

International fashion trade shows as brand identity enhancement platforms for Finnish microenterprises

Marketing
Master's thesis
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2015

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This thesis aims to examine how the brand identity of Finnish microenterprises can be enhanced in the context of international business-to-business (B2B) fashion trade shows. More specifically, how digitalization is affecting the industry in bringing in alternatives that take away from trade show attendance, and how the concept of trade shows should be improved to stay competitive. According to predominant literature, trade shows are known to be a popular medium for promoting and selling products and services. However, attendance has recently been declining and since many times companies do not even specify clear objectives while participating, it lowers the barrier to eliminate trade shows from the marketing palette. Technology and the vast communications power of the Internet are changing the business environment and offering new ways of promoting the brand so it is crucial for trade shows to stay on top of this change to stay competitive.

Methodology

Qualitative methods were used to carry out this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain understanding of Finnish microenterprises' trade show experiences, form an understanding of activities carried out at trade shows and find out how technology is shaping the industry from their perspective. The analysis was conducted using grounded theory to additionally catch themes outside the theory.

Findings

Based on the research data, the activities performed at trade shows support the notion of brand identity enhancement from all its dimensions. However, technology is inevitably affecting the industry by bringing in new, even better ways of doing business. This is taking away from trade show attendance and calls for renewing the trade show concept to better match the changing environment and evolving needs. Consistency, creativity and openness to digitalization are advisable for small fashion companies to stay in the forefront of competition in this hectic industry. The trade show concept in itself needs a 'facelift' by introducing more structure in organizing efforts, open communication to help exhibitors in planning efforts, better targeted and focused events and more bold implementation of new communication channels to better serve the needs of the small companies putting big monetary efforts into attending.

Keywords

Trade show, Brand identity, Fashion, Microenterprise, Digitalization

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this section, the background for this research is presented by creating a comprehensive overview of the topic. Next, the research gap, research problem and research questions are introduced.

1.1 Background

Creating and maintaining the brand identity is regarded as the first step towards building strong brands (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003). The classic theory of brand identity consists of four main perspectives: brand-as-product, brand-as-organization, brand-as-person and brand-as-symbol (Aaker, 1996). Organizational attributes have been proposed as more long lasting and resistant to competition than product attributes because organization has its unique people, values and programs that are much harder to copy than for instance a product (Aaker, 1996). Moreover, the business environment is changing due to digitalization and resulting in homogeneity of product quality and the decreasing number of personal relationships (Baumgarth, 2010). B2B branding is important in terms of increasing buyers' trust and confidence in buying decisions (Low and Blois, 2002) to develop affective ties with stakeholders (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2004).

Trade shows are known as a popular medium for promoting products and services (Kerin and Cron, 1987). Next to expenditures on print advertising, trade shows represent the largest component of the advertising and promotion budget for industrial firms (Business Marketing, 1990a). Despite the apparent importance of trade shows, little systematic research on this promotion medium is evident and according to Bonoma (1983), an underlying reason for this lack of attention is that "trade shows are inherently 'sloppy' marketing problem" in terms of quantitative research. However, trade shows can be an integral part of a firm's overall marketing program if properly executed (Kerin and Cron, 1987). They afford a unique opportunity to integrate and project a coherent message to prospective

and current customers through a firm's exhibit structure, graphic displays, salesperson-client interaction, collateral support material, and product or service emphasis and demonstrations (Cavanagh, 1976). Thus, firms also have different expectations of benefits of trade show participation – some are interested in generating leads, others in promoting their corporate image, and still others have objectives, such as casual contact with current customers and competitive considerations (Gopalakrishna et al., 1995).

Trade shows are being affected by trends such as social media, mobile technology, environmental sustainability and corporate social responsibility as well as budgetary constraints (Han and Verma, 2014). Technology will be increasingly woven into trade shows' structures and change its old form (Han and Verma, 2014) as well as influence other marketing efforts (Berthon et al., 1999). This forms an interesting starting point for studying fashion trade shows as brand identity enhancement platforms for Finnish microenterprises. Furthermore, how technology is changing the industry and decreasing traditional attendance.

1.2 Research gap, research problem and research questions

Research gap

Trade shows, like advertising, are typically viewed as complementary to the direct selling activity. For example, trade shows uncover previously unknown or inaccessible buying influences, which can project a favorable corporate image, can provide product information, generate qualified leads for salespeople, handle customer complaints and so on (Hutt and Speh, 1995). In addition, trade shows even satisfy competitive objectives and serve to enhance employee morale (Gopalakrishna, 1995). Existing trade show research well covers trade show effectiveness (Bonoma, 1983) and the way managers rate the performance of their firm along several dimensions (Kerin and Cron, 1987). Even though trade shows continue to thrive in the twenty-first century, both for information exchanges and

direct selling, numerous forces such as digitalization have meant changes in show operation (Han and Verma, 2014). The influence of technology on marketing will grow (Berthon et al., 1999). This has spawned another thread of research in the past two decades from descriptive themes towards more prescriptive strategies, including, for example, the role of technology and social media related to the management of trade shows (Han and Verma, 2014)

It does not matter whether the company is big or small; brand identity offers competitive advantage and creates business opportunities if well implemented (Wheeler, 2003). However, sometimes a company might face resistance towards attending from it's own organization due to lack of understanding the role when justifying attendance merely by talking about it being mostly a matter of image. This forms an interesting research gap to observe how brand identity can be enhanced in the context of international fashion B2B trade shows. Also, how the trade show concept should be developed to better match the changing environment.

Research problem

Already almost two decades ago, Kapferer (2002) explained the need for defining brand identity with the fact that we are living in a society full of communication where pressure is constantly placed on brands and that technology has led to growing similarity. The importance does not depend on the sector being private or public or the company being big or small (Wheeler, 2003). Brand identity offers a possibility to differentiate from competitors by better positioning oneself (de Chernatony, 2001) and being driven by a personal goal that is both different from others' and resistant to change (Wheeler, 2003). Despite its clear importance, exhibit marketing is essentially ignored in the academic literature of the last decade. During the 1970s and 1980s the academic literature recognized the importance of exhibit marketing and devoted considerable attention to its theory and practice. Many marketing and promotion managers know little about trade shows and how to exploit their vast potential (Pitta et al., 2006). It is only recently that new research focusing on how trade shows generally retain their traditional

format, while also taking advantage of the advances in information technology to open additional channels for marketing and communicating with trade show participants (Han and Verma, 2014). Now, a new thread of scholarly debate has revolved around changes in information and communications technology and the extent to which technology advances represent an opportunity or a threat for trade shows (Han and Verma, 2014). Noteworthy findings by Chiou, Hsieh and Shen (2007) on their trade show strategy, clarify that technology does not change the trade show's core function.

Hence, this serves as a great opportunity to research enhancing brand identity at trade shows in the case of fashion microenterprises. Also, whether digitalization serves as an opportunity or threat to the existing B2B fashion trade show concept. Thus, this study has both academic and managerial objectives. Academically, it is to contribute to brand identity, microenterprise and trade show literature. In a managerial sense, the aim is to create best practices for fashion microenterprises exhibiting in international trade shows and why it is relevant for fashion entrepreneurs to stay open-minded towards technological advancements. For trade shows organizers, this thesis aims to offer suggestions for improving the concept and to better match the business environment.

Research questions

- How does brand identity enhancement take place at trade shows?
- How is technology shaping the trade show industry?
- How does this affect small fashion companies and the trade show concept?

2 TRADE SHOWS

This section reviews the relevant research areas associated with trade shows as it forms the context for this study. First, the definition of trade show is introduced. Second, the objectives for attending trade shows are explored. Lastly, the evolution of trade shows is discussed, followed by the future of trade shows. The aim of this section is to understand the history of trade shows and view the direction where the industry is developing to better understand why attendance has decreased and make suggestion for improving the concept.

2.1 Defining trade shows

Trade shows can be described as industrial versions of shopping malls: they are industrial examples of potential buyers visiting prospective sellers (Gopalakrishna and Lilien, 1995). Simply put, trade shows are a popular medium for promoting products and services (Kerin and Cron, 1987). Thus trade shows could be referred to as a unique and potentially attractive industrial promotion vehicle. (Gopalakrishna and Lilien, 1995)

If the event is a business to business (B2B) trade show, both parties come together for a related purpose: to promote or experience a group of vertical products and services. The commercial purpose of the show is overt and the players participate actively. Companies may take orders for their products and have tangible sales results. Similarly, if the event is aimed at consumers, there is an overt commercial purpose. That purpose is to promote the products and services featured. It is less likely that the show will generate commercial sales but, depending on the event, they happen. Typically, the desired result may be awareness and image creation, but not necessarily sales. (Pitta et al., 2006)

According to Jacobson (1990), trade show expenditures are the second largest item in the business marketing communication budget after advertising, and they account for nearly one-fifth of the total budget for European firms. Also as with

advertising, trade shows typically complement direct selling efforts: for example generate awareness, project a favorable corporate image, provide product information, and handle customer complaints (Hutt and Speh, 1995).

2.2 Objectives for attending trade shows

The academic literature has noted that attendees have a combination of buying and non-buying objectives while attending a trade show. For example, the buying dimension may include the placement for orders and requests for product information from current or new suppliers, while the non-buying dimension may involve professional networking, browsing to see what is new and gathering competitive intelligence. On the other hand, attendee activities on the show floor, despite being generally in line with their own objectives, may also be influenced in part, by exhibitor objectives. These include the lead generation and handling of customer complaints, which are sales-related, as well as activities geared toward building product awareness and promoting corporate image which are non-sales related. Exhibitors often employ eye-catching signage, lively demonstrations, promotional give-away items, entertainers and other tactics to compete with rivals in attracting visitors to their booth. (Kerin and Cron, 1987)

As mentioned before, Pitta et al. (2006) identify a common purpose for parties attending business-to-business trade shows and this is to promote or experience a group of vertical products and services. However, many times companies do not even specify their objectives when participating in a trade show and it is left on a vague level. Reasons like "we go to trade shows because our competitors are there" and "it is mostly a matter of image" have been used by company professionals according to Bonoma (1983).

Reasons for a firm's participation in trade shows may depend on the mix of new and existing products being exhibited by them. Expectations of benefits are also drivers for participation such as generating leads or promoting corporate image. Others might have objectives, such as casual contact with current

customers and competitive considerations (Gopalakrishna et al., 1995). Attendance is especially important for manufacturers, suppliers, and service providers because they can directly connect with a large number of current and potential customers at one location in a relatively short time (Han and Verma, 2014).

Studies show that over half of the audience at a trade show is planning to buy and that 80 percent or more of attendees are a buying influence for one or more of the types of products exhibited. This suggests that a trade show can be an excellent opportunity for a firm to establish contact with potential customers. According to Williams et al. (1993), firms have several selling and non-selling objectives for attending trade shows, for example:

- Enhancing corporate image
- Servicing current customers
- Generating leads for their products (typically the primary reason)
- Gathering competitive intelligence

Similarly, Hutt and Speh (1995) recognize that trade shows typically complement direct selling efforts as they do advertising. They for example:

- Generate awareness
- Project favorable corporate image
- Provide product information
- Handle customer complaints

“Since smaller firms typically have fewer resources, they must be particularly aware of methods to improve performance to avoid the “double jeopardy” phenomenon, that is, suffering twice in a head-to-head comparison with a large firm” (Williams et al., 1993). An identified problem with small to medium-sized firms has been with booth getting crowded with “casual” visitors. The attendees who are actually interested in the firm’s products get discouraged by a wall of people

and most likely leave with little chance of coming back. Also, the difficulty of competing with giants, while some players might not even sell the same products but occupy the same floor with glamorous booths, causes attendees to overlook smaller players (Williams et al., 1993). Furthermore, because trade shows are planned and organized well in advance, they provide an opportunity for all stakeholders for smoothing out things such as the seasonality of demand, revenue, and cash flows (Han and Verma, 2014).

All in all, exhibit marketing is the most cost-effective means of reaching customers and prospects. It reduces the buying cycle and it allows companies to reach hidden buyers. One industry pundit called a trade show a four-day “bricks and mortar retail store” where customers could enter, learn about products and perhaps even buy. In essence, exhibit marketing is nothing more than marketing in miniature. Every facet of business marketing plan is present in an exhibit marketing program. The only difference is the scale: the plan is smaller, the duration is shorter and takes place within finite period of time. (Pitta et al., 2006)

2.3 Evolution of trade shows

Already almost three decades ago, trade show expenditures were recognized as the second largest item in the business marketing communications budget after advertising, and they accounted for nearly one-fifth of the total budget for U.S. firms and approximately one-fourth of the budget for European firms (Jacobson, 1990). Though the importance of trade shows is apparent, their role in a firm’s promotion mix and overall marketing program has been less clear (Kerin and Cron, 1987). Nevertheless, one major thread of research from the last two decades appears to be sales, promotion and service quality (Han and Verma, 2014).

Historically, trade shows have been viewed as an extension of a firm’s personal selling effort. Smaller firms or new entrants into an industry have viewed trade shows as an efficient means of reaching a large number of prospective buyers and

decision participants (Parasurman, 1981). Cavanaugh (1976) and Bonoma (1983) point out that trade shows have developed a much broader role. That is, many firms exhibit at trade shows for reasons other than making sales. These are firms that consider sales image enhancement, gathering competitive information, and improving corporate morale as equal to, if not more important than, selling. In these firms, the role of trade shows has expanded beyond selling to include a host of function (Kerin and Cron, 1987). Exhibit marketing has been misunderstood in the past; newer perspectives see its value as a vital part of the IMC process (Pitta et al., 2006).

Resistances towards attending a trade show within a company's own organization can result from the lack of understanding the role. This is a result from measuring issues being too vague and talks such as going there as mostly of a matter of image (Williams et al., 1993). Kerin and Cron (1987) employed subjective rating of performance by exhibit managers on several aspects such as corporate image. Thus, trade show performance for exhibitors can be defined as effectiveness of trade show booth personnel, generation of sales leads, image-building and on-site sales (Bonoma, 1983). According to Gopalakrishna et al. (1995), the measurement of return on trade show investments is confounded by a number of factors. First, direct sales effects and attitudinal or cognitive results, such as creating product awareness or interest and building reputation and image. Second, attending a trade show is usually interlinked with other elements of the marketing communications mix, such as direct mail, advertising, personal selling. Very often, it might take a prospective customer weeks or even months to move from interest to purchase. This makes it relevant to look at interacting marketing that interfere with measuring the true impact of a trade show (Gopalakrishna et al., 1995).

Exhibit marketing is a rich and versatile promotional practice that has spawned new applications and has the power to adapt to changing situations. For example, a relatively new exhibit marketing form has "popped up". Called a "pop-up store" it refers to a temporary retail establishment that might last a month or two and often used for seasonal products and services (Pitta et al., 2006). The broadened

perspective on trade shows indicates that they should be considered part of rather than an appendage to a firm's total communication program and it is suggested that when other communication tools successfully attract customers, trade shows might emphasize non-selling functions (Bonoma, 1983). It is also important to take into account the effects of social media and mobile technology on trade shows, which are noticeable but still in flux, as many shows increasingly use virtual methods for information exchange and contact development (Han and Verma, 2014). This has spawned another thread of research in the past two decades from descriptive themes towards more prescriptive strategies, including the role of technology, social media, meeting scheduling, sustainability and social responsibility related to the management of trade shows (Han and Verma, 2014). Already in common use, cheaper and more efficient technology, will continue to have a big impact on the way trade shows are organized, structured, and delivered. These include: touch screens, radiofrequency identification (RFID), wireless Internet access, virtual reality, and customized apps.

Despite big advancements in studies around trade shows, the predominant literature still lacks the focus of brand identity enhancement at trade shows for microenterprises and specifically in this changed digitalized business environment. That is where the weight of this study will be.

2.4 Future trends of trade shows

According to a very comprehensive and recent study (Han and Verma, 2014), trade shows are in flux. Trade shows will be targeted to a smaller audience with a more specific agenda, making them more valuable and focused. Technology will play a more significant role, new marketing opportunities will be experimented with, and environmental sustainability will become a larger consideration. (Han and Verma, 2014)

Technology will increasingly be woven into trade shows' structure through advancements such as touch-screen displays, computer simulations, and

solutions for scheduling meetings. It will aid in tracking attendees throughout the show and developing personal contacts by capturing attendees' attention. Also, the use of mobile apps is making trade shows more interactive. Some trade shows, or parts of them, will become completely virtual, which lets an "attendee" join a meeting in a specific trade show customized to their needs. There will also be trade shows with a combination of physical and virtual components. Some exhibitors fear that technology will take away from the valuable face-to-face interaction and the relationship to follow but others believe it will only aid in developing new ways to take care of customers and facilitate the face-to-face interaction. Attendees can, for instance, be connected with each other, with exhibitors, or with a main stage representative before the show. (Han and Verma, 2014)

The influence of technology on marketing will grow (Berthon et al., 1999) and may also be affecting other aspects of the trade shows because e-mail, online registration, and e-customer service have become commonplace. It will be possible for exhibitors to capitalize on social media and apps to get clients come to their booth. As marketers use social media, which is an effective use of time and resources for exhibit marketing, the outcome may be benefits that give companies additional communication channels to build brand loyalty beyond traditional methods (Jackson, 2011). Marketers also noticed benefits such as increased booth traffic, increased brand awareness, improved relationships with clients, increased event attendance, additional press coverage, and increased sales as a direct result of their social media campaigns (Han and Verma, 2014).

Sustainability continues to grow in significance as a megatrend (Russel, 2012), and the trade shows industry has focused on reducing its carbon footprint. Some trade shows already have a Green Aisle, which means there is a floor for exhibitors that want to be identified as green. Based on experience, this approach has been hugely successful, as these aisles have sold out almost immediately. Sustainability can also be seen in decrease in use of paper and brochures. Instead, flash drives and quick response (QR) codes are used for collateral. This applies for marketing, public relations, and communication for trade shows, which are constantly

evolving. However, traditional communication materials are not only a sustainability issue. It is also the participants who nowadays prefer to receive information via podcasts, e-mail, webinars, testimonials, and social media, which of course also creates the potential for attendees feeling spammed with mass messages. Many companies have ended up using Facebook and Bitworks, which lets you shorten messages with a link at the ends to facilitate for actionable communication on people's phones or tablets and proven to increase response rates. "It is clear that the basic objective of a trade show remains the same regardless of trends or technology, namely, to facilitate interaction between exhibitors and attendees so that they can have a favorable business outcome." (Han and Verma, 2014)

3 BRAND IDENTITY

This chapter comprises the concept of brand identity and its importance in the context of this study on how the brand identity of microenterprises can be enhanced at B2B trade shows. First, the concept of brand identity is defined and complemented with the most famous models for presenting it. Next, the modifications based on the traditional models, which are applicable in the B2B context are introduced. Lastly, the importance of brand identity is discussed.

3.1 Defining brand identity

Brand identity was mentioned for the first time as a concept in 1986 by Kapferer and quickly spread to the whole world (Janonis et al., 2007). Since then it has been the subject of increased academic interest (Aaker, 1991, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999, Kapferer et al., 2002). Brand identity can be defined as:

”A unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain and these associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization member.” (Aaker, 1996).

Brand identity is a configuration of words, images, ideas, and associations that form a consumer’s overall perception of a brand, which can also be described as the fingerprint that makes a brand one of a kind (Upshaw, 1995). It is something tangible and appealing to the senses, something that you can see, touch, hold, hear and watch, starting with a brand name and a brand mark, building exponentially towards a matrix of tools and communications (Wheeler, 2003). Kapferer (2008) identifies that identity is actually the expression of both tangible and intangible characteristics of a brand, giving authority to its precise values and benefits. Brand identity includes everything that makes the brand meaningful and

unique, including the aim, values, and personality, which make it easier to position the brand as a source of competitive advantage (Janonis et al., 2007). It is the whole fabric of how a product or service is seen by its customers and the integrated combination of how it is perceived to perform (Upshaw, 1995). Brand identity supports, expresses, communicates, synthesizes and visualizes the brand and as a communication form, it is the shortest, fastest and most present everywhere (Wheeler, 2003).

Both Aaker (1996) and Kapferer (1997) compare brand identity to a person's identity. It provides direction, purpose and meaning (Aaker, 1996) and works the same way as a personal identity card, defining in brief, who we are, what our name is and so forth (Kapferer, 1997). Upshaw (1995) comments that brand identity should include the strategy for how a product or service should be sold, the strategic personality that makes it humane and the blending of these two elements, all tangible and intangible executional elements that ideally flow from their joining, such as the brand name, logo, graphic system and so on. Even though brand identity is known to increase awareness and build businesses (Wheeler, 2003), it is only a few brands that truly know who they are, what they stand for and what the factor is that distinguishes them from others (Kapferer, 1997). However, changing conditions in the business environment have led a new type of market needing a new set of concepts and tools to succeed in it and this is where brand identity has stepped in (Kapferer, 1997). Next, the most famous brand identity structures are discussed to form a background for moving on to brand identity in the B2B context.

3.2 Brand identity structures

In this chapter the central structures of brand identity are presented. The introduction to these models sets the ground for introducing new variations building upon them, applicable to the B2B context, where the weight of this study will be.

3.2.1 Kapferer's six facets of identity

A hexagonal prism called 'the six facets of identity' is used by Kapferer (1997) to represent the concept of brand identity. This structure includes the brand's physical qualities or the 'physique', personality, culture, self-image, reflection and relationship. The physique of the product contains its central features, which are the brand's backbone and tangible added value. Usually, the developing of a brand starts with this defining of what the brand concretely is, what it does and what it looks like. The personality is something all brands have and builds up through communication, using for instance a figurehead or a spokesperson, symbolic or real. The culture is the set of values feeding the brands inspiration; it is where every brand comes from. This aspect is at the core of the brand since it can work as the differentiator in competition by focusing on the sources, fundamental ideals and set of values. A brand can also be thought of as a relationship since they often are in the center of exchanges between people. (Kapferer, 1997)

3.2.2 Harris and de Chernatony's six components to brand identity

Harris and de Chernatony (2001) present a structure to brand identity consisting of the following six parts:

1. Brand vision
2. Brand culture
3. Positioning
4. Personality
5. Relationships
6. Presentations

Brand vision is the core purpose of the brand's existence and represents a set

of values. Together with brand culture, they provide guidance and direction to the brand. Positioning relates to building competitive advantage by emphasizing the characteristics and attributes that make it special and provide a benefit offered to the consumers. Emotional characteristics are represented through personality, which is influenced by positioning, core values and culture in the top management. Relationships are those between employees, consumers and other stakeholders. Their evolution is influenced by vision and culture. Presentation refers to the styles used to present brand identity, taking into account stakeholders' needs and aspirations. (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001)

3.2.3 Aaker's brand identity structure

Aaker (1996) sees the structure of brand identity consisting of the core identity, extended identity and the patterns of meaning. Aaker (1996) and Upshaw (1995) agree that the core of identity is the timeless essence of a brand. Aaker (1996) compares it to the center of an onion or an artichoke that remains when you peel the layers or leaves away. According to Aaker (1996), this core is central to the meaning and success of the brand and contains the associations that usually remain constant and resistant even though the brand goes to new markets and expands to new products. The core identity should make the brand unique and valuable giving it a basis for credibility and value proposition (Aaker, 1996). A more detailed list is made by Upshaw (1995) of what the identity core or essence should actually include. This list includes the brand vision, its name, its performance standards, its signage, its packaging, its pricing philosophy, its marketing communications, its community relations policy, its sales force activities, its promotion strategies, and so on. The core substance and intrinsic identity are actually the source of outward appearance and overall looks and what really matters is the key message that we want to communicate (Kapferer, 1997). The brand's deepest values must also be reflected in the external signs of recognition and be explicit at once (Kapferer, 1997).

The extended identity brings texture and completeness to the brand identity with details and these elements are more likely to change compared to the core identity. These elements are drivers of the brand identity, a good example being brand personality, bringing that little extra. The product class is likely to affect the number of relevant elements. Cohesive and meaningful groupings or mental networks can be made around the identity components, which is a sign of a strong effective brand (Aaker, 1996).

3.2.3.1 Aaker's four perspectives/12 dimensions of brand identity

Aaker (1996) suggests that brand identity consists of twelve dimensions, which are organized around four perspectives. These are:

1. Brand-as-product (product scope, product attributes, quality/value, user-type, country of origin)
2. Brand-as-organization (organizational attributes, local versus global)
3. Brand-as-person (brand personality, brand-customer relationships)
4. Brand-as-symbol (visual imagery/metaphors and brand heritage)

The four brand identity perspectives according to Aaker (1996) are not all needed but rather the most appropriate one for a certain brand should be selected and the other ones kept in mind helping in the articulation of what the brand is in the customer's mind. These perspectives help in considering different brand elements, which then are usually organized around the core identity, mentioned in the previous section (Aaker 1996).

Brand-as-product

According to Aaker (1996), the brand as a product will always be an important part of a brand identity. This is because the associations related to a product are

directly linked to brand choice decisions and the use experience. The product thrust is usually thought of as the core element of a brand's identity, which will affect the type of associations that are desirable and feasible. The goal is to have people linking a product class or need to a brand and not the opposite way round. Products can have attributes that may create functional or emotional benefits at the time of purchase or use. These attributes work as a value proposition by offering something extra or better to the customer like some special features or services. The quality or value attributes are often used as the core identity elements by brands. This can be explained by the fact that value and quality are related through the price dimension. Brands can also own a use occasion or application, which forces competitors to work around it. Positioning a product by user-type can imply a value proposition and brand personality. Last but not least, a brand can be associated with a country or region by having a heritage of making the best within a product class. (Aaker, 1996)

Brand-as-organization

As the name already indicates, a brand can also focus on attributes related to the organization. These are for example innovation, drive for quality and concern for the environment, which are created by the people, culture, values, and programs of the company. It is good to note that some brand aspects can be considered as product attributes in some contexts and organizational in others, also a combination is possible. Organizational attributes are however more long lasting and resistant to competition than product attributes. This is because an organization with its unique people, values and programs is much harder to copy than a product. Also, attributes related to an organization usually apply to a set of product classes so a competitor in only one class may have problems competing. Attributes such as innovativeness are hard to evaluate and communicate so it is difficult for competitors to see whether they have overcome any perceived gap. The above-mentioned attributes also work towards a value proposition since they

can involve emotional and self-expressive benefits that are based on admiration, respect, or simple liking. (Aaker, 1996)

Brand-as-person

It is possible to look at a brand like a person. A brand can also have traits like being upscale, competent, impressive, trustworthy, fun, active, humorous, causal, formal, youthful, or intellectual. It is suggested that a brand with personality is more interesting than one based merely on product attributes. This makes it possible for customers to express their own personalities through the products they consume. Brand personality can also create a relationship or friendship between the product and the customer that communicates the functional benefit. (Aaker, 1996)

Brand-as-symbol

A symbol can provide cohesion and structure to brand identity and make it easier for customers to recall or recognize such a brand. Three types of symbols are highlighted: visual imagery, metaphors and brand heritage. Visual imagery creates a brand that is memorable and powerful since it holds much of its respective brand identity. It might only take a short look at a symbol to be reminded of the brand behind it. If a symbol involves a metaphor, it is even more meaningful when representing a benefit such as one emotional or functional. A meaningful heritage can also represent the essence of the brand. (Aaker, 1996)

3.3 Brand identity in B2B markets

Various studies have identified numerous benefits to organizations even though past research in B2B branding has been fragmented (Leek and Christodoulides,

2011). The new brand identity discussion identifies the need to define it in the context of stakeholders and not an audience. This also broadens the scope of the construct's definition and in this way overcomes a limitation of Aaker's (1996) work, which appears to be customer centric. Based on this, B2B brand identity is defined as:

"A strategist's vision of how a B2B brand should be perceived by its stakeholders." (Coleman et al., 2011).

A brand is a cluster of functional and emotional benefits that extend a unique and welcomed promise (de Chernatony and McDonald, 2003); this conceptualization is universal and applies to for instance B2B (de Chernatony and Christodoulides, 2004). Based on a broad literature review by Coleman et al. (2011), B2B brand identity is a multidimensional construct and its facets in the B2B context are: marketing culture, client relationship management, corporate visual identity, integrated marketing communications and brand personality.

The important role of culture in brand identity has already been noted by several brand identity scholars (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony et al., 2010; Kapferer, 2004). Marketing culture is the importance that organizations place on the marketing function (Webster, 1995). This is in direct relation to an organizational climate that facilitates the implementation of marketing initiatives (Appiah et al., 1999). Furthermore, building and nurturing a supportive marketing culture is regarded as a particularly effective way in managing the variability that humans can bring to service branding (Karatepe et al., 2005).

Client relationship management is an important dimension, as also noted by several scholars already in the B2C brand identity literature discussed above (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony et al, 2010; Kapferer, 2004). Brand customer relationships were considered the bottom line for enhancing brand identity (Aaker, 1996), a direct goal of a brand (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000), a facet of Kapferer's (2004) Brand Identity Prism and those between staff members, customers and stakeholders underpinning brand identity (de Chernatony, 2006).

In the industrial marketing literature, the importance of relationships is considered the cornerstone of the brand (Campbell et al. 2010). Consistent with Kotler and Keller (2006), several scholars highlight how crucial the role of relationships is for B2B brands due to the interpersonal nature of the market (Bengtsson and Servais, 2005). Thus, in the B2B context, it is more appropriate to refer to client relationship management as opposed to customer relationship management (Coleman et al., 2011).

The facet of corporate visual identity is based on the brand identity frameworks referring to symbolism, symbols or logo (Coleman et al., 2011). Aaker (1996) outlines how symbolism can provide cohesion and structure and make a brand recognizable. Also, Kapferer's (2004) logic of the physique dimension is extendable through tangible elements such as logo and other organizational nomenclature. de Chernatony (2006) outlines how physical cues such as logo, clothes employees wear and premises are particularly important in distinguishing the brand. The role of marketing communications in the B2B markets has been noted for some time already (Gilliland and Johnston, 1997). Mudambi (2002) highlights how B2B brands should communicate the value of their brands to a range of stakeholders if they are to leverage their full potential.

Brand personality is the salient most noticeable and important dimension of many brand identity models (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999, 2006; Kapferer, 2004). The 'brand-as-person' perspective of Aaker (1996) suggests looking at the brand like a person whereas Kapferer's (2004) Identity Prism shows what kind of person the brand would be if it were a human and de Chernatony's bringing the brand's emotional values to life. The role of emotions in decision making seems to have evolved more recently in B2B literature (Coleman et al., 2011) whilst it is acknowledged how earlier parts of decision making process are influenced by first impressions from sales representatives, trade shows and so on (Bloombach and Axelsson, 2007). This shows the importance of developing an emotional connection via brand personality, extending from consumer to business markets with increasing scholarly support (Coleman, 2011). Relationships with employees are usually more important in a B2B context than in a B2C setting (Kuhn et al.,

2008). The emotional attributes of brands are increasingly recognized as having a role to play in B2B purchasing which was previously perceived as being purely rational (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2007).

3.4 Importance of brand identity

Various changes in the business environment such as increasing homogeneity of product quality and the decreasing number of personal relationships due to digital communications have led to an increase in the interest in B2B branding (Baumgarth, 2010). The existing body of research knowledge on brand management has been predominantly derived from B2C markets, particularly fast moving consumer goods, and has only recently started to expand in other contexts. Branding in B2B markets has received little attention in the academic literature due to the belief that industrial buyers are unaffected by emotional values corresponding to brands (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011). However, it is found that B2B branding increases buyers' confidence in and satisfaction with their purchase decision (Low and Blois, 2002) and reduces their level of perceived risk and uncertainty (Bengtsson and Servais, 2005). More recently research has acknowledged that despite differences between B2C and B2B contexts, both types of brands need to engender trust and develop both cognitive and affective ties with stakeholders (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2004).

In many B2B purchase situations, the buyer builds up a relationship with the supplier; research has found that between 70 and 88 percent of the B2B relationships are greater than five years old (Ford et al., 2002). Relationships of this length are multi-faceted and encompass not only the relationship with the brand but also the relationship with the company and the company's employees (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011). The employees' knowledge, skills, brand perceptions, treatment of the customer and management of the relationship have been found to influence the customers' perception of the brand (Chun and Davies, 2006). The idea of the employee as being responsible for conveying the brand is taken to the

extreme by Gupta et al. (2010) who propose that brand relationships should be managed by the brand personified with a human representative of the brand (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011).

3.5 Brand identity enhancement at trade shows

This section will bring together the two main areas of research discussed above: trade shows and brand identity. Combining these two into what makes trade shows a successful environment for enhancing brand identity will form the basis of the empirical research part of this study. Moreover, how technology is playing a big role affecting the whole industry and bringing up a need for redefining the concept of trade shows.

Companies may take orders and have tangible sales results but also possess the desire to build product awareness and image (Pitta et al., 2006; Kerin and Cron, 1987). In terms of viewing brand identity in the context of B2B markets, it is defined as the strategist's vision of how the brand should be perceived by its stakeholders (Coleman et al., 2011). Since trades shows are a medium for product promotion purposes (Kerin and Cron, 1987), the context can be viewed as suitable for enhancing the brand identity.

One of the most important selling objectives for attending is professional lead generation (Kerin and Cron, 2011). Exhibit marketing is considered a cost-effective means of reducing the buying cycle and allowing companies to reach new customers and hidden buyers (Pitta et al., 2006). Brand personality is the most noticeable dimension of many brand identity models (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999; Kapferer, 2004). It is noted that the decision making process of buyers is greatly affected by first impressions of sales representatives, trade shows and so on (Bloombach and Axelsson, 2007). The emotional attributes of brands are increasing affecting B2B purchasing (de Chernatony, 2007), which makes trade shows an interesting context for perceiving brand identity enhancement from this angle.

An important non-selling objective for attending trade shows is networking (Kerin and Cron, 1987). Casual contact with current customers, manufacturers and buyers can easily be made at one location in a relatively short time (Han and Verma, 2014). Client relationship management is considered an important aspect of B2B brand identity and in the industrial marketing literature, the cornerstone of a brand (Campbell et al., 2010). This suggests that trade shows could well fulfill the purpose of forming new relationships with the long-term goals of selling.

Another non-buying objective for attending trade shows is promoting corporate image (Kerin and Cron, 1987). Moreover, Kerin and Cron (1987) found that exhibitors often employ eye-catching signage, lively demonstrations, promotional give-away items, entertainers and other tactics to compete with rivals in attracting visitors to their booth. The facet of corporate visual identity, as part of B2B brand identity, refers to symbolism, symbols or logo and even more to physical cues such as clothes employees wear and their premises (Coleman et al., 2011). Hence, the specific visually appealing activities exhibitors perform at trade shows (Kerin and Cron, 1987), implies that trade shows are a potential environment for enhancing brand identity also in the visual aspect by differentiating them from competitors.

Even with the growing role of technology, personal contacts maintain their importance in the long run. Exhibit marketing is a rich and versatile promotional practice that has spawned new applications and has the power to adapt to changing situations, the same way as small dynamic companies (Pitta et al., 2006). As an example, the earlier mentioned, relatively new exhibit marketing form "pop-up store" is a good indication of how small companies can creatively respond to the changing business environment by doing something different. This implies that as other promotion tools successfully attract customers, trade shows might well concentrate in emphasizing non-selling functions such as image enhancement in the broader marketing communications palette (Bonoma, 1983).

The trade shows industry is in flux. They will be targeted to a much smaller audience with a more specific agenda, making them more valuable and focused. Technology will bring in new ways of tracking visitors and better catering to their

needs. New communication channels such as social media facilitate trade show success by for instance improved relationships with clients. Advancements in technology assist in better serving the needs of today's buyers who may well wish to receive traditional communication materials in electronic form. (Han and Verma, 2014). The company's knowledge, skills, perceptions, treatment of the customer and management of the relationship have been found to influence the client's perception of the brand (Chun and Davies, 2006), which makes responding to the needs of the clients also in this changing trade show environment crucial.

4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research method used in this study. Secondly, the research process, context, research approaches and data analysis methods will be introduced. All choices will be justified accordingly.

4.1 Research design

The qualitative research method was chosen to gain a holistic understanding of the research subject (McCracken, 1988). Qualitative research in general is defined as an empirical, socially located phenomenon, defined by its own history, not simply a residual “grab-bag” comprising all the things that are ‘not quantitative’ (Kirk and Miller, 1986). Thus, the research was carried out in an abductive manner through an iterative process compared to a linear theory-before-research model (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1976). This way the literature review, data collections and analysis were done simultaneously as an on-going process, which allowed this research to build on the main themes and evolve as the research progressed. However, the initial interview questions and themes were based on theory, which was the starting point for conducting the empirical part of the research.

4.2 Data-collection

The data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. First, three preliminary interviews were conducted to ensure the correct focus of the study and improve the questionnaire. Further on, seven interviews were conducted to complement the preliminary data. The context for this research was chosen to be international B2B fashion trade shows as the aim was to study brand identity enhancement of Finnish microenterprises in international fashion trade shows. As small companies are known to be more dynamic than more established ones,

they form a good sample case in analyzing changes in the trade show industry through rapid reactions such as decreasing attendance and shifting to other alternatives.

4.2.1 Sampling

The data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with ten Finnish Fashion trade show exhibitors. The aim was to gain an understanding of their trade show experience and how it is connected to enhancing their brand identity. All of the interviewees had a background in sales and marketing efforts at trade shows visited. Amongst the interviewees, there were three companies who have stopped going to trade shows as this contributes to understanding the future of the trade show industry and how the concept can be developed.

	Company	Position	Name
Preliminary interviews	Uneins	Owner/Marketing	Alex Atanasova
	Samuji	Marketing	Antonia Hamberg
	Minna Parikka	Marketing	Heidi Cheng
Semi-structured interviews	Makia	Owner	Joni Malmi
	Villawool	Owner/Buyer	Rasmus Tikkanen
	Costo	Owner	Anders Bengs
	R/H	Owner	Emilia Hernesniemi
	CTRL	Head designer	Freeman
	2OR+byYAT	Owner	YAT
	Lumi	Owner	Bruno Beaugrand

Table 1: Overview of the interviewees

4.2.2 Interviews

Preliminary semi-structured interviews were conducted with three companies to form a general understanding of their trade show experiences in the scope of the research but also to find interesting points outside of it. Like mentioned before, these preliminary interviews gave good insights for further shaping the questionnaire, interview design and interview technique of the researcher for the rest of the interviews. Including the preliminary interviews, altogether ten semi-structured interviews were made and all learnings proved to be valuable and were included in the final data. The interviews lasted on an average 35 minutes, with the lengthiest one lasting 70 minutes.

4.3 Data analysis

The ten interviews were all recorded and transcribed. The findings were then mirrored against the literature of trade shows and brand identity. All findings relevant to the research questions were utilized from the transcribed interviews. The analysis was conducted using grounded theory, which is a research methodology primarily associated with qualitative research (Dunne, 2011). For the founders, Glaser and Strauss (1967), it constitutes an innovative methodology, facilitating the discovery of theory from the data. In grounded theory, the research is not focused on testing hypotheses taken from theory per se but rather developing new theory grounded in empirical data collected in the field (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, repetitively emerging themes outside the theoretical background can be applied. It is common, in grounded theory research, to use constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling (Dunne, 2011), which was also carried out in this research. Also, the data collection and analysis were occurring concurrently, rather than in a linear sequence like suggested by Dunne (2011). Thus, this thesis well utilized the possibility for dynamic interplay of data collection and analysis proposed by Payne (2007). This was found to be a suitable

way to carry out research in a hectic industry, which is known to be in flux (Han and Verma, 2014). It was important to be able to directly apply insight and themes gained from respondents to the research. Furthermore, to dynamically reach areas outside of theory as the goal was to offer insight regarding the future outlook of trade shows.

5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter is dedicated for presenting the findings from the interviews. First, brand identity enhancement is discussed through observing respondents' activities and objectives in the trade show environment. Finally, the effect of technology and other factors on small fashion companies' trade show attendance is covered.

5.1 Getting the products in the spotlight

In the center of every small brand are its products, which forms a big portion of their identity. It is what they do and what they have “put their hearts and souls into”. In the small Finnish fashion companies interviewed, this means clothes, bags, accessories and shoes. It is usually a combination of these forming the companies' product scope, which they are looking to sell when attending trade shows. Business-to-business trade shows offer a valuable environment for small companies to present their products to an optimally large audience that they otherwise could not as easily reach. *“Trade shows are a big and hectic place where you go to when you are not yet known. It is to meet different types of buyers, scouts and get publicity.”* Thus, this international playing field is used as an effective context for selling and promoting products during the seasonal buying weeks.

“If you want to find big distributors, trade shows are the place to be. That's where they come and spot new things. They (trade shows) are a channel to internationalization where you meet new clients and agents abroad.”

Like the above excerpt reveals, trade shows are considered an optimal environment for a company yet unknown with long-term internationalization goals. It is a place where new business relationships are born, which is the key to driving sales. For a small company, like the fashion microenterprises studied, this seems

to be the most potential marketing channel since *“most of the new business relationships are born at the trade show”*.

5.1.1 Gaining positive PR value and visibility

Demonstrating the products in the most beneficial way in terms of the whole brand world requires careful preparation, already prior to the trade show. According to the respondents, one of the biggest objectives for attending trade shows seemed to be related to getting their products out there for a crowd as big as possible to see. This means for all kinds of audiences from buyer prospects to PR and media as well as manufacturers. This means using the limited, raw space given in the most appealing way possible to attract the eyes of the passers-by. The audience is varied but everyone is looking for inspiration, so with great luck, *“even a company exhibiting for the first time, can end up in a style blog that serves as an example to hundreds below, so potentially, everyone will want your product”*.

“Everything is about impression, like with people, what places you go to and who with and how are you dressed form an image about your brand. Attending trade shows gives us publicity, name included in web pages and brochures, maps and guides, buyers, press, suppliers.”

As can also be seen from the previous and following quotes, the respondents perceived trade shows as an optimal source of PR and visibility as well as communicating the right impressions to the audience about what kind of brand they are. There seems to be a direct link to successfully building the brand world and connecting with the right people. This highlights the importance of first impression at the spot.

“There you can build a fancy space and create the right atmosphere there around the brand and show and communicate what your brand is if you do it well. That way you can easily meet good people

from around the world.”

Also, other personal benefits were clearly recognized by respondents like getting a clearer image of the industry. As a new brand, it is very recommended to go to trade shows to understand how everything works and get to know the system. Also, as noted in the following quote, it is seen as the only channel if showrooms are not in use either.

“If you are not presenting at a showroom, it is the only place where buyers can find and meet you. So it is important to build the presence that way by being out there, being visible.”

5.1.2 Communicating the identity through merchandising

Product attributes are often the differentiating factor for gaining competitive advantage: “the finest leather”, “the unique design”, “the luxurious materials”, “the extra-ordinary aesthetics and silhouette”. According to respondents, merchandising plays a key role in highlighting the products in a way, which catches the eye. *“It is extremely important, how the small and big pieces are disposed together. It ensures you are communicating the right image. It’s a big factor how buyers are perceiving you.”* According to a respondent, some stands will be extremely appealing and attract people to them and some will just be big mess that people don’t even look at. It can happen that a gorgeous product is presented in the wrong environment and does not get any attention and a more generic product is presented in a gorgeous setup and gets the booth very busy.

“We present a very minimalistic style at our booth, we always bring our own racks and hangers because it creates the right feeling, sets us apart from others and communicates the right identity. The clothes are carefully steamed and put into color order. It is important to have stuff that creates a personal look and feel even though the clothes themselves already do that through fine materials.”

The above quote demonstrates that different brands have very personal styles in

creating the feel for their booth. Attention to detail is a key factor in what decisions are made and what is highlighted, for example, hanging the clothes in color order or bringing in a beautiful vase for decoration. Even though these are small decisions, they may have a big effect on the image perceived by the audience. This is why image is tried to control as much as possible with things that can easily be controlled per se.

Also, having the right people at the stand answering questions about the product as much as possible is crucial. That is why many times is it the owner and designer themselves at the trade show representing their brand. There is a difference between presenting different products. Clothes can be neatly hung on racks as they in a way stand out for themselves. However, shoes or accessories such as bags are more difficult to make stand out and require more building and effort, for example building display platforms. This requires skills in building different layers to make the products stand out to their advantage, which is suggested in the following excerpt.

“We know how to build up different layers. There has to be food for your eyes for different times that you are spending there. You have to have the core item and then different levels, building up interest.”

Also, displaying the right amount of products has a difference. *“Too many products can be bad and not enough can look like lack of choice, the right dose is important.”* It is really important how a brand is positioned at the trade show, in a way that they are on the same level in terms of style and experience. This means that small companies really want to be positioned next to brands that are relevant to them and make them stand out well and not the opposite way round, which tends to happen. It is also considered very important to visit trade shows and show the products consistently. It is a bad sign if suddenly, buyers do not see you there anymore and causes unnecessary speculation. All of this affects the impression that the audience gets from the brand so everything that is done at the stand from merchandising to social interaction communicates the identity of the brand.

5.1.3 Allowing the buyers to touch and try the products

Trade shows provide a valuable chance to highlight quality and other value attributes. Quality is something that cannot merely be perceived from images online or brochures sent home. The quality is truly perceived by physically touching and trying out the products, which was seen as an extremely important factor when talking about B2B buyers. As the following quote demonstrates, this is even considered one of the main things that cannot even be replaced by technological advancements such as online solutions.

“Being able to try them (shoes) on is major. Our shoes come to life in your feet, especially combined with clothes. So, in real life, physical trade shows can never be completely replaced by digital solutions.”

Buyers come to the trade show primarily to look and feel the products. Orders are seldom placed at the show; buyers rather make notes and then place their orders after the show in a not-so-hectic environment. According to a respondent, being a good buyer requires knowing what they are really buying so they know the brand is good and delivering the quality that they have been signing for. This makes it crucial for them to attend trade shows by being physically present to allow buyers to do so. “It’s all about the buyers being able to stretch and squeeze the materials. And really try them out themselves.” Reading customers’ minds is a very important characteristic required from the sales personnel, which is highlighted in the following quote.

“It’s a lot about having discretion towards the whole deal, it’s completely different to selling some electric engines when someone just ask is this good and does it work whereas with clothes you go through every tiny detail and how you sense whether to start showing something extra or is it going to be too much and completely trying to read the customers mind.”

In their answers, respondents highlighted that the nature of fashion products requires physical proximity for the buyers to be able to get the right impression

and even get attached. This is what, according to respondents, distinguishes them from cheap alternatives that are purchased favoring quantity over quality. Touching, feeling and trying out the products is apt to creating the needed “wow effect” for them to make the buying decision so providing this opportunity for them is crucial. Also, there is so much more to a fashion garment than just its looks.

“Our aesthetic is quite unique with our signature silhouettes. We are counting on customers to get attached. Quality is number one for B2B buyers; they will test everything physically at the trade show. Usually with two sets of tests, aesthetics and quality and origin and story.”

5.2 Letting the story sell the brand

It is important to communicate and share the brand story with the audience. The story is what buyers are looking for when they look at a new brand. As a matter of fact, respondents identified hearing the brand story as the core interest of potential buyers visiting the booth. The following excerpt even suggests that is the main reason why the audience is there.

“We just are there and tell about our story. Every time we go there, there is always interviews and international media all over the place, interviewers who write all kinds of inserts. They want to here the story.”

The audience is more interested in hearing where a brand has come from and how it has come to where it is compared to just talking about product. Trade shows offer a room full of people to tell the story to and receive instant feedback. One of the main activities performed at a trade show is talking to people so the importance of trade shows is emphasized in the case of young fashion startups that want to share their story. This can potentially become a key differentiator in competition among the hundreds of brands exhibiting in the same space as seen in the following quote.

“The clients are looking at what you do, listening to the story, because the story is the key right now. Otherwise they will just go and buy some cheap stuff.”

It is a major advantage if the sales people look like the brand and organization that they are representing. “It impresses and leaves a mark to the buyers when you can really bring the brand and story out on the next level.” This builds on the story aspect of the brand as the audience visually sees the brand world in front of them. The following quote expresses how positive the reactions have been to these kinds of efforts.

“We have received a lot of positive feedback for looking like the brand ourselves and looking like we belong to that brand. It is very important that as the seller we can channel the brand in this kind of environment compared to showroom where there are many brands to sell.”

Highlighting the fine materials, origin and ways of manufacturing the products is typical when communicating with the buyers. Interestingly, the story telling might even be shifting from its basic form of where the brand is coming from to who the manufacturers are and what the story behind them is. People are really interested in the origins of the products and many times ask that as the first question. This is even suggested as a new source of competitive advantage and a way to even skip trade shows to still reach potential buyers and gain exposure. This is seen in the next excerpt from a small fashion company that is annoyed with the current trade show concept and looking to find new innovative ways to still gain the same main benefits.

“Telling a collective story with suppliers of fabrics and bypassing trade shows to still reach buyers and gain exposure, is something that we could do.”

5.2.1 Body language signaling the right attitude

Going to the trade show means representing the brand, not only through the products, but also through the organization and its people. It makes a huge difference how the brand is presented through people. Like mentioned before, one of the biggest objectives for attending trade shows is making sales and this happens through interacting with people. Some companies prefer standing throughout the whole show whereas some have tables and chairs for their own use. However, the bottom line is to be aware of how you are perceived through your actions. One very experienced respondent noted that “sitting down is a killer for your brand” whereas with for example heels you are communicating the right attitude. The following response signals that the right body language and gestures are directly linked to gaining new customers and making sales.

“It’s easier to talk to people walking buy when you’re standing, we call that fishing and it works too. You can get clients by fishing if you know how to chat with people, we’re in a sell business. You need to go towards the clients to make sales. Many people don’t behave at trade shows so it can’t be good for them. Working at a trade show is a very specific task and you need to know what you are doing.”

People really make a difference in how the audience perceives a brand and by really focusing on being open and welcoming makes a big difference in booth traffic. It easily happens that *“many come with hands in their pockets expecting that everyone will love their product and make a lot of orders. Doesn’t work like that. The brand has to know how to put right people at the trade show and to communicate the right exposure to them and get sales.”* As the following quote clearly indicates, keeping up the energy level at the booth is extremely important. It is even advised to be over-energetic compared to just normal. This suggests that trade shows are an event where exaggeration in a sense can even be a competitive advantage and make the brand stand out.

“It is a lot of waiting around and challenging and important to keep

up a certain energy level so you do not look bored even though nothing has happened in an hour and you are bored to death and look like this is the most horrible thing ever. It is important to keep a good vibe whether it's a buyer, media representative or whoever. I have to be the overactive me. Coffee consumption is a major weapon, when you have to be so overly social and represent full on."

Like the excerpts indicate, the body language and gestures made by people representing the brand can have a major effect in audience responses. There is a big potential to leave a positive impression and communicate a good attitude but at the same time also a pitfall to do the exact opposite and harm the brand.

5.2.2 Using visuals in communicating the story

Exhibitors often employ eye-catching signage, lively demonstrations, promotional give-away items, entertainers and other tactics to compete with rivals in attracting visitors to their booth (Kerin and Cron, 1987). According to respondents, it is true that a lot of effort is put into planning and designing the materials for distribution and visual imagery for the trade shows. It is extremely important to communicate the story that the brand carries through to the customers. Fancy look books and feeling books may be printed out with carefully selected fine materials that feel good in the hands and are an indication of quality being in the brand essence. Also, business cards and press books are typically also displayed and all the respondents highlighted the fact that basic marketing materials such as posters are not being used. Some want to do this more discretely whereas others might go just the opposite and make a huge ostentatious performance. This was identified as something that might drive away small brands if the difference between attending companies grows too big and budgetary efforts differ to the extent that some *"exhibitors just come there and show how big and mighty they are."* However, all respondents identified putting effort into appearance of major importance due to its potential for the audience to really be able to feel the world of the brand through these efforts.

" We display old campaign books on the table, business cards and a press release that communicates the feeling of the collections. Press books tell the story about where we have been and a flower vase brings some personal touch."

The above quote clearly states that there is a purpose behind every visual effort. Campaign books are used to communicate the *feeling*, press books are there to tell the story and decoration such as a vase is there to bring personal touch to the booth. For many small brands, details at the stand seem to be everything and efforts are described as "putting hearts and souls into it", building everything themselves, bringing in own furniture and always making everything custom. The space given is usually utilized maximally to the extent that is possible given the restriction that trade shows have. Within the limitations, the goal is to "build the booth so that the brand is memorable".

"Because our look is pretty rough and manly, we've used a lot of wood and metal on the racks and when building the stand. Materials are chosen so that they scream our brand and we've never ordered basic stuff. Last time we used wood on walls and a brass floor to build a bar with raw metal on the floor. The look has to match and communicate the brand so that they line up. Of course clothes are also neatly displayed."

As indicated in the excerpt above, customization is not only limited to promotion materials and custom furniture. Also, interesting materials such as wood and raw metal as well as textures such as brass successfully communicate the brand world. These efforts are usually taken seriously by small companies who are already making a major investment in attending so they are willing to invest all the way even to small details.

Materials such as look books are sometimes sent to potential or old buyers as well as media already prior to the trade show as an invitation to come and visit the booth. This gives them a pre-feel of the collection and many times buyers arrive at the booth with a list of items they want to feel. Through the materials provided, it is already possible for a small company to signal how the brand is doing. Putting effort into materials distributed can even give an image that the company is doing

better than it actually is, making it an important opportunity for small companies to utilize. This is seen in the following excerpt where a small additional investment can have a multiplied effect on the image of the small company.

“We make printed line sheets with prices and images, topped with a little folder which represents the look book with a few selected items and gives the buyer a luxurious feel. This has turned out a major advantage for us in looking bigger than we actually even are and builds trust and credibility when it looks like there is a big system in place in the background that is helping create the brand.”

The above excerpts underline the importance for details in communicating the whole brand world to the audience both through materials distributed as well as materials used for building the booth. Words such as “feeling”, “hearts and souls”, “brand world” and “custom” all indicate significant importance and effort in how this is perceived by respondents. The following quote still nicely highlights the importance of small details in bringing out the brand identity already prior to the trade show.

“We put a lot of effort into quality images and materials like the campaign and look books. Choosing the perfect paper communicates our world and has been a very important part of creating our brand image and marketing and sales efforts. They are the things that create the feeling and communicate the spirit of the collection and brand. It is an important selling tool that we also send to potential clients and stores beforehand so it is of great importance what the clothes look like worn and it is important that they are well styled and the overall brand identity comes out sharp and beautiful.”

5.3 Physical presence builds personality and forms relationships

One of the main objectives for attending trade shows is meeting people and networking. This is the starting point for any good PR and selling. Brand-client relationships form one of the core elements of brand identity in the B2B context (Coleman et al., 2011). Trade shows offer an excellent opportunity for relationship

nurturing at the stand and old buyers even expect that. Even though they might have already placed their order or are planning to do so afterwards, they still expect the brand to be present and available for them out there. It is common to hear “See you in Paris” or “See you in New York!” when running into existing customers even though they know you have already established yourself and do not in a way need trade shows any more per se. The relationships with buyers build over years and gradually, requiring brands to be consistently present and that way building credibility over the years. *“Buyers are looking for persistence, meaning can you make it 3 times in a row.”* It is really important to deliver the right message and this can be done both through communication as well as consistent presence. Leaving a positive mark in the old customers’ minds is very important and keeps them coming back. Big clients rarely place an order when seeing a brand for the first time, they want to see continuity for at least three times before they can look at the brand seriously and trust that it will not suddenly disappear.

“If you don’t deliver the right message and serve the client, meet the expectation, they are not satisfied, the perception is wrong and we lose the client and finding new clients is expensive so it’s better to keep the ones we have.”

Interestingly, the nurturing of old relationships was really held in value. As the above quote suggests, it is really important to meet the expectations of the old clients. Even though new business is a major reason for attending, it is also very important to maintain the image and perception that they have of the brand.

“Trade shows are a half yearly meeting point for us and our clients to meet face-to-face and yet again leave a positive mark in their memory. Even though we wouldn’t write an order, it is still important to be there and show yourself so the potential customers see that we are still here and haven’t gone bankrupt.”

Losing an old client can become expensive so if a brand is planning on quitting trade shows, it is important to communicate it clearly to clients what the new channel will be. As the above quote suggests, most times, trade shows are the

half yearly meeting point so it is important to keep the clients in the loop when shifting to new alternatives.

“It’s a big process all in all. Along the years, we’ve received a lot of good contacts who we approach every time we go to trade shows, let them know we are coming, send them our look book, line sheet and all, call. Trying to book appointments for the trade shows. Buyers still come to trade shows and expect to find you there. It’s a big thing that we meet the customers half yearly and it’s really fun seeing, really genuinely, it’s super nice seeing people because most of them are so nice people and then there’s all sorts of personalities and then we have established really nice contacts and friends.”

As can be seen above, brand-client relationships develop over years and require persistence and consistency no matter how well it seems to be going. Also, the more established relationships with buyers require nurturing and trade shows provably work as a practical half yearly face-to-face meeting point. It was even found enjoyable by respondents who still acknowledge the high cost of this event. Personal interaction is thus a major reason for exhibiting and putting in the big investment for this short duration of time; it is what keeps some small companies going back.

5.3.1 Exposing the brand to media potential

Trade shows are very important in terms of the huge potential for generating PR value for a small company. Ending up in a popular style blog can shoot a small company’s success through the roof after only one trade show. Moreover, just going abroad can enhance the image at the home market to the extent that against all the odds, it suddenly becomes the most successful one. So, even though a trade show would not directly be so beneficial in terms of sales, it might improve the image at the home market so much that sales are generated from the other direction. The underlying potential seems to be one of the biggest motivators for small companies to commit to the big expense that trade shows

creates. Usually, everything else might even have to be put on hold for making a trade show happen. It requires a brave “all in” attitude from designers who are usually putting everything they have at stake.

*“It’s a good chance to meet PR guys and media and ask them to look through the collection and get good visibility and presence. **There’s** always a few guys hired to handle the random passers-by so that there is always someone available to catch these and tell the brand story and form a new relationship.”*

As the answer above reveals, the PR potential at trade shows is tremendous and can have an exponential effect on a small company. The value of passers-by is highlighted as a major benefit of trade shows where it is possible to gain exposure with small efforts such as asking a media representative to look through the collection. The next quote demonstrates how a respondent is said to have gained great exposure through energy and personal efforts that have drawn attention to them.

“A lot of international media comes to trade shows and writes about us. They have been the passers-by who have spotted our energy and we’ve suddenly been on everything from Marie Claire and Vogue to Der Spiegel.”

5.3.2 Attracting new buyers through personal efforts

On top of nurturing old relationships, finding new ones is also an important activity and objective during trade shows. Finding new buyers and attracting media requires communicating the brand as well as possible in the given, usually small, space at your booth. Possibilities are endless but require creativity, budget and effort. There is a lot you can do with furniture, printed materials and such as mentioned before. Moreover, being physically present for buyers is considered very important so trade shows really serve the purpose. In some cases when the brand is strongly personified around one person, usually the designer, it can be

important for that person to be there answering questions. This enhances the brand on a personal level and communicates the brand personality at a maximal level. It was noted by a respondent *“it brings something extra, added value and story for the brand that the buyers want to know.”* However, it was also noted that this might also go against the brand, if the designer is there and takes everything very personally. In successful cases, it is a huge benefit when cues such as humor can be used and that way bond with buyers. Even though it strongly splits opinions among respondents whether or not the designer should be there or not, it is mutually agreed upon that connecting with people on a personal level is much more beneficial in making sales than aggressive selling tactics.

“Personal contact is really important. Our brand is such that we can joke around with the buyers and the business is done on the side and not the opposite way round. We want to chitchat nice things and restrain from aggressively selling, rather bring out the brand to its advantage in that situation.”

As the above quote suggests, it is identified by respondents that it is rather the informal gestures such as joking around and humor that generates sales rather than direct selling efforts. “Nowadays things have been switching. You have to go there to meet people personally. Get there and get your face known.” This was known to bring strong advantages in the changing business environment like also seen from the excerpt below.

“People develop personal affection to clothes, we want to leave that impression, we want them to like it so much in the process so we build relationships with our clients”

An important objective, identified unanimously by all respondents, is keeping track of whom they have spoken to during the trade show. This is extremely important in terms of follow-up after the trade show. Some trade shows have scanners, which are distributed to exhibitors so that they can scan everyone who comes to their booth and directly get their information to upload to Excel. Registers are also sold but they are usually expensive for small companies. If

scanners are not available, collecting business cards is crucial and some companies do not even have time for a conversation if the client does not have a business card to give back to you. The most important objective for all of the respondents was gaining access to new international clients on the retail side. As seen from the quote below, it might even be the only source of new clients, making it an important event for small companies.

“We have made and make all our contacts through networking at trade shows during the past ten years. So our main reason for exhibiting has been international clients on the retail side. For example, big Japanese and Korean buyers go to trade shows in Europe to make their pick, so that is where you want to be.”

Trade shows form a hub where relationships between the brand and buyers can be identified, formed and nurtured. “Trade shows are not only for meeting buyers, but also for press, developing contacts to develop the supply chain further as well as form business relationships in the production and manufacturing end.” Sometimes trade shows might even be the only way to gain access to some buyers who only use trade shows for scouting new brands. Even with the opportunities that the Internet provides, trade shows have remained their position as an important channel for small fashion companies. This is a context where many things can be achieved at once, from selling to PR to forming lasting relationships, it is considered impossible to do this online from the start.

“It’s completely different when you think about going to Sweden and walking into a store and presenting the collection and the buyer likes it but can’t afford it right there and then, at a trade show you are already on the same level, it’s harder to just walk by without stopping. Then you come and check out the collection, it’s so different to being in the amazing world of the Internet because it is so different.”

The above excerpts demonstrate the positive way respondents perceived the context of trade shows in terms of personal contact and physical proximity with the audience. It was even considered the only way to go about finding new clients

and developing lasting relationships compared to online efforts from the start.

5.4 The Internet age – a threat or opportunity to trade shows?

The Internet and along with it growing interest in timesaving digital solutions has had an effect on trade show participation. New online trade shows have evolved where brands can present their collections without having to physically be standing at a trade show. Potential buyers or media can browse the collection in an online portal amongst other brands. A fee is naturally charged when exhibiting online but low compared to the costs of physically going to a trade show. Many examples, in addition to the following excerpt, evolved from the interviews.

“Trade shows have been in a turning point during the recent years. How the Internet has rolled over with possibilities to present in online showrooms instead of trade shows, to which brands use more resources for rather than physically going to trade shows anymore. Online showrooms offer whole sale platforms, for instance Brand Boom, which is the biggest US company, where you can sell your collection.”

There are also a lot of mobile applications that work the same way with having a virtual showroom where you can directly buy. Participating in a trade show is a big effort in terms of budget for a microenterprise, especially in the beginning when the return on investment is negative. This makes alternate, less expensive options for presenting the brand tempting. However, it still seems online show rooms are mostly used as a complementing channel, which generates information such as reports on who has viewed the brand and if orders are received through them, they tend to usually be one-time deals. The general consensus was that this is, at most, just a complementary channel for trade shows and cannot replace them completely as can be seen from the following quote.

“The role of trade shows really is a bit tricky now. You have to have human interaction, you know in all those online trade shows that are

coming.”

However, everyone still felt that the Internet will, one way or another, change the system, which is demonstrated in the following quote.

“Looking at the grand scheme of things, it is easier to buy online, if everything is turning this way, trade shows are also going the same way. People will try to save time and effort.”

Many fashion entrepreneurs felt that online will not be any kind of threat to the fashion trade shows industry. “With no prior contact with the brand, rarely someone makes the order without any interaction be it face-to-face or email. Online showrooms are nothing major because with clothes people want to see them, touch them so it can never completely replace trade shows.”

“The Internet has changed the way of doing business, we just have to send an email to old customers with our new collection and that’s it. Of course it can depend on the products, if it’s something you don’t have to sell too much, it’s pretty easy when the response you get is just an order so it’s pretty cost-effective. Mostly, it’s just communicating with customers online and if there’s a better reason for face-to-face contact, a surprise visit might be made when being somewhere conveniently, we might just pop by but Internet has pretty much replaced that when the product is good enough, you don’t have to sell it so much.”

A respondent who has quit going to trade show offered an interesting, contradicting, viewpoint seen above. This was mainly because trade shows had changed so much compared to what they were in the past, pure selling events. The current form of trade shows was seen as a hangout where buyers come to “drink free beer”. Also, it was found that if the product is good enough, it does not need to be sold so much per se, meaning in this case at trade shows. Thus the Internet in this case has been able to replace trade shows and carry out business without it.

The Internet age is unanimously acknowledged to be affecting to industry. However, the answers reveal that the effect on small companies’ can both be

seen as a potential way of going about it or alternatively having the reverse effect. The latter view on the matter was based on disbelief about a system that would function without face-to-face contact and possibility to touch products.

5.4.1 Trade shows – a disappointing hamster’s wheel

“Trade shows are old-fashioned and the industry is disappointing. It’s like being a hamster running in a wheel because everyone else is. It’s about time digitalization has an effect. Web pages are just as important as brick-and-mortar stores. We are going against the cycle of two per year which is not trade fair suitable and releasing a collection every two months, capsule collections, close collaboration with textile innovation companies, real push towards sustainability and use of bespoke fabrics that no one else is using, don’t have to compete for attention for your manufacturer either.”

The above excerpt clearly indicates that the industry is found to be disappointing by microenterprises in their beginning. Cycles are accelerating because of fashion giants who hold the power to change the existing systems. “Whereas previously stuff was bought a year in advance, like next summer stuff this summer, now it’s going more like big international chains such as H&M and Zara, who produce stuff from idea to store in three weeks. Going more towards selling straight from stock so no pre-orders made anymore in advance.” “Big brands have moved away from trade shows, they used to always be there but now there is a clear decline. They don’t need it any more; it’s just a cost to them, just some form of marketing if anything.” The respondents, who represent small fashion companies, want to see digitalization as a potentially good thing that enables keeping up with the giants. *“The economy is strapped and people have to make buying decisions easier and faster so online will for sure become an opportunity, also for us.”* The response to this from smaller fashion companies is opening their own online stores where end-users and retailers can make their orders online and buy directly from stock or in advance. This is the way to keep up with the speeding cycles in the industry, which has also decreased big company

attendance in trade shows altogether and even resulted in major trade shows going out of business. This evens out the competition a bit and leads to innovation from the smaller companies who are budgetarily constrained compared to bigger competitors. All in all, respondents see a change that requires some sort of action from them but it remains unclear what exactly the answer is to this dilemma. The below excerpt presents one viewpoint of going against the cycle and for instance putting up a web shop to directly sell to both end-customers and buyers. This makes the cyclic role of trade shows transient.

“We have sometimes made collections in the cycle of trade shows but now no longer making a collection for a single event.”

5.4.2 Showrooms – the natural continuum for trade shows?

Complementing trade show efforts or replacing them completely with showrooms is trending. Showrooms are a fresh alternative for presenting the brand. Participation in the trade shows is either stopped completely and replaced with a showroom for the duration of a fashion week or used as a complimentary alternative. Local showrooms running alongside fashion weeks and trade shows, offer a valuable option for many small brands that have already exhibited for several years and established themselves in the industry. Meetings are scheduled to the showroom and potential buyers also captured while they have come to view other brands in the same space. Thus, the selling function is still strongly present but in a more classy way in terms of presenting the brand. The shift to showrooms could be implemented by running a few overlapping seasons and directing customers to showrooms for meetings. There is room for a lot of creativity for small companies enhancing their image, for instance renting a hotel suite or setting up a showroom to a big bus with a bar. This is also a natural continuum for a small company that has already established ground in the industry and is looking to advance in the eyes of their old buyers who's job is also made easier by them not having to go to a huge trade show to look for a brand. This is demonstrated in

the following quote.

“Showrooms are seen as a kind of next step because kind of anyone can go to trade shows. At the trade show, your products are there with so many competitors on the same level where as in the showroom, despite there being other brands, it’s more curated, products on the same level and in same price level and nicer more luxurious experience for buyers.”

What more, showrooms are seen as an even better venue in terms of image. It is easier for brands to build their presence there compared to restrictions at trade shows. It is also more stylistic and luxurious for the buyers who might also experience feeling important when invited to the showroom and catered more personally compared to the hectic trade show environment. This is seen in the following quote.

“When you have already established yourself, it makes sense to present the brand at a showroom. It is all in all a much nicer space, nicer for the customers, signals that we are doing well, more stylistic way of selling.”

There are also alternatives for the typical showrooms where the space is shared with other brands. With a little creativity, the space can be a hotel suite, a bus or other suitable private space that serves the purpose. This can also work as a convenient side event during fashion week and build presence in a more informal and laid back form.

“Many brands, if they are not sure which trade show to attend and they are all expensive, a brand might take a big hotel room or suite and make that their showroom where they invite buyers there. This is one extreme. We’ve used a bus where we can make a showroom at the back. That’s been useful in Berlin alongside the trade shows, directing people from the trade show to the bus with bar and drinks as a kind of lounge and extra that we are remembered for.”

It must however be noticed that trade shows still serve the purpose of finding inspiration for buyers, bloggers and other relevant audience. Respondents

expressed that they are still aware of this and that isolating oneself at a showroom might result in missing out on a nice media placement or style blog. These are however decisions that fashion entrepreneurs have to make in the scope of their budget and other limitations.

“Showrooms would be nicer if I was a buyer so I wouldn't have to go to a location to look for something when again, there's the, if you're a buyer and looking for something new, inspiring, it might not be at the showroom, then there's just the selected, specific what others also come and buy. If you want to find something new.”

As can be seen above, the viewpoint of respondents about the natural continuum for trade shows was dominantly showrooms. The opportunity to make the experience nicer for buyers as well as indicate the brand is ready to take the next step are seen good in terms of image building because it signals success.

5.4.3 Trade shows – replaceable or not?

Most of the respondents did not see the trade shows being completely replaceable but some did. The majority found that “the marketing budget should have some proportion for physical trade shows but how much that is the question.” At the end, it is all about the products being sold and it is hard to sell without letting the buyer actually touch and try them out. Respondents found that it is crucial for buyers to see what they are buying. In the following excerpt, the integral importance of fine materials is seen as such a big part of the brand that it cannot be shifted online.

“Technology does not affect us. Materials are such an important part of the product that it cannot be presented the same way in images.”

Like already mentioned, trade shows might be the only potential source for finding new buyers so it is hard to eliminate this channel completely before establishing a solid customer base. Then there are trade shows that are important

just for an image purpose of just being there. *“Many brands do still praise many trade shows like those in Paris and Berlin, which still run full on.”* Also, in terms of seeing other brands and spotting the coming trends, trade shows still serve the purpose for buyers, which means it is also relevant for small companies to be there.

“It was too big of a useless unnecessary expense for us, which can also be because of the trade show but I’ve heard a lot a like from other fashion trade shows that proves the same. It seems to be more partying nowadays when going.”

Interestingly, a respondent who has fully quit going to trade shows identifies the main reason to be the changed role of the event. This is the specific reason why trade shows were left in the past and room was given for the Internet to better cater serving the clients. As the direct selling function has vanished, it is now more of a social event where a well-established brand with a solid customer base does not feel they belong anymore. However, this respondent still highlights how for a small brand it still is a recommendable channel for growth.

“Back then, when we started in the 80s, it was more fruitful with the different buying culture at trade shows and people really came there to buy new things, whereas nowadays buyers just walk around and hope that they get a free beer from somewhere and leave and then you have to go to them and sell the product again. It’s become more of a social, hangout. But of course, for a starting brand, it’s very important that a buyer finds out about them when with email it’s pretty hard to be noticed and the presentation has to be done pretty well to be the basis for buyers to buy from you.”

Local agents have also evolved as being a natural continuum for having attended several trade shows in the past years. However, many respondents still feel that this is the biggest risk in working with an agent because of what might happen to the brand identity when your are not there to closely monitor it yourself. Strict agreements have been the key in preventing this from happening. Also, it still allows brand-client relationships, which are a key component of brand identity

(Coleman et al. 2011). Distributors, on the other hand, take care of everything and the brand ends up having them as the one customer that they are selling to and completely lose touch of the end-user. These alternatives also split opinions among respondents as seen from the following quotes. This was mentioned here to form background for the later discussion about why trade show attendance is decreasing and what better alternatives small companies are looking and going for.

“Most of the people have been hurt by agents and distributors and that’s why trade shows are still on, otherwise it would’ve been easy to just set up different show rooms and distributors here and there in different countries and you have a network while you sit here. But this is not like that. Distributor is even worse. Distribution means you are giving your baby away. Giving your brand to someone, you have no clue who their client is. Meaning the distributor is taking care of that country, their clients and selling to them under certain image you don’t control. So you have to have a very tight contract and strong trust on them because they are handling your brand for that country and you can’t do anything about it. If we work with either, we have to be very very careful that they are delivering the right message and have the right clients. Benefit of having one account versus hundreds of accounts.”

5.4.4 Underground events, PR stunts and pop-up shops – the new way to go?

A very interesting alternative arose from the interview about alternatives for brand image building than what trade shows offer. It was rather suggested that with underground or PR events it is possible to really concentrate in the target customers and get a better outcome matching the brand identity and image formed. Setting up own retail locations, pop-up shops or web shops have become commonplace for small fashion companies and allows communicating the brand and the brand message exactly like seen fit. “The Internet has certainly had an effect on trade show attendance. Nowadays, more and more purchases are made outside of trade shows and the event is just for stopping by.” When buyers and end-users are able to purchase online straight from stock, it gives

companies better control and new ways to surprise the customers such as packaging. The following responses present a variety of alternatives that small companies are already going about for marketing purposes other than trade shows.

“Trade shows are not the way to go, when trying to build image by how fancy stand you have compared to building image thorough underground events, through PR events really concentrating in target customers, money better in use this way than these huge platforms where you don’t know who is and where.”

The respondent here found that trade shows do not actually give a realistic image of the company. This is because it is so easy to manipulate the image by getting a good sponsor and building a fancy booth. Also, the fact how hard it is to measure success of trade shows efforts was found to be frustrating compared to more targeted events.

“By doing it ourselves, we are securing the message. This goes from the furniture, the entire store, the scent, the noise, you have all the senses that you are being exposed for when coming into the store. Of course, also the sales people, who will be generating information as much as the valued customer need.”

Another alternative, brought up above, was to have full control of the brand in a combination shop-showroom. The possibility to control all the aspects of the brand was found intriguing. Being able to communicate the brand identity through all the senses in a controlled environment was seen as an optimal selling context. This also signals, how important it is for fashion entrepreneurs to generate the right image to the audience through carefully planned out efforts.

It really has a big effect how easy it is for people and our buyers to refill more stuff as easily as possible if they run out. They see what is in stock and so that’s important making everything as easy as possible. Our site is updated at least four times a year and it is under continuous construction so that our online shop becomes more and more intuitive and the buying transaction is super easy.”

Putting up a web shop, like the above quote suggests, is another way of controlling the whole brand experience. Here, it is done online and completely by the company's own efforts. The advantage here is to make it more and more intuitive and easy for the customer, both end-users and buyers. There they are able to directly purchase and restock, which has a huge potential for convenient automation for a small company.

“Then alongside trade shows also, we sell a lot to the end customers ourselves nowadays, more than before. So that of course we have to take into account. So we do marketing such as, in Oulu we just had a pop-up store, arrange here at the shop nights for friends, we go to Tampere and do stuff, we just opened the web shop so how all that goes and how to do the marketing there. There's a lot of work thinking about that constantly and then when you have to think about it daily, the big picture, in a creative way, if this doesn't work like this worked before, like when collecting retailer from trade shows and if nowadays people have a strapped wallet, how you get them and how the whole thing works. It's really challenging, will you pack the collection at the back of your car and start driving around Sweden selling it. It's interesting looking at where online shop sales, what competitive advantage shows up, is it like, you know how it is packaged, is there a message in it, or some small extra thing, does it arrive with a messenger and all those little things are interesting.”

Finally, pop-up events came up as an alternative as small fashion companies at some point start selling to end-users themselves. This respondent had recently put up a web shop and started to sell through that as well as engage end-users through pop-up events. This suggests that marketing efforts have a lot of room for creativity. Also, when selling through the company's own web shop it was noted that there are endless possibilities to make the brand experience memorable for the customer.

5.4.5 Social media – a new potential channel for buyers

The size of the physical trade shows has started to bother exhibitors who feel that organizers have become greedy at the expense of them. Buyers are frustrated for having to run around a huge space and look for the brands they want to visit. It used to be more compact before and this is the direction that exhibitors wish but for some reason it has gone to the complete opposite direction. This at some point will backfire as trade shows lose popular brands that have initially been the reason drawing smaller unknown ones. Respondents felt that now both them and buyers are losing and only the trade show organizer is financially benefiting from this. People are looking for more targeted and compact alternatives nowadays and online alternatives in some cases seem to be doing the job better. Social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, are already offering alternatives for buyers to find cool brands compared to going to overcrowded trade shows where they are overwhelmed with the selling. This is naturally also a possibility for small companies to build a presence online and be found through social media channels.

“Somehow people might be blinded by megalomania so that they just collect the cash from the exhibitors and like bigger, bigger, bigger and then crashes when they lose those brands that have been the magnets for other smaller brands in the first place because they don't want to be in the bigger anymore but rather do their own. It's interesting in terms of brand presenting, for us at least it would be nicer to somehow be more humane size. Because then it's more intense and you get more out of it and you get to know your neighbors, compared to it being too big and your like argh, who where what.”

The above quote demonstrates the need for more targeted and controlled events. The focus of trade show organizers seems to be in generating more revenue rather than thinking about the exhibitors and their needs. If the event becomes too big of a mess, the options that the Internet age offers start interesting exhibitors who can additionally create presence online and have the

same chances of being found there.

“It’s nicer to find something or someone in the Internet and Instagram, some cool brands and then just decide that I’ll buy it rather than going to trade shows where they just force the stuff in your face. It’s such a big monetary effort as well for a small shop owner to go there physically, a few months salary for going somewhere to central Europe to a trade show.”

This buyer’s perspective above, further supports the possibilities that social media has to offer. Trade shows are found to be forcing selling from the buyer’s point of view and compared to that; social media offers a new fresh alternative. Moreover, this respondent indicated that even buyers from big department stores have started utilizing social media for buying and as a tool for analyzing consumer interests. This respondent found that trade shows can easily be eliminated from the picture and filled with more contemporary alternatives. The following quote justifies this claim.

“The whole industry is at a turning point, it’s hard to know where it’s going or at least for me as a shop keeper, it’s cooler to find the companies by chance and be like wow that is cool, what is that and find out what it is and buy that way rather than a company gets a crazy investor and makes a collection and goes to trade shows to sell it with crazy efforts. It’s kind of forced and it’s cooler to, or least I think in the future when you look at for instance Stockmann, where there’s new buyers now that I know, they also pay attention to what is being said online and if they find something on Instagram, they buy based on that to Stockmann, which is a big house. It’s just, the Internet is so strongly involved, it’s where people make up their minds about stuff and share them”

The above quotes point out that the whole industry is in a turning point. New ways of exposing the brand are requested by the small companies and new ways of buying are already being implemented in the buyers end, even in big departments stores. Trade shows have to become more focused for exhibitors and buyers or they will escape to more targeted mediums.

6 DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The activities performed at trade shows, in line with the brand identity dimensions, highly support the perception about trade shows being a suitable context for enhancing brand identity. In the case of fashion microenterprises, common objectives for attending and activities performed will be mirrored against important brand identity dimensions to better understand this instance. Also, an understanding of why respondents have reduced trade show attendance will be considered by mirroring it against changes in the industry and the future outlook of trade shows.

6.1 Merchandising at the core of successful sales

Selling, one of the main objectives for fashion microenterprises attending trade shows corresponds directly to the product aspect of brand identity highlighted by Aaker (1996). The selection of products displayed at the trade show is carefully thought out to best represent the brand and catch the eye of buyers who come to trade shows to spot new trends. The product attributes are communicated to buyers, press, media and other people showing interest in the brand, making trade shows a valuable opportunity for small companies with internationalization plans. Trade shows are such a hectic and unpredictable space that merchandising plays a key role in making the products stand out and communicate the right image of the brand. Generating and leaving the right impression is considered to be in a key role. This is why the exhibitors themselves build everything from shelves to decorations to communicate the right image. Different layers provide food for their eyes at different times when standing at the booth. Disseminating product information at the trade show corresponds to highlighting the quality and other attributes of the products, which is considered a key factor in the product dimension of brand identity (Aaker, 1996). Quality is something that cannot be perceived online the same way as it is physically. Many

small brands consider themselves a complete opposite to giants such as H&M mostly in terms of quality. It is easy to buy cheap stuff just by browsing online but when fine materials and aesthetics are in question, trade shows offer a valuable space for enhancing brand identity through the products themselves. Buyers can touch the materials and try the products on. This generates trust, which is considered to reduce risk and lower uncertainty (Bengtsson and Servais, 2005) in the buying situation.

6.2 Stories can be a game changer

The organization of a brand forms a big proportion of brand identity and is formed of its people, culture and values of the company (Aaker, 1996). Trade show activities corresponding to this aspect are various. Storytelling has been recognized as a key selling point for small brands, and buyers are willing to hear what there is to know behind the brand. Telling the story and sharing company values, such as sustainability, directly enhances the brand in the eyes of buyers. Other actions such as replacing brochures with virtual PDF catalogues impact the credibility and image of a company as being environmentally conscious, which is currently trending (Han And Verma, 2014). What was interesting was a hint of a new trend in storytelling shifting from its basic form to include stories of manufacturers and their ways of doing. Through open communication, trade shows offer a possibility for fashion microenterprises to tell their story while buyers are browsing through the products. Communicating the story and origin of the brand might well make the brand memorable for the buyer who will then write their order after the trade show. It was suggested that storytelling is actually the next big thing as it differentiates quality brands from mass products. If a media representative happens to like the story of a small brand, it can potentially lead to exponential growth after they include the brand in a story. A famous blogger might for instance make an unknown brand wanted by everyone in an instant. This is why trade shows are valuable for small companies in exposing their young brand

to an audience like this.

6.3 Attitude can change the perception of the brand

Gaining market knowledge through discrete competitor assessment makes trade shows a valuable observation point for small companies and sparks inspiration and drive for quality. Since a big part of organization is its people, it makes a huge impact how the people representing the brand at the trade show perform and behave. Sometimes the brand is highly personified around one person, the designer, so the effect is even stronger in this case. It is expected that the designer is there to tell the story and answer more specific questions and be accompanied by a sales person to build credibility. When participating in a professional community, gestures and body language make a huge difference. It matters whether the representative is standing or sitting down, whereas standing up is more inviting and attention grabbing. It is very important that the sales people can channel the brand in the hectic environment. This is obtained for instance through dressing up accordingly and looking like the brand, communicating that one is part of the brand. This enhances brand identity directly through the people of the company and further on positive feedback increases employee morale; an important objective for attending trade shows in the first place. This enhances brand identity directly through the people of the company who with their actions are open for building client relationships, which is considered the bottom line in brand identity (Aaker, 1996).

6.4 The importance of face-to-face cannot be underestimated

The brand-as-person aspect of brand identity turned out extremely important in brand identity palette (Coleman et al., 2011). In terms of technological advancements and digitalization having an effect on trade shows, this is the

hardest, or maybe even impossible, to replicate with online efforts. Activities such as networking, meeting new buyers and media representatives require face-to-face contact even for three seasons in a row. Business-to-business buyers require getting to know the people personally who they are buying from. Some brands are personified so strongly that it is even expected that the designer be there. The brand personality is enhanced at trade shows when humor and other informal tactics can be used to communicate the brand. Since trade shows mark a half yearly meeting point for brands and buyers, the importance of bringing the brand world to life for a few days is important. The brand-client relationship builds over years and develops based in these exact encounters whether or not the actual order is placed at the spot. Thus, the face-to-face encounters at trade shows build and nourish brand-customer relationships and communicate brand personality for the companies' advantage.

6.5 Visual efforts communicating the brand world

The trade show activities corresponding to the symbolic aspect of brand identity strongly relate to visual efforts. Prior to the trade show, a tremendous amount of effort is put into designing, building and preparing the trade show booth. This activity is really important because this is the chance to communicate the brand world to the trade show audience. Hearts and souls are poured into fancy campaign books, business cards, press releases, furniture, posters, and quality images to meet and exceed the expectations of visitors. In these efforts lies a chance for small companies to look bigger than they really are and make an impression on buyers and draw the attention media, directly enhancing the visual identity of the brand. Kerin and Cron (1987) have noted that exhibitors often employ eye-catching signage and lively demonstration to compete with rivals in attracting visitors to the booth. This was actually identified by respondents as well and it sparked annoyance how some bigger, more established brands might come and take away attention with exaggerated spectacles. This kind of turns

against the trade shows because smaller companies do not necessarily feel so comfortable especially if placed next to this kind of grandiloquent competitor.

6.6 Trade shows in flux

According to recent literature, even technology does not change the trade show's core function (Chiou, Hsieh and Shen, 2007). This has proved to be true in this study where fashion entrepreneurs still consider trade shows a valuable event when striving for international business opportunities. As the core functions on trade shows remains to be promotion and selling, even though orders are mostly placed after the event, it is crucial for small fashion companies to attend from the beginning of the company's life cycle despite being a remarkable budgetary effort. Anyhow, trade shows are considered the best way to reach an audience as big as possible and based on respondents' intuition measured up to the money's worth. Only a few respondents noted that after many years, trade shows still remain the main channel where new business stems from and image is maintained.

Trade shows allow highlighting parts of the brand that could not be imitated online such as touching the products and feeling the fine materials or the face-to-face interaction that enhances brand-customer relationships and builds trust from the start. This image creation is important for a small fashion company in the beginning to gain credibility in the tough industry where it is hard to get seen and noticed in the first place. In terms of brand identity, organization and people are hardest for competitors to copy (Aaker, 1996). Thus trade shows offer a great possibility for differentiation and competitive advantage for a company in the beginning of their life cycle trying to close the first sales through brand personality.

In many cases, even when the company has moved on in their life cycle, trade shows remain an important phase in the existing customers' buying process because that is usually the half yearly meeting point. However, it is important for companies to be able to identify their own standing and needs and find the right balance between trade shows and other marketing efforts that benefit the brand

as well as their buyers in the long run. Right now it still seems that trade show attendance decisions are made based on intuition and a more systematic approach would be needed, especially in the case of small companies with a limited budget. Many companies recognize the need for numeric goals but still seem to be lacking them.

Despite provably being an optimal platform for brand identity enhancement, especially through face-to-face interaction, trade shows are losing their share to new forms of channels driving the same outcome. The Internet and technology are playing a big role in how the industry is shaping into a faster and more unpredictable system. Small fashion companies are forced into out-of-the-box thinking while bigger companies are making their moves in this strapped economy. The new business environment has forced people to make buying decisions faster, which have an indirect role on smaller companies if the bigger companies abandon trade shows. There is already indication towards a snowball effect that bigger, more established fashion companies are leaving with the motive to cater buyers even faster and are turning to online solutions to do so. It was noted by a respondent that one major trade show, which used to be their yearly go-to trade show just went out of business due to the reason stated above. If technology enables big companies to accelerate their cycles and sell straight from stock without going to trade shows, it is vital for smaller companies to respond to this creatively and rethink their strategy to enable themselves to be found in the first place. This calls for renewing the trade show concept to be more targeted and focused.

6.6.1 Show rooms – the natural next step from trade shows?

After a few seasons, there is a possibility to present at showrooms, operating side by side with trade shows during fashion week, and invite the existing customer base there. Thus, the valuable opportunity for buyers to touch the products and try them out physically remains, as well as the personal interaction that many

buyers are still looking for when making big orders. This serves the brand image as well, as the space can be customized even more personally compared to the ready set trade show booths. The brand is presented amongst similar brands and works as an opportunity to gain new customers visiting another brand in the same space. In terms of image, the showroom also communicates a more luxurious feel for the customer and this enhances brand identity.

Referring to Han and Verma (2014), trade shows are to become more focused to better serve the companies as well as the brands. However, the direction seems to be going to the exact opposite, which is frustrating according to respondents. They really hope for trade shows to become more comfortable and focused but see greed as an unfortunate reason for expanding onwards. This is a very potential improvement suggestion for trade show organizers, as it seems that such is still missing. Relating to the same matter, it was also noted that more attention should be paid in brand placement in the exhibit space. This is something that small companies cannot control so there is a growing interest in shifting to showrooms where the image is more controllable in the space with other brands that are known about in advance and it is more planned out. So, also arrangements should be made with more effort and time so that it satisfies the companies putting huge monetary effort into being part of the trade show.

6.6.2 From frustration to innovation

Trade shows in general were perceived as a disappointing expenditure to which small companies do not have a choice but attend. The impression received from respondents hinted that new alternatives would be more than welcome in this digitalized world and the industry could certainly use renewing itself. New timesaving solutions have made it easier and faster to sell products but this seems to mostly benefit established companies who can decide to skip trade shows without losing their credibility or customers. There is a clear decline in attendance and reasons behind that varied from technological advancements to changes in

the trade shows environment becoming too big and unfocused. It is more about the position of the company in its lifecycle and taking next steps accordingly. Consequently, for bigger established companies trade shows are considered more of a cost than what it is worth when they already hold a solid customer base and presence.

What was most interesting was the boldness of smaller brands that see this turbulent environment as an opportunity to show creativity in communicating brand identity without the help of expensive trade shows. PR and underground events can be used to communicate brand identity to an even bigger extent than at a trade show and was seen to have a bigger impact per se. Moreover, small companies can even go against the cycle and promote sustainability through collaborations with textile innovation companies, do collective stories with them, bypass trade shows and still reach buyers and gain exposure. Setting up own web shops, pop-up stores and building a solid online presence can at some point override the benefits gained from trade shows. Pop-up stores, referring to temporary retail establishments (Pitta et al, 2006), are a good example of how in the broadened view of trade shows sees them as a part of rather than an appendage of the total marketing efforts (Bonoma, 1983).

6.6.3 Online trade shows

Online trade shows are trending but the general consensus did not support the idea of them replacing physical trade shows. Moreover, the socializing at trade shows is not replaceable with online efforts because no face-to-face interaction is involved. At trade shows, it is people talking to people and cues such as humor and non-verbal communication can be used. The brand-client relationships evolve and are nurtured by meeting the same people around the world at major trade shows where showing up is already considered a sign of success from the brand. However, as small fashion companies manage to establish themselves in the industry, usually within a few years, the direction seems to be towards regular

showrooms. Like earlier mentioned, the customers gained from exhibiting move with the brand to a new space that allows better catering their needs. Also as a space, it is nicer for customers and signals that the brand is doing well. There the physical proximity between the people and the products remains. Small companies see this as an opportunity also for themselves to jump out of this disappointing hamster's wheel, which is what trade shows feel like to them.

6.6.4 Social media

The Internet age, technological advancements and social media have impacted the way small companies can present themselves to buyers and also how buyers can make their buying decisions. Social media is one of the future trends that is seen to offer companies alternative channels for communication beyond traditional methods (Han and Verma, 2014). Even big department stores are known to be making decision based on social networks such as Instagram. This brings small companies the alternative to set up their own web shop and cater to them as well as end-users directly. Also, when building an online presence in social media, it gives control of brand identity and the whole experience of the buyer. Visuals can be polished to match the brand world, which was found to be a valid and credible factor in making a purchase decision by a buyer interviewed. For the trade show concept, there lies potential in matching this current experience with technological advancements through for instance better utilizing social media in building a more solid experience for attendants and visitors.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter aims to conclude the research by giving an overview of the study. First, a brief research summary is presented along with the main findings. Next, managerial implications are suggested on improving the trade show concept. Finally, limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

7.1 Research summary and main findings

In predominant literature, trade shows are perceived as a popular medium for promoting and selling products and services. This study supports the notion that trade shows provide an optimal environment for enhancing all dimensions of brand identity, contributing to a small fashion company in making sales and finding new clients. However, the effect of digitalization and technological advancements is inevitable, which has resulted in accelerating cycles leading to new forms of selling and promotion in the industry. The effect is trickling down to fashion microenterprises as a result from the moves made by bigger companies.

For small, starting companies, trade shows remain a crucial hub for making them known through face-to-face interaction and the physical proximity of the products for the audience. It is the social aspect of the event that seems to keep attendants and visitors coming back and enables credibility and trust to be formed over time. Strong personification of a small brand and that person being present, contributes to participants being able to enter the world of the brand in this limited time and space. The research findings suggest that the multiple activities such as careful merchandising conducted by exhibitors at trade shows enable brand identity to be enhanced from all angles.

Striving towards internationalization, trade shows remain a crucial stepping-stone for small fashion companies. As the company develops and gains ground, also the need for trade shows weakens, as brand identity can be built and nourished in better, more innovative ways. The small companies that have already

established themselves to a decent extent have started to move away from trade shows, replacing them with alternatives, such as showrooms or underground PR events, that better cater to their image and their customers' needs. Thus, also the supporting role of technology is linked to the company's life cycle phase and in a way steps in when the time is ripe. Currently, many of the respondents have already opened their own web shops where they are selling directly to buyers and end-users.

Interestingly, social media has become an important channel to reach buyers in this modern age where social networks are a sufficient enough basis even for buyers in big departments store. These are all signs of the weakening role of traditional trade shows and calls for renewing the concept. Building a social media presence is far less than the monetary effort placed on attending trade shows. This is a tempting option for entrepreneurs with a limited budget. Furthermore, it is also more fascinating for the buyer to run into an interesting brand online and do research about it and even purchase it based on that.

Most importantly, the study proved that there is a lot of underlying frustrations amongst trade show participants that can be utilized to improve the concept. Issues such as too little communication from the organizers, disappointing brand positioning at the venue, restrictions in decorating the booth and most of all expansion causing brands to get lost in a huge mess. Next, managerial implications are presented, both for fashion entrepreneurs and trade show organizers.

7.2 Managerial implications for fashion entrepreneurs

Previous studies have shown and highlighted the importance of brand identity both for big and small companies as a major source of differentiation and competitive advantage. The trade show environment is a platform where all the dimensions of brand identity are present and enhanced through trade show activities. Trade shows offer a context where, if carefully planned out, brand

identity enhancement can improve business opportunities for entrepreneurs. For fashion entrepreneurs, the beginning requires consistency and this is something that can only be acquired through time and will. Buyers are always looking for continuum and showing up once will not benefit a small company in the long run because buyers will forget you. Products and styles change seasonally so buyers will want to see whether the same theme continues that first caught their attention or was it just a “one-season-wonder”. Relationships evolve over time and depend heavily on effort placed by the brand so even though a good connection is established with a buyer during the first trade show, it will most likely not lead to a business relationship unless nurtured for another few trade shows. Through time, it becomes easier facilitating the brand image through solid experience built over years, which was noted as one of the major competitive advantages by respondents.

As noted in literature, brand identity exists only on the sender’s side. It is the brand image that is the final perception of the brand and everything else in between are just wasted messages (Wheeler, 2003). This is why it is important for a company to know what it is that they want to be and strive to match the image perceived. All dimensions of brand identity are exposed at the trade show and provide an opportunity to affect the perception of the audience and drive growth. The success depends heavily on efforts placed long before the trade show. Careful planning and preparation is a prerequisite for successfully bringing out the brand in front of a large audience. When materials, decorations, visuals and processes are in place, the valuable opportunity for social encounters can be maximally utilized, which is one of the most important reasons for attending. Interviews with exhibitors revealed that trade shows are ultimately the place for meeting people and selling. At trade shows, it is possible to enhance the aspects of the brand, which is hardest for competitors to copy. Some brands are strongly personified around one person, usually the designer, so having that person there enhances brand identity and offers competitive advantage for the company. However, this study suggests that there is a lack of measurement systems in place after the trade show and success is measured more on an intuitive level.

Trade shows are an important hub for gaining market knowledge through face-to-face interaction and observation. Attending trade shows allows chatting with other brands and buyers as well as identifying new trends. It gives a small company a sense of where they are positioned in the competition and helps to better design their own product scope. Many times it also offers peace of mind when realizing that it is not exactly easier for anyone else, thus improving the team's common motivation. Presenting the collection through a personalized stand, communicates the values of the company, thus enhancing the organizational aspect of the brand. For example, decisions such as virtual PDF's instead of brochures signal environmental consciousness from the brand, which touches the buyers that are looking for exactly this type of actions from brands they buy. Casual chitchat at the stand allows instant feedback and insights otherwise not accessible. A buyer might for instance react excitedly about a product but not include it in their order. This non-verbal feedback is valuable information for the designer in terms of what has been the eye-catcher of the collection and what the next season will look like. Allowing the buyers and media representatives to touch and feel the products and telling them the story behind the brand, has a huge impact on what their perception becomes. Trade shows are found to be an extremely valuable platform, exactly because of this opportunity for face-to-face interaction. Visual efforts and decorations at the stand give small brands an important opportunity to leave an impression that they are bigger than they actually are. The symbolic dimension of the brand is thus fortified in the eyes of the viewers and has major business potential for small companies setting up their brand for display for a few days in front of a huge audience.

Consistency

In order for the ultimate goal of making sales to happen, consistency is key for small fashion companies. Exhibiting once at a trade show will not leave the impression to buyers or media that a company is there to stay. Moreover, since the industry is extremely hectic and unpredictable, even companies themselves do

not know what the next year will be like for them and what will happen. Buyers are looking to see whether you can make it three times in a row and also want to make sure that there is consistency between the collections presented. They want to know exactly what they are buying when they finally make the buying decision. It is important to give the right impression and develop the relationship through careful consideration of how the brand is communicated during these years.

Brand identity enhancement

Trade shows are an excellent opportunity for small companies to consciously think about what it is they want the brand to be and communicate it to the audience accordingly. The platform that trade shows provide is comparable to a three-day brick-and-mortar store where the company can present the brand exactly how they best see fit. The product scope can be introduced, organizational aspects highlighted, personal brand-client relationships nurtured and symbolic aspects of the brand brought forth through visual efforts. Through face-to-face interaction, significant competitive advantage can be gained and the organizational aspect of the brand highlighted. When comparing trade shows to new kinds of channels introduced by technology, they still hold a dimension that cannot be replicated online. Face-to-face communication and physical proximity with the products are still considerable advantages of physical trade shows that especially small companies should utilize.

Creativity

When a steady customer base is already established and trade shows no longer generate sales or new clients, it is useful to look at new alternatives and stop wasting money on something that does not serve the goals set. Showrooms give more curating possibilities, are more luxurious for the buyers and make it possible to take the business to the next level. If there is not enough budget for trade shows in the first place, organizing events and PR stunts offer a good way to

stand out and communicate the brand identity. Building presence online, opening a pop-up shop or own web shop are all ways to answer creatively to the accelerating industry where speed is an advantage.

Build online presence

Even though technology might in some ways seem repelling, it is important to balance old and new ways of doing to better meet the needs of old and new customers. If buyers are shifting to purchase online, it is advisable to build a social presence. Also, if the trend to purchasing online grows, small companies have to respond to this by being available through their own web shop or other form of online presence such as a virtual showroom. Basic social presence is not a tremendous monetary effort and can lead to even a big buyer from a department store making their purchase decision based on that.

7.3 Managerial implications for trade show organizers

The goal of this study was to contribute best practices in brand identity enhancement activities to fashion microenterprises exhibiting in international trade shows but also make improvement suggestions to trade show organizers for renewing the concept.

The trade show concept is in need of a 'facelift'. Companies both big and small are getting tired of the old form of it and are showing signs of frustration. Big companies are responding to the economic situation, which is forcing faster decision-making, by skipping trade shows. This is because at the end of the day, they just see it as a cost to them. However, smaller companies do not have a choice and they consider trade shows a compulsory event where they have to go to get known. Even though they attend, they feel like "running in a hamster's wheel" with the reward not matching the effort. For some it is too expensive compared to what is gotten out of it.

Others feel that the concept is going to a completely wrong direction, adding more volume, whilst there is a need for more targeted events. Social media is already eating away buyers' budgets as they scan the web for interesting new brands. Trade show organizers should notice the potential in utilizing these new forms of social channels where buyers and brands are shifting. Even though sales and visibility were found to be good benefits of trade shows, it still lacks the "wow" effect that people are looking for. Other forms of presenting a brand, such as showrooms, are a very natural continuum for small brands exactly for this reason. There the environment is more controlled in terms of image communicated to clients. It was noted that for buyers, it is also very frustrating to run around the venue in search of a few brands they have come there for. This brings up the question of how the event could be made to better match the need of the people attending from small companies to buyers to media representatives and others. Now it seems like it is completely lacking structure and exhibitors never knowing where and how they are going to present their brand. The booth location and fixed structures should be better communicated to the small companies in advance who are coming a long way to build their brand image on the spot. All in all, there is a need for better serving the payers of the event or they will most likely jump out of the hamster's wheel as soon as they get the chance.

7.4 Limitations and suggestions for further research

As this study focuses on small Finnish fashion companies in the international market place, it does not have the credibility needed to make generalizations. This is because the Finnish fashion market size is still small and lacks further in-depth research.

It still remains to be seen what will happen to the trade shows in this changing digitalized environment. The results of this study strongly imply that there is shift of attitude towards trade shows already in motion. The question that still remains is that will trade show participation amongst small fashion companies continue to

thrive or will it only be a stepping-stone for reaching the next level of selling outside of trade shows.

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