

Saimaa University of Applied Sciences  
Faculty of Business Administration, Lappeenranta  
Degree Programme in International Business

Hoang Minh Tri

**Branding Implementation of SMEs in Vietnam.  
Case: Alpine Creative Ltd.**

Thesis 2014

## **Abstract**

Hoang Minh Tri

Branding implementation of SMEs in Vietnam. Case: Alpine Creative Ltd., 67 pages, 1 appendix

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The objective of this thesis was to examine the branding implementation of SMEs in Vietnam, especially those operating in the B2B market.

The theoretical framework was built up by collecting data from academic books, online articles and newspapers as well as precedent research. The customer-based brand equity model of K.L. Keller was the focus and including factors were presented respectively. Information for empirical data was gathered by qualitative research, mostly through individual in-depth interviews in a Vietnamese branding agency: Alpine Creative Ltd.

The results of the study showed that Alpine Creative had well perceived the role of branding and possessed a decent brand. However, due to certain factors, the current brand was not as good as expected. Therefore, the company has worked on the re-branding strategy. Many remarkable points have been put into consideration and holistic adjustments would be made to develop a stronger and more effective brand. The ultimate outcome has not been yet to come. However, the attitude and the plan initially follow the customer-based approach according to Keller's model.

Keywords: branding, customer-based brand equity, B2B, SMEs.

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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Reason of choice**

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is irreplaceable cells of Vietnamese economy. When Vietnam joined World Trade Organization (WTO), it brought a lot of opportunities but also challenges for these capital-restricted enterprises. One of the most remarkable threats is speedy investment from both local and foreign big companies. With all restraints of scope and scale, from human resource to influence in the market, Vietnamese SMEs have to take part in an unwanted competition with slight chance to win. So, what could be the survival guide to help them survive and claim their positions?

In recent years, the Great Recession that started from the US has greatly impacted on Vietnamese economy. Big-sized companies obviously suffer from difficulties, but perhaps the situation for SMEs is much more abject. A great number of these enterprises stand the threat of bankruptcy or inactivity. Again, what is the possible answer for Vietnamese SMEs to stand still and go through this tough time?

To build and possess a strong brand is the precise way to help Vietnamese SMEs overlook all the limits and restrictions. Realizing the rising necessity of that issue, this thesis is deeply emphasized on branding creation and protection of SMEs in Vietnam. For practical part, the reason of choosing Alpine Creative is that company is a young and potential small enterprise, which has also been working hard on their own branding to be successful in the Vietnamese market.

## **1.2 Purpose of thesis**

This thesis is written to examine the branding process of SMEs in Vietnam, especially that of those working in the B2B setting. Within this paper, overview of brands, history, definitions and relevant theory will be discussed. Among countless models and approaches to branding, the author has chosen the customer-based brand equity model of Keller (1993), which is also well-known as “Resonance Pyramid Model” as his compass. The reason comes from the fact that Vietnam is a

fairly big market with various potential group of customers. Therefore, fully exploiting available resources to attract maximum number of possible clients could be a right choice for them, especially for small ones to gradually develop, avoiding inescapable race with bigger and more resourceful competitors. Besides, from the writer's perspective, it is believed to be the most systematic and appropriate method to apply. Respectively, the following factors will be studied. Further information will be explained in the latter parts:

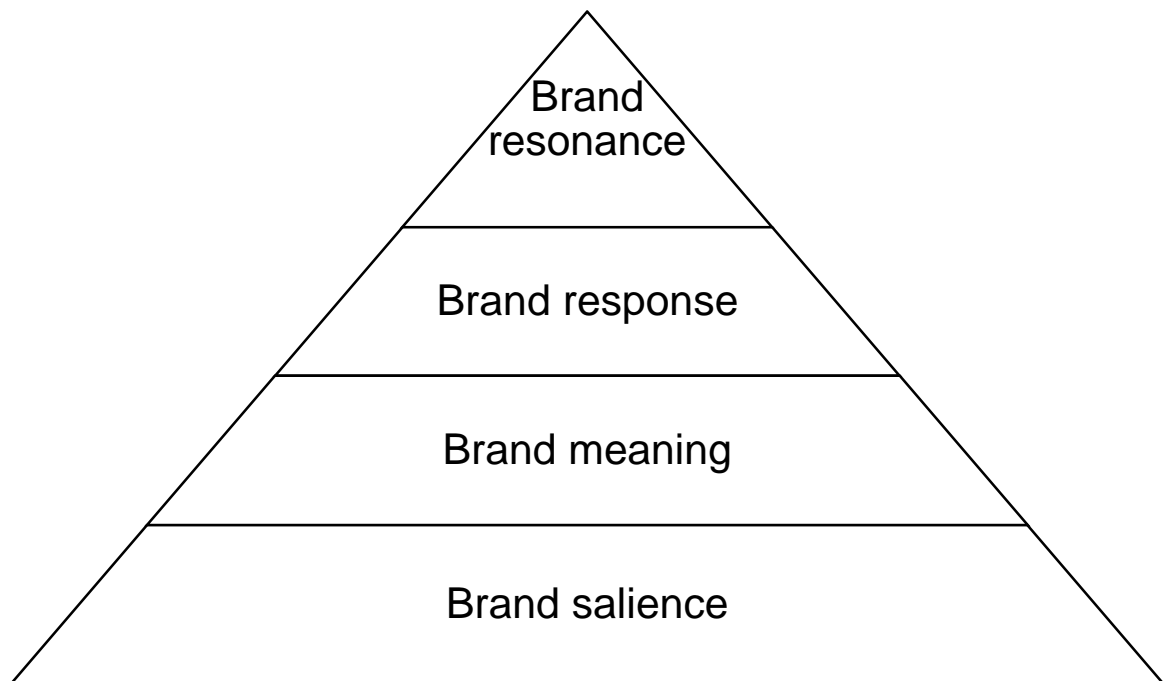


Figure 1: Overview of Keller's Resonance Pyramid Model

From this theoretical approach, the writer will focus on a service agency named Alpine Creative. Alpine Creative is a small enterprise, formerly a start-up joining the Vietnamese market in 2011. Their main activity is to offer brand building service as well as marketing packages for SMEs. Although the company is still young and not really experienced in the field, Alpine Creative has obtained certain achievements, reflecting a positive result. Unavoidably, they have also suffered difficulties from a very competitive market. There is an urgent need to differentiate themselves, developing a brand which is engaging and trustworthy to customers.

The desire of the writer is to study and have a close look at the meaning of Keller's model and its importance to branding of SMEs in Vietnam. It is extremely fundamental to clarify the fact that branding is a comprehensive procedure of all departments instead of separate efforts from marketing team or empty promises of the CEO. Additionally, the thesis also concerns issues, which companies in Vietnam have to handle during the branding process and feasible solutions for SMEs.

For the latter part, empirical data collected from Alpine Creative will be applied based on the theoretical guideline for comparison. The purpose is to analyze the variation between concepts in theory and the way they really are in practice. Besides, it is probably the holistic assessment, which Alpine Creative may find useful to re-evaluate the method they have worked on branding. This involves brand identity, brand image and reputation, as well as relationship with customers.

To achieve the above mentioned aims, the thesis will step by step answer the following main question and four sub-questions:

***“What can Alpine Creative do to improve their image in the following re-branding process?”***

1. What is the plan to renew brand identity to customers?
2. What could be done to improve brand performance and brand imagery?
3. What could be done to receive better response, both brand judgment and brand feeling?
4. What is the strategy to engage customers and improve relationships?

### **1.3 Delimitations**

The size of a company matters at some points. Inarguably, a big company's targets when investing on branding are different from a smaller one's. It certainly results in variation in a manager's concept and thinking. The thesis is merely associated with

the ecosystem of small and medium sized enterprises, the important components contributing to Vietnam economy but having to cope with many difficulties.

Situational context plays a key role in any research, obviously the main cause leading to different results and effects. In order to stay focused and maintain practicality, this paper only concerns issues related to brand building and management from a customer-based perspective. Therefore, CBBE model of Keller has been chosen as the backbone of the thesis. Theories and deduction are used to discuss and suggest effective solutions to establish a better brand and capability of attracting customers. On the other hand, financial benefits of branding and sales techniques are excluded. In addition, challenges in competition are also rarely mentioned. Although it is one of the most original and complete model on this topic, the single use of this approach certainly shows restrictions. The price of going deeper is the limitation of taking multi-faceted views from other models, including famous ones of Aaker (1996) or Kamakura & Russell (1993).

Empirical data is collected only from a small sized company in Vietnam. It is strictly stuck to the topic and the focus of this thesis. However, the obtained result just partly shows the branding situation in Vietnam but not the full picture. A big corporation may have entirely different approach in spite of sharing the common context. In addition, Alpine Creative is a typical B2B brand operating in the advertising industry, hence, theoretical viewpoints are inevitably considered and analyzed under the context of B2B market. There are elements in common with B2C for certain. However, that aspect will be ignored because it is not relevant to the case company.

## 1.4 Structure of the thesis

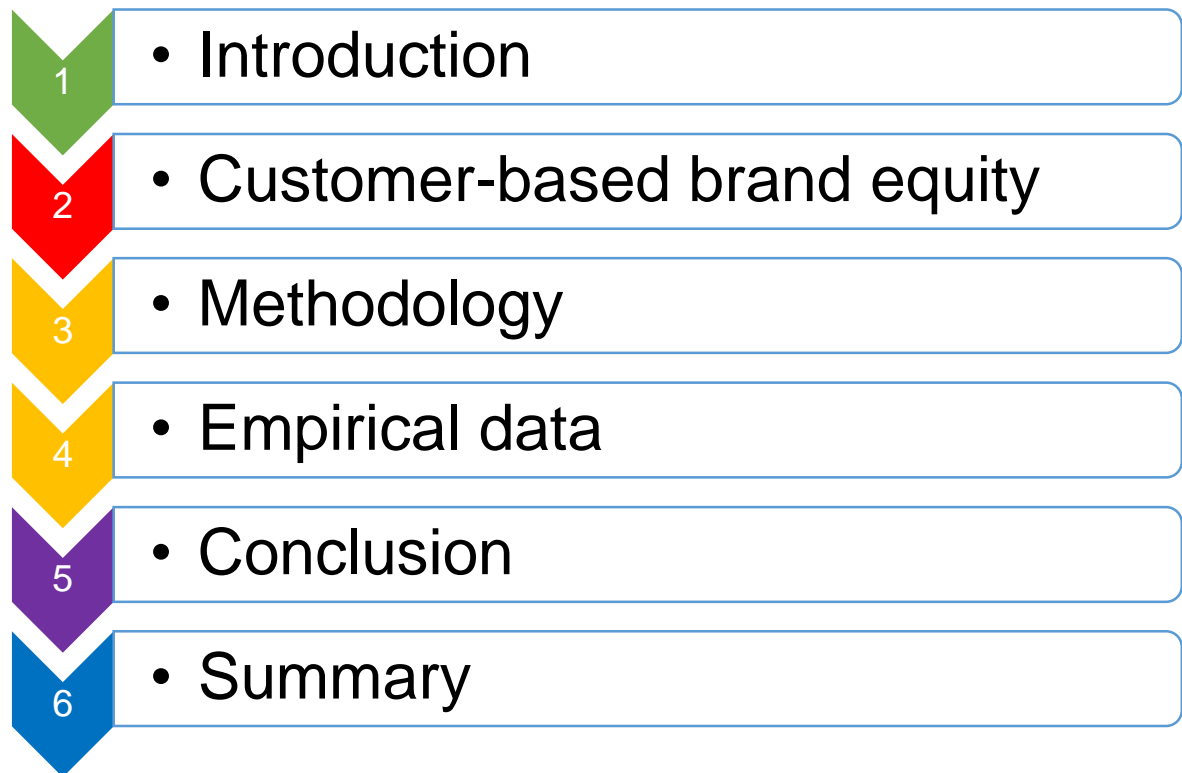


Figure 2. Structure of the thesis

In general, the thesis will contain two main parts: *theoretical framework* and *empirical research*. To make it easier to follow and let the paper be presented in a clearer way, the structure will be divided into seven smaller chapters: Introduction, Customer-based brand equity, Methodology, Empirical research, Conclusions and Summary. The theoretical framework will be included in chapter 2, where necessary theories to tackle the case of Alpine Creative will be provided. Its structure is based on Keller's CBBE Resonance Pyramid model and analyze its impact when applied in real company. It can also probably become a trustworthy guideline for Alpine Creative to rely on in their re-branding process.

The latter part – empirical research is comprised in chapters 3 and 4. In order to conduct a case study research and collect data efficiently, explanation on methodology in details will be demonstrated in chapter 3. Then, data which was obtained will be presented in chapter 4.



Chapter 5 concludes remarkable points during the process of studying, collecting and working with the case company. In addition, there will be personal recommendations for the branding process. Suggestions for other studies on the topic in the future are mentioned as well, based on advantages and drawbacks while writing the thesis. Chapter 6 is the completing section, recapping core ideas of the thesis.

## **1.5 Context of the thesis**

### **1.5.1 Vietnamese market**

Vietnamese market is dynamic and obviously not yet stable. There are many influencing elements inside the market affecting all aspects of business, including SMEs in the country, especially which are handling with branding matters.

With regard to socio-culture aspect, Vietnam is a high-context culture, where brand relationship with customers is extremely complicated. For those companies who are inexperienced or underestimate this matter, it is surely much tougher for them to gain a good image and set up long-lasting relationships. Another issue is long-term hatred against China due to conflicts in history. In May 2014, the territorial tension with China over its violation on South China Sea was pushed to the peak (BBC, 2014). The rage has been widespread among the Vietnamese, and there appeared massive boycotts against Chinese companies and products. Numerous Vietnamese enterprises had to stop importing and exporting Chinese goods and several even had changed their brand identity away from Chinese relevance (name, image) to avoid the anger from the crowd. Expectedly, all companies, specifically start-ups will continue to persist in averting Chinese pertinence in their branding process.

In terms of economy, it is allowed that SMEs could be established with only a small amount of money. This is undoubtedly practical and reasonable since Vietnam is still a developing country and this method really helps encourage more business to rise. However, it is also disadvantageous that with a restricted budget, SMEs usually have to overlook matters considered as “temporarily unnecessary”, such as branding.

According to Report 2012 of the Ministry of Information and Communications, E-Government Development Index of Vietnam has increased to 83<sup>rd</sup>/ 190. Telecommunication infrastructure has also greatly been developed for the last decade. It can be considered as a good condition to apply more high-tech in branding, especially digital branding. Evaluating the fact that it is not only efficient but also cost-effective, SMEs stand a golden chance to show a better performance without investing a great amount of money.

### 1.5.2 SMEs in Vietnam

According to the latest Vietnamese government's decree (56/2009/ND-CP), SMEs have been categorized in business specialization and there is a clear distinction among micro, small and medium-sized enterprises: "SMEs are businesses which have been registered according to the laws, divided in 3 levels : micro, small, medium based on total initial capital or average number of laborers annually". (Runckel, 2011).

	Micro	Small		Medium	
	Number of laborers	Total capital	Number of laborers	Total capital	Number of laborers
Agriculture, forestry and fishery	Under 10	Under 20 billion VND	From 10 to 200	From 20 billion to 100 billion VND	From 200 to 300
Industry and construction	Under 10	Under 20 billion VND	From 10 to 200	From 20 billion to 100 billion VND	From 200 to 300
Trade and service	Under 10	Under 10 billion VND	From 10 to 50	From 10 billion to 50 billion VND	From 50 to 100

Table 1: Categorization of Vietnam SMEs (10 billion VND ~ 350.000 EUR)

SMEs account for a huge proportion, even dominate in the total number of enterprises established and operating in Vietnam. Figures from the Vietnamese Statistics Office report show the situation:

Year	Total	Small and medium sized Enterprises			
		Based on capital	Ratio	Based on number of labor	Ratio
2011	324.691	309.322	95%	316.941	98%
2010	279.360	265.487	95%	272.283	97%
2009	236.584	226.624	96%	230.365	97%
2008	192.179	184.674	96%	186.379	97%

Table 2. Ratio of SMEs in the total number of enterprises in Vietnam.

No matter what criterion is chosen to calculate, from 2008 – 2011, SMEs always represent at least 95% of the total enterprises in Vietnam. It is under no doubts that SMEs have been greatly contributing to the economy.

Despite their greatness in number and important impact on the economy, it is worrying that these SMEs have not optimized all of their potentials, and one of those regard branding. According to the National Office of Intellectual Property of Vietnam, in 2011, among 45,311 newly founded companies, there are only 28,237 applied for trademark protection, and only 21,440 were granted trademark certificates (National Office of Intellectual Property of Vietnam, 2013). The ratio was only 47%, which means more than half of novel companies had not qualified, or what was worse – not even concerned about branding in general, and branding protection specifically.

### 1.5.3 B2B branding context

There are myriad differences between B2B and B2C markets. That is why a company operating in industrial market has special issues to deal with when building B2B brand. The buying behavior is much like a process rather than a spontaneous

purchase. Frequently, much more time, consideration and people involved in the decision making process are required. Manufacturers, producers and providers are forced to invest more in creating more reliable goods and services so as to encourage frequent organizational buying. These regular purchases, once turned into mutual benefits for both sides, certainly tend to evolve to more sustainable and long-lasting relationship (Fill, McKee, 2011).

One of the special characteristics of B2B market is a smaller number of buyers compared with B2C. However, the volume and value of each transaction are much higher. It does not mean that companies easily spend money but only indicate the high cost per package offered. In reality, SMEs with a modest and inflexible budget are hard to deal with. A good brand, at that point, shows its strength as a persuasive bargaining tool.

Strong B2B brands are built inside out and upside down (Doanh Nghiep Sai Gon, 2012). Orientation for all employees within the organization, from representatives to accountants, is a fundamental task to gain brand value and loyalty from customers. There must be assured consistency in both behavior and philosophy within the whole system, from the very high level manager to employees only staying at desk in office (Kotler, P & Pfoertsch 2006, p. 71).

## **2 Customer-based brand equity**

### **2.1 What is brand?**

#### **2.1.1 Definition**

“Brand” has its origin from the Old Norse “brandr”, meaning “to burn”. Thousands of years ago, when ranchers wanted to distinguish their sheep from other ranchers’ cattle, they sealed a heated iron mark on backside hip of their sheep, claiming the true ownership. Consequently, brand appeared from the need to differentiate products of producers.

There has been various definitions on the term “brand”.

Philip Kotler (Marketing Management, p. 425), “*A brand is a name that is given to a particular product or service or range of products or services. It basically exists to distinguish a particular product or service from its competitors*”.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) “*Brands are a name, sign, symbol design or a combination of them that are intended to identify products or services of one seller and to differentiate them from those of another seller*”.

Investopedia, “A distinguishing symbol, mark, logo, name, word, sentence or a combination of these items that companies use to distinguish their product from others in the market”.

Longman dictionary, “A type of product made by a particular company that has a particular name or design”.

These definitions compose of traditional elements of brands, mostly relevant to visual character and external factors associated to companies and brands.

A different approach is brought into view by The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO): “*Brand defines the differential features of a product or service: real or imaginary, rational or irrational, tangible or intangible*”. The difference is quite clear here. By this definition, the meaning of brands is not limited by a logo, a slogan, a statement, a symbol, or a shape. Tangible attributes are necessary but not enough. The existence and success of a brand, in fact, is so much hold within intangible values, which are unluckily hard to measure. These include remarks, sensory experience and impresses about the product, staff and service. This is also the meaning of the word “brand” referred to and used in this thesis. Stating that not to deny the importance of tangible characters but to emphasize the importance of customers’ experience. It is sure not to be exposed completely, like an iceberg as Hugh Davidson first mentioned in 1997 his book “Even More Offensive Marketing” (Clifton 2010, p. 10). There is one thing that has to be completely clear regarding this definition: the study in this thesis concerns not only superficial but also profound

matters deep down. Especially, to customer-based brand equity, the absence of the latter factors is simply wrong and fraudulent.



Figure 3. The brand iceberg model of Hugh Davidson (1997).<http://www.bfk.ie/articles-by-bfk/branding-accountants.html>

This figure is a way to clearly show most of the fundamental factors, which contribute to the brand's reputation, stay below the waterline, not in a position that is visible to customers. Nevertheless, without this most important base part, the name, brand identity and advertising definitely collapse and sink as a certain result.

Noticeably, the factors below the waterline are internal, while the above factors are external to customers. When a company works actively to develop a good system from inside, deliver a good customer service and bring them brilliant experience, then naturally brand identity will rise. It is the most sustainable way to create a brand.

### **2.1.2 “Brand” vs. “Trademark”**

Despite a close relation between these two words, there are still certain differences.

From the law principle aspect, “a trademark may consist of any signs capable of being represented graphically, particularly words, including personal names, designs, letters, numerals, the shape of goods or of their packaging, as long as such signs are capable of distinguishing the goods or services of one undertaking from those of other undertakings” (Article 2, Directive 2008/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council).

In practice, trademark is used to distinguish a company’s products from others. It will be recognized and protected by nation or the department which has responsibility provided that the trademark has been registered.

A “Brand” is also a signal to differentiate products or services. However, unlike trademark, a brand does its work by recalling images and emotions in customers’ minds. Basically, it is more about irrational feelings. Thus, there are no laws or regulations to protect a brand. It is all about company’s job to build a strong brand throughout time and bolster it in the thoughts of consumers.

From the essence aspect, as pointed out above, a trademark is more about the appearance, meanwhile a brand is about inner matters. A trademark could be easily used to demonstrate a brand, but a brand is not only demonstrated by a trademark. There are various ways to refer to it, as long as it is outstanding and impressive enough. A trademark could be registered simply within a very short time, of course with some fees. “Any one with \$50 can register an LLC and, in less than a week, be the owner of his or her own company” (Miletsky & Smith 2009, p. 8). But for a brand, it is more costly and time-consuming. Usually, it lasts for years, even the whole lifetime of an entrepreneur but is still not successful. A prestigious brand will be memorized for a long time, no matter how it wins or fails in the years later. However, without extending, a trademark will only be legally available maximum up to 20 years. (Nguyen 2009, pp. 7-9)

### 2.1.3 Brand equity

Before going deeper into the whole concept, brand equity is a term that needed defining sufficiently. It is “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that’s firm customers” (Aaker 1991, p. 15). Those elements that affect brand equity have to be connected with the name and symbol of the brand. It means, when there is a change in those factors, such as in re-branding, all assets and liabilities would be influenced or even completely gone with the old name and symbol. Otherwise, some may be transferred to the new ones.

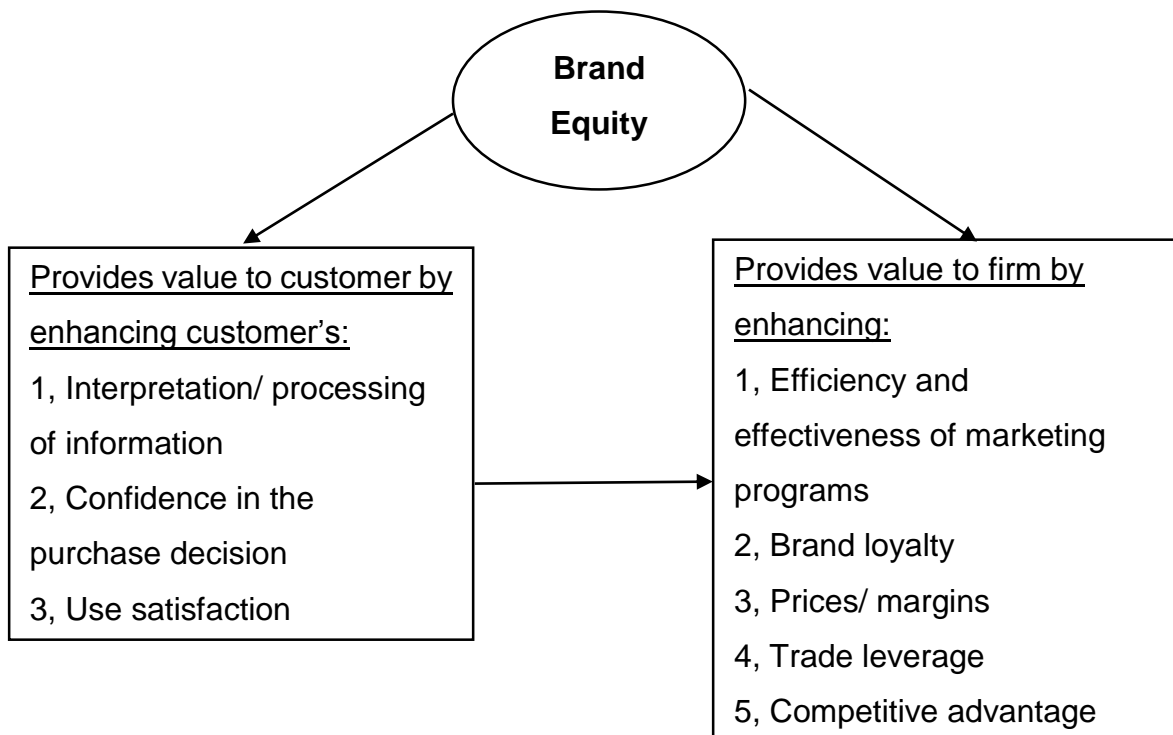


Figure 4. Aaker's model on brand equity

There are two perspectives regarding brand equity: *financial* and *customer-based*. The former illustrates financial performance, solely measured by figures. According to Guzman & Iglesias (2010, p. 440), a brand, under this point of view, is assessed in monetary term. It is an intangible asset to the company's financial value. There are various prestigious websites, which calculate and report top brands in the world



every year, based on their financial value, for instance, [interbrand.com](http://interbrand.com), [bestglobalbrands.com](http://bestglobalbrands.com), [forbes.com](http://forbes.com), etc.

However, a brand cannot possess financial value without customer value. Customer-based brand equity is the beginning of financial equity. A start-up or big corporation, a brand aiming for financial value always has to create values in a customer's mind and heart first. These values are brand awareness, trust in differentiation and superiority and emotion bond. In addition, when the matter comes to SMEs, it is extremely hard to measure or calculate their brands' effect and influence since they are too minor or unpopular for the majority of the world.

When the issue of customer orientation is brought into view, the relationship between a customer and a brand is raised. Why is a customer willing to pay a premium price? The reason stays within belief and engagement from time to time in customer's mind thanks to brand marketing. Customers buy solutions, not products (Patel, 2010). It is important to clarify that the focus must stay on customers. Products can only be regarded as helping tools for customers and bring them positive experiences. Enterprises have to find themselves in the role of offering solutions, not products. (Patel, 2010). On the other aspect, many SMEs think about branding as a competitive tool to win customers from competitors before anything else. Nevertheless, it is ignored that the first task should always be to strengthen themselves and gain easy customers. Customer-based brand equity is a good approach for these types of companies, considering the fact that before taking part in big battles, they have to prepare and grow large in advance.

CBBE approaches brand equity from the customers' point of views. Listening, understanding their needs and offering suitable products and services to satisfy them is the key point of building a successful brand. The most basic point of the CBBE is the impact of a brand that lies within what customers perceive, feel and experience. The way a brand influencing customers is in fact based on everything about the brand that stayed in customers' mind. Challenges to SMEs managing to build a strong brand are to assure consumers to have positive experience with

products, services, marketing program and engagement of the company. From that point, desire, feeling, perception and opinion start tying to the brand.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the model of Professor Keller will be exploited as the primary tool to approach the issue of customer-based brand equity. His model is presented in the following graph.

The model - Brand Resonance Pyramid is displayed to identify four essential steps and subdivide them into smaller sections. The ultimate goal is to get to the top of the pyramid - brand resonance. This is where relationship is possibly tightened, increasing a customer's loyalty and willingness to promote the brand. There are two different ways to climb up there: rational route and emotional route. Both are equally vital to SMEs, together forming the shape of the pyramid. Each of them represents some blocks within the pyramid, which will be shown in more details in the following chapter.

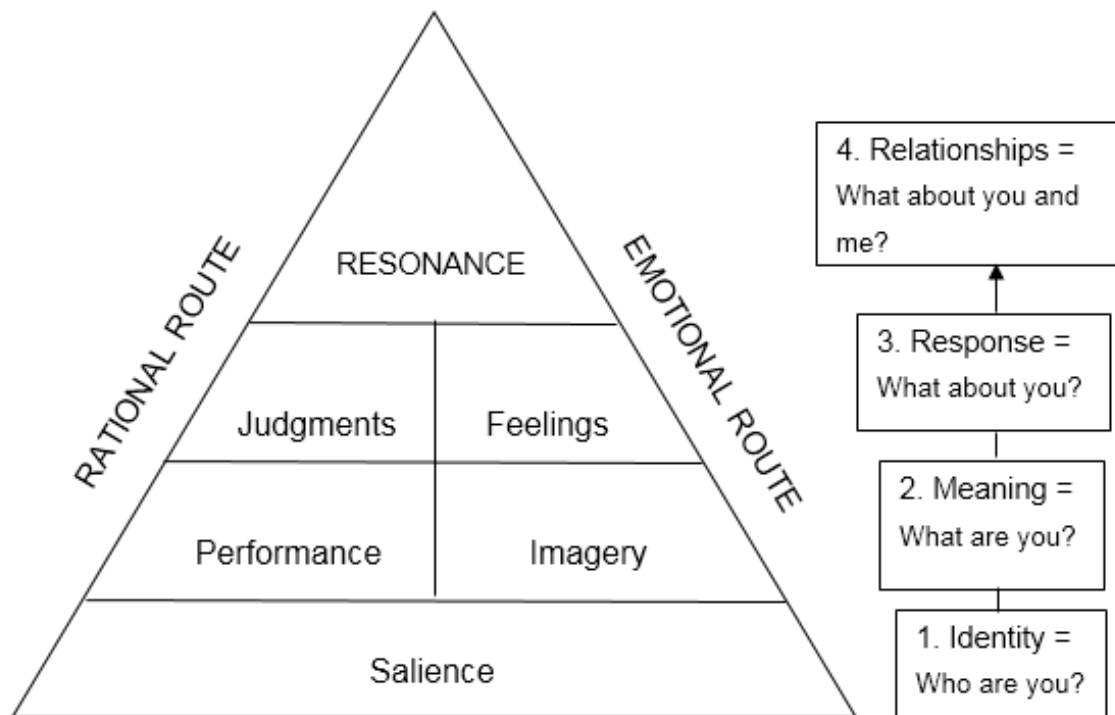


Figure 5. Keller's Pyramid of Resonance (2013, p. 108)

## **2.2 Brand identity/salience**

Brand identity describes who the brand is in the market. Brand identity itself is a valuable treasure to gain advantages in competition. This source when put into use reasonably and appropriately would be a useful tool in marketing to customers. On the other hand, “customers must recognize that you (a brand) stand for something” (Howard Schultz, Starbucks). Therefore, a precise decision on showing key aspects is extremely essential to deliver a clear and exclusive message to customer. It can be understood that choosing components to show in the foreground should be harmonious with the intended promise. All of other elements must be left in the background, no matter how they contribute to the enterprise (Hammond, 2008). All have to be dedicated to one goal - the consistency in brand identity. Such a thing is absolutely not easy to achieve, several factors regarding this issue need paying special attention.

### **2.2.1 Name**

A company’s name is one of the most important factors that make the first impression. This impression, in most circumstances, could be lost or made to the company reputation (Lipe, 2006). There are several “must-be” guidelines possibly helpful for companies that Jay Lipe suggesting in his book.

First and foremost, a name must be *appealing*. Outstanding from the crowd is the best-case scenario all companies would dream of. A name which has been rarely or never used before to avoid similarity among competitors is not a bad idea. The name of the company must be able to pique a customer's interests as well as incentivize them to discover its meaning. In all cases, the name must not cause any detrimental effects and repulse the customers.

The second element that should be noticed is *memorable* to customers. A unique name is not always a wise choice and needs being taken into serious consideration. Understandably, a company’s name must be easy to remember. One way to solve this problem could be setting a name sticking to a significant place or name, for

instance, Nokia (a city in Finland, where Nokia headquarter was first located), Nike (the name of a Greek Goddess, which means “victory”) or Suzuki (named after its founder, Michio Suzuki).

Next, a name has to be *succinct* enough. A short name has higher influence and requires customers less efforts to remember. A short name also simplifies tasks for a designer to put it fit in banners, brochures, card names or any other marketing materials. As a result, a great amount of time, money and effort saved by this small adjustment could be better used in other activities benefiting the company. In many cases, the names could be shortened by putting an abbreviation into use, such as WHO (World Health Organization), LG (Life’s Good) or ING (International Netherlands Group).

It is fundamental that the name of the firm should be *easy to find*. A company’s name must be crystal clear and leave no ambiguity for customers. Obscure words and twisted sounds are first to be eliminated. It is strongly recommended that the name should be easily recognized and written down after just one time glancing or hearing.

There are still various ways to set a name to an enterprise, sometimes even without any meanings but just from the interest of the founder. But in the tough race of being distinctive and unique, one should not go too far and ignore the link with its root. The choice is up to each manager, but one thing for sure is that a name would be easier to memorize if there exist stories behind to tell and reasons to explain. The brand then undoubtedly becomes friendlier and more inspirational with customers.

Apart from the legal aspect, a brand name should be considered from linguistic point of view (Hammond, 2008). For SMEs, it is perhaps a little early but not redundant to invest time in researching from the start. In the future, sooner or later, a company probably makes contact with foreign partners, and what if the company name appears to have a bizarre or inappropriate meaning in their languages. The situation is a lot better if the name is neutral and leaves partners with a totally positive impression.

## 2.2.2 Logo and Pattern

In most cases, creating a compelling visual experience is a difficult and complex task. To assure expectation to go its way, hiring specialists or consultants who have lots of understanding in the field would be both rapid and effective. Currently, there are different firms operating in Vietnam specialized in brand building and branding consultation. Among them, Lantabrand, Masso Group, Landor Group and Grey Group are the most successful names. To meet demands of branding in the globalization age, these brand consultant agencies have offered up-to-date packages. However, not all companies, especially Vietnamese SMEs, are capable of affording them because of the high cost the service may take compared with budgets they have. Fortunately, it is not the end of the world. In some cases, things could be simpler than it seems. A logo can be really complex and sophisticated, requiring skills and designs such as Alpha-Romeo or Porsche. It can also be surprisingly uncomplicated, e.g. just based on the name. Apple, the giant dominating the world, has nothing more than an apple partially bitten on its logo. Orange - one of the most powerful mobile network operator in Europe is another example. On their logo, there is solely the name of the company with orange background.

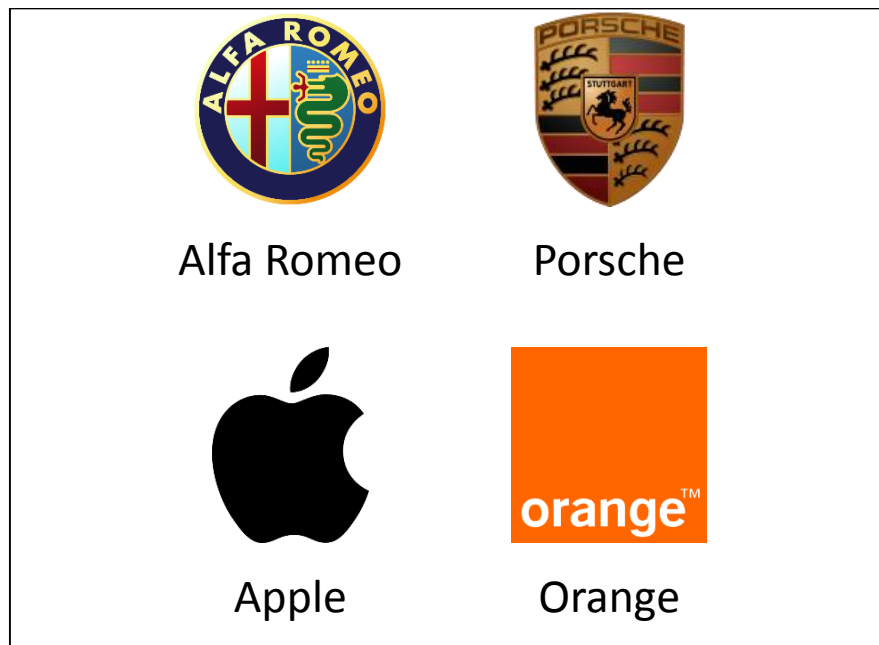


Figure 6: Some examples of logos of popular B2B brands

What is more, branding is a game which involves psychology. Whatever a customer sees should be a tool silently evoking feelings, memories, and impressions. Enterprises today no longer compete to approach customers from the rational way. Touching irrational mind has been proved to be far more effective and inspirational than the traditional one. Imagination when evoked will respond in a way which ignores all logical limits and actively link products to the brand. (James Hammond 2008, pp. 90-91). An ambiguous but relevant logo definitely proves its strength by not only provoking emotions and thoughts of customers but also allowing them to think the way they want to.

For instance, take a look at the following figure. It is the logo of a non-for-profit organization supporting start-ups in Vietnam. A sense of curiosity, vulnerability but bravery are demonstrated in the logo. However, it is the situation of most start-ups: fragile but dare to take the chance. Therefore, start-ups could find themselves much closer to the organization. Although the business is merely about professional work, the organization has succeeded eliminating all cliché images, either formal suits or grand office buildings. Instead, the figure of a hatching egg inspires entrepreneurs to get started right away with business ideas. At the same time, others see a little chicken with a courageous look, ready to handle challenges.



Figure 7. HATCH's logo

### **2.2.3 Tagline**

A tagline can be considered as one of the most powerful marketing tool. It is defined as a memorable and impressive phrase that summarizes values the mission statement of the company. These values and mission contained within must be consistent with the brand identity and external image (Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel 2013, p. 10). In B2B business context, well-designed tagline focuses on what a company can deliver to clients. In other words, just by seeing the tagline, customers know exactly what is offered and what can be get from the company. Normally, there is no need for more than ten words to create an influential tagline (Lipe 2006, p. 145). Therefore, to be efficient, a tagline must be kept brief and focused. Here come some examples of pure B2B companies:

*Solutions for a Small Planet – IBM*

*Intel inside – Intel*

*High performance. Delivered – Accenture*

*Built for the Human Network – Cisco Systems*

To Vietnamese SMEs with small budgets, a tagline plays an even more important role as a cost-effective and helpful public relation tool. Different from marketing campaigns, which may require a great amount of money, a tagline is probably more practical and long-lasting. Smaller in both scope and scale, making a great influence like IBM, Intel and Cisco is something out of their reach. However, that is the story of the tomorrow when they grow bigger. For the moment, as long as they have a decent tagline which really speaks to customers and gains their faith and support, those SMEs can be considered successful.

### **2.3 Brand meaning**

There are two different sections relating to the rational route and emotional route, respectively the brand performance and brand imaginary.

### 2.3.1 Brand performance

Brand performance shows the ability to satisfy customer of a brand. As mentioned before, brand identity could be the hook to draw one's attention but that's just not enough. Brand performance plays a key role in making the best use of attention and showing the brand's inner ability. The reality shows that brand performance can be often inferred from figures in the annual report. However, ignoring all the numbers, there are criteria for marketers to evaluate and improve brand performance:

- Primary characteristics & supplementary features
- Product reliability, durability and serviceability
- Service effectiveness, efficiency and empathy
- Style and design
- Price

(Keller 2013, p. 114)

In the B2B market, it is common that consumers exploit their own business network to know about these criteria while considering whether they should buy from a certain brand. Normally, mostly the industry is not too big for the information of a specific player to be widespread rapidly (Miletsky & Smith 2009, p. 87). Therefore, positive or negative perception and evaluation on brand performance can be the decisive factors to get a contract. Again, it bolsters the opinion that a brand cannot be created by just a good name or a catchy logo. No matter how the situation may change and the trend could evolve, the quality of a product and service must be secured. A shortcut is impossible since branding process has its own order to follow.

Although a number of Vietnamese SMEs realizes and successfully practices brand performance, majority of SMEs has unavoidable problems. Firstly, shortage in resource deter the ability to deliver a satisfactory performance which convinces picky customers. With the initial capital no more than 10 billion VND (~350,000 EUR), possibly about 2 billion VND (~70,000 EUR) for a household-owned company and one-member limited liability company, SMEs hardly find a feasible way to generate



enough money to increase the quality. Especially according to the Vietnam General Statistics Office, in 2011, among 309,322 registered SMEs, there are 269,901 are small and super small enterprises, accounting for 66.9%. CEOs may try to keep a product stable temporarily. However, together with a bunch of costs and taxes, it is impossible to maintain a consistent performance (Hoang Hai Au, 2014).

Year	Number of big-sized companies	Number of small and medium sized companies		
		Total	Medium-sized	Small-sized
2011	15,369	309,322	39,421	269,901

Table 3. Number of total enterprises in Vietnam until 31/12/2011

Secondly, deficit in high-qualified human resources should also be mentioned. According to Associate Professor Pham Tat Thang (2014), SMEs are clearly not attractive to experienced or elite employees. The reasons may vary: low wage, lack of chance to promote, unprofessional working environment and so on. SMEs, mostly private or limited liability companies, often have very small scale, which is hard to invite professional experts in branding. A more practical option can be recruiting new graduate students who are believed to be easier to negotiate with. However, when they have worked long enough and become more experienced and ambitious, they will leave for bigger and better companies. Unfairness in Vietnamese regulations causes increasing strain to SMEs in this aspect. After signing a contract, training expenses will be spent on employees. While an enterprise has many troubles to unilaterally terminate the contract later, employees are able to do the same thing without difficulties (Hoang Hai Au, 2014).

Lack of identity and reputation, even student recruitment is not always easy for SMEs. Many companies have to go to each and every university to PR about the

company, but usually the answer is ignorance from good students. In this manhunt competition, victory frequently belongs to big companies with already strong brands (Sexton 2010, p. 304). Therefore, it happens to SMEs that an employee has to handle two to three positions at a time. This serious insufficiency in human resources undoubtedly results in poor performance of companies and tiredness of the staff.

### 2.3.2 Brand imagery

Brand imagery is much more about a customer’s emotional route. It is utilized as a way to reach customer’s abstract awareness by driving them to think about one of the following factors:

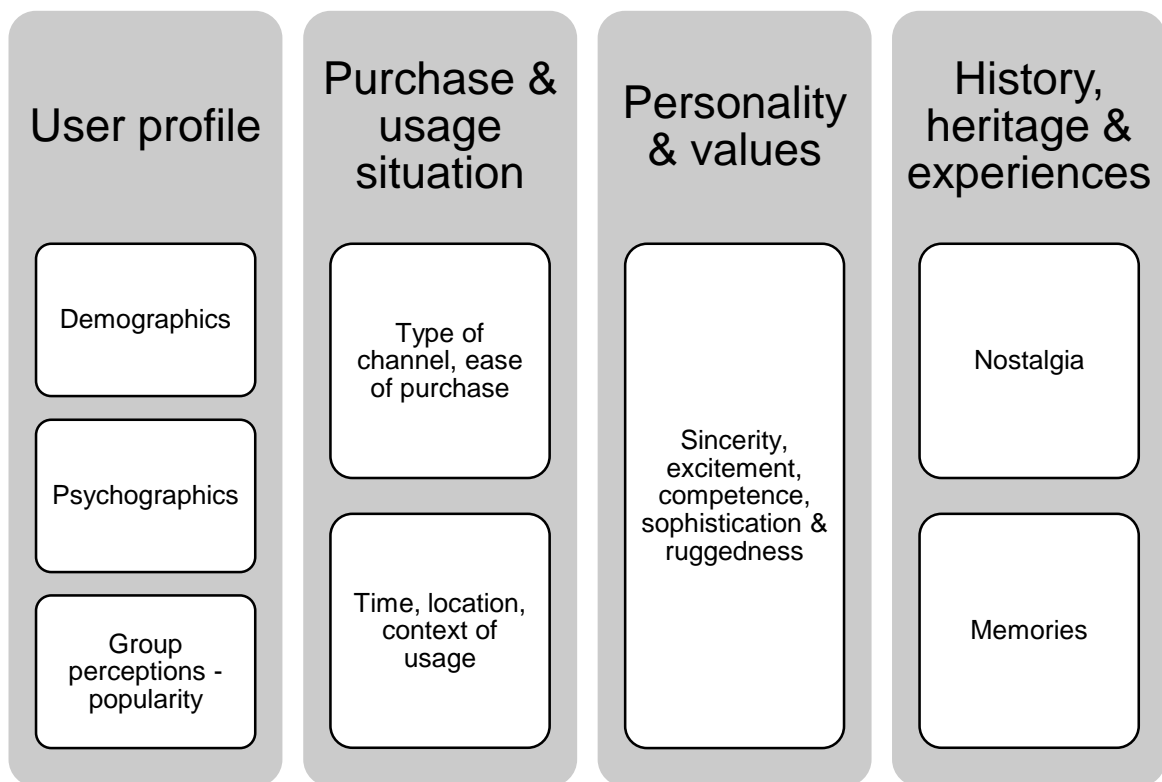


Figure 8. Brand imagery’s factors (Keller 2013, pp. 114-117; Keller 2001, p. 11-12)

Imagery may lead customers to have associations to a *user profile*. This mental connection is based on three factors: demographics, psychographics and group perceptions – popularity. In the B2B context, the first former two are usually not very significant, however, the latter one is rather essential. A brand which is widely known

and used by people is considered as “big” or “popular” in the field (Keller 2013, p. 115). This impression of clients possibly affects their opinion on the company’s size and position.

*Purchase & usage situation* include type of channel (visual store, online store, direct negotiation, etc.) is related to purchase situation. Meanwhile, usage situation is based on when, where or how the brand could be used.

Brand imagery is a tool to develop a brand’s own personality and values. There are five dimensions included: sincerity (honest, goodwill), excitement (up-to-date, motivating, and inspiring), competence (proficient, successful), sophistication (elegant, stylish) and ruggedness (robust, tough).

*History, heritage & experiences* include certain associations and events in the brand history that can help distinct the brand further. Examples of such associations can be a customer’s positive experience with the brand.

The user profile and usage situation are the most essential criteria regarding brand imagery in B2B (Kuhn & Alpert 2004, p. 5). When a company purchases a product or a service from the other company, it would consider itself in partnership with that company, partly sharing an amount of characteristics. Besides, the brand must leave a strong impression in customers’ minds and relevant images so that later when encountering a specific usage situation, customers recall the brand as an available option. Personality, values, history and heritage are mostly ignore in B2B market and more popular in the B2C market since the essence of two customer types is different.

For instance, in Vietnam, MISA is a prestigious IT company which offers management software for companies, especially accounting. The company has successfully developed high-quality products and created an accurate, responsible and professional image among enterprise community. Together with reasonable price, it is believed that using MISA products would partly show professionalism and transparency to both employees and other partners. Indeed, by far, there have been

more than 100,000 clients, including 50,000 enterprises purchasing their products (MISA official website, 2014).

Briefly speaking, brand meaning sketches an almost complete “image” of what a brand wants to become. Certainly, to complete the intention, there are many other external factors involved in the implementation. In that picture, while brand performance is the outer frame, brand imagery will be the pattern and details creating focal points to allure customers. Image of a brand is much dependent on the brand’s resources and ability to show a decent brand performance, as well as its planning on emotional categories which will be touched to evoke brand imagery. Brand meaning, or “image” in another word, is totally a factor under control of a company and managers are fully responsible for either a positive or negative result since it is all about their decisions.

## **2.4 Brand response**

Brand response is the third step in the process of reaching brand resonance. After identifying and demonstrating the best features, it is time SMEs concerned about the question “What about you?” A customer’s response will be measured in both way, rational judgments and emotional feelings.

### **2.4.1 Brand judgment**

The judgment of a customer is based on personal opinions and evaluation concerning the brand. Details about brand performance are mainly referred to as main criteria. There are different kinds of judgments, but to create a strong brand, the following four types are worth paying the most attention.

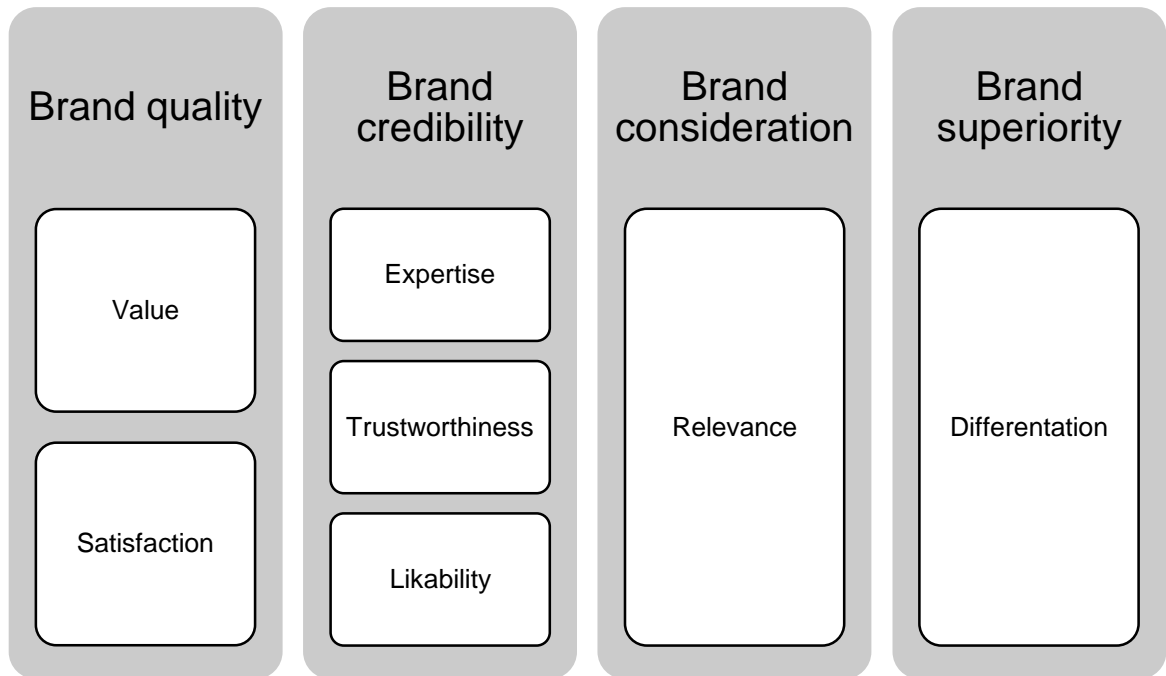


Figure 9. Brand judgment categories (Keller 2013, pp. 118-119).

In terms of a brand name, it is obvious that *Brand quality* is the basic criterion which every customer cares about. Brand quality, in a definite aspect, also means the quality of products and services. Within this category, value and satisfaction are the most essential dimensions. Brand quality could be objectively determined by experts or people who have understanding about technical details. On the other side, when customers' assessment taken into account, evaluation is possibly made in a more subjective way. As long as it is considered valuable to customers and satisfy their certain needs, the quality will be seen as superb. This judgment is called "perceived quality". (Aaker 1991, p. 85)

*Brand credibility* is the extent to which a brand shows different levels of reliability of customers. While brand quality focuses on the worthiness of characteristics and purchasing purposes from a brand, brand credibility concerns more about assurance in doing business with the brand. Brand credibility is measured based on three main dimensions: expertise (competency of the brand), trustworthiness (sensitivity to a customer's demand) and likability (attractiveness and interest of a brand to customers). Expertise refers to achievements, categories, and employees

qualifications of the brand. Trustworthiness is related to the dedication to answer clients' confusion and willingness to address it. Lastly, likability implies attractive characteristics, visible or invisible evoking the desire to trust the brand.

*Brand consideration* is quite different from the previous two because it highly depends on relevance of need of customers. Therefore, no matter how good and credible a brand might be, as long as it is not relevant, customers will stay ignorant (Keller 2013, p. 119). What is even more, being known and recognized is simply not enough, a brand has to manage to appear in available option lists of customers. In other words, top-of-mind or not, it must be in some ways "considered" by clients as a promising solution provider.

*Brand superiority* relates to differentiation in feature, service, policy or anything which could benefit customers. However, differentiation should stay within the range and be consistent with the brand identity.

As mentioned earlier in the thesis, competition in the Vietnamese market is intensely aggressive. According to the Vietnam Statistics Office, the number of SMEs skyrocketed from 121,252 to 309,322 in the period 2006-2011. As a result, customers have a wide range of brands to select depending on their preference. When there are various options available, and it takes lots of time to consider all the facts, *credibility* of one enterprise could be used as the simplest way to make a decision (Kuhn & Alpert 2004, p. 5). Quality and differentiation are undeniably good but credibility is what needed to establish a contact in B2B context. Regarding DMU in the B2B setting, decision makers are usually not using their own money. Hence, a cheaper price is not the best option but making a sound deal with high chance of success is what should be aimed for instead. (Miletsky & Smith 2009, p. 87)

Social media appears as an effective solution to address this issue (Gillin & Schwartzman 2011, p. 8). Through channels of social media, people can interact conveniently more than ever (Miletsky & Smith 2009, p. 211). Clients have to handle costly transactions, thus, there is a need to connect with "technicians" who stay behind the product. Direct contacts with designers and personnel responsible for the

product keep customers closer and help clear customers' doubts. According to Adam Christensen, the manager of social media at IBM, relationships are better connected with the help of social media (Gillin & Schwartzman 2011, p. 8). Social network, an important part of social media, can also be utilized as a both more convenient and more effective way to communicate whenever needed instead of the traditional meeting in person. Connection on professional networking site such as LinkedIn would not only provide clients deeper information but also strengthen engagement between two two sites. Therefore, the more transparent SMEs are, the more credible they become, and the more successful they potentially grow.

#### **2.4.2. Brand feeling**

Brand feeling is irrational assessment about the brand, and mainly derived from brand imagery. Different from brand judgment, brand feeling is easily affected, e.g. by mental factors or social factors. Keller (2013) pointed out that there are six types of emotions a customer can be evoked with when expressing feeling toward a brand:

- Warmth
- Fun
- Excitement
- Security: the extent by which a customer feel safe and protected when choosing a brand. The reason varies, either previous experience or customer's belief in quality of the brand would eliminate purchase and usage problems.
- Social approval: the concern over customer's status in the other's opinion when using a brand, associated with appearance, responsibility and morality.
- Self-respect: the confidence and pride when choosing a brand.

Warmth and fun would hardly be the feelings met by customers in the B2B context. In the B2C market, customers are easier to be satisfied by only internal emotions. An end user may purchase a product since it elicits the feeling of peacefulness, the spontaneous enjoyment or stylish features. However, with B2B clients, regarding such a large amount of money spent, external emotions are essential. When

investing on a product from a brand, they need to be sure that it is a safe choice at least. Even more, social approval and self-respect are other feelings which motivate and encourage them to make purchase decision.

As two sides of a coin, brand feeling can be good or bad. A positive feeling is undoubtedly favorable for enterprises, being the fundamental key to open the door of brand resonance. Conversely, a negative feeling has the power to demolish a brand down from the top. The case of VEDAN that happened in 2008 is a valuable lesson for Vietnamese SMEs. At that time, VEDAN was the biggest player in the Monosodium glutamate (MSG) market and totally overpowered competitors. The quality and flavor were absolutely on top and it was almost a monopoly market for VEDAN. It was later found out that during producing process, the company seriously polluted the Thi Vai River nearby by discharging untreated effluents into it through underground pipes, affecting environment and health of local people. Although endless efforts were made to purify the water and compensate local farmers, customers and giant distributors began to boycott VEDAN's products. After the incident, the Saigon Co.op and Big C supermarket chains announced they would stop selling VEDAN products (ThanhNien News, 2010). The reason was simple, these companies did not want to be considered to support illegal acts of VEDAN. Besides, it was a wise choice made to gain social approval by showing CSR through the boycotting campaign.

Overall, if brand meaning is the image that a brand wants to show, brand response would be "reputation". In other words, it is how customers perceive the brand. (Salinas 2011, p. 9). Through all the years, reputation is still a vague term, which has been mentioned in history. There was a quote of Abraham Lincoln "Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it, the tree is the real thing." (Burke, Martin & Cooper 2011, p. 45) The same happens to the brand, reputation is what customers think about it, and the brand itself is the "character", its existence and activity creates either good or bad reputation.

While image is a manageable factor and totally depends on the brand's strategy, brand reputation is uncontrollable. It is more like an "award" granted for efforts to



create a splendid image. Those who grade a brand are no one else other than customers. There exist controversies whether reputation is an intangible asset or not. Despite it is regarded as a reward, reputation is widely claimed impossible to be bought, sold or transferred (Salinas 2011, p. 365). Whatever result the argument could lead to, it does not affect the fact that reputation (brand response) plays an irreplaceable role in a brand though.

## **2.5 Brand relationships**

The final step of Keller's model is *brand resonance*. It refers to the essence of customer-brand relationship. It shows how close a brand has been taken by a customer. Two main criteria to measure this are the intensity of psychological bond and supporting behaviors motivated by that link (Keller, 2013). Psychologically speaking, it is believed that the *attitude* of customers toward the brand plays an important role in relationships between them and the brand. Even though, it may sometimes be confusing and misleading since the term was called by the other names (Macinnis, Park & Priester 2009, p. 283). The more important a brand seems to its clients, the stronger attitude the brand gets. This results in higher protection from the appeal of other competitors and stronger influence on future thinking and behavior (Macinnis 2009, p. 286).

People may often overestimate the impact of the attitude that a positive attitude would lead to the definite purchasing behavior. Obvious as it may sound, the attitude will only contribute to a limited part of decision making. Recently, modern theories point out that clients are now getting used to staying in relationship even when being unsatisfied. According to Rusbult and Martz (1995), it is a certain result of a practical world where they are ready to endure unfavorable conditions to achieve aimed achievements (Macinnis 2009, p. 284). The point is that a brand must offer enough brand-supportive reasons and encouragement towards customers, emotionally and rationally. The B2B setting is again not as simple as the B2C setting. To gain clients' favor is somehow the same, but making them to do an actual favor, such as purchasing, demands more.

The strength of the connection between the attitude and supportive behaviors of customers causes different levels in brand resonance:

- *Behavioral loyalty*: this refers to not only the frequency of purchase but also quantity each time. A client is added into this category when satisfying both of mentioned ones.
- *Attitudinal attachment*: this level requires some more elements compared with the previous one. Behavioral loyalty is sometimes built up due to very situational contexts. Location, restricted range of products or competitive price are external factors which hugely impact purchase decisions. Customers in these cases are accidentally encouraged to repeatedly choose and even buy in great quantity. However, to be considered as attitudinal attachment, a much more positive preference has to be shown, for instance, expressing pleasure or delight working with and owning a product of the brand.
- *Sense of community*: at this level, customers would find empathy with others who are associated with the brand. Owners of a brand's product would be proud to belong to the user community, to be a part of that brand. There appears a mental bond among these customers, finding others sharing the same interests.
- *Active engagement*: the highest level of customer-brand relationships. Without impacts from outside, customers are willing to follow news about the brand and spend lots of time as well as money to be the first ones to possess the latest product. What is more, they voluntarily recommend and suggest the brand for the others. In this case, they become the most effective ambassadors with the powerful word-of-mouth tool.

(Keller 2013, pp. 121 – 122; Keller 2001, p. 15)

Without doubt, brand resonance is hard to achieve, and that is the reason why it is the ultimate level, requiring the fulfillment of previous steps. It is popular that numerous companies have been working hard just to accomplish the lowest level –

behavioral loyalty. At least enough money will be generated and the brand stays among first choices temporarily. On the other hand, although active engagement is difficult to reach but at least in Vietnam, not only big brands but also SMEs are capable of winning it. Discount is never an ideal and absolute method to establish a firm relationship.

According to Lauren Mallian Bias, there are some practical ways which may be suitable for Vietnam SMEs:

*Keep quality high:* It is obvious that nobody would reject a product which is worth its price. SMEs are not able to deliver luxury products, so simply do not try. Much practical way is to concentrate on what is suitable with their resources and deliver products as promised.

*Engage customers:* The advantage of SMEs is that they do not have a great number of clients, therefore, it is easier to communicate and manage existing contacts, inform them about upcoming features and developments of products.

*Solicit feedback form customers:* Feedback collecting has always been seen as a waste of time and money to SMEs in Vietnam. The reason lies in the high-context culture of Vietnamese. When asked about satisfaction, people rarely say no since negative refusal is believed to endanger harmony (Ashwill 2004, p. 112). Therefore most of answers from surveys are possibly deceiving and sometimes make companies fall into a trap if totally believe in them. It requires much sophistication and sensibility to get true data.

*Give customers a reason to come back:* A loyalty program is a good choice to encourage customers come back to the brand instead of competitors'. In the context of Vietnamese society, where private contacts are highly appreciated and influential, worth-of-mouth has never been more efficient to attract more people. A recommendation or even just a compliment from a friend or a family member is stronger than the actual performance of products. It means a satisfied customer can bring back several more of his partners. More importantly, these potential customers

come to the brand with trust and positive attitude, which hardly happens at start to SMEs.

*Stay relevant:* Flexibility is highly appreciated when there are many competitors in a sector and a great range of products can target multiple customers at once. However, focus must be kept on the company's strengths and marketing campaigns are absolutely not allowed to be off the category.

*Show appreciation:* Apart from formal meetings and business contracts, clients also expect to receive caring words. A thank-you note after a successful transaction, a birthday card on foundation day celebration or congratulation on new achievements would really touch customers. It seems to take time and effort, but good relationship is priceless. As discussed above, customers do not buy products, they purchase a solution. Emotional incentives added up to would make a perfect solution package which is hard to resist.

Briefly speaking, in the Vietnamese cultural context, where expertise is often overlooked and the emotional decision resulting from "private relationship" is highly appreciated instead, brand relationships should be more and more focused.

### **3 Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 The case study**

Research, according to Cambridge Dictionary, is defined as "a detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover information or reach an understanding". It is a movement from the known to the unknown (C.R.Kothari 2004, p. 113). Because of its importance, various strategies appear to support this progress, in order to improve the accuracy. The case study, not different from other methods, is a way of investigating an empirical topic by following a set of procedures. In reality, it has been applied in numerous aspects such as psychology, sociology, political science, social work (Gilgun, 1994), business (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002) and community planning. The case study will also be considered appropriate in this case, since

“how” and “why” questions are being studied about a company’s branding implementation situation, over which the researcher has no control. (Robert K.Yin 2003, p. 1).

The case is selected because of several reasons. Alpine Creative is a typical small firm within the SMEs category in Vietnam. More interestingly, after existing some years under that name, the company is developing a plan to re-brand itself. This is a phase which has many issues to work on, and by working on this case, it is believed that the author is able to collect useful information.

### **3.2 Data collection**

There will be two sources to collect data: secondary and primary. The former one will be compiled through online articles and company documents. Meanwhile, the primary data is collected from the CEO and CMO of Alpine Creative, located in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Because of the essence of this study, merely qualitative research methods will be applied. The qualitative method is defined to focus primarily on the kind of evidence which makes it possible to understand the meaning of what is going on (Gillham 2010, p. 10). Flexibility and suitability of this method are also necessary characteristics for the purpose of in-depth understanding and examination without prior judgment (Carson & Gilmore 2006, p. 174). Assuredly, with a small targeted number of samples, qualitative method is a proper way to get deeper information and understanding. Fully exploiting its strengths possibly illuminate complicated questions and propose clues and explanations for issues this paper is aimed at.

In this specific case, interview is chosen as the main supporting tools for qualitative research. *Semi-structured in-depth interviews* will be conducted separately with three managers. Despite more time and effort it may take, this enables certain advantages compared with group interviews (Proctor 2004, pp. 234 - 235):

- Interviewees feel the focus of attention as well as in constant rapport with the interviewer, which is important to make him/her answer actively
- Extra time will be useful to reveal new information and feelings lying under statements
- Semi-structured interviews allows more flexibility in changing questions according to what the respondent answers.
- Non-verbal feedback would be more well-noticed by the interviewer.

Due to the distance restraint, all of these interviews were conducted online through Skype video call. This function is not only helpful in transmitting voice but also observing interviewee emotions and reactions.

Before the implementation, the researcher had decided the true overall objective so as to it is matched with not only the topic but also the case company's situation. As the theoretical framework strongly relies on the Pyramid Resonance Model of Keller, the guideline questions were designed consistent with and following four levels of the pyramid.

During the interviews, all preparation was strictly followed. Thanks to the acquaintance between the researcher and respondents before, atmosphere from the start was very friendly and cozy. Because it was expected to receive honest and objective opinions, the interviewer tried to behave in the same way by frankly briefing his research process and assuring interviewees' benefits from the study. After provided the purpose and instructions for the interviews, respondents were so open to answer the questions that conversations stayed informal and smooth without intention. To encourage them to tell more, questiones were usually under the form of "Share with me" or "Let me know" instead of rigid questions. Being all managers and running a company and various projects, it was supposed that they would feel more comfortable in the position of sharing experience and knowledge.

All respondents agreed to recorded the voice call and video calls, however, they all suggested that the recordings were only to be used personally and restricted them

from being published or exploited in other purposes. Understandably, their brand is in the middle of planning and has not yet been exposed, therefore, the worry of information leak is real. Besides, there were figures and information for internal staffs only achieved based on long-lasting relationship and trust on the researcher. Those information, as their words, “make it easier to explain” and help the author to understand more the current situation of the brand.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

A data analysis carries findings and raw data through demanding processes so as to acquire the most credible and accurate research result. There are two different stages in the process: *detective work* and *creative leap* (Carson & Gilmore 2006, p. 176). The former one is to make sure all necessary information has been collected. To achieve this purpose, video-call and voice call interviews through Skype were recorded under the respondents' permission. The recordings were repeatedly listened to and transcribed on paper. There were three in total and each lasted for one hour in average. Twelve pages of transcript were drafted and four pages of core ideas were abridged. From those archives, answers and details provided by the interviewees were keenly tracked down in order not to leave out anything. In fact, during the interviews, the researcher always left space for flexibility but did not forget to stick to the planned structure. It is confident that all essential matters had been referred to. However, the depth of every response were varied, which means one may have provided different details compared with others. Hence, it is necessary to concentrate on the detective work still.

The second phase aims to classify information and place suitable details in appropriate categories. According to Mintzberg (1979), “there is no one-to-one correspondence between data and theory” (Carson & Gilmore 2006, p. 176). Therefore skills and efforts have to be well-spent to wisely reflect information. Indeed, during this process, it is realized that not all information is needed and very often answers are actually located in other places instead of where they are supposed to be. Because interviews were all semi-structured, interviewees were allowed to share freely when they were in the flow. Thus, the disorder of information

is now and then inevitable. After listening to recorded files and reading the transcript for several times, information identified to be in the same theme was highlighted with the same color. Subsequently, they were grouped together based on structure questions and used as the outline for the empirical data part. In this research, topics which would be utilized for different questions appear, and how to connect from one to the other was complicated. Avoiding overlapping ideas but still showing the linkage would be considered as the main objective.

### **3.4 Reliability and validity**

For a qualitative research, there are two perspectives to test its quality: reliability and validity.

#### **3.4.1 Reliability**

Reliability refers to the extent how reliable the collected data is. It could be illustrated by the repeated result conducted in another occasion or by another researcher (Ereaut, 2002). In this study, the data is achieved from the interviews with CEO, CMO and Project Manager of the case company Alpine Creative. As the founders of the company and creators of branding strategies not only for the company but also for their clients, their understanding about the company as well as about the topic is under no doubts. Within in-depth interviews, terminologies and Keller's model were quite familiar with them, therefore, they found almost no difficulties to understand and respond to questions. Only one slight problem is the limited sample size as the company does not have many employees, and in fact, there are only three of them responsible for macro-strategy and branding matters. The reliability regarding this issue may be just at an average level but the results are undoubtedly beneficial for Alpine Creative.

#### **3.4.2 Validity**

Validity concerns the ability to actually test what initially planned to be measured by the researcher (Ereaut, 2002). There are two main threats for the validity of every research. First is prejudice. It is normal for humans to be prejudice, especially it



happens when researchers lack information (Gillham 2010, p. 27). Preference is even worse. It is no more about expectation of a certain result but the desire to achieve it against all odds. Reality discovered through the research possibly goes the other way and appears to be “contradictory” (Gillham 2010, p. 26). However, it would be fraudulent and irresponsible to intentionally modify the result to make it count. The author determines to stay as objective as possible and respects the actual result despite existing differences from the theoretical framework. At the same time, to get positive validity, the content of interviews had been prepared with the focus and relevance to the topic to reduce irrelevant topics and increase available time for more fundamental topics.

## **4 Empirical Data**

### **4.1 About the case company – Alpine Creative**

Alpine Creative is a very young Vietnamese company, founded in 2012, located in Hanoi. Alpine Creative is currently working in the field of innovation services agency, specializing in ideation, product development, customer-focused design, and brand management. Their current clients are medium-sized enterprises in Vietnam. Apart from about four main managers and six other employees, who are in charge of all projects at the moment, Alpine has an excellent network of high-qualified freelancers in Vietnam, working in various fields.



Figure 10. Alpine Creative's logo

There are three main types of branding agencies operating in Vietnam: *super-cheap*, *supreme quality* and *world-class*. The first one is not considered in the same category with Ablink. Those companies within the group offer really cheap package, from \$300 to \$500, solely working on name, logo and pattern creation. Supreme quality agencies, which are claimed to be main competitors, offer high-quality branding strategy for the whole system. Alike Ablink, they also involve in various aspects of branding: creation, design, management and miscellaneous issues. The last one includes giants in the industry, such as Landor and Grey Group.

Despite its youth and lack of experience, Alpine Creative has claimed its particular position and got an average number of contracts. Nevertheless, the leaders' ambition is high and their desires are to expand Alpine Creative greater and bigger. To further improve the company's performance, the need of re-branding is raised and brought into serious consideration.

Up to the moment when the interview was conducted, the process was not yet completed but the direction and plan are already clear. Therefore, information collected from the interview is believed to be rich in both quantity and quality.

## 4.2 Reasons for re-branding

There are several reasons presented by the interviewees for re-branding.

Alpine Creative was not established to become a branding agency at first. According to Mr. Pham Quoc Dat, manager of the company, it was originally his plan to found a start-up incubator, supporting and assisting Vietnamese start-ups. The incubator was supposed to approach and work with start-ups with all matters of business including finance, management, operation and marketing. The former name of the company was only Alpine, based on the name of Alpine goat inhabiting on the Alps Mountain. The image of this goat type was considered so much alike with start-ups: brave, fearless, and relentless. After all, the plan was changed and the name Alpine Creative was born to be suitable with the situation of a branding agency. It was just a temporary adjustment due to complexity in re-designing thoroughly all materials and logos. With all existing competencies and knowledge of the team in the field, the company had no difficulty handling with expertise matters when taking this process.

Since then, Alpine Creative has shown a consistent performance. Nonetheless, current results are only regarded as accomplished (Aaron, CMO). The whole team understands that it is time to restructure the company's branding painstakingly in order to grow stronger and reach further overseas. Proficiency is only a small problem while not-well-prepared Alpine Creative branding causes much more troubles (Pham, CEO). According to him, when international, or even regional standard is dissimilar with the domestic's one, customers are also more demanding. It is his worry how the company can be trusted to do branding for clients when it is incapable of building its own brand completely. A big change is awaiting, hence, there are many tasks to be completed before introducing the new brand (Pham, CEO).

## 4.3 Customer-based brand equity

### 4.3.1 Brand identity

Regardless of the company's type, B2C or B2B, brand identity is always of great concern considering its importance to communicate with customers and clients and win the top-of-mind position in their minds. Brand identity plays even more essential role in the typical branding section, since it is an effective tool to PR about the brand without saying a single word.

The case company is absolutely aware of this fact and emphasizes its own brand identity considerably. Starting with the name of the new brand – Ablink. “Ablink” is understood as “A-blink”, the act of shutting and opening the eyes quickly (Oxford Dictionary). It is implied that clients are going to have a simple decision to make: falling in love with the brand with a blink of an eye. In a more negative scenario, when the situation is not favorable and co-operation is not practical, it is a guarantee that professionalism is priority and separation can be decided quickly to save time for customers as well. “Ablink” is also a way of pun - combination of “able” and “link”, accentuating the *ability to link* itself to customers and its clients to the end customers. From a more specialized perspective, within the name, A/b testing – a well known experiment method used in marketing and branding is also included. This is a way to present a sense of professionalism and flexibility in finding the best solution for customers.

Compared with the previous name, Ablink has shown its capability to better fit in the section, it is not only more succinct, easier to remember but also more appealing. There are stories behind to tell and inspiring explanations to give. Theoretically, at least it has succeeded to illustrate several different dimensions at the same time and evoke customer's thoughts and emotions. However, the name will be hard to get when it is heard. Listeners may find it confusing to identify whether it is with space or without space between “a” and “blink”. Besides, it could be fairly baffling for the customers who do not expect the connection between the name and its expertise.

Such matters could be a problem in word-of-mouth marketing, unless it is clarified plainly enough.

The logo of Ablink is not yet published, therefore, it has been taken from the design material given by the interviewees. According to them, the logo was built up by mixing together the four most easily-perceived colors by human eyes. The purpose and inspiration are coherent with the whole identity – catching customers’ attention quickly and making them to fall in love “in a blink”. Furthermore, angular shapes and layers organized in an abstract way in the logo are considered to be appropriate with the spirit of a branding agency. All mentioned elements are in an absolute contradiction with the logo of Alpine Creative, where the main theme colors are blue & grey, and patterns are also simple. They may be useful in creating a professional and trustworthy impression for an incubator (as the initial intention was), but that is hardly adequate for a creative agency.



Figure 11. Ablink’s logo

The tagline of the new brand is “Brand you can’t stop staring at”. Compared with the former one, “Prepare to climb (to the top of your business)”, it shows an improvement

in both brand self assessment and mission of the company. While the previous sounds ordinary with moderate confidence in helping customers achieve success (only “prepare” to go the top), the latter presents greater boldness and certainty in the promise. With this tagline, Ablink delivers a picture of a resourceful branding agency, capable of providing brilliant service to make them proud. The tagline is consistent with the intended image of the brand: “new, bold, focus, fast, smart” and has reasonable length for clients to impress and mesmerize.

#### **4.3.2 Brand meaning**

The *brand performance* of Alpine was evaluated as not really successful since it failed to generate expected money. The name Alpine itself has not also created necessary advantages in a negotiation process due to the lack of certain characteristics. Therefore, Ablink is rebranded with the determination to surmount those drawbacks. First and foremost, the company aims to become “a solution for clients” instead of a traditional service providers as the way many other firms are operating, and actually also the way they operated before. The approach to customers’ problem will be greatly changed in pursue of offering more impressive but practical service and showing helpfulness to clients. Traditionally, it is compulsory for Alpine’s customers to sign a contract first, only then next steps will be implemented. However, customers may have found it risky to agree on spending money while they have not known clearly what their main problem is and possible solution for it. On the other hand, being in short of information about customers led Alpine into difficult circumstances after signing contract.

Hence, a change is necessary. Ablink is about to work with clients even before entering official cooperation. They believe that knowledge about customers is more essential than anything else to understand their needs. For branding, there are many elements to specify, from micro details to macro strategy. Therefore, it is absolutely impossible to customize customers’ experience and satisfy them without understanding their needs. A customer and market information search along with situation analysis, will be prepared before signing a contract. There will be meetings to openly exchange information between both sides to understand more about each

other. As discussed in the theoretical part, B2B customers hardly purchase simply a product or service, what they want is the solution. Understanding that need, Ablink is going to deliver exactly it regardless of the fact that more efforts must be spent.

In addition, realizing the rise of digital branding in the market, the company has decided to focus more on this aspect. This time, when the brand is aiming to reach also international clients in other countries, this supplementation is compulsory for productivity and communication. It is a part of their new strategy to apply smart campaign through social media for Ablink itself and its clients as well since it is easily accessible and more viral. That is also the reason of recruiting two extra digital designers. Before, lack of resources has partly deterred the brand from showing a decent performance. The task was usually outsourced to freelancers, who are not always available. By accomplishing this, not only a beneficial aspect of branding is certainly covered, but Ablink will also demonstrate a firm performance with capability. The upcoming recruit aims to select young talented designers since they are believed to be more dynamic and ambitious. Besides, to allure experienced experts seems to be out of their reach since the brand's financial situation of the brand is not strong enough to meet high salary requests. Likewise, how to invite a competent Creative Manager with a restricted budget is the main worry. Since this position is awaited as one of the factors to make a leapfrog for the brand, a lot of time will be spent on finding and choosing a candidate who is suitable to the brand's situation.

With regard to the price, Ablink is not going to offer "Rate-card", which means full-price package. This is one of the few unchanged things between Alpine Creative and Ablink because of its proved efficiency. It is extremely hard to set standards and every case is particular, which means efforts made are not equal. Therefore, unfairness could happen to either customers or employees to calculate in the way that everything is summed up generally. In addition, a rate-card is only popular among "super-cheap" category, which can affect the company's image and its positioning. Then, the total cost will be calculated according to the working hours of each staff member taking part in the project. In average, the range will fluctuate

between \$10,000 and \$30,000. To medium-sized companies in Vietnam, this price is considered as reasonable when compared with their turnover per year. At the same time, there is no big difference shown between Ablink and potential competitors within the “supreme quality” category, such as RichardMoore or Dentsu. Thus, it is strongly believed that customers will not consider the price as a negative point regarding brand performance.

The *brand imagery* of Ablink is depicted in the following figure:

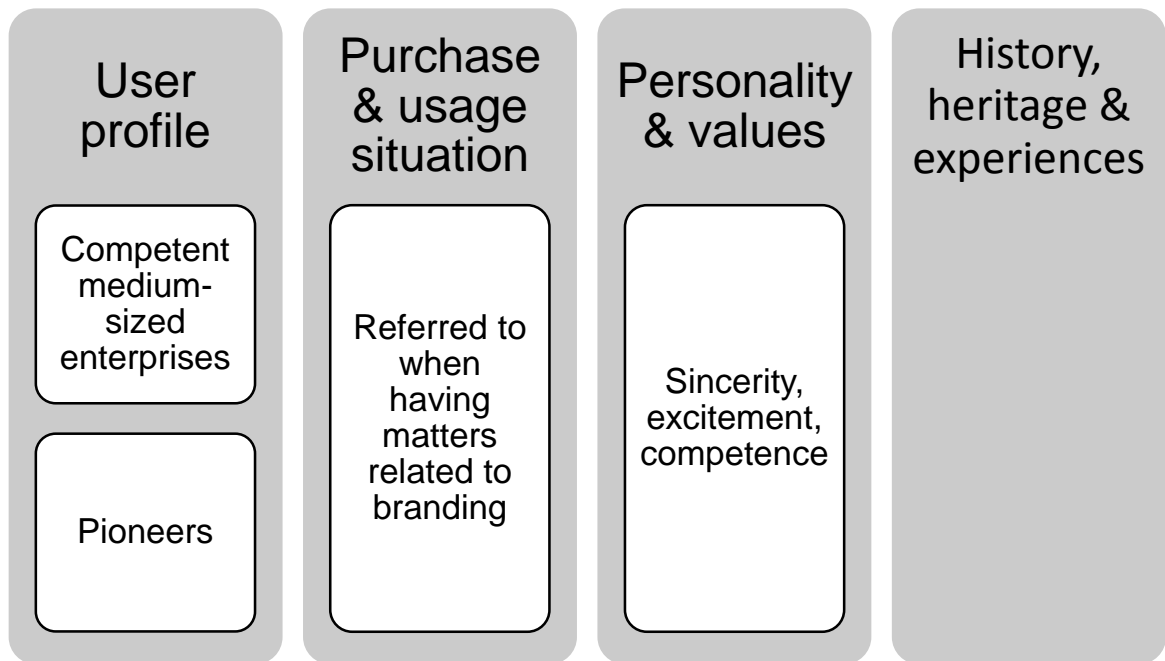


Figure 12. Ablink’s brand imagery

Ablink focused on three categories: User profile, Purchase & usage situation and Personality & values. Being aware of the fact the brand is young, already including the history of Alpine Creative, the last category is left out understandably because the brand is sure not to create any remarkable effects from it.

The decision on pricing policy and categories offering says it all: the novel brand would be a proper companion with medium-sized companies, which possess stable finance and the scope is average. Small-sized clients would find it easier and time-saving to decide to blend in this group or not. However, large-sized enterprises,



regarding themselves as medium ones, would hardly refer to Ablink at the moment, since it would be a sign of reputation deterioration. Besides, Ablink also aims to raise a sense of pride in customers' thoughts as pioneers choosing the brand. The breakthrough point of the brand partly stays in bold and unique ideas, distinguishable from ordinary thinking. Their customers would be brave and modern leaders in this novel approach and contribute to widespreading it in the Vietnamese market.

The decisive choice of rebranding is the most apparent sign of highlighting the usage situation of the brand. The council has determined to make it completely clear for clients about the specialization and the field they are working in. At the same time, sincerity, excitement and competence are values which are paid attention to. They are recognizably identified through the latest sales process, "fast and bold ideas" they are going to sell, as well as the expansion in digital branding.

The brand meaning, or brand image – as mentioned in chapter 4.2, is the most important part a brand can exploit to show customers. However, Alpine Creative was depicted as being "in lack of investment to promote brand image". As a newly found company, money had been spent to various purposes, mostly to keep the brand in existence. CEO Pham also acknowledged that later when the brand made some profits, the decision were made cautiously because the brand was not well-designed enough to be promoted through big campaigns. Alpine Creative then continued to utilize personal networks of Aaron – the CMO who has been working in the field in Vietnam for 10 years to attract customers. The other way is traditional pitching, presenting ideas against other agencies to convince clients. Basically, the old brand only searches for contracts in a passive way. However, the new brand, which is supposed to be "better prepared to reach for the top" (PM, Nguyen) will be focused much more on promotion. Ablink will start improving its image, add more techniques to make it more well-known in the field and receive attention from B2B customers. In other words, a proactive method is about to be applied to allure clients to the brand, no longer just search for them.

### 4.3.3 Brand response

Different from many other cases where researchers work on a brand which has already operated for years, Ablink is not yet fully built and published. Although it is mostly based on Alpine Creative, it is impossible to measure how customers are going to response to the brand in the future. Therefore this chapter and the next chapter will be emphasized on *strategy planned to be used* to gain the most possible positive response and relationship to the brand. All explained follows below are not actual response of clients. The researcher's own evaluation and suggestion of are presented.

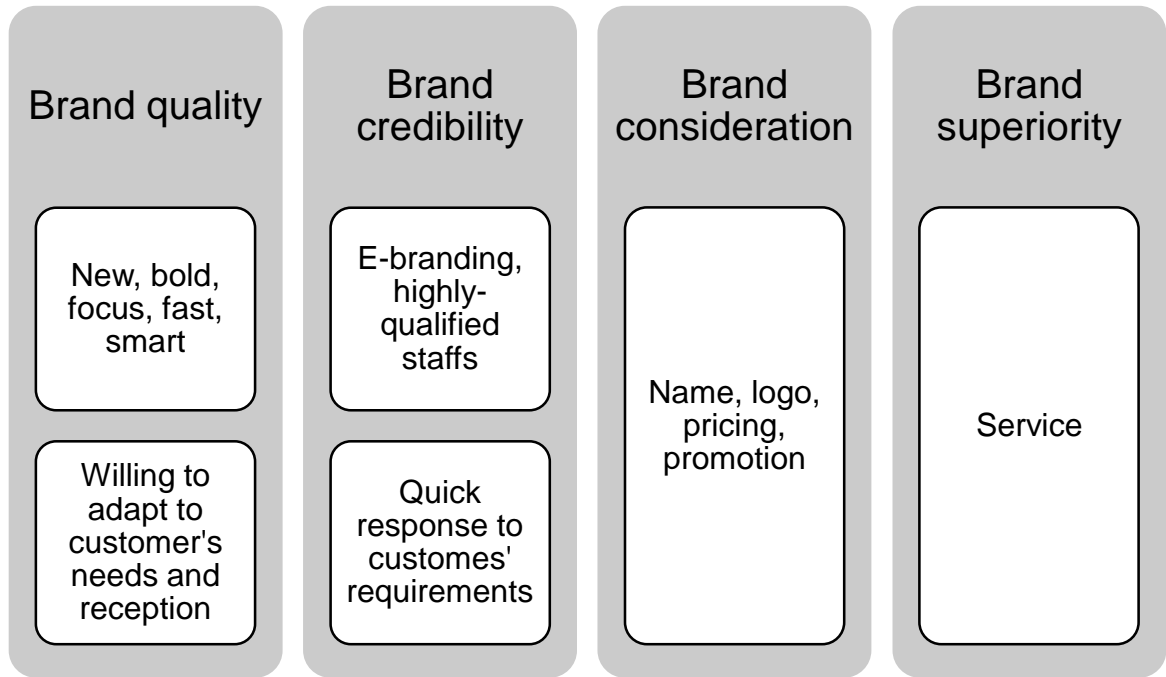


Figure 13. Ablink's brand judgment expectation

According to the respondents, all elements which possibly form a good *brand judgment* from customers are all under consideration.

First start with *brand quality*. With all the changes in the sales process and the company's approach to customers, it is expected that customers are going to see "new, bold, focus, fast, smart" as additional values, along with value of money spent in each business. Branding assessment is a process involving one's own preference

and irrational factors, Ablink sees the chance and space to add intangible values to evoke clients' favor. While "new" is a compulsory criteria clients need to see from a branding agency since nobody ever expects stereotype and trite ideas used on their own brands, the rest are seen as core values to leverage brand quality. Values, as a matter of fact, vary widely. Depending much on its essence and its vision, a brand has various possibilities to receive different opinions of customers on values. Explaining their expectations for "bold", an interviewee claims that the well-recognized ability to "think out of the box" in advertising industry in general, and specifically branding is the most important element to build a successful brand. According to him, that value is not something coming up spontaneously but totally in line with the brand's strategies and characteristics related to brand performance. "Focus" and "fast" are closely attached values, "focus" without "fast" is only inefficient, but "fast" without "focus" is probably low-quality. These values are determined to be achieved in the process of working with customers and dealing with problems. Employees will all be oriented and trained to give their best efforts during the shortest time possible. Lastly, "smart" is considered as a balancing element for the rest. According to the interviewees, they are confident and expect that customers would identify the brand's ability to understand them and their market situation and wisely modify services. "New, bold, focus, fast" are not always exposed in the same way but in a flexible, "smart" way. These points, if accomplished together and shown worthy to clients, are added values to brand quality without doubt.

Satisfaction is put much less simple thoughts from interviewees. To them, with a typical service like branding, the main factor leading to customer's satisfaction is the willing to listen and adapt to their needs. It is true that in B2B, pleasure is hardly achieved by anything else except for good performance of the purchased products or services. However, in branding service, sometimes excluding professional issues, there are requirements based on personal interests or styles (for instance: CEO's preference). Therefore, according to respondents, since "the customer is king", the task of understanding their desires and translating from ideas to reality correctly is the most essential factor to make them satisfactory. "New and bold" are considered as typical values of the brand but probably cause several troubles towards

customers' satisfaction. It was explained in the interview that the majority of Vietnamese companies have not yet got used to unique ideas standing out from the crowd. Without precise interpretation, customers possibly get the meaning wrong and find it hard to agree with the brand. This possibly results in unwanted dissatisfaction and misunderstanding on brand quality.

*Brand credibility* is the second factor to be considered after brand quality. Although Alpine Creative has not succeeded to attract much attention of customers, but for those who have cooperated with the brand, interviewees believe Alpine Creative has made a reliable impression and possessed high credibility. For the time being, Ablink is supposed to be able to transfer brand credibility from the former brand. Inspired of a Vietnamese saying: "If I trust you, I will work with you", the brand Ablink even aims at higher integrity to put customers into the most comfortable mood when coming to work with them. With regard to "expertise", the extension to e-branding is definitely a boost to this aspect. Having internal staffs responsible for this task means more discipline and responsibility. It also a sign of staying up-to-date of the brand. In addition, a team of high-qualified employees definitely makes great impact. Currently, staffs working for Alpine Creative (and soon to be Ablink) is evaluated knowledgeable about the field. Especially according to CEO Pham and PM Nguyen, CMO Aaron is highly respected by specialists in Vietnam thanks to his long experience in Vietnam and unarguable competence proved in numerous projects for giant cooperation such as Vinaphone and Landor. His network and reputation have always provided great help for the brand.

Responses show that a quick response to customers' requirements is what has gained high credibility for Alpine Creative. During different phases of collaboration, there are minor yet unsettled issues to solve. As soon as a client informs and suggests for something new, the whole team starts working on it right away to give the client the quickest answer. In addition, the ability to catch up with international models and trends is also evaluated as a strong point of the company since most of their customers were excited to see this adoption. At the moment, the strategy of Ablink on this is to keep up the good work and make no big adjustments.

During conversations, all interviewees were either avoiding the point of “likability” because they claimed that it plays no role in this case or answered ambiguously with little certainty of what it could be.

The application of social media as a tool to increase brand credibility was also mentioned. With the development of technology and the easy access to social networks and Internet sources, the brand intended to make the best use of it to show transparency in the brand’s activities.

Next is *consideration*. With all changes in brand identity, specifically name and logo, Ablink is determined to receive more consideration from potential customers and clients who have not been reached previously. They aim at easier access and more correct perception from customers about the specialization that the brand is working on. Moreover, viral marketing is going to be applied to their own brand to further promote the brand image, leading the customers to include Ablink in their list of feasible options. Ablink will also inform former customers all about this change, in case they want to have further cooperation in the future.

Lastly, the concern is put into *superiority*. The point that all respondents seem to be most confident and take pride in is the service - the method of delivering their product. For the quality product itself, respondents admitted that there is hardly anything outstanding or distinguishable from other competitors in the “supreme quality” category since Ablink is lack of both capability and demands from the market. However, after visiting, competing and deeply researching about competitors, they have found out that there is a shared problem among these branding agencies in Vietnam at this level: ordinary quality service. Therefore, they persist in pursuing a higher-quality standard, learning from other international brands, especially in Singapore and Philippines, since they share many common elements in both business context and cultures.

Ablink aims and expects for the feeling of excitement, safety, and self-respect from its customers regarding *brand feeling*. With creativity involved and a youthful generation of staffs, clients are about to find it excited to work with the brand. Being

a company which specializes in building brand for others, it would be a must to make their customers feel inspired when working with them first. Bold and innovative ideas are also contributing factors for this feeling.

Safety is the second feeling Ablink wants to offer. Different from companies which deliver tangible products such as machine components or raw materials, the product of Ablink is unable to be tested beforehand. Even though customers may find no difficulties tracking back and reviewing results of previous products, in each case the need is different and the evaluation is only relative. What is more, the final result will not be seen until the whole process is completed. Therefore, through meticulous explanation and assurance from the start, the brand expects to make customers to feel safe to believe in whatever would be suggested and implemented. They also offer refund policies if they do not fulfill certain areas in specific projects. Together with focusing on building the sincerity personality for the brand as mentioned earlier, this forecast on safely feeling is consistent and understandable. As a branding process usually lasts for months, which means not only money but time and efforts are spent, the feeling of safety guarantees a smooth cooperation and comfort for both sides.

Self-respect is something managers also want their clients to feel when using Ablink brand. In specific, it is the pride when using a supreme quality product, not a commodity. Nonetheless, respondents are not overexcited or overreacted about this point. Practically speaking, the brand is still new and there would hardly be any breakthroughs to rapidly expand the fame of the brand so that customers may feel extremely proud to use the service of Ablink. In the long run, even when the brand gets close to the position of Landor or Grey Group that are (in the world class category), clients probably feel great, but it is only the story of managers of the customer company. According to CMO Aaron, branding is something at the very backstage that never would a company be ready to share the process. It is very popular for a company to be proud of their brand but undoubtedly it is rare to hear one showing his pride to the company which designed and created it. That is a typical industry characteristic, much different from many other B2B transactions. Even

though the inner “self-respect” about a brand’s high quality product is still essential and hard to achieve.

Social approval is a feeling achieved by Alpine Creative but overlooked by Ablink. CEO Pham with his passion to incubate young start-ups has supported them by sponsoring for some start-up competitions and events in Hanoi with the budget of Alpine Creative. Because of the former brand identity also originally designed for them, they have received average attention and respect for their contribution on a better start-up ecosystem and responsibility for encouraging the entrepreneurship spirit. However, the influence from that recognition is evaluated as “limited”, and start-ups, for the moment, are no longer the segmented customers of either Alpine Creative or Ablink. After all, despite concern for these types of firms, Ablink will stop investing in CSR.

#### **4.3.4 Brand relationships**

This chapter, just like the previous one, is not a synthesis of the actual result of the relationship of Ablink and its customers. The following analysis is developed from Alpine Creative’s current situation and forthcoming plan of action for Ablink.

In the theoretical framework, four levels in brand relationships were listed. However, the cases of branding agencies in general and Alpine Creative in specific are exceptional. Unlike most other products, branding is only “one-time purchased” and very rarely appears a company that would appear twice in a short time. In the 3-year existence and operation of Alpine Creative, there has not been a record of such a case like that. Therefore the “behavioral loyalty” is simply impractical to achieve, no matter what factors may affect or how well the brand may have done. “Sense of community” or “active engagement” are not also expected by managers since the brand was small and did not reach the position which can make such great impacts. “Attitudinal attachment” was considered as the feasible target in order to well bond customers. Nevertheless, according to the interviewees, in spite of having completed most projects favorably, it would be an overstatement to declare that they have acquired that. The majority of clients may find the ultimate products satisfactory,

however, they did not seem to be “attached” to the brand Alpine Creative. The failure in accomplishing attitudinal attachment is also a great contributor to the demand of re-branding.

Ablink is expected to perform better than Alpine Creative in achieving the same goal, at least for the next five years. Learning from the valuable experience with Alpine Creative, there are compulsory improvements which the company plans to take care of. Earlier, they were too careless about post-purchasing customer care since it was believed that when a project is done, there would not be too much connection in the future. But they are trying to change this by more regular follow-up after each completed transaction. Customer management will be taken into serious consideration with the help of a CRM application to collect and save important information about clients. Flowers and congratulations will be sent to clients on their big events to show goodwill and they play a role as an implicit reminder about the previous cooperation as well as the existence of the brand in case the client has problems to be solved. Or else, it is still good to establish a good image, since a positive attitude if not leading to repeated purchases, definitely creates favorable effects on people around.

In terms of customer’s feedback, from the responses of the interviewees, it can be inferred that there would not be any formal forms of feedback. According to the explanations, as branding is a process carried on for a long period, not just a transaction occurring in a week, it is redundant and ineffective to measure a customer’s opinion just after a survey. The right way should be to observe, notice and then collect feedback throughout the whole procedure. Furthermore, for a product that could be considerably customized in various ways, the feedback of customers must be given with continuity to keep the product on track. Clients also do not hesitate to complain about what they find unsatisfactory. CMO Aaron introduced the general feedback evaluation process of Ablink.



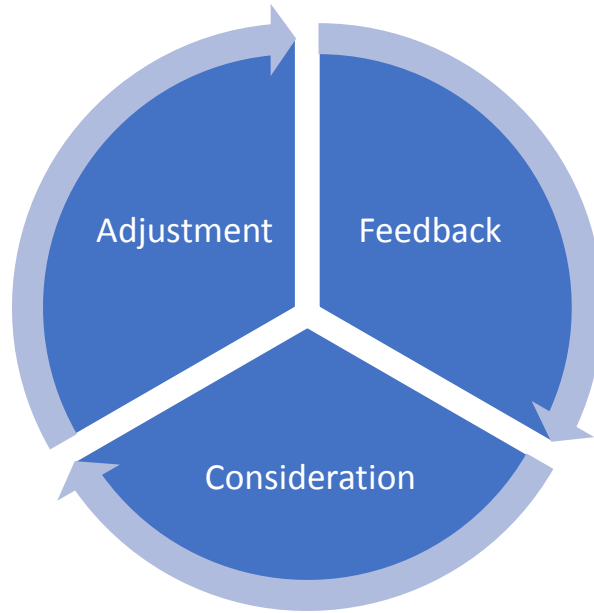


Figure 14. Ablink's feedback evaluation process

Although the company is open to listen to and appreciate opinions of customers, experience with Alpine Creative has shown that clients' feedback is not always reasonable. The same thing happening to Ablink is foreseen as well. Since feedback is given in the middle of the procedure, customers expect to see it come into effect immediately. In these case, ignorance for theirs is not a good solution. Depending on the situation, particular reactions will be chosen to be explained to customers and not make them feel neglected.

## **5 Conclusion and recommendations**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

Generally speaking, the research illustrated a picture of branding of Alpine Creative based on Keller's customer-based brand equity model. It has shown that brand managers are well aware of the importance of branding to their business. This has pushed them to make a decision to implement re-branding. The purpose is reasonable and understandable: overcome current deficiency and develop an

excellent brand for a competitive market. The study has also presented issues a SME may suffer in the B2B context while handling their branding.

With the new name – Ablink, various changes have been applied to the brand. As a branding agency, the whole branding process has been handled by themselves without the help of a third party. It is a good point that the brand would save lots of resources to self-conduct. More importantly, no one else understands about the brand as they do. Therefore, strategy and design promise to be perfectly coherent with intended ideas and they successfully convey what they want to.

Ablink's brand identity is designed in a wise and modern way. Above all, the brand identity comprises necessary elements to clarify what Ablink is and indicate which category it belongs to. It is also consistent in showing a message of creativity, professionalism and attractiveness. Being a player in the advertising industry, the above mentioned characteristics are compulsory and the brand seems to put enough attention to them. In comparison with the previous one, there is no doubt that the managers of the company have done a great improvement.

The brand meaning, or brand image, has been put into serious consideration as an absolute solution for future development of Ablink. After an unsuccessful period time with Alpine Creative, brand managers have realized the importance of not only a good preparation but also promotion to bring its image closer to clients. With regard to brand performance, product characteristics and serviceability, product reliability and empathy to customers and pricing are the most concerning matters. Above all, the statement “a solution for clients” is the backbone guideline for all relating adjustments. Although the idea shows responsibility and a basis for strong and sustainable business, only practice would show its effectiveness. The novel sales procedure could be highly time consuming and effort wasting if after all meticulous research, the collaboration is going nowhere. A reasonable charge for pre-test service would be appropriate. Or else, this should only be applied with very particular case which they are uncertain about the level of success. Price is not set cheaper than other competitors' is their attention to stay competitive and imply the brand in the “supreme quality” category. Despite operating for three years under the name

Alpine Creative, the brand Ablink is still a novice in the field with new customers. Therefore, the brand should reconsider this issue carefully to be more appropriate with their situation.

User profile, purchase and usage situation, personality and values are remarkable issues when it comes to brand imagery. Medium-sized companies are segmented clearly as the main users of the brand. It is very essential and appreciated to attract the right customers and establish an imagination of brand scope and scale. The purpose situation is also made apparent with the good work on brand identity. Sincerity, excitement and competence are core features Ablink wants to deliver build and show to customers, adding up patterns to the brand performance, creating exclusive meaning for the brand.

The response of customers to the brand, or Ablink's reputation has not yet been measured but ideas about how to improve it better than the previous brand did are already planned. Brand performance is expected to receive more positive opinions regarding brand quality and brand consideration thanks to meticulous preparation and bigger investments. Service is considered as the brand superiority with other competitors in the field. However, it is seriously in doubt because customers would rarely recognize it because they only purchase "branding" one time only and therefore cannot compare to see if the service is really superior or not. Ablink should really think about a more visible advantage as the leverage, such as an alluring and unique portfolio. By doing this, it also helps receive good judgment on brand credibility, in relation to "likability". At this stage, brand credibility is supposed to be firm thanks to good collaboration with Alpine Creative's customers in the past and a team of dynamic and capable staff.

Ablink expects to make customers feel safe, excited and self-respected when working with the brand. While safety and excitement are short-term targets, it takes time for the brand to grow bigger to make customers find self-respect. Social approval used to be well-achieved by Alpine Creative through CSR program to support start-ups. However, the result collected from it was not really efficient. Hence, it is left out in this re-branding.

Due to its industry characteristics, the resonance only involves attitude but not purchase behaviors. To be practical, Ablink only aims at the “attitudinal attachment” relationship level. It means they expect customers feel great inside and be willing to express their pleasure to work with the brand. This was something Alpine Creative failed to achieve to engage their customers. Further expectation about brand resonance would be adjusted according to real situation after the brand has been launched to customers. To acquire this, the brand is likely to show much more concern to customers post-purchasing. Along with existent strategies, supplementary assistance to customers with marketing campaigns in the future would be something worth considering. Even though the brand now only focuses on branding, competency in the advertising area stays the same. Therefore, this exclusive service, with a reasonable price, for customers who have used branding of Ablink, is something unique. The brand will not only understand about its customers and its market through previous research but also stand a golden chance to create supporting behaviors in frequent purchasing, obviously in a smaller scale albeit. Appreciation to the brand’s clients also needs to be expressed more frequently, especially after a successful project.

## **5.2 Recommendation for a future study**

The scope of thesis is quite restricted because of the wholeness of Keller’s Resonance Pyramid Model. Several important matters of branding were not mentioned and analyzed such as brand positioning or brand-employees relationship. This could be a hint for future research to combine this with other models to have a more holistic view on branding matters of a company.

The case study is a pure B2B enterprise also contributing to the limit of the scope. Researchers may find it more comprehensive to study a both B2B and B2C company (such as Apple, Samsung, and Siemens). There are totally different perspectives between these two settings, some elements may be irreplaceable for one but inappropriate for the other. In this study, some factors were left out because of the same reason. Hence, a research on how well a brand is managing to handle its

branding for these dimensions at once would be informative for both the analyst and the company.

As for research methodology, a quantitative research should be conducted to collect answers of customers about *brand response* and *brand relationships* since they are interaction between both sides in essence. By applying this, it definitely reveals the productivity of the model and enhance practical recommendation for the brand. At the time this thesis was written, the case company was still working on their plan for re-branding and the implementation was incomplete. Hence, the same method would not be practical.

In brief, the Alpine Creative rebranding process to Ablink can be portrayed in the following figure:



Figure 15. Key points in Ablink’s Resonance Pyramid Model

## 6 Summary

The thesis has been focused on analyzing the impact and application of Keller’s Pyramid Resonance Model to branding of SMEs in Vietnam as the initial intention.

At the very first step, reason of choice, structure of thesis and delimitations were stated. Along with them is context of the thesis to clarify elements and aspects. Vietnam market and B2B setting are included as the two filters for the focus of thesis.

The second part is theoretical framework. Different definitions of branding from various sources in different time to provide readers with the most basic concept of the main theme were cited. Then, different factors of the model were mentioned respectively: salience (brand identity), brand meaning (brand performance, brand imagery), brand response (brand performance, brand feeling), resonance (brand relationship).

The latter part is about methodology to collect empirical data and the way to analyze it. After that, it was presented step by step according to the structure of the theoretical framework to compare difference and similarity between theory and practice of the case company.

The conclusion has been drawn up from achieved data about the brand. From that outcome, personal evaluation and recommendations for incomplete parts in the re-branding process of Ablink were brought into view as a referable tool to assist the brand.

## **Figure**

Figure 1. Overview of Keller's Resonance Pyramid Model

Figure 2. Structure of the thesis

Figure 3. The brand iceberg model of Hugh Davidson (1997)

Figure 4. Aaker's model on brand equity

Figure 5. Keller's Pyramid of Resonance

Figure 6. Some examples of logos of popular B2B brands

Figure 7. HATCH's logo

Figure 8. Brand imagery's factors

Figure 9. Brand judgment's categories.

Figure 10. Alpine Creative's logo

Figure 11. Ablink's logo

Figure 12. Ablink's brand imagery

Figure 13. Ablink's brand judgment expectation

Figure 14. Ablink's feedback evaluation process

Figure 15. Key points in Ablink's Resonance Pyramid Mode

## **Table**

Table 1. Categorization of Vietnam SMEs

Table 2. Ratio of SMEs in the total number of enterprises in Vietnam.

Table 3. Number of total enterprises in Vietnam until 31/12/2011

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## **Appendix: List of questions used in interviews.**

1. What is your position?
2. What is your responsibility with the re-branding plan of Alpine Creative?
3. What is the reason of the re-branding decision?
4. What is the plan to renew brand identity to customers?
  - a. Explain meaning of the current identity?
  - b. Explain meaning of the new brand identity?
5. What could be done to improve brand performance and brand imagery?
  - a. Characteristics of service packages of the brand?
  - b. What are difficulties and advantages in improving brand performance?
  - c. What kind of brand imagery the company aims to build?
6. What could be done to receive better response, both brand judgment and brand feeling?
  - a. Which criteria are supposed to receive better responses from customers regarding brand judgment?
  - b. Which brand feelings are focused when customers purchase and use the brand's service?
7. What is the strategy to engage customers and improve relationships?
  - a. In general, how is the relationship between Alpine Creative and customers?
  - b. What is the strategy to maintain and improve it?