THE COMPETITION RESULTS IN INADEQUATE BRANDING EFFORTS	41
STEP 5: PROPOSAL SOLICITATION AND ANALYSIS.....	43
PREMIUM BRAND AND PREMIUM PRICE VS PREMIUM PERFORMANCE BUT PRESSURE ON PRICE.....	43
THE NEED TO FIND SPECIFIC FIRM STRENGTHS AND BE SPECIFIC WHEN COMMUNICATING THEM	45
STRATEGICALLY TARGETED BRANDING AS A POSSIBLE WAY TO CREATE A STRONG POSITION WITHIN THE KIBS SECTOR	46
STEP 6: SUPPLIER EVALUATION AND SELECTION	50
THE MEANING OF THE BRAND – BRANDING AS IMPORTANT IN THIS SECTOR AS IN ANY OTHER B2C OR B2B SECTOR?	50
THE PEOPLE ARE THE BRANDS FOR FIRMS WITH WEAKER BRAND NAMES.....	51
STRONG BRANDS SUGGEST DEVIATION FROM DEPENDENCY ON INDIVIDUALS CHARACTERISING KIBS	53
ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO BE SELECTED - RECOMMENDATIONS OR REFERENCES AS A WAY IN	54
ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO BE SELECTED – DEVIATE FROM EVALUATION OF INDIVIDUALS BY DEVELOPING CAPABILITIES TO SIGNAL TRUSTWORTHINESS AND COMPETENCE	56
STEP 8: PERFORMANCE REVIEW	59
TO FOLLOW UP CLIENTS’ PERCEPTIONS THAT CONSTRUCT THE FIRM’S BRAND IS A LEAD-TIME CHALLENGE.....	59
STEP 9: POST PROJECT PRE RE-BUY.....	60
EXTENSION OF THE BUYING PROCESS DUE TO EXTENDED MEANING OF THE BRAND POST PROJECT AND PRE RE- BUY	60
INFLUENCE OF THE BRAND MAKES CLIENTS’ RELUCTANT TO ACT ON A POOR PERFORMANCE.....	61

THEMES OF IMPORTANCE ILLUSTRATED.....	63
<u>CONCLUSION.....</u>	65
THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL CHALLENGING THE POWER OF THE BRAND	66
KIBS, THE NEED TO RUN A CREDIBILITY AND TRUST FIRM	67
A STRONG BRAND MEANS STRONG EVALUATION IN THE ADDED POST PROJECT PRE RE-BUY STEP	68
IMPLICATION AND CONTRIBUTION	69
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	69
<u>REFERENCES.....</u>	70
<u>APPENDIX.....</u>	74
APPENDIX 1: FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVIEW THEMES (FIRM REPRESENTATIVES FROM MAXIMIZE STRATEGY CONSULTANCY AND WOW BRANDING)	74
APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE 1- KIBS FIRM REPRESENTATIVES.....	75
APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE 2 - CLIENT REPRESENTATIVES	78
APPENDIX 4. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW: AUTHORS THEMES AND SUBJECTS.....	80
APPENDIX 5. THE B2B BUYING PROCESS.....	81
APPENDIX 6: INTERPRETATION AND MODIFICATION OF THE B2B BUYING PROCESS	82
<i>CHARACTERISITCS OF THE STEP 4, 5, 6, 8 IN THE BUYING PROCESS (KOTLER & PFOERTSCH, 2006, P.29).....</i>	<i>82</i>
12. TABLES AND FIGURES	
<hr/>	
<i>TABLE 1: THE STUDIED FIRMS - AN OVERVIEW OF CHARACTERISTICS</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>TABLE 2: CHART OVER CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>FIGURE 1: THEORY OVERVIEW</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>FIGURE 2: THE BUYING PROCESS.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>FIGURE 3: FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>FIGURE 4: THEMES IN THE ANALYSIS WITH IMPLICATIONS OF THE BRAND WITHIN THE BUYING PROCESS.....</i>	<i>64</i>

Introduction

Problem formulation

The Business to Business (B2B) industry is heterogeneous and there has been a recent increase in awareness of the diversity of sub-sectors within the industry. This has spurred a better understanding of what defines the different sectors, and of their relative importance in financial contribution (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006; Muller & Zenker, 2001; European Commission, 2012), hence enabling further distinctions between the sectors. However, how the importance of branding in general and how both the construction, and the function of the brand is affected by the characteristics of particular sub-sectors has neither been agreed upon, nor thoroughly researched, by scholars. Theories and literature on how building and managing a strong brand is important in order to increase competitiveness mostly relate to manufacturing and service companies in a Business to Consumer (B2C) context. Traditionally in B2B, on the other hand, the brand has not been seen as a prominent resource (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). However, this neglecting of the brand relevance by B2B firms has been increasingly questioned, and it has been suggested that a holistic branding approach will be needed to ensure sustainable future profitability (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006).

Further, the distinction between manufacturing and services becomes increasingly blurred, and it is suggested that the competitive advantage of a company is determined by the service the customers gain from the transaction, rather than the product (Miles, 2005; Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007). Moreover, Windrum & Tomlinson (1999) highlights the role of knowledge production and distribution in the economy, particularly with respect to new knowledge-based services and the role of strategic services in the shaping of competition and competitive advantages.

While services have been acknowledged to have importance in most industries, 'services' includes firms and offerings with little homogeneity, where services can span from highly standardized to highly skilled. Further, the role of the service can be valued secondary to a core product, or constitute the main offering. The sub-sector of companies whose main business is built around highly skilled services, distinguishing them as Knowledge Intensive Business Services (KIBS) are of certain growing economic weight and importance (European Commission, 2007; Muller & Zenker, 2001). There is no standard definition of Knowledge Intensive Business Services (KIBS) (Wood, 2002). However, Muller and Doloreux (2007) state that KIBS are mainly, "concerned with providing knowledge-intensive inputs to the business processes of other organisations, including private and public sector clients" (p.5). Among the examples of firms operating in the industry are management services, legal services, advertising and market research, R&D services and engineering and technical services (Miles, 2005). Elaborating on this,

KIBS firms supply customized services based on professional knowledge, which are created and delivered in collaboration with their clients, to other companies with the purpose of improving their results. The importance of KIBS is emphasised in a report from the European Commission (2007) suggesting the sector to be “one of the main engines for future growth within the European Union” (p.7). The linkage of KIBS employment with GDP and its relative weight is stressed, with the European living standards being likely to depend more and more on productivity improvements in business services than in manufacturing (European commission, 2012).

Furthermore, the sector-growth has resulted in increased competition, leading to a need for KIBS firms to become more competitive (Bagdonienė, Kunigėlienė & Jakštaitė, 2007). In response to this and in accordance with established branding theories, Eppler and Will (2001) states that many companies today compete through and for knowledge, thus it is suggested that the branding of that knowledge becomes a crucial and strategic market activity for the corporation to manage. This is supported by Kotler (2004) who suggests a need for consultancy firms to improve their brand building abilities. However, researches that emphasise the benefits associated with branding are without consensus on neither KIBS sector specifics nor the relationship between the brand and the KIBS firms’ commercial performance. Hence, the branding theories available in large build on the more general service and service B2B sectors.

In service B2B, theories are traditionally putting emphasis on networking, and customer relation management rather than the brand (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). While this is continuously supported, interest has been raised regarding branding as a principal success driver. Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007) argues that there still are gaps with unrealized brand potential in many B2B industries, and at the same time the awareness of the importance of branding for service organisations is increasing (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Davis, 2007; Bagdonienė et al., 2007).

Researchers argue that the corporate brand, or brand name, is especially important for service firms since the company name equals the brand name, in comparison to traditional producing companies where the product is the primary representation of the brand (Berry, 2000). It is also suggested that the brand is exceptionally important for the long-term success of services, since it offers an opportunity to ‘tangibilize’ the inherently intangible service (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003).

Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) state that the degree of brand relevance is dependent on the market characteristics and that decisions regarding investments in the brand need to consider if the brand generates additional value in the buying process. The importance of the buying process is additionally considered by Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė (2008). Contrary to Kotler and Pfoertsch,

Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė emphasise the brands stressed importance independent of market. They suggest a dependence of the clients' awareness of the firm, its offerings, and service supply in order for the firm to be a considered alternative in the buying process. The buying process and its inherent complexity is also identified as important in order for firms to maintain profitability, hence there is a need to reduce risk and minimize complexity in this stage. These requirements closely correspond with a brand's generally acknowledged ability to function as a risk reducer, increase information efficiency, add value and create beneficial images to a company (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Furthermore, the brands' importance in the B2B firms' relation with the clients has been emphasised with branding being a marketing tool needed in all stages of the relationship building, additionally to the buying process and the pre-relational stage (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008; Bagdonienė et al., 2007).

More recent empirical research (Lee & Beak, 2008) stresses the importance of the brand within the KIBS sector but concludes that the performance of the brand is largely dependent on the internal management of the brand, the firm's Brand Management System (BMS). This is additionally supported by Santos-Vijande, Belén del Río-Lanza, Suárez-Álvarez and Díaz-Martín's (2013) study, stating that successful branding in the KIBS sector "is not just about smart, creative brands, but also about well planned and executed brand management"(p.154). In other words, the Brand Management System potentially allows firms to improve their brand-building activities and develop brand equity efficiently (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). When focusing on the construction of the brand within the KIBS context the above findings suggest a need to further examine the internal management of the brand. However, little research exists within this area (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

The importance of the Brand Management System is also considered by Lee and Beak (2008). Their results show that brand management is found to not directly influence the firms' financial performance. However, the Brand Management System influences the customer performance, which is found to be a mediator between the Brand Management System and the firms' financial performance (Lee & Beak, 2008). This suggests a long-term focus and that the firms' branding efforts and their brand management system need to focus on improving the customer performance since this will ultimately influence the firms' financial performance.

Research interest and relevance

Several theories and studies are suggesting a need for Knowledge Intensive Business Service (KIBS) firms to assess their branding strategies to achieve sustainable success (Kotler, 2004; Bagdonienė et al., 2007; Lee & Baek, 2008; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). However, the majority of the research interest in relation to KIBS firms are not primarily focusing on the construction of

the brand, the brand strategy and management, or treating the brand as an asset. Instead the general themes concern the characteristics of the sector (Muller & Doloreux, 2007; Von Nordenflycht, 2010), innovation (Muller & Doloreux, 2007; Muller & Zenker, 2001) and relationship management (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008; Bettencourt, Brown & Roundtree, 2002). Branding is acknowledged as part of the firms' competitive advantage but not given such importance as implied in the research earlier referred to.

Considering the research gap, two firms that operate in the KIBS sector, and representatives of the firms' clients, are included for the contribution of empirical material. The firms serve as representatives for the KIBS sector, allowing for insights (Bryman & Bell 2007). The first participating firm, *Maximize Strategy Consultancy firm* is a management consultancy firm providing its services to clients from a diverse range of industries. The latter also applies to the second firm, *WOW branding* however this firm is a brand management consultancy firm.

In addition to the earlier discussion implying different degrees of brand relevance, the knowledge regarding to what extent KIBS firms engage in branding activities is limited. A possible measurement is the registration of trademarks. Although excluding internal processes, trademarks are closely related to brand strategy with the purpose of registering a trademark suggesting beneficial gains such as 'increasing visibility' or 'reflecting competitive strategies' (Gotsch & Hipp, 2012; Millot, 2009).

European Commission (2012) suggests that, in general, for KIBS firms, other methods of protecting knowledge than trademarks seem to be more significant. This implies that these firms engage less in marketing innovations and certain branding activities. However, the connection to branding is vague and the existing purpose of trademark as a measurement has been to assess innovation within KIBS firms. One possibility is that the relatively recent acknowledgement of brand importance within KIBS firms makes branding activities to be generally classified as firm innovativeness.

Following the discussion above, the purpose of the thesis is to study the 'brand' concept in relation to KIBS firms, given their industry context. We will investigate the meaning of the KIBS firms' brand in relation to their clients. Rather than to limit the research to a narrow focus of what a brand *is*, the tangible components of the brand, an emphasis is on the construction of the brand and the actions undertaken relating to the brand. Thus, the focus of the thesis is on the meaning of the brand, in order to gain insights into, and to better understand the impact or influence the brand has on the KIBS firms' ability to develop new client relationships.

Aim

The aim of the thesis is to explore the meaning of the brand within the Knowledge Intensive Business Service (KIBS) sector, through the brand's construction and management, in order to contribute with insights into the interaction between branding theories and the sector.

Method

In this chapter we motivate, describe and argue for the method chosen to fulfil the aim of the thesis. Potential criticisms are raised and addressed continuously to further support our choices. We start by describing our research approach, method and research design and continue with a description of empirical study. Subsequently, the method used for the interpretation and analysis are presented. Lastly we present a methodology discussion.

Research approach

The research is done holding an interpretivist position as a general epistemological standpoint (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The standpoint is chosen to facilitate the fulfilling of the research aim of providing insight and better understanding of the brand's role within the certain industry. The aim is in turn based on the phase of the current research into the area - a stage with literature without consensus, thus, motivates an exploratory approach of gathering deeper understanding of what affect the research objects behaviour (Bryman & Bell 2007). This implies that the thesis is limited in the requirements to be causal, rather aiming at being exploratory or descriptive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The focus of the research is to gain greater understanding of the human behaviour in relation to the brand; the brand management and the construction and meaning of the brand in relation to the firms' clients. Hence, we arrive at an agreement with Weber's definition of sociology as a "science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects" (Weber, 1974 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.18).

Therefore the thesis takes a hermeneutic approach which is a theory of the interpretation of human action and that emphasises the need to understand from the perspective of the social actor (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Important in the hermeneutic approach is that, to gain knowledge in an area, one need to view and connect all entities and elements to be able to understand the whole context. This can only be done through understanding the entities that play a part in the area one wants to gain knowledge in. The entities can vary in complexity and range from individuals, to institutions, but do also include texts and literature (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994). The interpretive element is of importance in the hermeneutic approach and it is the researchers'

interpretation of the entities that allows further understanding of the subject as a whole (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 1994).

Ontological considerations regard the nature of the social entities (Bryman & Bell, 2007). We acknowledge social entities as social constructs built up from perceptions and actions of social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2007), thus taking a constructionist stance. The constructionist stance implies that it is the behaviour of the associates and the stakeholders that construct the brand. Thus emphasizing the importance of gaining a better understanding of the actions of the social entities in order to fulfil the purpose to also gain better understanding of the brand. In order to arrive at an enhanced understanding of brand meaning as a whole, which is the aim of the thesis, we have to understand the entities connected to the brand. An understanding that is accessed through the interpretation of the literature gathered and the interviews conducted with representatives being part of our empirical research.

The thesis takes a firm perspective whilst having a constructionist stance. This implies that the entities (the firms) are not regarded as having a reality external to social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2007) Instead, the firm, seen as an entity, is constructed from perceptions and actions of the social actors, the people in the firm (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Therefore, the thesis needs to incorporate multiple research objects in order to achieve its aim of gaining greater understanding.

Furthermore, the frame of the research concerns branding within the KIBS sector in which all of the firms' employees play parts in the construction of the brand in the contact points with external stakeholders. This is a prominent characteristic of the service and KIBS sector (Santos-Vijande et al, 2013). This further enhances the importance of both their inclusion in the conducted research, and to gain further insight into the role they play. In addition, including multiple research objects also relates to the importance to reflect the inherent heterogeneity and complexity of the KIBS sector and its firms (European Commission, 2012).

Research method

The thesis is conducted using a qualitative method with a basis in the social constructionist view of science (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This view emphasises the social entities role in the construction of their perceived world, highlighting the importance of the people in relation to the brand. Further implying that the brand's relation to the interview objects can only be understood through the interview objects' interpretations of it. This motivates the use of a qualitative method, since one of the strengths is that it allows for the focus to be on the interview objects while limiting the reflection of the researchers concerns (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Further, qualitative methods have an ability to provide a holistic insight and reveal the complexity within subjects (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which suggests it to be the best strategy for exploring the relatively new research area of branding within the KIBS sector. Due to the current gaps in existing research we focus on gaining a better understanding of the brands role within this certain sector. For this, a more exploratory or descriptive approach is preferable, which is why the qualitative method is suitable. (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994)

Taking a more practical perspective, qualitative methodology also allows for more flexibility than quantitative methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Flexibility is of great importance since the empirical data is collected through interviews with representatives and clients of two firms. This method enables the research to be more adaptable to unexpected situations and events during the process of cooperation.

We use existing theories as a framework to guide the construction of interview guides and to further allow for the interviewees' answers to direct additional theoretical research. A conceptual and theoretical understanding of the investigated phenomena is stated to be needed in order to further the understanding of knowledge obtained in the study (Kvale, 1996). The study can therefore be categorised as using a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning, referred to as abductive reasoning (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Characteristic for this approach is that the analytical framework is successfully reoriented during the research process as it is continuously affected by new information from the empirical studies (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

The inductive approach, which traditionally is argued to be suitable in qualitative research, is not directly applicable in this thesis since the authors started off with initial theoretical knowledge as well as conducted theoretical research before undertaking the empirical data collection. Theories were used as a foundation to enable a structure to our exploration of the brand's meaning within the sector (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Research Design

The focus of the research is to explore the KIBS sector as a whole and therefore the importance lies in the sample in cases, with lesser focus on the differences in context between the two cases. Following this, the study should be categorized as a cross-sectional design (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This design is defined by Bryman and Bell (2007) who describes how the data collection needs to be done from more than one case at a single point in time and further how the goal is to examine the data in order to identify patterns of association. Though, when elaborating, a cross-sectional design most often include many more than two cases and aim to collect a body of quantifiable data, which is not in accordance with the aim of the thesis.

Bearing this in mind, the characteristics of a multiple case study being to conduct a detailed and intensive analysis of a few cases would probably be more in accordance with the purpose of this research. Bryman and Bell (2007) describe how this design allows for cross-case comparability, facilitating theoretical reflections on the unique and common findings between the cases studied, which corresponds well with one of the main purposes of the thesis being to explore the existing branding theories relevance and application in the special context of the two companies, the cases. The focus and emphasis of a multiple case study is however on the unique context of the single case, which derives from our aim of contributing with insights regarding the sector.

Bryman and Bell (2007) state that any kind of research can be constructed as a case study and also discuss how most research illustrations can display features from more than one research design. Following this and the discussion above, the thesis is proposed to draw on elements from both the multiple case- and the cross sectional research design. This is suitable since the aim is to explore, which implies to study both similarities and differences between the cases. It is also motivated by our aspiration to contribute with insights concerning the sector rather than the single cases.

Literary review

Literature and theories have shaped the method and our understanding of the research. The process started out with a broad outline of concepts - regarding the brand, and the sector, which was then revised and narrowed down through literature review (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The decision to include such a deductive element, thus deviating from an inductive stance, is firstly to leverage on the knowledge, theories and conceptualisations existing among authors and researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The literature review incorporated a broad base of research areas relevant for our frame. It primarily included literature regarding branding in various industry contexts and at different levels, and during the research process we also chose to include theories from the strategic management field. Additional advantage gained from the literature review was to allow the existing constructs and theories to serve as a formalized body that could be confronted with the empirical findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An approach suggested to facilitate an enhanced empirical study and analysis through the development of frameworks and themes (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The literature review is by definition dependent on the judgments of the authors' and this need to be considered to improve the reliability of the literature (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Therefore the literature has included acknowledged researchers and articles in areas and disciplines relevant for the subject. It has also included the most recent available findings within the framed area of branding in the KIBS sector, in order to reflect the current research situation. Throughout the process the relevance and reliability of sources has been regarded and preceded the incorporation of literature. The articles have further been validated through 'peer review' or publication in qualitative journals.

The literature review has served as a base to both problematize the subject as well as construct intertextual coherence between the current researches (Bryman & Bell, 2007). However both the literature review and the research are done through an iterative approach, meaning that the collection and analysis of the material is done simultaneously. The reason is to enable assessment of the need for further research and to develop our framework during the process, in accordance with the inductive elements and the nature of qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Empirical study

In this section we discuss and motivate the method chosen for the empirical study. We describe the sampling method used in the selection of the firms, associates and clients interviewed in the study. In addition, we present the firms and the participants more closely. Finally, a description is given of how the conduction of the interviews.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews

We have conducted semi-structured interviews, a form that includes suggested questions and themes to be covered during the interview. At the same time the semi-structured approach allows for openness to changes of sequences and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given by the participants (Kvale, 1996). A reason for choosing the semi-structured approach as opposed to an unstructured is to ensure that data around the same subjects is collected from all interviewees, in order to guarantee that the study is kept within the frame of the thesis (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This is of importance since the research is conducted to reach a stated aim and thus cannot be solely explorative. Furthermore, the use of an interview guide facilitates comparisons between interviews as well as allows for a higher degree of transparency, which will increase the external reliability of the thesis (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The interview guides were constructed with the objective to thematically cover the 'root' of the study, the aim of the thesis (Kvale, 1996). The process of constructing the guides included developing two interview guides. One covering the thematic research questions and, building on this, a second guide with the questions to be asked during the interviews (Kvale, 1996). A 'set' of two guides was constructed firstly in preparation for the interviews with representatives of the KIBS firms and an additional, adopted set was developed for the client representatives. The themes used in the development, and the two interview guides can be found in "Appendix 1: Framework for interview themes", "Appendix 2: Interview guide 1 – KIBS firm representatives", and "Appendix 3: Interview guide 2 – Client representatives".

In accordance with characteristics of qualitative interviewing, the direction of the interviews was partly dependent on what areas, within the framework, the interviewee emphasized as important to explain and elaborate around. Following this, the possibility of the interviews straying from the interview guide had to be considered. Therefore a flexible approach was taken in order to open up for a change of direction in the research if important new issues emerged during the interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Finally, the personal influence from both the researchers and the interviewees were considered when conducting the interviews. Regarding the researchers' effect, we needed to be self-aware and realise the influence our actions and interpretations might have on the results (Kvale, 1996). As researchers we have inevitably been affected by our previous knowledge and interest within the area of branding. This implicates that we might have had a tendency to work on the supposition that branding is of importance in most contexts. However, this could have been an advantage in the research process and the compilation of the thesis since we have a deep pre-understanding of the subject (Kvale, 1996).

Further, the results may have been affected by the interviewees' suggested tendency to intentionally or unintentionally adapt their answers in order to be perceived in a certain way (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To minimise this impact a cautious approach was taken regarding the interpretations and conclusions made from the interviews.

Sampling

Following the example of Gephart (1988) cited in (Bryman & Bell, 2007) the firms are chosen through theoretical sampling. The firms, as well as the representatives being interviewed have been chosen since the parties "represent the main groups involved in the inquiry" (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 500). They are representatives of the variation of firms included in the KIBS sector with examples being management services, legal services, advertising and market research, R&D services and engineering and technical services (Miles, 2005). Further, the high relative importance of the KIBS sector in the Stockholm region compared to other regions in Sweden have led to a choice on attaining insights from representatives from firms originating from this region (European Commission, 2012).

Since an important part of the thesis is to gain insight into the interaction between the firm and its clients we made use of snowball sampling to reach the clients of the firms initially chosen (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The inclusion of multiple clients was important since they are acknowledged as influencers on the brand (Davis, 2007; De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006), and of emphasized importance since the frame is considering the KIBS sector. This since the clients and the collaboration between the client and the KIBS firm characterises the sector (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008).

The chosen method is suitable since it facilitates problems regarding access to the client representatives. It is also the most widely used method in qualitative research. Even though the method has been criticised of being "plain and rather commonsensical so as to avoid systematic reflexive considerations" (Noy, 2008, p.329) it has also been argued to bring considerable benefits to the research. In addition to serving as a tool enabling access, snowball sampling can ex-

pose and bring insight into social aspects of interaction and relationships between the firm and the clients given access to. In other words, the procedure can provide knowledge in itself. This knowledge can further the outcome and value of the research (Noy, 2008).

The studied firms

The characteristics presented refer to information gained during interviews with the firm representatives.

Maximize Strategy Consultancy firm. Referred to as *Maximize Strategy Consultancy Firm* or *Maximize*, the first firm represents a SME (Small and Medium Enterprise) Management Consultancy firm providing its services to clients from a diverse range of industries. The ability to operate their expertise in multiple industries is a characteristic of the KIBS sector and implies heterogeneity in clients (Muller & Doloreux, 2007). Maximize Strategy Consultancy Firm's client base consist of clients operating both within the finance sector, as well as being industry-clients. The client organizations are heterogeneous in terms of size and global presence.

The firm was founded in 2007 and has expanded into employing just fewer than 20 employees, all with similar educational backgrounds. Half of the staff are economists and, the other half are engineers. Age distribution ranges from the mid twenties to above fifty. The majority of the staff is between 25 – 35 years old, they occupy partner- and senior positions, in addition to more junior positions. The offerings are limited to certain areas of specialization but aims at providing knowledge services. The projects are varying in terms of scope, involvement, complexity and intensity. Projects range from short and defined two week collaborations to those that last over several years.

WOW Branding. The second firm in the study, *WOW Branding* or *WOW*, is a brand management consultancy firm. Demonstrating a similarity between the firms, WOW Branding has a client base originating from multiple industries. However, the clients include MNC's (Multinational Corporations) and a difference is that WOW Branding is being responsible for their brand strategies extended to a global level. The firm was founded in 2002 and has expanded rapidly and do now employ around 75 people. The employees are from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds ranging from higher academic fields to focusing on the more specific creative competences such as design. The size, client base and heterogeneity of the staff imply an observable distinction from Maximize Strategy Consultancy firm. WOW Branding's service offering consists of five main areas but focus is on brand strategy.

Table 1: The studied firms - An overview of characteristics

Organisation	Size	Offering	Pricepoint*
Management Consultancy firm, founded in 2007. Located in Stockholm	Around/Under 20 Employees	Strategy Consultancy	Lower than/Below sector leaders
Brand Strategy / Brand Management firm, founded in 2002. Located in Stockholm	Around 75 Employees	Brand Strategy Consultancy	Pricepoint as sector leaders
*Based on statements from employees in the present study			

Scope of inclusion of participants. The total of 19 interviews include seven representatives from Maximize, eight client representatives (four with industry clients and four from the finance sector), three representatives from WOW and one participant represents WOW's clients. A more detailed description of the interviewees can be found in "Table 2 - Chart over conducted interviews".

Table 2: Chart over conducted interviews

Name	Participant characteristic	Firm	Role	Length of interview
Adam	Firm representative	Maximize strategy consultancy	Analyst	60 min
Jonas	Firm representative	Maximize strategy consultancy	Partner	60 min
Claes	Firm representative	Maximize strategy consultancy	Managing partner	60 min
Viktor	Firm representative	Maximize strategy consultancy	Founding partner	60 min
Peter	Firm representative	Maximize strategy consultancy	Founding partner	60 min
Richard	Firm representative	Maximize strategy consultancy	Partner	60 min
Maja	Firm representative	Maximize strategy consultancy	Partner	60 min
Martin	Client	Maximize strategy consultancy	Finance client	30 min
Simon	Client	Maximize strategy consultancy	Finance client	30 min
Jens	Client	Maximize strategy consultancy	Finance client	30 min
Max	Client	Maximize strategy consultancy	Finance client	30 min
Gunnar	Client	Maximize strategy consultancy	Industry client	30 min
Fredrik	Client	Maximize strategy consultancy	Industry client	30 min
Oscar	Client	Maximize strategy consultancy	Industry client	30 min
Gustav	Client	Maximize strategy consultancy	Industry client	30 min
Axel	Firm representative	WOW branding	Partner and CD	60 min
Sofia	Firm representative	WOW branding	Partner and Account director	60 min
David	Firm representative	WOW branding	User experience manager	60 min
Marie	Client	WOW branding	Industry client	30 min

The majority of the participants are representatives from Maximize Strategy Consultancy Firm and their clients. This means more participants represent Maximize and their clients compared to WOW and their clients. The unequal representation of participants was due to the time limitations of the thesis. It was not possible to get more interviews with WOW's clients within the given scope of time. However, this is not regarded as a problem due to the main consideration being to gain a variety of insights. This, in order to improve the quality of the study (Kvale, 1996), which the total number of interviews conducted with clients enabled.

In addition to Maximize and their clients, the inclusion of the additional firm, WOW Branding, was valued considering the heterogeneity of the KIBS sector. Whilst both firms operate within the KIBS sector providing knowledge, the firms differ on several aspects, for example in size and areas of experience.

The choice to include multiple representatives from the two firms and from their clients allowed for better understanding of the roles the different entities play in the context of interest in the study (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994). This focus was chosen in order to enable the thorough understanding needed in order to correctly interpret the social entities representing the firms (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Restrictions and anonymity. The actual names and other details of the companies, clients and participants have been removed to allow for anonymity, which was requested by the companies. To ease the reading both the firms and the participants have been given fictional names in the thesis.

While the request limits the thesis' freedom to give in-depth information on the firms, their anonymity does not interfere with the aim of the thesis (Kvale, 1996). Due to limited existing research on the subject the present purpose is to gain new insights into the sector of Knowledge Intensive Business Services (KIBS), rather than to define differences between the two studied firms. Therefore a straight forward comparison between the firms is not the primary purpose of this research. Rather, it is their function as firms operating in our frame of the KIBS sector that is of value. The firms enable access to exploring the brand meaning within their market context and sector. Secondly, the anonymity of the firms and the respondents minimises the risk of them withholding or adapting their answers in order to appear in certain ways (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Conduction of the interviews

Semi-structured depth interviews were conducted with both firm and client representatives. The firm representative interviews were one hour each, while the client representative interviews were half an hour each. The interviewees were provided with a context for the interview and all interviews ended with a debriefing (Kvale, 1996). In all cases we took a cautious approach and avoided to use concepts that could be leading or interpreted in different ways, the most important being brand, and concepts relating to brand strategy (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Instead concepts like 'strengths' and 'diversifying factors' were chosen.

Most interviews were done in person with the exceptions were five telephone interviews conducted with client due to limited access caused by their geographical placement (Kvale, 1996). The personal interviews were held at places chosen by the interviewees. The objective was to make the interviewees feel as secure and as comfortable as possible. Both authors were present at all interview occasions, enabling for one to take a more active interview role and the other to be responsible for recordings, notes and attendant questions. The attendance of both authors was further motivated by the facilitation of the analysis, since both had a foundation for the consecutive analytical work.

The first part of the interview included questions concerning the person's background, age and work role, which gave us a good perception of his/her role within the company. Starting with "introducing" and "follow-up questions" also facilitated the rest of the interview, since the interviewee got the possibility to get used to the situation and we could get a perception of how we should adapt our role as interviewers to facilitate the interviewees' personality. (Kvale, 1996). Further details on the conduction of the interviews are described below.

Interviews with firm representatives. For the interviews with firm representatives, the interview questions were built around four themes; (I) Nature of the KIBS sector, (II) Brand strategy, awareness of brand meaning, focus on construction and management (III) KIBS sector attributes having impact on the brand, focus on the firm-client relationship, and finally, (IV) Brand management and implementation. An elaboration of the themes is found in "Appendix 1: Framework for interview themes". Some questions were formulated and stated within each theme to guide the interview in the right direction and ensure the empirical material to cover all areas of interest for the thesis (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Though an open approach was taken, depending on the interviewee's responses. The questions were structured in an order that would be useful for the outcome of the answers, with less sensitive questions in the beginning and more straightforward questions further on (Kvale 1996). The interview guide can be found in

“Appendix 2: Interview guide 1 - Interview guide for firm representatives”.

Interviews with client representatives. For the interviews with client representatives, the interview questions were built around industry specific branding theories and their suggestion of the client’s important role in the construction of the brand. They were further structured following the different steps of the buying process (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, p.29), since these represent different situations where the two parties interact with each other. Following the same logic as for the interviews with firm representatives we took an open approach during the interview, with the possibility of modifying the direction dependant on the person’s answers (Kvale, 1996). Interview guide for interviews with client representatives can be found in “Appendix 3: Interview guide 2 - Interview guide for client representatives”.

Interpretation and analysis

A total of 19 interviews, with representatives from the KIBS firms and their clients, were recorded and transcribed by the authors of the thesis resulting in 213 pages of material. The processes included systematically listening to the material and reflect the interviews in writing. However we are aware of the limitations with the inability of the transcripts not being copies of an original reality and that they are influenced by interpretations of the authors (Kvale, 1996). To further the reliability, the transcriptions were done in Swedish in order to more correctly represent the answers given by the participants. Therefore the citations used in the analysis are translated by the authors of the thesis, with the originals to be found in the transcriptions.

A primary listening to the recording was done shortly after the interviews were conducted in order to capture initial reflections and detailed observations (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The transcribed interviews were individually read several times by both authors of the thesis (Kvale, 1996). After completing the total amount of interviews the accumulated material was analyzed separately in order to not be biased by each other's analysis. The approach, which includes hermeneutic elements, emphasize the importance in understanding the participants' perspective (Bryman & Bell, 2007) as well as view and connect all entities in order to understand the whole context (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994).

The compilation of the analysis included to primary capture detailed observations, followed by connection and contextualisation of the observations, and finally the identification of themes. The analytic process was grounded in our theoretical framework which facilitated the identification of themes, that were both in coherence with the framework as well deviated from what has previously been emphasized in theory (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The analytical framework was partly reoriented during the empirical study, following insights gained from the participants. The shift in focus will be further described in the section "Background to the analysis". The practical process consisted of colour coordinating participants' answers into the identified themes.

After initial analysis, the individual insights were we discussed, compared and compiled. In accordance with Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994), we acknowledged the interpretive element as important in order to finalize the analysis, aiming at allowing further understanding of branding within the KIBS sector.

Methodology discussion

The methodology chapter has aimed at continuously discuss and highlight criticism and relevant risks the methodology choices propose. The actions undertaken in order to minimize the implications of such risks have been discussed and the methodology choices have been motivated. However, to establish the quality of the research we need to assess the validity of the results. Lincoln and Guba (1985) cited in Bryman and Bell (2007, pp. 395-396) suggest four criteria in order to establish and assess the trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria will further be discussed in relation to our study.

Credibility

Actions have been taken in order to increase the credibility of the results. Both the empirical and theoretical research has been thorough in proportion to the given limitations in time and resources, to provide as detailed and accurate a picture of the context as possible.

Additional actions were undertaken in order to increase the credibility. The use of multiple sources as well as the conduction of interviews with representatives from more than one firm both strived at improving the credibility. Furthermore, the number of researchers being more than one is in itself a facilitator for a higher level of credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The presence of both authors at all interview occasions, as well as interviews being done in person, aimed at decreasing the risk for misinterpretations of the statements. To ensure the concurrence between the citations used in the analysis and the respondents' replies they were given the opportunity to confirm its accuracy before publication (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To avoid misinterpretations during the analysis, both the authors separately read and interpreted the results. Thereafter the results were compared to define differences and similarities. Finally, observations and analysis have been done continuously through the empirical study. However, conclusions were not made until at the absolute end of the analytical work to ensure that no matter of importance was overlooked (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

The qualitative method in general does not facilitate transferability, since its focus lies on exploring the unique aspects in certain contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The aim with this study is to gain deepened understanding of the limited context and not to be a generalizable representation for all firms in the KIBS sector. However, the transferability in this instance aims at easing the

application of the understanding gained in the thesis in other contexts. This has been done through the providence of a thorough explanation of the background and theoretical frame as well as a detailed description of the method used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Dependability

The authors are aware of the inherent subjectivity of interpretation and thus have aimed to provide the readers with a possibility to track where the material has its base. To allow for high dependability of the study, all the empirical material has been saved, both in writing in the form of transcriptions, and as audio files (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These can be made available for auditing parts if requested. Moreover, the work has been audited by external parts, such as the supervisor, personal contacts and contacts at the participating companies during the compilation.

The participating companies and client representatives are being anonymised. This could be argued to decrease the dependability of the results. To handle this, the supervisor has been informed of which the companies are and thus been able to confirm their accuracy and the motivation for them being used in the empirical study.

Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight the importance of the researchers not intentionally letting personal estimations effect the implementation and conclusions drawn from a qualitative study. On the other hand they also emphasise the impossibility to be strictly objective. The personal influence as well as the previous knowledge and interest within the area of research, that both the researchers hold, has continuously been considered when conducting the interviews. A cautious approach has further been taken in order to minimise the risk of this influencing the results (Kvale, 1996).

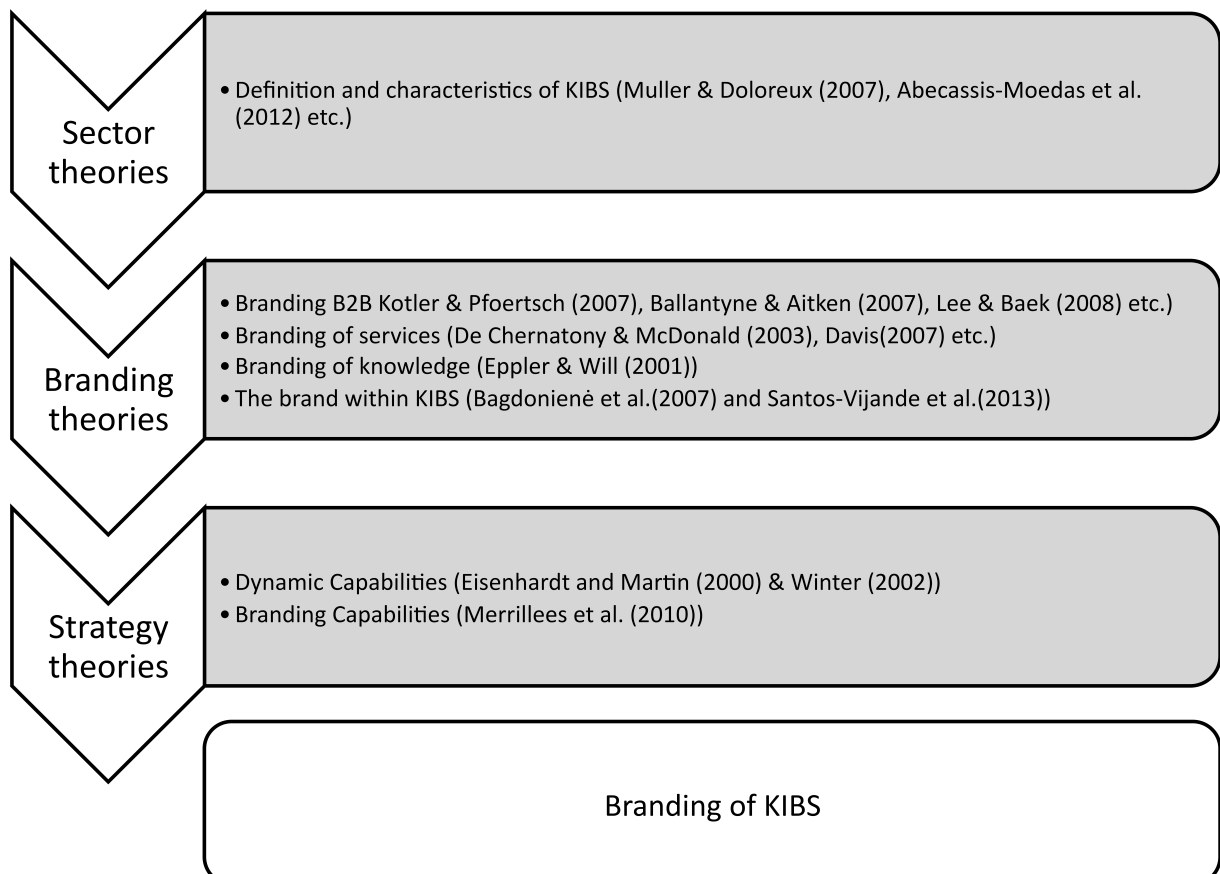
Theoretical frame

In this chapter we describe and present our theoretical framework. Theories on characteristics of the Knowledge Intensive Business Service sector are presented. Thereafter traditional as well as more sector specific brand theories will be discussed. Finally we have chosen to include certain theories drawn from the strategic management field in order to further the understanding of branding within KIBS. The theories presented have served as a basis for both the empirical study and the analysis.

Theory overview

Theories have been collected and reviewed with focus on three fields of research, within which we have chosen to focus on certain specific theories and authors found to be most relevant for the frame of the thesis. The following theory chapter will be structured according to the three main fields of industry theories, branding theories and strategy theories. An illustration of the main theoretical areas in which we have conducted our research is found in “Figure 1-Theory overview”. A more detailed overview can be found in “Appendix 3: Theoretical overview - Authors themes and subjects”.

Figure 1: Theory Overview



Sector theories

Definition and characteristics of Knowledge Intensive Business Services

Miles, Kastrinos, Bilderbeek, den Hertog, Flanagan and Huntink (1995) identify certain characteristics for companies categorised as Knowledge Intensive Business Services (KIBS). They state that these firms rely heavily on professional knowledge and are either primary sources of information and knowledge or use their knowledge to produce intermediary services for their clients. Their services are of competitive importance and supplied primarily to businesses (Miles et al., 1995).

Further emphasised is the complex relationship between the firms and their clients explained by the clients possessing knowledge needed for the firms to deliver their service (Bettencourt et al., 2002; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). This results in the service being created through collaboration between the two parties (Bettencourt et al.; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė). Moreover, this leads to every service being customized, unstructured and dependent on commitment and adaptation from both parties. (Bettencourt et. al, 2002; Kasper, van Helsdingen & Gabbot, 2006 cited in Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008)

Wood (2002) suggests that there is no standard definition of KIBS. However, Muller and Doloreux (2007) present several different definitions of KIBS found in the literature reviewed for their working paper. Based on these definitions, they state that KIBS firms are, in general terms, "concerned with providing knowledge-intensive inputs to the business processes of other organisations, including private and public sector clients" (p. 5).

A more specific definition is given by Bettencourt et al. (2002) who define KIBS as "enterprises whose primary value-added activities consist of the accumulation, creation, or dissemination of knowledge for the purpose of developing a customized service or product solution to satisfy the client's needs" (pp. 100-101). This is also the definition followed in the thesis.

KIBS sector characterized by importance of relationships

One of the most prominent features that characterize the Knowledge intensive business service (KIBS) sector is the importance of the relationship between the KIBS firms and their clients. Emphasized is both the way the relationship requires adaptation of the firm's offerings through "collaboration, commitment and adaptation" (Kasper et al, 2006 cited in Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008, p.222) and how the relationship function as a primary mean to gain competitive advantage (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). This since it is "impossible to copy KIBS providers" ability

to build or to sustain relations with clients” (Sobel, 2006 cited in Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008, p.220). In other words, both parties’ involvement in, and contribution to, the relationship makes it unique and therefore hard to copy.

However the importance of the firm-client relationships assumes that a relation of some sort exists, even if it just regards correspondence or is transaction based. The existing literature regarding the subject does not emphasise what facilitates the relationship in the pre-relationship stage. Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė (2008) acknowledges that “the process of relationship change requires adequate instruments of marketing” (p. 224) and suggests market segmentation as an important tool in this stage. This is also supported by Crane (1993) who recommends a use of “combined demand oriented and image-oriented promotion” (p. 64). This can be considered as further acknowledgement of the importance of brand activities, however the importance or function of the brand is not specified or further regarded.

Branding theories

Brand relevance becoming increasingly relevant in different industry contexts

Branding, and branding theories, has gone from focus solely on B2C to become increasingly relevant in B2B as well. This has been a change in acknowledgement of branding, from not regard branding as important to an acceptance of the meaning of the brand within the industry (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). The growing importance of brands in the B2B industry is increasing the need for new knowledge on the B2B sub-sector of KIBS. Additionally relevant is to address what challenges the increasing brand relevance proposes and how this can be applied to our focus on the KIBS sector. It is argued by Eppler & Will (2001) that the concept of branding knowledge can benefit from the use of theories from both product and service branding, but with a focus on describing how its certain characteristics separates branding of knowledge from the other two.

Importance of the buying process

When branding begun to cross industries and become acknowledged in a B2B context in addition to be proven relevant mostly in B2C some main doubts regarding its applicability was aired, particularly referring to differences in the buying process (found in "Appendix 4: The B2B buying process")(Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). The buying process involving organizations implies increased complexity; more people, more money, more technical and economical considerations. In short, more risk (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Therefore brands were thought to play a relatively smaller part in the buying process of organizations. Rather, the decisions were thought to be based on rational evaluations considering what would be the most profitable decision based on price, feature, functionality and service offered (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). While it is true that the buying process in a B2B context often is more complex the rationality of the organizations buying centres' has been argued to not be the only influence on the decisions made. Organizations do often have an enhanced need to be more rational but the objectivity and rationality of the buying centres is stated to only be true to a certain point (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006).

The frame of the thesis is a sub-sector of the B2B industry, the KIBS sector. Therefore the meaning of the brand in this process is of interest. Theories more narrowly regarding branding in the service and Knowledge Intensive Business Service sector also bring up important characteristics corresponding with the steps in the buying process. One of the most prominent characteristics is that the contact points with the clients are of huge importance (Bettencourt et al., 2002; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008). It is in the contact with clients that the service is delivered and any held perceptions of the brand cannot be confirmed or disregarded before then (Davis,

2007). Furthermore, the perceived quality of the services is often a result of collaboration between the firm delivering the service and the client implementing it (Bettencourt et al., 2002; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). Thus, since the majority of the steps in the buying process consist of the firm having contact with clients these specific sector characteristics are implied to be observable in this process.

The definition of the brand varying in scope and focus

With the increasing awareness of the brand's importance within different industries and sectors, the definition of a brand should be discussed. The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (American Marketing Association, 1960). This description focuses quite narrowly on what a brand is, the tangible components of the brand, but is limited in the description of its functions and neglect mentioning what constructs the brand. While this definition of a brand certainly is valid in various market contexts (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006) it does not consider what the variations in context imply. Furthermore, other definitions of a brand are more wide and inclusive when describing both its functions and what constructs the brand, as will be discussed below.

The focus of the thesis lies in branding, which implies an emphasis on the actions undertaken (by firms) relating to the brand. A model widening the definition to include the construction of the brand is 'The Brand Triangle' consisting of the company, its customers and its co-operators (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006, p.55). The triangle suggest a facilitation of connection between the elements that constructs the brand and the model recognise these main elements; the company, the customers and the co-operators, as influencing the brand, hence their actions have an impact on how the brand is created. An additional interest of the thesis is also the chain of influence running the opposite way, how the brand influences the firm through attracting certain customers and co-operators. Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) state that "The brand is the one thing that connects everything across all touch points" (p. 56). Not only does multiple stakeholders have an impact on the creation and construction of the brand, the brand itself is part of influencing the connection between the stakeholders, hence suggesting an adjustment of the triangle to be more like a circle of cause and effects. Focusing on the brand as "the one thing" that enables this raises the question of what functions the brand has and what benefits the brand facilitate.

Some widely accepted brand definitions include the functions of the brand in the definitions themselves. By this suggesting that they should be applicable independent of the industry context. A combined description of the brand and its functions by Dunn and Davis (2004) and Knapp

(2000) state that a B2B brand differentiate, reduce complexity and simplify the decision-making process. Anderson and Naurus (2004) supports the cross-industry application of the definition of functions by stating that brands serve exactly the same general purpose in B2B markets as they do in B2C markets. However literature and research specifically regarding the different industry contexts gives voice to differences between industries, somewhat challenging the transferability of the brand definition between industries. Depending on focus in context, different authors are adding on functions, or suggesting an adjusted relative importance of the functions.

The suggested relative importance of different functions, depending on industry or sector, is something that is emphasised in the thesis and will be further discussed with an emphasis on the specifics of the KIBS sector. However, relating to the above discussed definitions, we most closely support Kotler and Pfoertsch's (2006) statement that "The brand is the one thing that connects everything across all touch points" (p. 56).

Branding of services

Following on the earlier discussion considering varying meaning of the brand depending on its context, we will arrive at a focus on the brand within the KIBS sector. However, since the research within the area is limited, theories covering the broader service brands and branding of services are presented as a first step in narrowing the frame.

The importance of the brand for service firms is emphasised by many researchers. (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Davis, 2007; Bagdonienė et al., 2007). The corporate brand, or brand name, is suggested to be especially important for service firms since the company name is the same as the brand name. This is a contrast to traditional producing companies where the product is the primary representation of the brand (Bagdonienė et al, 2007; Berry, 2000).

Services are characteristically intangible, which makes it difficult for consumers to find distinct reference points for the brand values (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). An additional challenge for services is the risk the consumers perceive since they are unable to see the product prior to the purchase and they are often becoming risk averse. A well-known brand having certain brand values connected to it is argued to be perceived as a less risky choice. (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; Davis, 2007) Following this, it is suggested that the brand is exceptionally important for the long-term success of services, since it offers an opportunity to 'tangibilize' the service and thus reduce the risk for customers. (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; De Chernatony et al., 2001). Service brands are therefore implied to generate benefits for firms' who successfully can create strong brands. The next section will therefore elaborate on the construction of a service brand.

Construction of a service brand

In order to get an improved foundation for the understanding of the brand's construction within the KIBS sector theories regarding the construction of a service brand are presented.

Both De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2001) and Davis (2007) describe how service brands' values are created over-time, both through the internal corporate culture and through the relationship with the clients, as well as their perception of the companies' performance. Further, Davis (2007) also discusses how the brand values are neither confirmed nor discarded until the consumer uses the service, implying that the brand image as such is not actually created until at the moment of the service delivery. This highlights the importance for the firm to reduce the gap between the promised and the perceived service experience in order to create a strong brand image. This would imply that the creation of the brand (creation of the brand values) is a long-term process, but also that the values connected to the brand are easily discarded if the company fail to deliver at the service encounter (Davis (2007)).

Commonly stated in theory considering service branding is that internal branding is of great importance in order for the company to deliver a consistent brand image. (De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Brodie, Whittome & Brush, 2009; Berry, 2002; De Chernatony, Harris & McDonald, 2001). De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2001) elaborates on how the brand should represent the firm's values and culture and that it is therefore necessary to involve the employees.

Even though service branding theories facilitate a bettered understanding for the construction of the brand within the KIBS sector, the sector characteristics propose certain differences that will be discussed in the following section.

Difference between construction of service brands and construction of KIBS brands

Comparing the earlier discussion, regarding the employees' importance in the creation of the brand, to the KIBS sector it is argued that characteristics of the employees are different in a KIBS firm (Windrum & Tomlinson, 1999). Firstly, the "frontline workers" are intellectually skilled, in comparison to other service firms where this is mainly a characteristic for the executive and support functions (Alvesson, 2000). Secondly, the individual employees are suggested to play an even more critical role in these firms since their motivations and characteristics have a large impact on the perception of the firm (European Commission, 2012).

Thirdly, the service delivery is characterised by certain specifics that differ from those of similar situations in traditional service firms. In KIBS firms the delivery of the service is more intimate, highlighting the importance of the consumer interaction (Abecassis-Moedas, Mahmoud-Jouini, Dell'Era, Manceau & Verganti, 2012). The importance of the firm-client interaction within the

sector is also stressed by Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė (2008) who states that the relationships between the KIBS firms and their clients are dependent on some key factors. These include commitment and trust, experience, satisfaction with the experience, and communication. Since the clients' need for knowledge is hard to recognise and there is a need to explain the value the knowledge firm can contribute with, elements of trust are needed, emphasising the need for relationships (Eppler & Will, 2001).

Fourthly, the service encounter is characterised by direct transfer of knowledge between the firm and the client as well as creation of new knowledge through the interaction (Windrum & Tomlinson, 1999).

Further emphasised as a difference between KIBS firms and other service firms is how all stakeholders, and not just consumers, are participants in the construction of the brand (Eppler & Will, 2001). Davis (2007) elaborates on how all product experiences and service perceptions meld with the brand associations over time and how this affects the reputation of the firm in both internal and external stakeholders' minds.

Due to the importance of the different stakeholders, De Chernatony (2001) suggests that service brands would benefit from using a corporate branding perspective in order to create a coherent brand towards all stakeholders. According to Eppler and Will (2001) this would be of even more importance to KIBS firms since the company is equal with the corporate brand in the minds of the clients'. This implies that KIBS firms' should strive to connect the various competences within the firm to one another and thereafter communicate the same message on all levels, to all stakeholders (Eppler & Will, 2001). This do in turn imply an emphasised importance of both the personality and the competences of the individual employees and their ability to interact with the clients.

Characteristics and functions of a knowledge brand

While the above section discussed the differences between the construction of a service brand compared to a KIBS brand this section focus more narrowly on the latter and elaborates on the characteristics and functions of a knowledge brand.

One of the peculiarities with KIBS firms is that "knowledge forms their commodity and marketplace as well as their source of competitive advantage" (Huggins & Weir, 2012, p. 261). Knowledge is defined by Eppler and Will (2001) as "a strategic resource which consists of the skill and capabilities which individuals, teams, and organizations use for problem solving" (p. 2). They further describing how the certain characteristics of knowledge branding separate it from product and service branding. Firstly, the actual need for knowledge is often implicit and not easily

recognized by the potential consumer. Secondly, a knowledge brand needs to be put into a context to reveal its potential value as opposed to the utility of products or services that requires little or no explanation. Finally, the analytical tools and strategies used in the transfer, and creation, of knowledge remain with both the client and the firm after the service delivery. (Eppler & Will, 2001)

Focusing on the function of the brand, Eppler and Will (2001) further propose that the brand has four functions for a company supplying knowledge; materialisation, legitimisation, simplification and differentiation. In other words, the brand firstly makes the invisible value proposition both visible and tangible through the connection to “symbols, slogans, artefacts or personalities” (Eppler & Will, 2001, p.450), thus materializes the service offering. Secondly the brand legitimises the single competences by connecting them to the institution, the firm, which offers them. Thirdly, this further leads to simplification of the complex offer that a skill or competence is (Eppler & Will, 2001). Fourthly, the brand proposes an opportunity to emphasise certain distinguished characteristics and competences, enabling differentiation from the competitors. (Eppler & Will, 2001)

In addition to the above stated functions, other theories considering function of knowledge brands (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008) argues that the brand can decrease clients’ sensitivity for price, also confirmed by Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) in more general branding theories. Also relating to price, but rather focusing on how to strategically manage the price, Kotler (2004) suggest that firms can use value-based pricing in order to attract new clients. Noteworthy is how this is suggested for firms as part of their strategic management (Kotler, 2004).

The brand within Knowledge Intensive Business Service (KIBS) sector

Arriving at a focus on branding in the KIBS sector, theories from the above sections are considered, with additions from theories considering KIBS more specifically.

It is suggested that KIBS firms are dependent on the client having knowledge and understanding about the firm’s offerings in order to obtain any initial relation (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). The clients’ ability to understand the firms’ offerings in turn implies an emphasised importance of the brand. This since the corporate name, the name of the firm, is equalized with the brand and additionally, since the possibilities to brand certain offerings are regarded limited (Berry, 2000; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008). Thus the reasoning implies that, the brand as a general complexity reducer is important in order to ease the clients’ understanding in the firms’ offerings, which in turn is essential in the relationship creation (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). Similarly, Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007) state that increased information efficiency is one of the most important brand functions in the B2B industry, and other authors are suggesting the brand as a

mean to “tangibilize services” in a B2B and B2B-service context (Ballentyne & Atiken, 2007; De Chernatony et al., 2001). This implies that the brand has an ability to aid the clients’ understanding of the KIBS firms’ offerings and thereby facilitate the relation in the pre-relationship stage.

The brand’s earlier mentioned function as a complexity reducer (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008) as well as its ability to serve as a guarantee of quality and performance (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007) also relates to the need for a means to facilitate management of expectations. A need that characterises the KIBS sector where many clients are said to have implicit and unrealistic expectations of the services offered (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008). Hence, suggesting possibilities to leverage the brand when assessing the requirement to facilitate management of expectations. Such a risk do further imply that firms neglecting undertaking adequate actions risk to jeopardize important customer satisfaction (Davis, 2007) and relationship building (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008).

Communication has been emphasized as a key factor in the important KIBS firm–client relationship development (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). Since one function of the brand is communication of beneficial functions (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2007) communication as key suggests for benefits with brands facilitating communication within the sector. Not referring specifically to branding Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė (2008) further states that in the KIBS sector the competitive advantage is dependent on communicating both traditional factors leading to competitiveness as well as more specific KIBS factors. The traditional success factors include flexibility, reputation and ability to identify clients’ needs. Specific KIBS success factors are stated to be specialization in knowledge, innovativeness and creativeness. Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) agree when they, in other words, state that highly innovative products or services that dispose of a unique selling proposition (USP) have the best potential for a successful brand.

Strategy theories

Importance of brand management

In the previous sections theories considering the brands function and construction within different context have been discussed. To obtain the theoretical base needed in order to facilitate an understanding of the meaning of the brand these theories are complimented with theories on brand management.

It is suggested that the special characteristics of services result in certain demands on brand management in order for the firm to create a successful service brand (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; De Chernatony et al., 2001). The importance of brand management is further supported by researchers suggesting that the largest difference between branding of services and branding of products does not lie in the concept of the brand, but rather in the execution of the brand strategy (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003).

Santos-Vijande et al. (2013) state that important dimensions in a brand management system are to have the brand supported by the corporate culture and to establish an internal branding concept. This highlights the importance of the employees' collaboration in commuting the brand in contact with the customers. At the best develop ties with the brand and becoming 'brand ambassadors'. Of importance is also the need to treat the brand as a core strategic resource (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

Importance of brand management leading to focus on capabilities

Broader branding perspectives further emphasise the need to see the brand as a resource and a strategic asset (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007), pointing out the importance of branding and branding activities. However they do not in large acknowledge, what means, or capabilities, that are needed in these processes in order to enable the needed behaviour by the firm.

When branding literature more specifically considers management of the brand, the focus is primary on the constructs that are important. In other words, the different stakeholders and the activities they need to undertake rather than the firm's (internal) capability to execute these management activities. Relating to more industry specific views, it has been suggested that branding in the service sector is dependent on the execution of the brand strategy (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). Hence, has a focus on branding as the outcome of how able the firm is to undertake the actions needed to develop a strong brand.

Some authors further regard branding or elements of branding as capabilities (Merrilles et al., 2010; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013) Still, the understanding of what capabilities is, what capabilities are required to facilitate the branding efforts or how the firm becomes capable of executing the activities leveraging on these capabilities, are not often emphasized in branding literature. Researchers concerned with brand management within the specific sub-sector of Knowledge Intensive Business Services partly support this by stating “little research examines how firms should manage their brands internally“(Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

This suggests that even though brand management is implied to be of importance for the creation of the brand within the sector, further specifications on how this should be done has not been thoroughly researched.

Santos-Vijande et al. (2013) conceptualize brand management as dynamic capabilities and propose an exception by emphasizing the focus of the implementation of the activities needed in order to develop a strong brand. The outcome is suggested to be based on the firm’s ability to manage some fundamental elements; (I) Develop a marketing strategy coherent with the desired brand image; (II) having a long-term focus and set goals when planning the brand management. The firm also need to (III) evaluate the evolution in the brand image and value in the market and (IV) allocate the resources necessary for the brand management.(Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

This propose insight into some processes needed, however do not further specify what capabilities are required in order to facilitate the establishment of these processes. Thus we see a need to broaden the theoretical frame and extend it to theories regarding management strategy in general and dynamic capabilities in particular (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2001), in order to facilitate our understanding of how the brand is managed within the sector.

Understanding of capabilities leverage the understanding of branding

The logic proposed is that by incorporating literature concerning capabilities this will facilitate a greater understanding regarding the execution of brand management since the capabilities are means to successful branding (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2001; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013)

Insights can be gained by highlighting the difference between foremost valuing the brand as a resource, which is prominent in the branding literature (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007), or seeing the brand as a result of capabilities. Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) propose, “Resources per se cannot do anything. What is important is the capacity to utilize resources effectively, that is, a capability” (p. 4). Following this, the brand is considered the ‘resource’, which is constructed by the firm’s ability to utilize these capabilities in executing the distinct branding activities. This since it

is these branding activities that construct the brand and communicate it to the external stakeholders,

Furthermore, the approach emphasizes routines as the key driver in developing the capabilities. The capabilities are described as organizational processes by which a firm codifies tacit knowledge and experiences (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Applied to the branding context this implies that capabilities are developed through codifying the tacit knowledge that exists within the firm, in order to better use these capabilities in the execution of the branding activities. However, it is suggested for the routines to further be effected by the market context in which the firm operates (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Hence, the firm needs to consider its market context when evaluating how inflexible the implemented routines should be, since they in turn affect the firm's capability in execution of the branding activities. This since the market context is suggested to have indirect effect on how the firm should strategize its branding efforts. Something that has also been emphasized by Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007), however while they focus on differences in market context, Eisenhardt and Martin (2000), takes a more practical approach, relating the market context to the degree the firm should establish the routines needed in order to facilitate the development and management of a strong brand.

Analysis

In this chapter we present the analysis based on the analytical framework and the empirical study. We present 14 themes based on our findings, which are structured according to the different steps of the buying process.

Background to the analysis

The aim of the thesis is to explore the meaning of the brand through the brands construction and management within the KIBS sector. This implies a focus on branding activities undertaken. The activities that affect the creation of the brand can be found within the KIBS firms, and can (and should) have a starting point in identifying the firms' core strengths but could be activities such as leverage a coherent corporate culture (De Chernatony, 2001). This focus remain, however due to initial observations of the participants limited acknowledgement of activities aiming at constructing the brand, the focus is also directed to the function of the brand.

Important activities can also be found outside the firm. These activities include, but are not limited to, marketing communication efforts. Rather, the creation and function of the brand happen through the accumulated communication in every contact point with stakeholders (De Chernatony & Segal-Horn , 2001; Davis, 2007; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007) One of the most frequent and important contacts are with clients (Abecassis-Moedas et. al, 2012; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). Therefore the creation and function of the brand can be displayed through exploring the communication with the firms' clients in particular. For this reason a significant part of the empirical study constitutes of interviews conducted with the firms' clients.

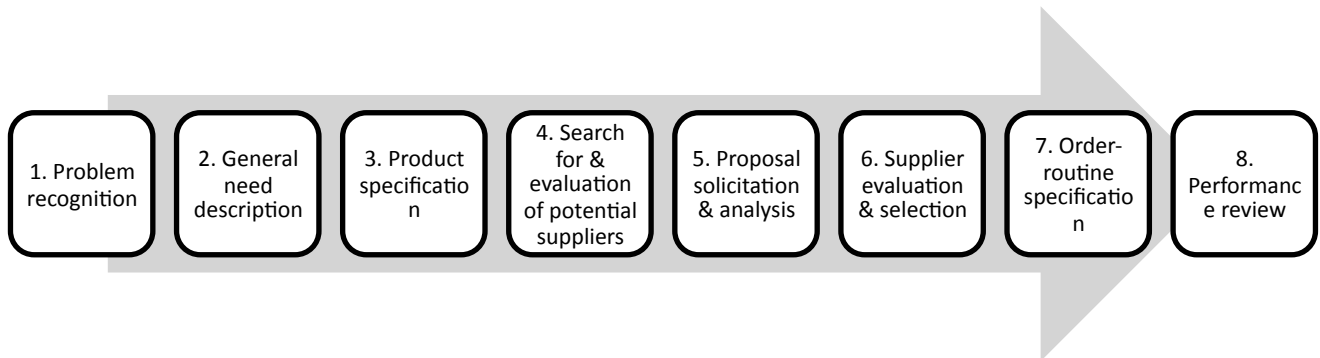
Thus, everything communicates when it comes to building and developing a brand in the KIBS sector and this has been a consideration in the following analysis of the empirical material.

The frame and the structure of the analysis

To ease the read, the analysis is structured with the themes being incorporated into the buying process (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006, p. 29) found in “Figure 2: The buying process”.

Figure 2: The buying process

From “B2B brand management” (p.29) by P. Kotler, P. & W. Pfoertsch, 2006, Berlin: Springer. Copyright Kotler, P. & Pfoertsch, W & Springer 2006.

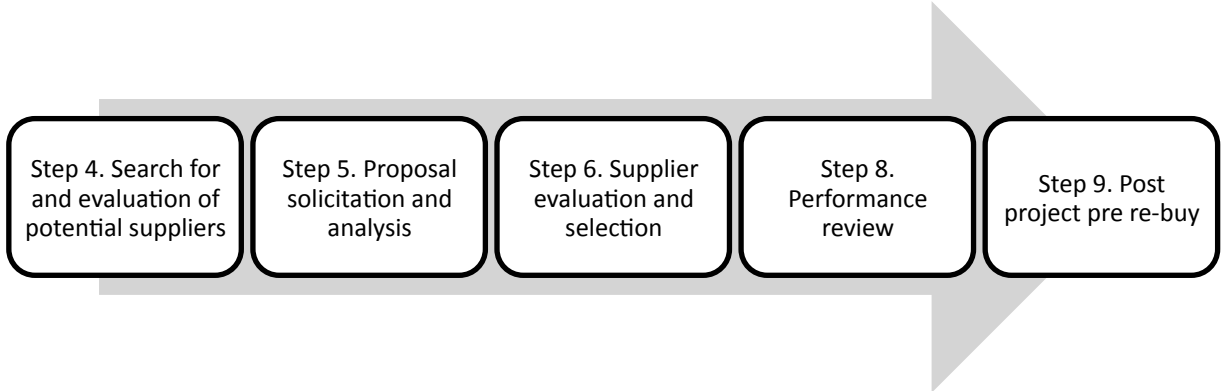


The brand is argued to be of importance primarily from step four ‘Search for and evaluation of potential suppliers’ when it can be observed to affect the clients’ consideration set. It is stated that branding can speed up the process (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). The brand is further relevant in the following step five and six in the buying process; ‘Proposal solicitation and analysis’, ‘Supplier evaluation and selection’. (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). However, more recent research suggests for further emphasize of branding in eight: ‘Performance review’. This since the firms’ brand values cannot be confirmed before the service is used (Davis, 2007) and the brand is simultaneously constructed. In addition, it is suggested that it is first when the client’s performance is enhanced as an effect of the firm’s service delivery, that the KIBS firm’s financial performance will be improved (Lee & Beak, 2008). This requires a long term focus (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013) which implies for the branding being important even *after* ‘Step 8. Performance review’ (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). We therefore find it motivated to include an additional step. Therefore ‘step 9. Post project pre re-buy’ is added to the framework of the analysis. We argue that this additional step complement the steps commonly referred to and that it better mirrors the observed buying process for KIBS firms’. The framework of the analysis will consequently con-

sist of describing the brands relevance and function in 'step 4. Search for and evaluation of potential suppliers', 'step 5. Proposal solicitation and analysis', 'step 6. Supplier evaluation and selection', 'Step 8. Performance review' and finally 'step 9. Post project pre re-buy' in the buying process (Seen in Figure 3 – Framework for the analysis).

Figure 3: Framework for the analysis

Modified reproduction from "B2B brand management" (p.29) by P. Kotler, P. & W. Pfoertsch, 2006, Berlin: Springer. Copyright Kotler, P. & Pfoertsch, W & Springer 2006.



Elements outside the frame of the thesis are of course having implications on the buying process (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). However important, these are not focused in the analysis in order to allow for a primary focus on branding. Additional elements are incorporated in the analysis to different extents. This in order to gain insights into the KIBS sector, which is required to fulfil the aim of gaining insights into the meaning of the brand within the specific sector. However the additional elements relative importance to the buying process compared to the brand are not argued to be mirrored correctly, due to the limitations in the scope of the thesis.

Presentation of analysis

Step 4: Search for and evaluation of potential suppliers

Knowledgeable clients implying knowledgeable buying centres

The role of the buying centres is acknowledged as important in theories regarding B2B branding (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). This is supported by the participants in the study. In accordance with theories, firm representatives are experiencing initial challenges due to clients' limited awareness of the firms' different service offerings and how the offerings support the clients' business (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008).

Interviewer: "Are you aware of what service offerings the firm has in addition to the service your firm bought?"

Participant: "No, I can't say I am."

Martin, finance client

Theories regarding the KIBS sector characteristics are supporting the important role of the buying centres by emphasizing the part clients play in identifying and understanding the service offering (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). The theories suggest the complexity of the services as the reason to why there is a need to clearly define the scope of the project. This is partly supported by the participants in the study. In accordance with theories participants continuously refer to the initial phase of the collaboration as particularly crucial for the outcome of the project. Multiple statements were also referring to problems both with initially defining the scope of the project and to agree on this definition throughout the collaboration process.

"I regard the start-up phase as extremely important. Because if you hit of on the wrong track you are going to end up with even more errors in the end. So therefore it is very important to have a thorough briefing beforehand: 'What is it that we are after?'"

Martin, finance client

"Prior to the initiation of a project it needs to be crystal clear that 'this is what we are going to do, this is what we are going to find out, it will take this long, these are the resources we will need'. And it is required of us to do this internally, but also to be clear towards the clients in communicating what information we need from them and what information we will be able to extract. Be distinct with these kind of things."

Adam, Maximize, analyst

However what is not emphasised in theory as a reason for the difficulties is the increased expertise of the clients and the buying centres and the implications this has on the buying process. Firstly, the degree of expert knowledge held by the clients result in them being able to better compare the service offerings. The clients' increased ability to rate the offerings result in an increased need to distinguish offerings from other firms. This puts additional pressure on the firms' capability to correctly define and communicate their offering. Otherwise the services, even though argued to be complex and inherently intangible (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003) risk to become 'generic' or comparable. Comparability in turn intensifies the competition, hence implying an increased need to undertake efforts aiming at differentiation or branding (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006).

The difference between clients' knowledge and competence, and the implications of that, are described by a partner and analyst:

"...to be honest the private equity funds [clients] are extremely competent people. They have often worked as consultants, have high educations. They are very sharp and informed regarding what they are doing. In that sense they are extremely demanding as clients. While industry clients are very competent and informed in what they are doing in their industry they might not have the time to work as much with strategy...Therefore they are often very pleasant as clients."

Maja, Maximize, partner

And further, as stated by one of the firm's clients:

"We are extremely critical buyers. It is tough when they are 'drop outs' from one of the firms and we are 'drop-outs' from another firm but working here now. That means two very knowledgeable sellers and buyers are meeting."

Jens, finance client

Furthermore, the clients' ability to 'do the job themselves' proposes an alternative to hiring a firm. That risk decreasing the demand for the service. This risk is confirmed by a client:

"The need is almost always there, it is more about 'how much should we do in-house and how much we should outsource in order to get it done faster and possibly better? [...] we are much more focused in that sense that we approach the firms with a specific question when we have done much of the ground work."

Jens, finance client

The increased importance of the buying centres due to the complexity inherited in service offerings is thus confirmed (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). The participants' statements also illustrate difficulties with initially defining the scope and the value of the service (Eppler & Will, 2001; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). However, in addition to this and opposite to what is commonly

emphasized, it is not the clients' *lack* of knowledge or competence in comparison to the firms that create the complexity. Rather, the clients themselves are 'knowledge workers' and possess comparable competence to define the need of the service, the scope and the expected outcome of the service delivery. This do in turn suggest the clients to be more able to compare the firms and their offering, again implying additional pressure on the KIBS firms' ability to differentiate their firms and their offerings from each other.

Firms need to be differentiated but what do they need to be different from?

The need to hire a KIBS firm is observed to emerge either through the firm calling the client and making them aware of a need or by the client contacting the firm, but in most cases it is a combination of those. The clients contact the firm following being previously contacted by the firms in the firms' attempt to create a relation. When the need to hire a KIBS firm later emerges, the clients tend to choose between a few firms that they have in their consideration set. These are then invited to present a proposal on the project. This sequence of events confirms that firms are dependant of the clients' awareness about the firm's offerings in order to obtain any initial relation (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008).

The importance of being in the clients consideration set is illustrated by the following statements:

"...we usually let more than one [firm] present an offer, but we do have some favorites and those [are the ones which] can come..."

Martin, finance client

"I continuously meet consultants and from time to time I meet someone new and someone that might be suitable. But we very rarely hire consultants and then it can be one of those you have recently met, that you feel that they might be suitable here..."

Gunnar, industry client

In order to be considered and get the opportunity to present an offer the firm need to have top-of-mind awareness in the minds of the client (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008), which is also confirmed during interviews with the clients. The KIBS sector as a competitive landscape is commonly described as one where one can easily distinguish a few market leaders. These market leaders referred to as 'tier one' firms', hold top-of-mind positions, which is illustrated in the study when the participants (both the KIBS firm representatives and the interviewed clients are asked to mention a firm within the sector. These few 'tier one' firms' names are mentioned by all participants.

At the same time, the top-of-mind awareness of firms other than the few 'tier one' firms' names is a very limited set. However, that the awareness of the existence of additional players in general is broad, both among firm representatives and clients, is illustrated when representatives describe the competitive landscape. The 'market challenging firms' are often Small-Medium-Enterprises (SME), holding less strong brand names. One of the participants describes how it is an abundance of consultancy firms and suggests that:

"There are 'thirteen to the dozen' consultancy firms"

Jonas, Maximize, partner

However, the statement also illustrates how the ability to further specify company names often is much more of a challenge, suggesting low transparency and an unawareness of firms other than the 'tier one' firms with well-known company names and brands.

Interviewer: "Do one know of any other, except for those two largest?"

Participant: "I do not know of any other. That's how it is. I don't."

Oscar, industry client

The limitation in awareness of the competitive landscape is not suggested to have been a major consideration of the studied firm, with one partner of Maximize stating:

"Well...it is a good question...It is probably partly because the players are rather small, that could be it. Also that you put less..[laughs]. We try to teach our clients to be aware of their market, but we ourselves might not be as aware...or it is pretty obvious. We are not as aware of our competitors as we want our clients to be [of theirs]."

Richard, Maximize, partner

Further, when asked how generally aware one is of the 'smaller' firms or "firms of similar characteristic or size as your organization", the managing partner at Maximize, Claes, states:

"You mean the market players like us? Pretty low awareness...most people know of McKinsey and then the awareness about BCG and Banes might be a little lower and then even lower of 'tier three'...and then it is firms like ours that are very few...Very low awareness within the market"

Claes, Maximize, managing partner

The above illustrates what can be argued to be one of our most interesting observations. Branding theories are argued to be generally acknowledged in the B2B industry (Kotler & Pfertsch, 2006). The KIBS sector is a sub-sector within the B2B industry and distinctions are not commonly made between sectors when discussing branding. An interpretation of that implies branding to be acknowledged among the firms representing the KIBS sector. But the limited aware-

ness of the competitors suggests that this is not the case. In order to undertake branding efforts the participants should arguably express a better awareness of their market and their competitors. This since awareness of competitors is part of the starting point in order to undertake branding efforts and develop a strong brand (Santos-Vijande et al, 2013). However, as illustrated, such awareness is not observed to exist among the participants. Even though acknowledging the competition to propose a challenge, an inability to further specify the competitors suggest acting upon it an even greater challenge.

Therefore, rather than illustrating an acceptance and acknowledgement of branding, the participants express some reluctance in acknowledging the possible meaning of the brand. Thus suggest support for the argument that there is a need for firms to improve their branding efforts (Kotler, 2004). This observation and discussion will be further elaborated in the analysis.

Inadequate perception of the competition results in inadequate branding efforts

The 'tier one' firms' brands function as a means for stakeholders to understand their position and their offering (Eppler & Will, 2001; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Which in turn makes it easier for the firms and clients within the sector to identify what differences there are between these 'tier one' firms and smaller players. This is in accordance with Eppler and Will's (2001) suggestion that the brand proposes an opportunity to emphasise certain characteristics and thereby enabling differentiation from the competitors.

The ability to identify differences is also beneficial for the smaller firms in terms of better benchmarking. This can facilitate their process of creating a position and starting to develop an identity by differentiating themselves from the 'tier one' firms. However it is observed to limit their awareness of other players more similar to themselves, and lessens their ability to objectively consider more similar players in addition to the 'tier one' firms.

This proposes a risk for the smaller firms. When focus is on engaging in efforts to distinguish themselves from the 'tier one' firms, they are missing to also identify distinguishing features of other competitors. As a result, most of the smaller firms are pushing the same (or similar) strengths and distinguishing features.

"Yes, there are a lot of firms within this sector. And a lot of small ones. And what separates...it is probably easier to talk about what separates large and small firms than what separates small firms [from each other]. Besides, I do not have that large insight into other small firms either."

Jonas, Maximize, partner

This illustrates an observed gap that exist between players that the firms perceive as their main competitors and players that the clients consider to be competitors and comparable when evaluating what firm to hire. Firms are regarding the 'tier one' firms with strong brand names and certain characteristics as their competitors. However this definition of competitive landscape is not coherent between all stakeholders. The clients do not evaluate the 'tier one firms' on the same basis as they evaluate the smaller firms. To the clients, the smaller firms are 'more similar', more comparable to each other in terms of actual position and offering. The clients discriminate between the offerings from large 'tier one firms' and offerings from smaller firms, while the smaller firms are perceived to offer the same service. This results in the firms' risking communicating strengths as unique selling propositions (USP's) (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006) that will not improve the clients' evaluation of the firm. Or alternatively, risks communicate strengths that the client does not value as unique to the specific firm.

*"That they come here, want to buy me lunch or present themselves. And then you try them. Because it is kind of... 'same s**t different name' ...with these small firms[...]"*
Jens, financial client

The statement illustrates firstly how clients have problems distinguishing differences between the firms. It also shows how the lack of initial awareness of differences increases the need of other ways to get considered by the client, exemplified here as 'lunch'. The observed differences regarding perceived competition is further illustrated by a statement from a client to Maximize describing the differences between larger and smaller firms by comparing their brand to car brands:

"If you're buying a Fiat you'll get a Fiat...If you're buying a Mercedes you'll get a Mercedes"
Jens, financial client

This is contrasting to the different view held by one of Maximize's managing partners:

Participant, Maximize: "We are often comparing ourselves with the big firms that you are probably aware of, McKinsey etc..."

Interviewer: "And if you were to compare yourself with the smaller firms in Sweden? Or, why are you making the active choice not to do so?"

Participant: "Well, we are doing that as well [pause] but it is natural that it is the ['tier one firms'] that we come across. They [the 'tier one' firms] are most frequently the ones that we compete against. When exposed to competition there are these American firms [...]and only occasionally one in a comparable size to ours. But we have a limited presence while the large firms have a large presence"

Claes, Maximize, managing partner

Not being aware of the competitive landscape is troublesome. It suggests implications on branding since the firms need to consider what positions on the market that can give relative advantage in order to define and communicate unique brand strengths (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). The above statements suggest that this awareness does not exist. Additionally, this is again demonstrating the argued unawareness of branding and unawareness of the brands function observed within the sector.

In 'step 4: Search for and evaluation of potential suppliers' insights have been gained regarding how the knowledgeable buying centres within the sector are implied to put additional pressure on the KIBS firms' ability to differentiate their firms and their offerings from each other. Also described is how the firms need to have top-of-mind awareness with the clients to be a considered alternative. However, further stressed is how the firms' unawareness of their competitive landscape proposes difficulties for them to see what positions on the market that can give relative advantage. The unawareness risk to further lead to missed opportunities to communicate brand strengths or unique selling propositions (USP's). Concluding, it is suggested that there is a need to manage and communicate a brand, however the participants are argued to be reluctant to acknowledging the meaning of the brand within the sector, which further leads to difficulties for the firms to understand how it can be created.

Step 5: Proposal solicitation and analysis

Premium brand and premium price VS premium performance but pressure on price

Problem follows the non-coherent definition of competition discussed in the previous step. When the market challengers, in large, focus on benchmarking against these strong brands they are observed to fail to define and effectively communicate distinct USP's and benefits of their own. As Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė (2008) suggest, the firms are dependent on the client having knowledge and understanding of the firm's specific offering in the initial relation. Therefore, the inability of the firms within the sector to distinguish themselves from one and another is suggested to have contributed to lead the market towards competing on price. With price reductions for new clients being mentioned as a commonly used strategy.

"I think that some sort of trust must exist initially, but then it is also like we can offer some first time-discounts, a lower price, to attract a new client to choose us, so in that way it is a little like we need to compensate for this lack of trust"

Adam, Maximize, analyst

The 'tier one' firms' brands have embedded perceived benefits that the clients are willing to pay price premium for (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007). A lower price point compared to the market lead-

ers is often implied by being a 'market challengers', and for less strong brands, in order to stay competitive. A competitive (lower) pricing strategy can be part of the firms marketing mix in order to attract new clients (Kotler, 2004). Even so, there is a danger in using this as the only tool to compete or distinguish the firm from competition. Such a danger is suggested to be prevalent due to the argued unawareness of the competitive landscape and an inability to define and communicate additional strong USP's. Not complimenting a lower price with a coherent branding strategy risks limiting the clients perception of the firm as only offering a 'good enough' service but to a lower price. This chain of consequences is confirmed by the following statements.

"In many cases, in the minds of the clients, it does not matter that much, it is a rather similar product that the client feel that she buys from different management consultancy firms and that is where our challenge lies how we differentiate ourselves from others"

Adam, Maximize, analyst

"I call them 'the slightly cheaper firms', often 'drop outs' from one of the 'tier one' firms that are working for half the price"

Jens, financial client

This illustrates how the KIBS firms are aware of the perceived lack of differentiating features or unique strengths. It also confirm the discussion regarding how the clients' ability to distinguish the firms often is limited to discriminating between 'tier one' firms and 'the rest' or 'the slightly cheaper firms'.

According to the clients, price is often their main consideration and base of evaluation. They are observed to be aware of the market challenging firms' need to offer low prices and how this benefits them as clients.

"...I think we are rather 'unfaithful' in the sense that we are going for differences...pressure on price and things like that [...] Many of the smaller [firms] that are growing are delivering good [services], like a larger firm, but only charges half the price"

Jens, financial client

This suggests for a need to build a brand communicating enough USP's in order to deviate from such a disadvantageous position. Even though proposing a challenge, it also suggest for possible advantages to be gained for firms that successfully can identify and build a brand. This is supported in theory, suggesting benefits of a strong brand is that it makes client's less sensitive to price (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). However, the awareness of such need or the possible advantages are not observed to be anchored among the participants.

The need to find specific firm strengths and be specific when communicating them

The firms are to some extent aware of the clients' inability to separate the firms' offers and the need for them to differentiate from their competitors. However, the strategy used when trying to do so is observed to be limited to benchmarking other competitors. This becomes questionable since firms might have very different unique strengths as well as offer diversified benefits for potential clients. What is further significant is that most firms seem to limit the benchmarking to the very few companies with brand names that people are aware of, the firms that have top-of-mind awareness, the so called 'tier one' firms within the sector. The 'tier one' firms are, on many aspects, argued to be significantly different from 'the market challengers' and it is therefore not appropriate to simply resemble their communication strategies. How the 'tier one' firms can leverage their unique resources is further described below.

The 'tier one' firms use their relative advantage in terms of human capital, and global structure capital to communicate an ability to 'be good at everything'. They have the base of available resources needed in order to successfully claim that they are 'good at everything', making their firm's strength into their company brand's USP that the clients then pay a premium price to get use of. A client to Maximize suggests:

"They have a global business, if let's say there is a company that manufactures their products on another continent, then it is a clear advantage if you are Bain or McKinsey because they have local presence all over the world. So they can put together a team that is not Stockholm based. There is nothing wrong with consultants working in Stockholm, but if you want a broader perspective the [large ones] are definitely useful"

Max, finance client

The 'tier one' firms have the resources to communicate this as their USP with proven repute.

The benchmarking against the 'tier one' firms have influenced market challenging firms to the extent that they strive to copy their way of communicating that they are also 'good at everything'. This lead to difficulties in efficiently communicating the firm's service offerings. This makes the USP, or specific area of competence each firm possess, hard for the clients to convey. It rather creates problems such as lesser belief in all the firms' capabilities and credibility, resulting in clients despondently expressing:

"...but then at the same time with that sort of consultants, almost regardless of what I say that I want they say that they can do it."

Gunnar, industry client

This is interesting since transparency is continuously brought up in the interviews as a 'lead word' for credibility and trust. What additionally makes it interesting is that innovation and being innovative is described as a way to stay relevant within the Knowledge Intensive Business Service sector (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). Therefore this use of benchmarking, furthering neither transparency nor innovation, is in total opposition to advantageous strategies for the firms within the sector.

One possibility is that the firms are unaware of the importance of undertaking branding efforts strategically developed and motivated in coherence with the firm and its strengths (Santos-Vijande et al, 2013). Rather, inadequate benchmarking lead to the firm undertaking efforts, sometimes being more 'ad hoc' rather than strategic. Even though not thoroughly investigated, such an explanation is supported by the argued finding that the spread of acknowledgement of brand management is limited within the KIBS sector.

On the other hand, another possibility could be that the firms are aware of the importance of branding and the beneficial functions strong brands can imply but that they actively choose to not undertake branding efforts. Reasons for this could be that undertaking branding efforts would be possible but not profitable, hence not valued as important or beneficial. However such reasoning would suggest an opposite logic than argued by researchers who suggest branding to be an investment into competitive advantage and future profitability (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Actively undertaking strategic branding efforts has also been stated to be indirectly beneficial for the KIBS sector (Lee & Beak, 2008; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013) and is further supported by observations in the study elaborated on below.

Strategically targeted branding as a possible way to create a strong position within the KIBS sector

When both the participating clients and firm representatives are expressing why they admire, or would choose to work with, a certain firm they commonly express it to be because they feel that the firm is "the best at what they want to be best at". Or, put differently, because they have known brand strengths and USP's in relation to their competitors. This is similarly described in theory (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006) suggesting that innovative services that dispose of unique USP's have the best potential for a successful brand. The partner and creative director at WOW Branding describes why he admires certain competitors:

"Yes, well, when I say "good" I mean that they are good at what they want to be the best at. If you for example take Stockholm design lab, they are really good at design because that is what they are passionate about. And King, they are passionate about

commercials and they do that very well. And [...], if you should call us competitors, that is what reaches the customer"

Axel, WOW Branding, partner and creative director

This is further illustrated by participating clients, describing why they work with Maximize:

"How we are doing it is that we are mainly working with two firms in each area [of competence]"

Simon, finance client

"We have found a distinct function for them in terms of this role they can fill"

Max, finance client

The statements above illustrate how one way for market challenging KIBS firms to create a strong position for the firm is to strategically identify and offer something that distinguishes the firm from others and efficiently communicate this to potential clients (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013) This is confirmed by theories suggesting specialisation in knowledge (combined with innovativeness and creativeness) as leading to competitiveness (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008). Alternatively, Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė (2008) suggest market segmentation to be an important tool in the pre-relationship stage. This motivates the need to decide on who your potential clients are, rather than trying to reach everyone.

What both suggestions have in common is that the KIBS-firms that are market challengers could preferably benefit from strategically communicate a limited set of core strengths to a more specific group of potential clients. The advantages with such a strategy are further illustrated by the following statement:

"Mm, sometimes when we have lost a project I've heard it was against a more niche-firm and they hired the firm because they had done this before, had more specialization within the area [...] we are not using a niche strategy in that way."

Maja, Maximize, partner

Further illustrating possible disadvantages of not having a strong brand nor using a targeted strategy is the following statement:

"...they don't have the most well known name in the business. There are some challenges for Maximize to grow into other types of segments [that they have not proven their competence in]. Since they don't have the size or the ability to cover several continents or in other ways... so I think there's a need to be more focused when picking what clients to work with..."

Fredrik, industry client

Following this, it is suggested for the KIBS firms to connect their brand to a smaller set of specialised competences in order to communicate a clear message and by doing so find a distinct position in the minds of the clients. A small set of competences or a brand name communicating one distinct message is suggested to be necessary for service brands in general, since the intangible nature of the offerings create difficulties in discriminating between complex messages (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003).

"...today a, to us, unfamiliar person called and said that he had asked people in his network and they had said 'The people within Maximize, as I have met, they know [this specific competence], call them'. We are then organizing a meeting followed by him saying 'You seem to have the competence, shall we try a smaller collaboration to get to know each other?'. It is commonly happening like that."

Viktor, Maximize, founding partner

Once the firms have gained trust from the clients regarding their competences in this special area, the clients are more likely to accept that they have the competences to deliver within related areas as well. This is observed to be an important characteristic and is frequently supported by the participants:

"We are getting a lot of our projects just because we are so strongly associated with strategy. And then one thing leads to the other [...] So in that since we sort of resemble a 'Trojan horse'. We are rolling in a 'strategy-horse' and out steps numerous people with other creative competences [laugh]"

Axel, WOW Branding, partner and creative director

"They have found a smart niche doing this... So I would definitely use them again in that purpose. And one can certainly find other situations when they would be suitable in the earlier phases as well"

Max, finance client

Still, it is not enough for the firms to know what unique firm strengths they have if they fail to communicate them to their potential clients (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). Having the competence as a resource is not enough; the firms need to be capable of utilizing it (Eisenhart & Martin, 2000). This is consequently supported by observations in the study. At the studied firm Maximize Strategy Consultancy, the employees are observed to have a coherent view of what their firm's strengths are. They are describing what internal strengths they possess and what benefits clients can expect from collaborating with the firm. Still, they are failing to effectively communicate this outside the firm, arguably due to the lack of capabilities and knowledge on how to do so (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Whilst being relatively sure about the firms' strengths participants are also observed to display doubts regarding their capability to communicate this to external stakeholders.

Participant: "Yes, I believe so [that they are aware of the firms specific strengths and competences]. Then it probably differ quite a bit regarding how good one are to communicate and describe what distinguishes our firm from our competitors. But, I think that is how it is and we do have a coherent perception on how we distinguish ourselves."

Interviewee: "And do you think these [strengths] are recognized by the clients as well?"

Participant: "That is more uncertain. It is something we are trying to push but it is not certain."

Peter, Maximize, founding partner

When elaborating on their possible lack of capabilities to communicate the strengths one negative consequence is suggested:

"So that's when you can occasionally miss out. Either that the competitors have more industry specific competences or that they are displaying it in different ways. I mean that they are showing it in a better way, even though we also have it [the competence]. So those things are not necessarily the same thing."

Richard, Maximize, partner

The awareness of negative consequences and ability to identify the reason suggest that the neglecting of communication efforts is not only due to the observed lack of acknowledging communication efforts as important. The explanation could also possibly be a lack of routines and processes needed in order to develop communication capabilities (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

In 'Step 5: Proposal solicitation and analysis' an elaboration has been made regarding how the firms' difficulties in differentiating from each other have resulted in competition on price. Further implications are given on the meaning of the brand in order to deviate from this. In accordance with earlier discussion, the awareness of such need or the advantages of undertaking branding efforts are observed to not be anchored among the participants. Instead firms use benchmarking, furthering neither transparency nor innovation, which are elements argued to lead to competitive advantage in the sector. Possible explanations given are that the firms are unaware of the importance of undertaking strategically developed brand management activities or lack the developed routines and processes needed.

Step 6: supplier evaluation and selection

The meaning of the brand – branding as important in this sector as in any other B2C or B2B sector?

In the prior sections the analysis has proposed examples of how branding is not commonly acknowledged as important by the participants and what implications this is observed to have on the firm in the buying process. In this step, it is observed how strong brands *are* acknowledged as important hence further motivates a broader awareness of brand meaning and the role branding plays.

As when branding was critiqued for being irrelevant in the B2B industry as a whole it is commonly expressed by the participants that the brand is not of great importance in the KIBS sector. It is a people's business, a credibility business and a trust business – the human resources and their capabilities are the commodities and firms should be evaluated thereafter. The result is what ultimately counts. However true this is, the process and the results are hard to foresee in the evaluation step of the buying process (Bettencourt et al, 2002). It is observed that the 'market leaders', or 'tier one' firms benefit from their brands functioning as risk reducer (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006) when the client evaluates and selects what firm to hire. This is confirmed by the partner and creative director of WOW Branding, when talking about why clients initially choose to work with them or a certain firm:

"In the world of consultancy, one [the client] is in some ways buying an insurance. If you are hiring a consultancy firm that has an established reputé and it for some reason goes wrong it's not my fault [as a client]. They are supposed to be the best... If a CEO hires McKinsey to manage or fix a company and that fails the board can't just say 'What are you doing?'. 'What do you mean, they are supposed to be the best in the world!'. He [the client] cannot do anything else. So it is a lot like that."

Axel, WOW Branding, partner and creative director

Another statement similarly illustrating the brand's ability to function as a carrier of attributes that signals trust is given by a CEO of one of Mazimize's client firms:

"...One need to present [the choice of firm] to the board of directors and executives and these kinds of names [the 'bigger'/'more known' names] are naturally ranked higher since you are getting a 'mark of quality' with the name, If you are bringing in a smaller company there is a risk that there are doubts regarding their quality and their competence."

Fredrik, industry client

The above stated is also in accordance with Ballantyne and Aitken's (2007) and Davis' (2007) theories regarding how the customers' inability to see the product before they buy it often

makes them very risk averse. They further elaborate that a famous brand with certain brand values connected to it will be perceived as a less risky choice.

The people are the brands for firms with weaker brand names

With the exception of the 'tier one' firms' brands, the focus on firms' brands is argued to not be widely acknowledged within the sector. On the other hand, the employees, the individuals representing the firm, are observed to be of certain emphasized importance. Their importance to the firms and the meaning and function of the people can be argued to be extended beyond what is commonly discussed in branding theories. The people in the firm are often emphasized as important in theories regarding branding (particularly service branding theories) (De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Brodie, Whittome & Brush, 2009; Berry, 2002; De Chernatony, Harris & McDonald, 2001), and theories regarding the KIBS sector (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008; European Commission, 2012). However the focus is commonly on the importance of the employees representing and communicating the firm's brand (De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Davis, 2007). In theories regarding the KIBS sector, the focus is primarily on the people with regards to knowledge and knowledge transfer (Windrum & Tomlinson, 1999), or on the employees as human capital (Miles et al., 1995). The participants in the study have expressed additional meaning of the individuals. Statements are suggesting that the individuals are acting as 'personal brands', working as substitutes or complements to the firms' brand. Insights into the degree of dependency of the individuals relative to the firm as a whole are illustrated by the following statement:

"The firm's entire strength is the people employed. If these people would not be there we probably wouldn't work with that firm either. Or, it can depend on what other people there might be, but the strength is in the employees, in the people. The firm as such has no great value."

Marie, industry client

While the section regarding strong 'tier one' firms' brands are supporting the benefits and functions of a brand commonly argued in theories (Dunn & Davis, 2004; Knapp, 2000; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006), statements as the one above suggest an emphasized dependency on individuals. The smaller firms that do not have an equally beneficial brand get evaluated primarily on the people representing the firm. When a firm is not holding a relatively strong brand name the importance of proving competence and credibility is to a great extent put on the individuals representing the firm (De Chernatony, 2001). The employees are observed to be evaluated on to what degree they possess the qualities needed for the client firm to develop the trust needed in order to get chosen.

“And of course ‘McKinsey’ and ‘Bain’ – those are incredible brand names and, in the end, those names are contributing incredibly. But it is the individuals behind that are ‘the thing’. Especially if you don’t have a known brand name.”

Martin, finance client

The individuals are observed to be evaluated on a number of factors such as previous experiences, what clients the key representative has worked with and previous work places.

“The one thing you can judge the firm by is through knowing where the partners resigned from. From what firms they originate from.”

Jens, finance client

This logic of evaluation is indirectly incorporating branding as relevant since employees who have experience from firms with strong brands are argued to be preferred. However it is the individual that is observed to be the primary object of evaluation. This role assigned to the employees, the logic of evaluation and the part brands play are not recognised as commonly emphasised in theory.

Furthermore, the evaluation is often built upon the key representatives’ ability to communicate these competences and experiences to the client in the initial stages. The clients’ evaluation of the firm being based on evaluation of individual competences and experiences, rather than the firm as a whole is, according to the empirical study, seen as a ‘characteristic’ for the KIBS sector. Possible explanations why is illustrated by an analyst at Maximize:

“...Our resources as a firm is encapsulated within our heads. We are trying to share knowledge as much as possible but some have more experience and particularly within certain areas [of competence] some have much more knowledge”

Adam, Maximize, analyst

“...Many clients appreciate if you know [their] industry beforehand so you get a shorter ‘start-up’ time’ So that’s a reason for us occasionally missing out [on clients]. Either because the competitors have more competence from the industry, or they are communicating it in another way”

Adam, Maximize, analyst

This highlights what has been continuously mentioned by participants in the study, the individuals’ unique competence and expertise is highly valued. Due to limitations in knowledge transfer the evaluation of the individual becomes essential in order to minimize the perceived risk. Similar descriptions exist of how direct knowledge transfer is characterising the KIBS sector (Windrum & Tomlinson, 1999) and how this knowledge transfer happens through more intimate contacts between firm representatives and clients (Abecassis-Moedas et al., 2012). Davis

(2007) further suggests that the perception the client gets of the service delivery affect the firm. Therefore one can argue that through evaluating the important individual, and confirming or disconfirming held perceptions of the individuals competence, the client is constructing a perception of the individual's 'personal brand'. As a result, the individuals' personal brand's ability to function as a risk reducer can be further argued to compliment or substitute for weaker company brands. However this meaning and function of the firms' employees is not emphasized in theory.

Strong brands suggest deviation from dependency on individuals characterising KIBS

The emphasised importance of the firms' employees can be contrasted to the more limited role individuals are observed to play in the evaluation of firms with strong brands. The number of firms that can benefit from having a brand that is strong enough to be considered a market leader or 'tier one' firm is relatively limited. However, they are examples of what is traditionally described as strong brands and the functions of their brands are the same as all big brands, for example they are risk reducing and complexity reducing (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). In the evaluation of the 'tier one' firms it is to a greater extent assumed that the employees accumulatively can fulfil whatever requirements the client firm has in order to create trust. Rather than evaluating individuals and referring to experiences and competences held by individuals these firms are referred to as the company name, the brand name, and the credibility of the firm is based on accumulated achievements from all individuals working within the firm. The credibility is embedded in the firm's brand.

"[A well known firm] had been working 900 000 hours in a specific sector. Well, that is 470 years or whatever it was we calculated it to be...I don't know if I'm all that impressed by that, I don't know if I get very impressed by things like that, it is kind of silly. But it has an 'impress-quality' to it that I think clients appreciate. Or that they feel safe in that."

Jonas, Maximize, partner

"sometimes something big and global is what one are after [...] and if existing in the whole world it is hard to believe that there will be one person that can do it better than McKinsey for example...It's more the collective experience of the firm that is relevant."

Simon, finance client

This suggests that strong brands can make the client deviate from the KIBS characteristic of assuming knowledge is encapsulated within the knowledge workers. Or alternatively, firms with strong brands are thought to have better established processes for efficient knowledge transfer making all employees more likely to have similar competences. Independently of explanation,

this gives support to meaning of the brand within the KIBS sector and suggests brand functions of certain importance in the sector.

Alternative ways to be selected - recommendations or references as a way in

It has been argued how the brand is simplifying the buying process and has relevance in impacting how to get selected by the clients (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006) even though the brand has not been broadly acknowledged as an important basis of evaluation. Since the aim is to gain insights into the KIBS sector the focus includes insight into what other bases of evaluation are important in order to get selected. Somewhat outside the scope of branding is the importance of networking. However the relevance of references, displayed by the participants in the study, emphasises its inclusion. Networking is also defined within the KIBS sector as a factor leading to competitiveness, in addition to specialisation in knowledge, innovativeness and creativeness (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). One participant is describing what implications some important stakeholders can bring to the firm:

"...and influencers. For example, board members we work with are working in other organizations. If not recommending us at least they can confirm that 'We have been working with Maximize, they know what they say they do ... So you get some initial 'amount of trust' [capital of trust]"

Richard, Maximize, partner

The importance of recommendations and references is continuously supported by the clients participating in the study with one client stating that he:

"makes a choice based on recommendations on experiences of working with them beforehand"

Fredrik, industry client

The client further motivates the choice with the referral's function as 'a mark of quality'. This illustrates how firms who have a long-term focus can leverage benefits from client collaborations. This is an example of how the customers ultimately influence the firms' financial performance by facilitating inflow of new clients. Thus in accordance with theory arguing how a firms' Brand Management System should focus on long term benefits gained from clients (Lee & Beak, 2008).

Furthermore, the strategy of relying primary on individuals; assigning them the importance of communicating credibility and competence, keep up contacts, bring in references and essentially bring in projects, is stated to have traditionally worked in the sector in general, and for the studied firms in particular. However, due to the changes within the KIBS sector, that for example is

characterised by industry growth and increased competitiveness (Bagdonienė et al., 2007; European Commission, 2012) additional strategies are suggested to be required. The direction and phase of industry change is illustrated when elaborating on the firm's distinguishing features:

"...Looking back in history, ten years ago when we were established, back then we were relatively unique [...]"

Interviewer: "Could you describe the competition within the industry?"

Participant: "I don't know if this will answer the question but one way to answer the question is that this is an industry that in some ways isn't 'feeling very well'. Much of the competition is today focused on price."

Axel, WOW Branding, partner and creative director

It is also being recognized how one can no longer depend purely on old relations and on references:

"It is different because we more consciously turn to these type of companies compared to a couple of years ago, back then we relied on previous relations that were not as exposed to competition. And we also worked more with smaller funds and smaller companies that the large [consultancy firms] did not compete for"

Viktor, Maximize, founding partner

The individuals' achievements and other earlier mentioned bases of evaluation are all bricks in the game when trying to establish credibility. Another possibility, if none of the team members are known beforehand, is that their competence may be confirmed by reference cases, where the firms' show that they have previously done projects for well-known companies or brands. In these cases the focus lies in previous clients being familiar to potential new clients rather than the project scope being similar. How this can be practically used is described by one of the founding partners at Maximize:

"I'm using this very much in the sales process, 'I have been project leader working with SXXX [A very well known Swedish Multi National Corporation (MNC)]'. If you are the CEO for an organization then this MNC is a role model and a global company and all of that. So you are gaining trust if [the client] know that someone bigger and better has chosen me then 'I [the client] can definitely do that'. At least that is how I believe they are thinking when they are getting the [MNC's] logotype in front of them"

Claes, Maximize, managing partner

This further illustrates how the individual gets evaluated but how brand's indirectly influences the evaluation process. One interpretation is that strong brand names are having 'spill-over' effects on the individuals. The individuals are gaining credibility by being associated with a strong brand.

Alternative ways to be selected – Deviate from evaluation of individuals by developing capabilities to signal trustworthiness and competence

To deviate from the strictly individually based trustworthiness the KIBS firm needs to show that it has strengths and knowledge embedded in the firm and not only in the single employees. The tacit knowledge needs to be transformed into organizational knowledge (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). This is done through the spreading of knowledge within the firm, but more importantly when focusing on branding efforts aimed at clients; the firms' need to communicate their organizational knowledge and their firm's strengths to the clients. As earlier discussed, for 'tier one' firms, this is partly done through the brand, functioning as a 'guarantee' of organizational knowledge. The smaller, market challenging firms need to find other ways to communicate this successfully. Therefore they need to find ways to improve their communication capabilities in order for the potential client to trust that the firm holds the required organizational knowledge and competences. They are suggested to be required to 'codify tacit knowledge' within the firm in order to both develop the capabilities to engage in branding activities as well as communicating it externally (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000).

"In offers from McKinsey a lot of the focus is on 'these are the projects we have done internationally'[...] If I was in charge of buying these services I would think 'none of the people who participated in those project will be involved in this collaboration'. So [I am] trying to focus a lot on that I as a project leader has done these projects. So...This propose a communication challenge in the sales process to understand this difference between firm and individual"

Claes, Maximize, managing partner

The statement highlights both how trustworthiness within the sector is built around strong repute and experience, how different firms faces unequal challenges in proving that they have this organizational experience and competence, and finally how the firms' ability to succeed in doing so is dependent on good communication capabilities.

"When in meetings, talking to a 60 year old CEO who have been working in the organization for 40 years and feels he 'know this' and this industry inside out while you at the same time are 25 [years old] and are going to convince this CEO to buy really expensive services – and you don't know how the product will look like prior to the delivery – then you have to be able to be trustworthy straight from the start"

Maja, Maximize, partner

The statements thus follows theories suggesting that strong capabilities need to be developed in order to execute the activities needed in order to communicate this 'trustworthiness', hence in order to develop a stronger brand (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Development of capabilities is

suggested to be done through establishing routines (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) or an internal infrastructure related to a Brand Management System (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

Empirical example: A found way to implement routines and communicate trust and credibility. Illustrating how implementing processes furthers firms' communication capability is how the studied firm Maximize Strategy Consultancy developed routines focusing around a tool, called 'the book'. It is something to build a communicative framework around when contacting potential clients. It enables the employees to call someone with whom they have neither a professional, nor a personal, relationship with and still signal enough trustworthiness and credibility to be given a chance to present themselves.

"'The book' is such a tool. We are focusing on the fact that we know how to create trust.[...] It is a mean and I strongly believe in communicating around it, nag about it, rub it in [...] 'No-one else [has this particular competence expressed in the book] but we know it.' So that is a very powerful tool."

Claes, Maximize, managing partner

The use of this tool is interesting of additional reasons, one of them being as a case study in how innovative branding efforts are observed to be beneficial for the firm, hence further questioning the observed limited awareness of such efforts within the KIBS sector. As suggested earlier, innovative and different branding efforts is not a prominent feature in the sector, where the focus more lies on benchmarking certain competitors.

This mean, 'the book', offers an opportunity to 'tangibilize' the intangible tacit knowledge and thus reduce the risk for the clients (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; De Chernatony et al., 2001). Maximize has succeeded with creating a marketing tool that communicates the qualities observed to be valued within the sector (credibility, trust and knowledge). It is at the same time highlighting and putting emphasis on what is differentiating the firm from other firms. Further, an additional benefit being the mentioned use of the tool to build a communicative framework around when contacting potential clients.

"The objective with this tool? The main objective when communicating to the client is to build our knowledge capital and competence... because that is something it [the tool] has done. But the primary objective is to sell projects and increase the client base through leveraging our references and creating this image [of having unique knowledge]"

Claes, Maximize, managing partner

Statements from clients confirm that the objective expressed above has been reached and that the tool has been an efficient marketing effort.

"...They have done this nice book and that is of course helping in building trust and brand"

Martin, finance client

"To me, they are differentiating themselves since they are the only [firm] who comes up and tell me what their conclusions are and done an analysis [relevant for the specific client]. Of course that is a distinction"

Gustav, industry client

Even though the above is limited to one example it shows that innovative branding efforts in accordance with the firm's core strengths can create competitive advantages. This is highlighting the possible benefits for KIBS firms that undertake such actions, supporting that specialisation in knowledge, innovativeness and creativeness can lead to competitiveness (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). It further corresponds with Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007) suggestion that "there are still gaps with unrealized brand potential" (p.6) in many sectors that could be leveraged for maximized brand potential. Similarly supported by Santos-Vijande et al. (2013) suggesting a focus on innovativeness in brand management leading to competitive advantage within the KIBS sector. And further supports their statement that successful branding in the KIBS sector "is not just about smart, creative brands, but also about well planned and executed brand management"(p.154).

In 'Step 6 - supplier evaluation and selection' important functions of the brand are discussed. Of suggested importance is for the brand to signal trust and credibility. Also, the argued extended importance of the individuals in the firms, in comparison to traditional branding theories, is highlighted. It is found that the evaluation of the firm's trustworthiness often is based on key representatives of the firm possessing 'enough' relevant experiences to be trustworthy and credible. Resulting in a dependence on the individuals' ability to communicate these competences and experiences to the client in the initial stages. However, it is implied that firms' with strong brands can deviate from this dependence, since their credibility is embedded in the firms' brand name. This gave support to the meaning of the brand within the KIBS sector and also suggested brand functions to be of certain importance. Finally two observed alternative ways to be hired were presented. The first being the use of recommendations or references and the second to make use of innovative branding efforts.

Step 8: Performance review

To follow up clients' perceptions that construct the firm's brand is a lead-time challenge

As mentioned above, theories suggest that the clients' held perceptions of a brand is dependent on the outcome of the collaboration (Davis, 2007). Therefore KIBS firms arguably need to communicate and explain to the client what part of an improved performance is a result of the collaboration. The evaluation of the outcome is also argued by theories to become more complicated since clients have implicit and unrealistic expectations of the service delivery (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). This has not been stated by the participants as a frequent problem. However, what has been emphasised by the participants are difficulties due to the result of the firm's service not often being observable until after the service delivery, when the client implement or act upon the suggestions delivered.

An observed KIBS characteristic of uncertainty of the outcome even after the service delivery is illustrated by a client:

"At the same time it is a risk taking, one never know [if the delivery is satisfying] until when trying to build on it. That's the risk within this industry."

Jens, finance client

There is an increased need for firms with less strong brands to make sure that the client is aware of the connection between an increased performance and the KIBS firms' service delivery. This since the firms' contribution to the clients' value often is hard to recognize (Eppler & Will, 2001).

Additionally, in order for clients' perception of the firm as trustworthy and credible not to be disconfirmed by a poor result, the firm is argued to be receptive of feedback. This is related to theories arguing collaboration, commitment and adaptation to be of certain importance within the KIBS sector (Kasper et al., 2006 cited in Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). This suggest that by communicating that the firm is capable of acting upon whatever caused the faulty result, they can ensure the firm's future potential and competence and thus minimize the possible harm on the brand (and the firm).

In order to make sure that the clients' have beneficial perception of the service delivery, hence has beneficial associations to the firm (Davis, 2007), the firms are argued to be required to follow up on the collaborations. However this is observed to not be a given activity in the collaborative process. This if further argued to be questionable since lead times is observed to propose a gap between the service delivery and when the client can evaluate the firm's performance.

"And they have not taken responsibility for the delivery during the couple of years that is the lead time for the implementation. Sometimes it [the implementation] works out and sometimes it does not..."

Jens finance client

The lead time between the service delivery and when the firms' can leverage the benefits of their work, is also acknowledged in Lee and Beak's study (2008) who argues that an improved client performance is what will ultimately affect the KIBS' firms' financial performance.

Additionally important is, as discussed prior in the analysis, that strong brand names are likely to be valued on their performance as a firm, or a brand, while the firms without such ability are judged more on the performance of individuals. Therefore, when an employee at a firm with a less strong brand name performs badly the whole firm is suggested to risk being valued thereafter. Contrary, the strong brands with extensive structure capital are not observed to be valued to the same extent. This since they are perceived to have other individuals with the competences needed, while this is not obvious for smaller firms. When the outcome is not living up to the standards, a client might value staying with a strong brand in the future and rather change the individuals found to be responsible for the projects poor result. This function and meaning of the brand in the evaluation step is not found to be commonly argued in theory.

In 'Step 8: Performance review' it is suggested that lead times propose a gap between the service delivery and when the client can evaluate the firm's performance. This motivates the need for KIBS firms to follow up the projects in order to ensure that clients understand the connection between an increased performance and the KIBS firms' service delivery. Furthermore, firms are argued to be required to be receptive to feedback, in order for clients' perception of the firm as trustworthy and credible to not be disconfirmed by a poor result. It is argued that if a client's perceive the outcome to be unsatisfying this is in turn effects the construction of the brand since the construction is highly dependent on the client's perception. An additional function of the brand observed in this step is how a strong brand increases the clients' will to stay with the firm despite of an unsatisfying outcome of the collaboration.

Step 9: Post project pre re-buy

Extension of the buying process due to extended meaning of the brand post project and pre re-buy

Discussed in the analysis is how participants emphasize the outcome of the collaborations as important rather than the brand, and often not acknowledging branding as relevant. Such reasoning is similar to what was argued when B2B firms in general were proposed to consider

branding (Kotler & Pfertsch, 2006). It was suggested that rationality is the base of decisions (Kotler & Pfertsch, 2006).

Following those statements, and in order to generally disregard branding as relevant, one should find proof of the brand's limited importance compared to rationality in the step 'post project pre re-buy'. This is argued since the buying centres, in this stage have had a chance to evaluate and review the firms' performance and the outcome of the service. As a result, if firms were mainly valued on their performance, it should imply that firms' evaluated to have preformed satisfactory should be hired again. The clients' should be willing to re-buy from these firms. And in contrast, the clients should be likely to disregard firms' who have delivered dissatisfactory outcomes. However, what has also been observed and illustrated in the analysis is the meaning and function of the brand within the KIBS sector more in accordance with branding theories (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Eppler & Will, 2001; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). To illustrate this further we propose this additional step to the buying process: 'Step 9 – Post project pre re-buy'.

Influence of the brand makes clients' reluctant to act on a poor performance

Of certain interest is the brand's observed influence on the performance review (step 8). Statements from the participants illustrate how clients deviate from the maximization of performance and rationality when evaluating the performance of a firm and instead prioritizing other factors (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007). Often emphasised as important in the KIBS sector is firm-client relationships (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). However in addition, observed as having prominent influence is the firm's brand, which highlights the argued relevance of brands within the sector. Although being aware of clients unequal evaluation participants express doubts regarding the reason for the clients' different treatment:

"I've heard about clients who have been working with McKinsey and been dissatisfied. They have then been working with us [and expressed satisfaction] and do then return to work with McKinsey again. And I'm just asking myself 'How is this possible?' Had we been the one delivering such a poor result we would never have gotten the opportunity again."

Claes, Maximize, managing partner

Not suggesting knowing the answer to the question asked, the analysis offers different possibilities. Firstly, as earlier discussed, the 'sign of guarantee' that a strong brand name brings is often leveraged when there is a need for the person liable for the decisions to defend herself towards other stakeholders. The same reasoning is suggested to be prominent in this stage of the process. In a project that ends unsatisfactory the benefits to 'transfer' the responsibility away from oneself, by motivating the choice of decision with the brand of the hired firm, are stated to be valued.

Secondly, firm's can regard a poor outcome being caused by secondary factors rather than the KIBS firms' poor performance. This can be explained by the strong brand's function as carrier of quality in combination with the complexity of the service delivery that characterises the KIBS sector. Among observed examples of secondary factors instead blamed for the dissatisfactory outcome is 'changing conditions' for the implementation of the service.

Furthermore, statements provide insights regarding the brand's additional effect on modifying the importance of the result and outcome of the service delivery. Stronger brands are suggested to be less likely to experience negative effects as a result of an outcome of the project. In other words, firms with strong brands are suggested to be less affected by brand associations being disconfirmed (or confirmed) over time (Davis, 2007), compared to weaker brands. The suggested lesser relative negative impact on a larger firm's brand is illustrated by WOW branding's partner and creative director when discussing what implication a dissatisfied client would have on the firm:

"That depends. The simple implication is if they start to trash talk the firm. And that is never good[...] hard to say how that affect the firm. We are big enough so we have a catchment area that is big enough for someone to trash talk us in one corner it doesn't[...]So that is not anything we are particularly worried about "

Axel, WOW Branding, partner and creative director

The statement suggests that bigger firms are not as dependent on confirmed or disconfirmed brand qualities and the client's altered perception of the firm. This since a stronger brand is more likely to have a position in the minds of the clients', which is needed in order to be considered (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). The strong brand lessens the dependency on individuals communicating the firm's qualities. This since the brand function as a carrier of the brands' strengths and additionally as a complexity reducer (Eppler & Will, 2001; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). As a result, this implies that the firm with a stronger brand is less dependent on references in order to attract new clients, hence, make the firm less exposed in the occasion of clients 'trash talking' the firm.

In 'step 9: Post project pre re-buy' the inclusion of this step in the analysis is motivated. It is highlighted how clients deviate from rationality and re-hiring firms with strong brands even when an outcome or result has been unsatisfactory. Two possible reasons are suggested. Firstly, buyers appear to value to use the brand's function as a 'sign of guarantee' to transfer the responsibility of the performance away from themselves on to the brand (the firm). Secondly, clients are observed to hold secondary factors responsible when the outcome is unsatisfactory due to

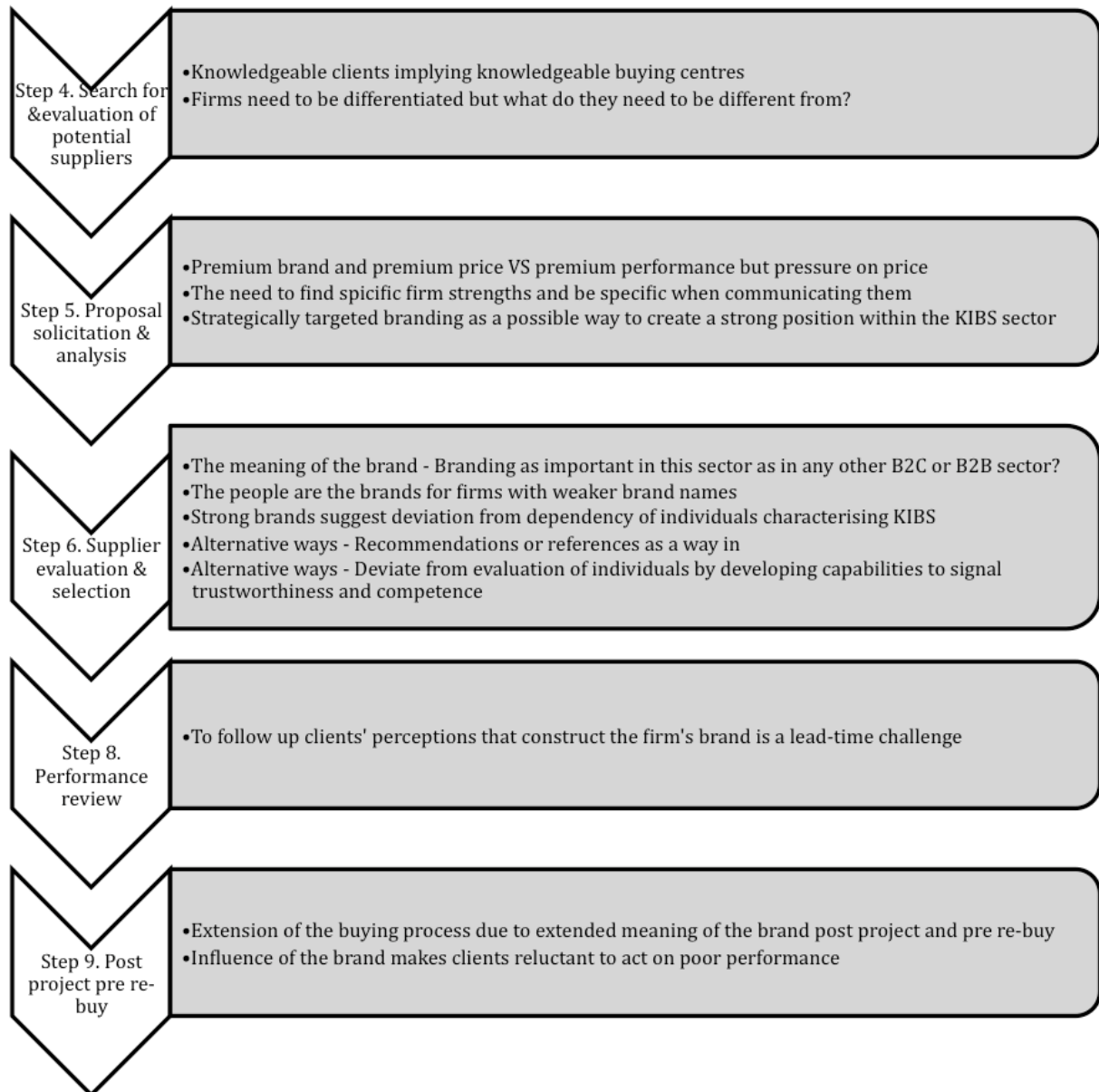
the strong brands ability to serve as guarantee of the firms being credible. Additionally, firms with strong brands are less dependent on references and recommendations, thus not as affected by clients sharing bad experiences.

Themes of importance illustrated

In the analysis section we have discussed themes that aim at bringing insight into the meaning and the function of the brand within the KIBS sector. The empirical study provided initial insights that somewhat altered the direction of the thesis and analysis. Observations regarding the limited acknowledgement of the creation and management of the brand led to further additional emphasis on the function of the brand. The brand relevance within the KIBS sector has been observed to be complex, with the need to consider sector characteristics in order to bring insights into the meaning of the brand. An overview of the themes found to be of importance and that have been discussed in the analysis are presented in “Figure 4: Themes in the analysis with implications on the meaning of the brand within the KIBS sector”. In the following concluding section three main themes are presented incorporating the insights gained from the analysis.

Figure 4: Themes in the analysis with implications of the brand within the buying process

Modified reproduction from "B2B brand management" (p.29) by P. Kotler, P. & W. Pfoertsch, 2006, Berlin: Springer. Copyright Kotler, P. & Pfoertsch, W & Springer 2006.



Conclusion

In this section we aspire to connect the findings from our empirical study to the theoretical frame in order to draw conclusions regarding the meaning of the brand within the Knowledge Intensive Business Service sector. We emphasize findings from our analysis by presenting three themes that each relates to our aim: (I) 'The power of the individual challenging the power of the brand', (II) 'KIBS, the need to run a credibility and trust firm', and (III) 'A strong brand means strong evaluation in the added post project pre re-buy step'.

Insights in differences between industries have furthered the development of branding theories. By incorporating insights on specific industry characteristics into established branding theories, modifications have been made that have furthered the theory formation as well as relevance of theories (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Most researched are the differences between the B2C and the B2B industry, but substantial theories also consider characteristics regarding the service sector to have implications on the meaning of the brand (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Davis, 2007). However further consideration of characteristics that imply requirements for adaptations of the meaning of the brand in the KIBS sector are not commonly made in branding theories.

The analysis of the meaning of the brand becomes complex since initial insights gained from the representatives in the KIBS sector suggest limited acknowledgement of activities aiming at constructing the brand. Therefore implying the focus to be directed to the function of the brand. Thus, the insights into brand meaning within the KIBS sector need to be gained by exploring the function of the brand and additionally incorporate the construction and management of the brand. However, to gain insights into the meaning of the brand all aspects need to be coherently regarded. Within the KIBS sector, the brand function, and the meaning a strong brand has, is observed to be in accordance with branding theories, with one example being the ability of brands to function as a representation of preferable qualities (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Eppler & Will, 2001; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). However the general brand relevance is not thoroughly acknowledged and therefore result in limited awareness of the creation and management of the brand.

Existing theories and research on the Knowledge Intensive Business Services, and a conducted empirical study of firms and clients representing the KIBS sector, have provided insights into characteristics that have implications on the meaning of the brand (Abecassis-Moedas et al.,

2012; Bagdonienė et al., 2007; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008; Eppler & Will, 2001; Windrum & Tomlinson, 1999). This have allowed us to identify three main themes that contribute with insights on characteristics of the KIBS sector that need to be regarded, and distinctions that need to be made, when discussing the meaning of the brand in the sector. Additional themes have been identified and elaborated in the analysis, with observations regarding KIBS sector characteristics. However, further presented are the three themes most directly related to the aim of the thesis: (I) 'The power of the individual challenging the power of the brand', (II) 'KIBS, the need to run a credibility and trust firm', and (III) 'A strong brand means strong evaluation in the added post project pre re-buy step'.

The power of the individual challenging the power of the brand

The importance of the individuals is highlighted in theories in general (Davis, 2007; De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001) and in sector theories specifically (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008; Abecassis-Moedas et al., 2012). The employees in KIBS firms can be argued to be of extended importance beyond what is commonly attributed to the employees in branding theories. Their role in the sector is multifaceted. It is observed how the individuals extend to be inseparable from the firm's brand, thus highly effecting the construction of the brand. The clients' perception of the firm is observed to be dependent of, and therefore often equal to, their perception of individuals representing the firm. The individuals' personalities and performance then becomes the only reference point the client has for the brand values. On the more extreme, but also commonly observed, is how individuals are acting as 'personal brands', functioning as substitutes or complements to the firms' brands.

The observed exception being the limited cases when firms' have managed to create brands which functions as carriers and representations of the firms qualities, in accordance with acknowledged branding theories (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Eppler & Will, 2001; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006).

Following this, the employees' important role in the creation of the brand implies a need for them to be capable to communicate the firm's brand strengths. In order to develop these capabilities a focus on management is suggested (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013), with an establishment of processes to leverage and further these capabilities (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). This is of emphasized importance due to prominent characteristics of the KIBS sector being difficulties of 'tangibilize' the offers (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008; De Chernatony et al., 2001), and collaboration with clients in which the brand is confirmed or disconfirmed, thus partly created (Davis, 2007).

However this is observed to not be commonly acknowledged, resulting in limited awareness of the creation of the brand. This proposes additional challenges regarding the management of the brand, since theories imply a large importance of the firm's and its employees' capabilities to execute the brand strategy (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). In turn, resulting in limited actions aiming at creating or managing the brand are undertaken. Therefore the observed dependence on the individuals, not only as knowledge workers, but also as 'personal brands' are sustained.

KIBS, the need to run a credibility and trust firm

One benefit with strong brands is the ability to function as carriers of preferable qualities (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Eppler & Will, 2001; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006), which can shorten the complex evaluation and buying process (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). What qualities are considered beneficial is varying depending on context. The ability to signal credibility and trust is found to be preferred within the KIBS sector. These qualities are frequently mentioned by the participants and are observed to be significant as a requirement in the evaluation of firms and their service offerings. The explanation to this can arguably be found in sector characteristics.

Firstly, the service offering is hard to define in the initial stage (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė 2008). Further, characteristics of the sector relate to the difficulties connected to every project being unique and adapted to the clients' needs (Kasper et al., 2006 cited in Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008). That a firm has proven its competences in one project is therefore not perceived as a guarantee that it has the competences to perform well in the next collaboration. Thus the firm is required to be perceived as trustworthy by the clients who need to trust that the firm has the competence to deliver in prospective services.

Secondly, the clients express a need to know that the firm is credible. This quality is arguably mediated by the employees and the employees need to be credible both in the contact points with clients and in the service delivery (Bettencourt et al., 2002; Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008; Davis, 2007). Additionally, even if a firm representative is able to communicate the preferable strengths to the client throughout the collaboration, additional stakeholders will be involved in evaluating the choice of firm. Implying the ability to prove trust and credibility to be necessary in every new collaboration and to all new contacts. One possible way to deviate from the dependence on the individuals is for the brand to function as a guarantee that all employees in the

firm individually are credible and trustworthy. This emphasize the brand's ability to function as a communication tool of the preferred brand qualities to all stakeholders, in addition to those who can confirm the firm's qualities through involvement in the collaborative process. The brand's function as a representation for the firm's credibility and trustworthiness facilitates deviation from the dependency on individuals. Thus emphasize the brand meaning within the KIBS sector.

A strong brand means strong evaluation in the added post project pre re-buy step

The brand's ability to influence the buying process, the evaluation of firms and the choice of firms is commonly argued and acknowledged (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). The rationality, initially argued to steer the evaluation and choice of firms in the B2B industry, is affected by additional bases of evaluation, with the brand as a significant influence. This is also supported to be relevant in the KIBS sector.

What is further argued in the study is the additional meaning of the brand in the evaluation of a firm's performance and in the post project pre re-buy phase of the buying process. This is not commonly emphasized in theory, while other influencers, such as relationship (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2008) and foremost, the outcome and result (Lee & Beak, 2008), are focused. Strong brands are found to affect clients to deviate from the maximization of performance and rationality also when evaluating the performance of a firm. In other words, when delivering an unsatisfying outcome of a project, stronger brands are suggested to be less likely to experience negative effects, such as not being rehired or the brand associations being disconfirmed (Davis, 2007).

A more rational reasoning, focusing on performance maximization, should imply that firms evaluated to have performed unsatisfactory outcomes should be likely to be disregarded. However, what has been observed and illustrated in the analysis is that firms do re-buy from the firms with well-known brands even in occasions when they have been unsatisfied with the outcome. Possible explanations for this have been observed in the study. Firstly, the firms with well-known brands are suggested to be less dependent on the evaluation of the individuals in the project, resulting in the possibility for the client to re-hire the firm as such, but request other individuals in the team. Secondly, what has also been highlighted in the analysis is the need for the person buying the service to defend her choice towards other internal stakeholders (such as board members). A buyer choosing a KIBS firm with a well-known brand is implied to be accepted by all stakeholders and less required to motivate the choice, due to the brand function as a guarantee to deliver a credible result. If a project ends unsatisfactory, the brand then offers an

opportunity for the buyer to transfer the responsibility for the result away from herself and on to the firm.

Implication and contribution

The thesis present insights into how the KIBS sector characteristics have implications on the brand meaning within the sector. We further highlight the importance of those implications. Additionally, in order to better reflect the meaning of the brand in the KIBS sector as observed in our study we propose an interpretation of the buying process (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006, p.29) including a ninth step, 'Post project pre re-buy', to follow 'Performance review'. By this we have accomplished the aim of the thesis to contribute to branding theory by providing insights into the meaning of the brand in the Knowledge Intensive Business Service sector.

Suggestions for further research

In general, more research focusing on industry- or sector specific influence on branding theories is suggested. Existing branding theories emphasize the importance of considering different contexts when applying theories. Our conclusions support for further need to focus on how the theories need to be adapted with regards to different sector characteristics. The empirical study in the thesis was based on interviews with representatives from two KIBS firms and ten of their clients, limiting the application of the results in a broader context. The meaning of the brand within a sector cannot be easily generalised, especially considering the KIBS sector's heterogeneous characteristics. Hence, in order to enable generalisation of these findings we suggest for further research including additional representatives from the Knowledge Intensive Business Service sector.

One of the most prominent findings was the observed importance and meaning of the individuals within the sector. Therefore we suggest for further research into how individuals' important role in both the construction and the management of the brand, and the firms' observed dependence of their 'personal brand' affect the meaning of the brand in the KIBS as well as additional sectors.

Finally, it was observed that the meaning of the brand had implications on the performance review, the evaluation of the firm as well as on the post project pre re-buy phase of the buying process within the studied context. This was therefore incorporated and proposed in an interpretation of an additional step to the buying process. However, due to the limitations of the thesis it is suggested for further research into the brand meaning in this phase, in order to confirm (or disconfirm) it to be generalisable within the KIBS sector.

References

Aaker, D.A. & Joachimsthaler, E. (2000). *Brand Leadership*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Abecassis-Moedas, C., Mahmoud-Jouini, S. B., Dell'Era, C., Manceau, D. & Verganti, R. (2012). Key Resources and Internationalization Modes of Creative Knowledge Intensive Business Services: The Case of Design Consultancies. *Creativity and innovation management*, 21 (3), 315-331.

Alvesson, M. (2000). Social identity and the problem of loyalty in knowledge-intensive companies. *Journal of Management Studies*, 37, 1101–1123.

Alvesson, M. & Sköldbberg, K. (1994). *Tolkning och reflektion, Vetenskapsfilosofi och kvalitativ metod*. Lund: Studentlitteratur

American Marketing Association. (1960), *Marketing Definitions: A Glossary of Marketing Terms*. Chicago, IL: AMA

Anderson, J. C. & Naurus, J. A. (2004). *Business market management : understanding, creating and delivering value*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pearson Prentice-Hall.

Bagdonienė L., Jakštaitė R. (2008). *The relationship between providers and clients of knowledge intensive business services and its marketing*. Kaunas: Kaunas University of technology, Faculty of economics and management.

Bagdonienė L., Kunigėlienė D. & Jakštaitė R. (2007). *Relationship Marketing as Factor for Competitiveness of Knowledge-Intensive Business Services' Providers*. Kaunas: Kaunas University of technology, Faculty of social sciences.

Ballantyne, D. & Aitken, R. (2007). Branding in B2B markets: insights from the service-dominant logic of marketing. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 22 (6), 363 – 371.

Berry ,L. L. (2000). Cultivating Service Brand Equity. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 1, 128-137.

Bettencourt, L.A., Ostrom, A.L., Brown, S.W. & Roundtree, R.I. (2002). Client Co- Production in Knowledge-Intensive Business Services. *California Management Review*, 44, 100-128.

Brodie, R. J., Whittome, J. R. M., & Brush, G. J. (2009). Investigating the service-brand: A customer value perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(3), 345–355.

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2007). *Business Research Methods* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

- Crane, F. G. (1993). *Professional services marketing: strategy and tactics*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Davis, J. C. (2007) A conceptual view of branding for services. *Innovative Marketing*, 3 (1), 7-12.
- De Chernatony, L., Harris, F. & McDonald, M. (2001). Corporate marketing and service brands. *European Journal of Marketing*, 35, 335-352.
- De Chernatony, L. & McDonald M. (2003). *Creating powerful brands* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- De Chernatony, L. & Segal-Horn, S. (2001). The criteria for successful service brands. *European Journal of Marketing*, 37, 1095-1118.
- Dubois A. & Gadde L. (2002) Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55, 553 – 560.
- Dunn, M. and Davis, S.M. (2004). "Creating the brand-driven business: it's the CEO who must lead the way". *Handbook of Business Strategy*, 5 (1), 241-245.
- Eisenhardt, K. & Martin, J. (2000). Dynamic Capabilities: What are they. *Strategic Management Journal*, 21, 1105-1121.
- Eppler, M. & Will, M. (2001). Branding knowledge: Brand building beyond service and product brands. *Brand management*, 8 (6), 445-456.
- European Commission (2007). *Towards a European strategy in support of innovation in services: Challenges and key issues for future actions*. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities.
- European Commission (2012) *Knowledge-intensive (business) services in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union
- Gephart, R. P. (1988). *Ethnostatistics: Qualitative foundations for Quantitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Gotsch M. & Hipp, C. (2012). Measurement of innovation activities in the knowledge-intensive services industry: a trademark approach. *The Service Industries Journal*, 32 (13), 2167-2184.
- Huggins, R & Weir, M. (2012). Intellectual assets and small knowledge-intensive business service firms. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 19 (1), 92 – 113.
- Kasper, H., van Helsdingen, P., & Gabbot, M. (2006). *Services marketing management* (2nd ed.). *A strategic perspective*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Knapp, D.E. (2000). *The Brand Mindset*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

- Kotler, P. (2004). *Marketing for consultants*. Management Consulting News. URL http://www.managementconsultingnews.com/interviews/kotler_interview.php
- Kotler, P. & Pfoertsch, W. (2006). *B2B brand management*. Berlin: Springer.
- Kotler P. & Pfoertsch W. (2007). Being known or being one of many: the need for brand management for business-to-business (B2B) companies. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* 22 (6), 357 – 362
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kvale, S. and Brinkman, S. (2009). *Interviews - Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lee, Y. P. & Baek, L. (2008) The impact of the brand management system on brand performance in B-B and B-C environments. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 37 (7), 848–855.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lugnet C. (2012). Morgondagens mest innovativa och lyckade företag kommer att vara bransch- eller sektorshybrider som inte helt uppenbart kan infogas i etablerade bransch segment och kända affärsmodeller. *Kreativitet är det nya stålet*, 65-73, Veckans Affärer.
- Merrillees B., Rundle-Theile S. & Lye, A. (2010). Marketing capabilities: Antecedents and implications for B2B SME performance, *Industrial Marketing Management*, 40 (3), 368–375.
- Miles I. (2005). Knowledge intensive business services: prospects and policies. *Emerald Article foresight*, 7 (6), 39 –63.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman A. Mi. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, I., Kastrinos, N., Bilderbeek, R., den Hertog, P., Flanagan, K. & Huntink, W. (1995) *Knowledge-intensive business services: their role as users, carriers and sources of innovation*. Manchester: PREST.
- Millot, V. (2009). *Trademarks as an Indicator of Product and Marketing Innovations*. OECD Science, Technology and Industry Working Papers, 6, OECD Publishing.
- Muller, E, & Doloreux, D. (2007). *The key dimensions of knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS) analysis: a decade of evolution*, Karlsruhe: Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innova-

tion Research, Innovation Services and Regional Development.

Muller, E. & Zenker, A. (2001). Business Services as Actors of Knowledge Transformation: The Role of KIBS in Regional and National Innovation System. *Research Policy*, 30, 1501–1516.

Noy, C. (2008). Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research. *Int. J. Social Research Methodology*, 11 (4), 327–344.

Santos-Vijande, Belén del Rio-Lanza, Suárez-Álvarez & Diaz-Martín (2013). The brand management system and service firm competitiveness, *Journal of Business Research*, 66 (2), 148-157

Sobel, R. (2006). Getting Ahead: Technology and Innovation. *Perfumer and Flavorist*, 31 (10), 32-35.

Von Nordenflycht, A. (2010). What is a professional service firm? Toward a theory and taxonomy of knowledge-intensive firms. *Academy of Management Review*, 35 (1), 155–174.

Weber, M. (1974). *The theory of social and economic organizations*, trans. A. M. Henderson and T. Parsons. New York: Free Press.

Windrum, P. & Tomlinson, M. (1999). Knowledge- Intensive Services and International Competitiveness: A Four Country Comparison. *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, 11, 391–405.

Winter, S. G. (2002) *Understanding Dynamic Capabilities*. Philadelphia: The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Department of management.

Wood, P. (2002). Knowledge-intensive Services and urban innovativeness. *Urban Studies*, 39, 993-1002.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Framework for interview themes (firm representatives from Maximize Strategy Consultancy and WOW Branding)

The questions have been developed based on the literature study, existing branding-, strategy-, and industry theories. The process consisted of constructing themes that aim at cover all aspects following the aim of the thesis. The questions were then rearranged in order to ease the structure and flow of the interviews, the conduction of the interviews.

Themes:

1. Nature of KIBS sector/industry

Aim: since the characteristics of the industry are argued to have an impact on the meaning of the brand, brand construction and brand management, it is of importance to see if theoretical descriptions correspond with reality. This to get insight into some of the implications the industry characteristics are presumed to have on the meaning of the brand.

2. Brand strategy, awareness of brand meaning, focus on construction and management

Aim: To get insight into the extent the firm is aware of, and have identified, their core brand values, what affects their brand identity, what they are trying to communicate to their clients in terms of brand promise. This, in order to get an understanding of how the representatives perceive their brand. Get a better insight in how the firm perceive “the distinctive or central idea of a brand and how the brand communicates this idea to its stakeholders” (De Chernatony, 2006, p .45) and additionally, how the representatives vision the brand to be perceived by its stakeholders. Do the representatives perceive the company to have the capabilities needed, which in turn is important as this serves as the base for positioning and the implementation of other branding efforts.

3. KIBS sector attributes having impact on the brand, focus on the firm-client relationship

Aim: Get insight to which industry specifics that have an impact on the firm’s brand (foremost construction). What impact the single employees (believe they) have on the perception of the company/brand and how important they regard their role in contact with the clients (do they feel responsible for delivering the firm’s image). Gain insight into if the brand image is foremost based on the firm’s performance or emotional/personal factors.

4. Brand management and implementation

Aim: The theme strives at gaining insight into if and how the firm is currently implementing branding efforts/branding actions. The functions and benefits of the brand is dependant of the implementation of the branding efforts. The implementation is in turn argued to be dependent on how capable the firm is in their execution. To enhance these capabilities brand management is additionally argued to be beneficial.

Appendix 2: Interview guide 1- KIBS firm representatives

1. Name:
 2. Age:
 3. How do you define your job title?
 4. What is your main field of work?
 5. How long have you been working within Maximize/WOW?
-
1. How would you describe the sector you are operating in?
Planned prompts
 - a. How would you describe the competition
 2. What distinguish/differentiate Maximize/WOW from other firms within the industry?
 3. Would you describe the employees as homogenous or heterogeneous?
Planned prompts:
 - a. Is there anything you think you are having in common with other employees within the firm?
 - b. What would you say are a common feature/connecting the employees within the firm?
 4. Can you mention a firm that operates within the sector that you have high regards of?
Planned prompts:
 - a. What are the reasons for mentioning this firm?
 5. Do the firm actively seek out for/trying to attract new clients or do you commonly get approached/contacted by potential clients?
Planned prompts:
 - a. Do you have any preferences regarding the clients that contact you/ you are contacting?
 - i. (Strong name, profitability potential, reputation, etc)
 6. Why do you think the firms' clients initially chose to collaborate with Maximize/WOW?
 7. Could you describe how the initial meeting with a client plays out?
Planned prompts:
 - a. Do you have any framework or routines considering meetings with clients?
 8. What do you regard as important during the process of collaboration / during the project collaboration?
Planned prompts:
 - a. Relationship, outcome, good collaboration etc?
 9. What do you regard as important after a project has ended/been completed?
Planned prompts:
 - a. When the project is completed, what do you regard as important: outcome, delivered within the time frame, process gone smoothly, establishment of potential to good client relationship etc?

10. Possible learning / 'take withs' from the projects, how do you use those/communicate those?
 Planned prompts:
 a. Spreading within the firm, putting in use in future projects?
11. Can you mention a client that you have high regards of / or that you feel satisfied with have had as a client?
 Planned prompts:
 a. Why do you mention this client?
 b. Did the collaboration contribute to the firm in any way?
 i. In what way? / How?
 ii. (reference client, contacts etc)
12. In the occasion of a client not being completely satisfied with the outcome of the project / your work:
 a. What affect would that have on the firm?
 b. How would you handle this?
 i. Planned prompts:
 ii. Do you have any policy/routines/processes?
13. Can you describe what the clients regard as important when collaborating with your firm?
14. Have different employees within the firm distinguished competences?
 a. Also employees in the same position / field of work?
15. What individual strengths do you think have implications on the client collaboration?
 Planned prompts:
 a. Do the relative importance of your role/your strengths change or vary throughout the process / as the collaboration process moves forward?
16. Do clients request competences attributed to individuals or competences that the firm have (as a whole)?
17. What do you think people external to the firm (foremost potential clients) think of /associate "Maximize/WOW" with?
 a. What would you prefer them to think about?
18. Is there anything you think could be done that could alter/strengthen the stakeholders perception of the firm?
 Planned prompts:
 a. Have this been discussed?
 b. Have you considered doing this?
 c. Why is this not done?
 d. What is the objective / what would the objectives be with undertaking such activities?
 i. More people knowing about the firm (brand name), reaching more clients etc
19. What would you say are the firms' most prominent strengths?
 a. Are these found in the offering, in the employees, in the corporate culture?

- b. Are these strengths discussed internally?
 - c. Are these strengths defined or agreed upon internally?
- 20. Can you describe any activities (aimed at internal stakeholders/employees) aiming at communicating these strengths?
- 21. What stakeholders do you regard as important that they are aware of the firm (the firms' strengths)?
 - Planned prompts:
 - a. Clients, potential clients, competitors, possible partner firms etc? Are
- 22. Do the firm leverage the strengths when communicating with clients (or other external stakeholders)?
 - Planned prompts:
 - a. Is there a framework, processes, routines on how to communicate these strengths to clients (or other external stakeholders?)
 - i. In meetings with clients? Marketing activities specifically leveraging the strengths? Other official activities the firm is taking part in: competitions, events etc?

Appendix 3: Interview guide 2 - Client representatives

Company name:

Name:

Position within the company:

1. Could you describe how the need occur for the type of services that Maximize/WOW offer?
2. What was your opinion of (view of) Maximize/WOW prior to your collaboration?
3. How did you become aware of the firm as a feasible alternative to hire (for their services)?
4. Did you actively look for firms or were you contacted by Maximize/WOW?
5. If you were contacted: Can you describe how they contacted you/ how they contacted you?

Planned prompts:

- a. Who did they contact ?
 - b. Can you describe what they were offering when contacting you?
 - c. Can you describe their initial presentation (of their offering/company)?
 - d. Can you describe how the initial meeting played out?
6. Are you aware of what services Company X are offering in addition to the one you bought?
 7. How do you define the service you bought?
 8. What is regarded as most important during the process of working with a (consultancy) project?

Planned prompts:

- a. (the relationship, the result, the delivery, successful collaboration, that deadlines are held etc?)
9. Were Maximize/WOW involved in the implementation of the service / solution they came up with / that they offered?
 10. In what ways have Maximize/WOW been following up the project?
 11. How would you want them to follow up the project?

12. How many times have you worked with Maximize/WOW?
13. Why did you choose to work with them again? Why not?
14. What comes to your mind when you hear “Maximize/WOW”?
15. What are the company’s most prominent strengths?
Planned prompts:
 - a. Found in the offer, the employees, the execution?
16. Have these strengths been communicated to you in some way? How?
17. How important are the team members’ personal qualities and skills during the collaboration?
18. Were you (as a company) aware of a certain person that you wanted to be involved in the project?
Planned prompts:
 - a. If you choose to work with Maximize/WOW again: Would you request for a certain associate to be involved in the project?
19. What differentiate Maximize/WOW from other firms within the industry?
20. Can you mention another firm within the industry, except for Maximize/WOW?
Planned prompts:
 - a. Why do you mention this firm?
21. Have you worked with other firms within the industry?
Planned prompts:
 - a. Why did you work with this/these firms?
 - b. Did the collaboration differ in some way? How?

Appendix 4. Theoretical overview: Authors themes and subjects

THEORIES:		Sector	Branding	Branding in B2B	Branding of Service Capabilities	Strategy theories
THEMES:		KIBS	Branding related	Branding in B2B	Branding of Service Capabilities	Capabilities / Dynamic Capabilities
Main areas						
AUTHORS:						
Abecassis-Moedas, Mahmoud-Jouini, Dell'Era, Manceau & Verganti	Focus on KIBS: construction of brand, staff difference, service delivery, consumer interaction	X	X			
Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė and Bagdonienė, Kunigėlienė & Jakštaitė	Focus on KIBS: construction of brand, firm-client relationship, industry specific function of brand	X	X		X	
Ballentyne & Aitken	Explores how the service-dominant logic of marketing impacts B2B marketing concepts.		X	X		
Davis	Function of the brand in the service sector		X		X	
De Chernatony, Harris, & McDonald, De Chernatony & McDonald and De Chernatony & Segal-Horn	Brand identity in different industry contexts, Internal Branding, Service brand characteristics		X	X		
Eisenhardt and Martin	Understanding Capability theories, Understanding the industry in relation to capabilities					X
Eppler & Will	Knowledge branding		X			
Kotler & Pfoertsch	Importance of Branding, dependency on industry context, brand management, strategic brand management		X	X		X (Strategic Brand Management, not as capabilities)
Lee & Baek	brand management, brand performance		X	X	X	
Merrillies, Rundle-Theille & Lye	Brand management, brand performance, B2B industry specifics, Importance of capabilities		X	X	X	
Muller & Doloreux	Literature review and key dimensions of KIBS	X				
Santos-Vijande, Belén del Río-Lanza, Suárez-Álvarez & Díaz-Martin	Focus on KIBS; Internal branding, brand management system, strategic brand management, implementation of brand management system as capabilities	X	X		X	
Windrum & Tomlinson	Characteristics of knowledge intensive firms, firm-client relationship within knowledge intensive firms	X	X			
Winter	Dynamic capabilities					X

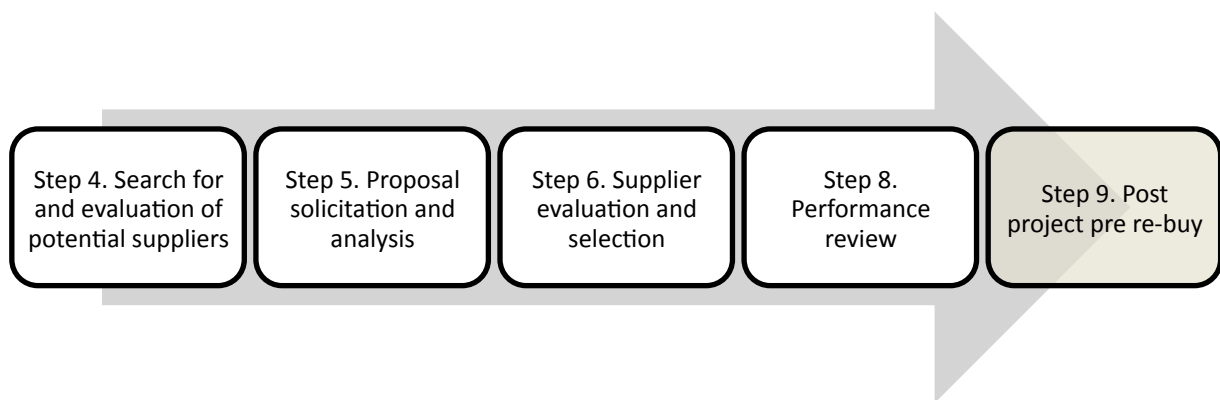
Appendix 5. The B2B buying process

From "B2B brand management" (p.29) by P. Kotler, P. & W. Pfoertsch, 2006, Berlin: Springer. Copyright Kotler, P. & Pfoertsch, W & Springer 2006.



Appendix 6: Interpretation and modification of the B2B buying process

Not. Modified reproduction from "B2B brand management" (p.29) by P. Kotler, P. & W. Pfoertsch, 2006, Berlin: Springer. Copyright 2006. Kotler, P. & Pfoertsch, W & Springer.



Characteristics of the step 4, 5, 6, 8 in the buying process (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006, p.29)

4. Search for and evaluation of potential suppliers

- Best case scenario: The buyer uses various media to search for all potential suppliers and then evaluate whether they are able to fulfil expressed need.

5. Proposal solicitation and analysis

- Proposal from qualified potential suppliers, defining important criteria for latter evaluation and selection.

6. Supplier evaluation and selection

- Which company will it be in the end? Weigh different criteria established in previous stage

7. Order-routine specification

8. Performance review

- Consequently, the organizational buying process is finished after the product or service has been received and checked by the company

Unrealized brand potential in the growing Knowledge Intensive Business Service sector

LUND. The benefits of managing strong brands within the KIBS sector are observable. But a recent report from Lund University suggests that branding activities are not fully acknowledged. This implies an existence of unrealized brand potential for KIBS firms – if they are aware of the sector characteristics implications on the brand.

The Business to Business (B2B) industry is heterogeneous and there has been a recent increase in awareness of the diversity of sub sectors within the industry. This has spurred a better understanding of what defines the different sectors, and of their relative importance in financial contribution

The sub sector of companies, whose main business is built around highly skilled services distinguishing them as Knowledge Intensive Business Services (KIBS) are of certain growing economic weight and importance. European Commission suggests the sector to be “one of the main engines for future growth within the European Union”. Among the examples of firms’ operating in the industry are management services, legal, advertising and market research, R&D services and engineering and technical services.

In a recent study by Jessica Follin and Fanny Sandström on the meaning of the brand within the sector, firm representatives in the KIBS

sector are argued to express limited acknowledgement of activities aiming at constructing the brand and therefore results in limited awareness management of the brand.

At the same time the authors highlight the meaning brand have within the KIBS sector and suggest benefits for firms with well managed brands. One example being the ability of brands to function as a representation of preferable qualities, making the clients less sensitive to price.

While the study highlights the possibilities of unrealized brand potential the study also suggest that KIBS sector characteristics have implications on the brand meaning. It is argued that these need to be considered when discussing branding in the sector. They therefore argue a focus to be directed to management of the brand.

The study could bring to attention the challenges as well as potential regarding the meaning of the brand in a sector presumed to be fueling the growth in the years to come. ■

Sector Insights: KIBS sector characteristics having implications on the meaning of the brand

The power of the individual challenging the power of the brand	KIBS, the need to run a credibility and trust firm	Strong brand means strong evaluation in the added post project pre re-buy step
Individuals extend to be inseparable from the firm’s brand. The clients’ perception of the firm is observed to be dependent of, and therefore often equal to, their perception of individuals representing the firm. On the more extreme, but also commonly observed, is how individuals are acting as ‘personal brands’, functioning as substitutes or complements to the firms’ brands.	In the KIBS sector every project is unique and the clients need to trust that the firm has the competence to deliver the prospective services offered. Even if a firm representative is able to communicate the preferable quality, additional stakeholders will be involved in evaluating the choice of firm. The brands function as a representation for the firms’ credibility and trustworthiness facilitates deviation from the dependency on individuals.	The study argues that the brand has additional meaning in the evaluation of a firm’s performance and in the post project pre re-buy phase of the buying process. When delivering an unsatisfying outcome of a project, stronger brands are suggested to be less likely to experience negative effects, such as not being rehired or the brand associations being disconfirmed.