

Branding Knowledge

Brand Building Beyond Product and Service Brands

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that product, service, and corporate brands are about to be extended by one other type of brand: the knowledge brand. A knowledge brand is a clearly differentiated visual and verbal identity that bundles and communicates a set of skills, competencies and methodologies in one coherent manner. This becomes crucial as companies are not only selling specific products or services, but also market their unique know-how in improving services or products. For this purpose a knowledge brand has to communicate its topics (why its knowledge is valuable and rare) through specific tools (such as surveys, Extranets, or CEO-newsletters) and transmitters (such as conventions speeches, interviews, or specialized conferences) to its targets (such as CEOs, CFOs, CIOs, or other regional and functional directors).

INTRODUCTION

Branding issues often reside within the context of product branding where a – typically consumer good – mass product has to be marketed (externally and internally) through a

clearly recognizable visual and verbal identity – the brand. Although there is a growing body of literature on the theory of branding, on strategic brand management and on branding processes, corporate and service branding are relatively new dimensions in branding literature and practice alike. In particular, we refer to Gregory, 1997 (1) and Ind, 1997 (2), where *corporate branding* is closely related to reputation management (3), and where a company's name is treated as a brand in its own right (typically targeted not only at consumers, but also at current and potential shareholders and at the greater public) in addition to existing product brands. Furthermore, we view the aim of *service branding* as to bundle a set of services under one brand in order to be recognized by current and potential clients as an integrated and unique offer.

In this article, we will argue that this *branding triad* of corporate, product, and service brand is about to be extended by one other type of brand – the *knowledge brand*. We will argue (and illustrate through short cases) that problem solving capabilities, methodologies, experiences, and solution skills need to be branded differently than traditional products, services, or corporations. We will show that – in a time when companies compete *for* and *through* knowledge – the branding of that knowledge becomes a crucial – and strategic – marketing activity. This is especially true in times where companies seek to not only sell their products and services, but also capitalize on the marketing of their accumulated knowledge. Prime examples of this trend are Hewlett Packard, Siemens, Lotus, and IBM. These companies have initiated professional services or consulting branches in addition to their product sales branches.

In order to achieve these aims, we will start by focusing on the main *characteristics* of a knowledge brand, then stress four core *functions* of a knowledge brand, as well as describe the *process* of branding knowledge. To conclude the article, we will discuss short *cases* to illustrate our approach with real-life examples.

CHARACTERISTICS OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE BRANDING CONTEXT

There are specific characteristics of knowledge that affect the branding process and make a differentiated approach necessary that significantly differs from traditional product or service branding. Below, we describe the main characteristics of knowledge that need to be taken into account in marketing know-how as a brand.

Knowledge is neither a product nor a service. Although there is a wide variety of definitions of what a "product" is, knowledge does not qualify as a simple, standardised solution to a given need. Keller, 1998, p. 3 (4), referring to Kotler says that "a product is everything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption that might satisfy a need or want. Thus, a product may be a physical good, service, retail store, person, organisation, place or idea." In this broad sense, almost everything may qualify as a product, except for knowledge, where the actual need is often implicit and not easily recognised by the potential consumer. In a consulting engagement, for example, the consultant often has to help a client articulate his or her need by comparing the client's situation to the consultant's distinct set of competencies. Knowledge can be defined as "a strategic resource which consists of the skills and capabilities which individuals, teams, and organizations use for problem solving" (5). Knowledge (for example in the case of a due diligence study) remains with the clients even after the relationship with their "supplier" expires. In so far, it is more a product-orientated relationship, since as with products, there is a change of ownership. But from a different perspective, knowledge intensive solutions usually develop from a service-orientated relationship with the client, since the handling of the offered analytic tools must be taught to clients in the first place. But differently from a service, those tools remain with the client and with the producer after the market transaction. Thus, selling and consequently branding knowledge has to go beyond simple product or service brands. It has to make this

two-fold nature of knowledge (originating as a service and then mutating into an independent product) explicit.

Branding in this context is neither a classic marketing nor a standard communication process alone. There is a wide variety of meanings for branding in the context of marketing. In our understanding of marketing, we refer to Aaker/Keller, 1998, p. 357 (6): "Corporate Marketing activities as publicly visible programs and actions that companies initiate and that are not identified with a single product or brand sold by the company." In this context, we omit implications corporate culture could have for the branding process, since – as will be shown below– the article focuses on the process of communicating a knowledge brand externally rather than on the elements or constituencies of a brand. Branding as a perspective on marketing must not only focus on advertising, sponsoring or design (traditional marketing domains), but also, for example, on press, on investors, on lobbyists and on employees as well as on clients (integrated communication aspects). In particular, the multipliers in the general public and in the financial and political spheres are key to success for an integrated branding concept, which aims to catch the attention of the relevant target groups. For Kapferer, 1998, p. 46 (7), the only effective approach to branding is a holistic one: "Branding means much more than just giving a brand name and signaling to the outside world that such a product or service has been stamped with the mark and imprint of an organization. Brands are a direct consequence of the strategy of market segmentation and product differentiation." A knowledge brand strategy must therefore be derived from the competence strategy of a company, e.g., how its various skills, experiences, and methodologies can be bundled, used for client benefits, and coherently developed.

In consequence, *branding knowledge* stresses a different type of offer (as has been shown a hybrid between product and service) with an integrated marketing & communication concept, i.e. *branding*. Therefore, branding knowledge must take the specificities of knowledge (i.e.,

its intangible and complex nature) and the holistics of branding (i.e. its various target groups and forms of expression) into consideration. The concept of branding knowledge benefits from both product and service branding, but is more closely related to corporate branding and reputation management. Gregory, 1997 (1) views corporate branding as "a planned inclusive strategy that sets communications standards and policies for the benefit of the whole entity."

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE BRANDS AND CORPORATE BRANDS

Why is branding knowledge, in our view, most closely related to corporate branding? In contrast to service branding, which focuses almost solely on clients, corporate branding takes both current and potential shareholders and employees into consideration. All of these most important stakeholders are indispensable for branding knowledge, since it is most certainly more an intangible than a tangible good. Hence, as Mottram, 1998 (8), writes, "in today's markets, companies increasingly compete on the basis of intangible factors and the reputation of the corporation itself is often the most valuable and most misunderstood intangible of all." Thus, knowledge is crucial for the goodwill of a corporation. Kapferer (7) points out that the term goodwill - as difference between market value and book value - requires at least these three stakeholders: "While the investors are willing to pay for goodwill, the employees and their relationships to clients are actually the creators of goodwill." The goal of branding a company's knowledge is exactly that: to materialize and differentiate this type of goodwill in order to generate a competent reputation.

Stressing knowledge as a brand in its own right can avoid the likelihood of becoming a commodity as a corporation (which would subsequently mean to sink into a lower margin business). In other words: If a corporate brand is connected to various bundled competencies (such as unparalleled market research or in-depth CEO-surveys), it is usually branded with the

corporate name (such as *Merrill Lynch Research* or PricewaterhouseCoopers' *Straight from the CEO* magazine, or its *Global CEO Surveys*). It is these relationships to either companies or CEOs, which put Merrill Lynch or PricewaterhouseCoopers in the position to develop such knowledge. Thus, a knowledge brand requires the reputation of a corporate brand as a prerequisite, in order to be able to draw expertise and insights from clients, other companies or CEOs or in order to transfer knowledge to them. But also in the other direction, as in the case of a famous methodology (e.g., Renaissance Inc.'s Balanced Scorecard concept) or a knowledge product, like an analytic company journal (e.g., The McKinsey Quarterly), the knowledge brand can contribute to the reputation of a corporate brand. A further interdependence between the knowledge brand and the corporate brand lies in the adequate use of sub-brands and umbrella brands, where a knowledge brand is divided into various sub-brands (e.g., Arthur Andersen's Knowledge Space that is divided into other sections such as the Global Best Practices, see www.knowledgespace.com). In this case, the corporate brand is used to devise an intellectual brand architecture that spells out the relationship between various knowledge brands. All of these relationships can be laid out in a knowledge brand architecture. As we see it, brand *architectures* derive from respective brand *strategies* or strategic brand management (for example: Kapferer 1998 (7)) or even brand leadership (for example: Aaker/Joachimstaler 2000, (10)). These strategic brand (leadership) decisions are often based on the question of how to best capitalize on the value of a brand. It could lead to extensions (Kapferer 2000, (11)) or to the leverage of a corporate brand (as Aaker, 1996, pp. 209, (9) describes, for example, for the GE case).

However, if one examines the brand strategies and – subsequently – architectures of Merrill Lynch Research and PricewaterhouseCoopers, one will realize that the value offered their clients is in fact in the first place a *reduction of complexity* through their unique knowledge. In consequence, a corporation which wants to have access to high-margins and knowledge-

intensive markets, has to *materialize* knowledge (through people, systems and combinations of both) in its corporate brand *and* through special knowledge brands such as branded *methodologies* (such as Arthur Andersen's KMAT methodology to assess knowledge management problems), *branded conceptual tools* (such as the Boston Consulting Group's Learning Curve tool) , *newsletters* or *magazines* (such as the McKinsey Quarterly), specific *surveys* (such as PWC's E-Business Surveys), *conferences* (such as IBM's Knowledge Management Conferences), or *Internet portals* (such as brint.com a portal on e-business know-how) or *software* (such as Gemini's Knowledge Galaxy). In doing so, the company reduces the complexity of its own offerings – since the communication of knowledge is a rather complex process (see the subsequent section) – by materializing it in tangible proxies.

Figure one below describes the discussed branding issues by visualizing the relation of the different brands to the complexity of the brand message and their impact on the corporate brand. The figure shows that knowledge brands have a greater impact on the corporate brand than most service or product brands since they directly contribute to the reputation of a company. The chart also shows that the complexity of brand messages of knowledge brands is considerably higher than that of service brands or pure product brands (where the utility of a given product or service requires little or no explanation, knowledge always has to be put into a context in order to reveal its potential value). The examples that are provided in each cluster represent typical brands of each group. Product brands often make no reference to the company that is behind the brand. Pringles, for example, is a well-known food brand that does not stress the connection with its producer Procter & Gamble, neither in its advertisement nor in its packaging. The impact on the corporate brand it thus very limited. There are, of course, product brands that also leverage the company brand, such as the Audi TT or the Volkswagen New Beetle, or vice versa (as in the case of Swatch). The second cluster, consisting of service brands, shows that there are brands which market a service without mentioning the corporate

brand (such as the “Taxi” insurance for young people by Winterthur Insurance, the Mobility car sharing service, or the Magellan fund by Fidelity) while others use the corporate name to market their services (such as Club Med). The knowledge brands finally provide access to a higher margin business, and hence originate in knowledge-intensive industries such as market research, consulting, or investment banking. Unlike the previous two types of brands, the knowledge brands in the diagram below represent a certain competence (such as IT-competence in the case of the Gartner Executive Briefings, or strategy-competence in the case of the McKinsey Quarterly Magazine) and not a specific service or product. Many knowledge brands can be positioned within the business-to-business context (such as client events of consulting companies), while there are also knowledge brands targeted at end consumers, such as those of on-line opinion portals (i.e., slashdot.org, ehow.com, or epinions.com) that broker expert knowledge and advice or conferences such as TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) by Richard Saul Wurman (see www.ted.com).

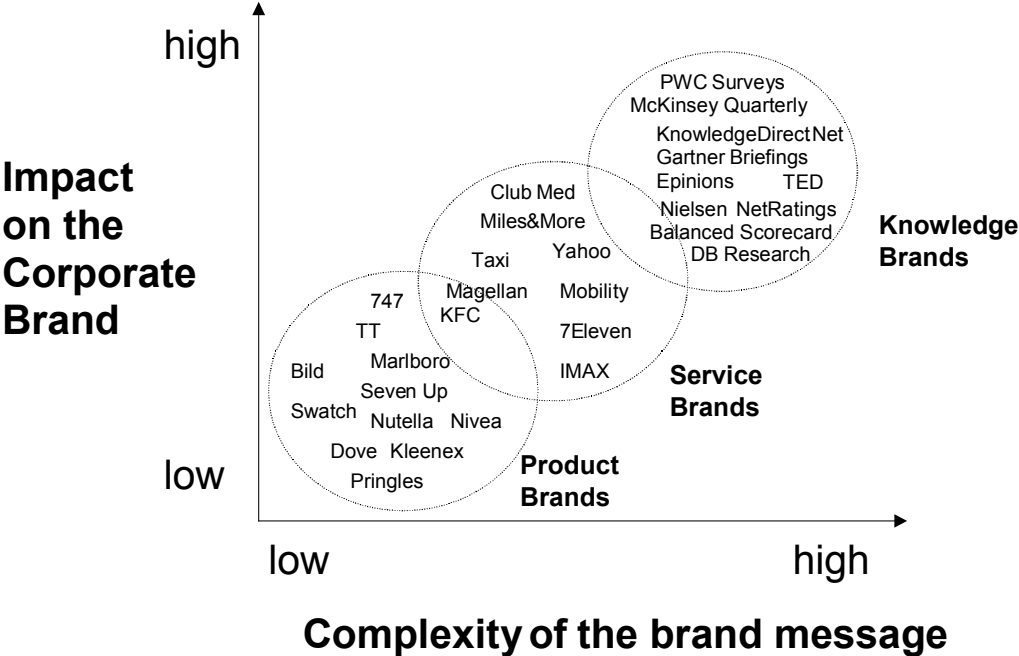


Figure 1: The brand typology and exemplary brands

FUNCTIONS OF AN KNOWLEDGE BRAND

As the name indicates, intangible assets such as knowledge are difficult to illustrate or render visible. Hence, the foremost function of a knowledge brand is exactly that: to make the invisible value proposition inherent in a competence visible and tangible (*materialization*). This can be achieved through the use of powerful symbols, slogans, artifacts (such as surveys), or personalities (who embody the marketed skill or talent, as Orit Gadiesh – chairman of the board at Bain & Company - embodies the aggressive intellect of the consulting firm Bain & Company). In addition, the brand needs to *simplify* the often complex value proposition inherent in marketing a skill or competence. This can be achieved by stating the purpose of the packaged knowledge explicitly (i.e., in the accompanying slogan, as in “We know what your customers want”). A third function of a knowledge brand is to relate the skill or knowledge to the institution that offers it and thus *legitimizing* it. This should be achieved by linking the competence back to a core-competence rooted in the organization. Sony for example, traces back its portable music technology products to its core-competence of miniaturization. The fourth and final function of a knowledge brand is *differentiation*. Following the argumentation of the resource based view of the firm (12), the branding process should differentiate a company’s knowledge by showing that it is:

- **valuable** to customers (e.g., that it solves a specific client problem in a competent way),
- **rare** (that it cannot be bought or acquired elsewhere at the same level of expertise and experience)
- **difficult to imitate** (that others cannot easily imitate the problem solving experience, tasks and skills of the company), and
- **difficult to substitute** (that the problems a client faces cannot be solved with skills related to the area of expertise).

Section four of this article will show how these four functions of a knowledge brand can be achieved.

Examples of brands that fulfill these four functions can be found in the fields of consulting, market research, or financial services, as the case studies in the fourth section will show. Knowledge branding is therefore a process that benefits the marketing of solutions such as a reengineering methodology, an analytic tool such as a risk monitor or brand valuation tool, a market research report, or a trend report on future developments in an industry.

From a problem perspective, a knowledge brand can be used to market solutions for the following types of client problems:

- improving knowledge about their customers (direct marketing companies),
- improving knowledge about their own company (consulting companies),
- improving knowledge about the market (market research),
- improving knowledge about the competition (competitive intelligence firms),
- improving knowledge about the future (trend scouts).

Having shown the functions of a knowledge brand, it remains to show how these functions can be achieved through the branding process.

THE BRANDING PROCESS

We cannot prove that knowledge brands originate from “old” service brands, though examples such as Merrill Lynch or PricewaterhouseCoopers indicate such an evolution. Logically, such a strategic evolution is a pre-condition for the brand development. The previous section explained that a knowledge brand has four functions: materialization, legitimization, simplification, and differentiation. In order to specify how these four functions can be achieved in the knowledge brand, we follow a branding concept that we abbreviate in the *four T's* of Topics, Targets, Transmitters and Tools. These 4T's can be used as a general

communication heuristic, which – in our case – is being used specifically for the process of branding knowledge.

This 4-T-framework is based on the idea that – with the strategic evolution for business and clients in mind – a communication process requires to (1) select topics (what the company wants to communicate or portray), (2) match targets with topics (segment target audiences), (3) create tools (communication means) and transmitters (communication intermediaries) for the branding strategy and its implementation and (4) connect the identified topics with the targeted groups through tools and transmitters. A short example can illustrate this pragmatic approach to branding: The views of the future by well known business leaders (**topic**) could be distilled to a specific group of CEOs (**target**) through a CEO-survey (**tool**) and be presented on a CEO-conference on future developments (**transmitter**) to strengthen a consulting company’s reputation as a competent problem solver on a strategic scope.

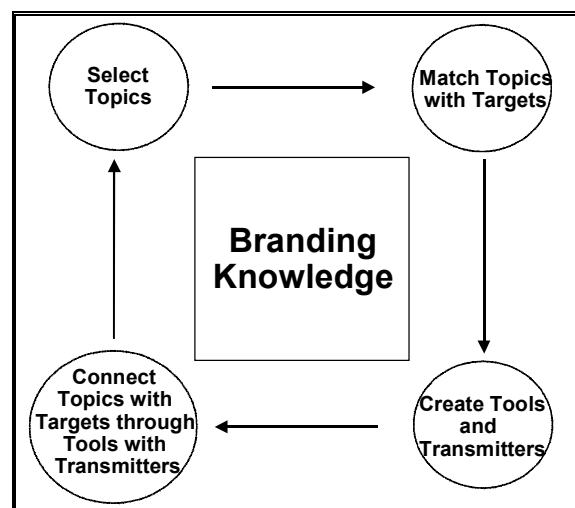


Figure 2: Four steps of the general communication process for knowledge branding

An inherent aspect of a knowledge brand in this process consists of relating the various competencies of a company to one another. The objective of a knowledge brand is, in other words, to create “members” of a family of brands that relate to one another through a common

visual and verbal identity. By creating a family of knowledge brands, the various competencies of a firm can be traced back to the same institution and create a logic of intellectual capital.

Below, we outline the four steps of the branding process in detail.

1. Step one: Select topics

In step one, the four functions of a knowledge have to be made explicit topics themselves. For example: *We may know the trends of the future and why they are relevant for your company* (materialization). *We have done so before and have a track record of anticipating future topics* (legitimization). *We can reduce the complexity of such future topics and explain their relevancy to you* (simplification). *We do it differently than other advisors – since our solutions provide sustainable value, are unique, and cannot be imitated or substituted* (differentiation).

These four functions have to be reflected in a ***balanced portfolio of topics***. CEO's have different topics than CFO's or "ordinary" line or regional managers. The reason for the mix is simple: a knowledge brand cannot offer a CEO-conference once per quarter, because it would simply lose its extraordinary character. The relevant portfolio of topics can usually be narrowed to three different themes: issues, resources or regions.

2. Step two: Match topics with targets

In step two, the portfolio of topics must be matched with potential target groups. A CFO, as an example, might be interested in a conference on "Investment opportunities in Eastern Europe", an HR-director tends to focus on a joint-conference with, for example, the Warsaw

business school in Eastern Europe or the CEO himself might be interested in a conference on “the future of Eastern Europe”.

The *portfolio of topics and targets* has to be attached to the corporate brand, in order to start branding the corporation’s ability to “develop and apply” knowledge. Both slogan and logo must interpret the corporate brand’s ability to materialize, legitimize, simplify and differentiate knowledge on every level and in every region. Slogan and logo are the interfaces between topics and targets. They work both to the inside (identity) as much as they do to the outside (image).

In the information society, where capturing the attention of potential targets is critical, the portfolio of topics and targets must subsequently be mirrored in *one brand-cascade*, e.g. the same main message must be made visible on all levels (company level, knowledge or competence level, product and service level). Thus, the company can be positioned as one set of related competencies.

3. Step three: Create tools and transmitters

Tools are everything which contain knowledge (i.e. a survey), while transmitters are everything which explain knowledge (i.e. a conference or a person). In order to maximize momentum for the process of branding knowledge, companies should co-operate with other valuable knowledge brands which have a different role in the knowledge value chain (e.g. which engage in fundamental research as opposed to applied research or which distribute knowledge rather than create it). Oracle (slogan: *Software powers the Internet*) for example cross-branded with the both Newsweek and the Davos World Economic Forum by providing the daily www.dailydavos.com Web-page. This Web-site was in turn announced on the front-page of Newsweek. Thus, the magazine (Newsweek) provided the content from a well-established knowledge transmitter (Davos Forum) with a well-known Internet brand (Oracle).

This is the first step to exemplify the strategic evolution from a corporate to a knowledge brand.

As mentioned before, the knowledge brand must create awareness for its knowledge through the brand-cascade (via press conferences, advertising, personal contacts, cross branding, round tables etc.). Creating awareness does not mean to disclose full results or offer all insights for free. In contrast, this step is solely devoted to the fact that potential clients will be interested in the ability to “develop” knowledge. The key to success for attracting attention is differentiation, i.e. doing a survey, which others cannot (because they do not have the contacts), making it rare (limited access to the full results), and showing the difficulties to imitate and substitute the findings. A special type of knowledge brand – which is often difficult to imitate or replicate - in this context is the *business book*. By creating a special technical term and using this term as a book title, a company can create a knowledge brand that is associated with its business. This strategy is often used by consulting firms in order to market their know-how. The IT and media consulting firm Booz, Allen & Hamilton, for example, used a book to increase the reputation of its media practice. The leading partner of that practice, Michael J. Wolf, published a book called “The Entertainment Economy” (which included the concept of the e-factor for entertainment value in regular services) thus claiming that term for the company and turning it into a knowledge brand.

4. Step four: Connect topics with targets through tools with transmitters

The art of building a knowledge brand is to connect the four T’s. In doing so, the corporate brand can show that the new knowledge brand is actually providing new thoughts, new systems, new ideas, new solutions or new trends. Examples are given in the box below:

Tools:

- surveys from leadership-groups for distinct CEOs enforced by a knowledge brand (e.g., PWC’s “Straight from the CEO”);
- white papers from well known think tanks sponsored by a knowledge brand (such as Ernst&Young’s Center for Business Innovation or Accenture’s Institute of Strategic Change (ISC));
- exclusive access to clubs (such as Club of Rome) sponsored by a knowledge brand;

- exclusive access to both information and people (such as market gurus) endorsed by a knowledge brand (e.g., Accenture's sponsoring of professor Thomas Davenport or Gemini's and Xerox's sponsorship of knowledge management chairs at reputed universities).

Transmitters:

- a well-positioned conference, organized by a specific knowledge brand;
- round-tables with distinguished leaders organized under the label of the knowledge brand;
- one-to-one meetings with well-known specialists, who work for a knowledge brand;
- exclusive access to virtual chat-rooms or Extranets provided by a knowledge brand.

Connecting Topics with Targets:

- re-consider your brand logo and slogan with your findings;
- advertise a synopsis of your findings;
- cross-brand with other reputed knowledge brands (such as journals, research institutes, think tanks, gurus);
- write articles for selected opinion leaders;
- sponsor events around your findings and organize conferences.

EXAMPLES OF KNOWLEDGE BRANDS

PricewaterhouseCoopers:

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) is a textbook case for a consulting firm which is currently undergoing the evolution from a service to a knowledge brand. PWC's communications process clearly exemplifies the use of the four T's.

The company's verbal identity (slogan) is: *Join us. Together we can change the world.* PWC has selected a variety of topics on strategic management (**topics**) devoted to the CEO-level (**targets**), which they communicate through their *Straight from the CEO-magazine* (in various languages) or through their client Extranet site at KnowledgeDirect.Net (**tools**). Additionally, they have submitted the *Global 2000 CEO Survey* from CEO's for CEO's (**tools**) issued on the Davos World Economic Forum (**transmitters**).

The have also been doing regional surveys (**regional tool**) (e.g., E-Business in Switzerland together with the mcm *institute*) (**regional topic**) for business leaders in Switzerland (**regional target**), marketed through regional press conferences (**regional transmitter**).

Furthermore, PWC is undertaking significant cross-branding in Europe marketed under *Introducing New Europe* (**regional topics**), which they do through, for example, a European CD-ROM (**tool**) and present on various European conferences (**transmitter**). All this is obviously targeted to a European and/or Europe related audience (**targets**).

Merrill Lynch:

Investment banks are almost in the same problematic situation as consultants. They can only survive if they achieve to market their unique ability to develop knowledge in addition to pure services. Merrill Lynch's slogan: *The difference is Merrill Lynch* is stressing this knowledge difference.

After a slow start, Merrill Lynch offered on-line brokerage for its clients, using their almost second-to-none research capabilities (**topics**) as the argument for differentiating themselves from the Charles Schwab's of the world. They target the on-line community (**target**) with a new Merrill Lynch Direct (**tool**) through first class research sites (**transmitter**) that offer a lot of insights into various markets.

Merrill Lynch announced the new tool through the following advertising: "... you can invest, online or offline, with the world's leading broker – period, dot, exclamation point – and with the leading research team in America, Asia, Europe and Latin America – a.k.a. the earth."

CONCLUSION

In branding its know-how and solution capabilities, a company has to stress more than its products and services, and more than its reputation as an institution. It has to make a specific, coherent, credible and comprehensible statement about its experience and skills in providing

solutions for certain problems. A knowledge brand can provide such a coherent message in a variety of forms ranging from an on-line portal, a methodology or conceptual tool, a conference, a survey, to a sponsored university chair or a glossy CEO-magazine that provides the latest research findings. The knowledge branding process has to focus on the crucial communication *topics* (the uniqueness of the company's knowledge), use adequate *tools* and *transmitters* (such as high-quality client magazines, topic-centered conferences and surveys, etc.) to reach its prime *target* audience (typically senior corporate decision makers). If these four T's are well balanced, a company can not only market its products and services or increase its reputation, but also leverage its intellectual assets to gain access to a higher margin business.

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