Investigating Channel Push Branding
The Case of Konftel

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Abstract

The role of branding in building distribution relationships has attained increased attention in the marketing literature lately and several studies have shown that branding is an effective tool for building stronger relationships between manufacturers and their distribution partners. Unfortunately these findings fail to explain how channel push strategies work independently of consumer pull strategies when it comes to building strong manufacturer brands. On one hand, it is asserted that close interaction between brand representatives and distribution channel members is a prerequisite for success, while it on the other hand is asserted that direct communication to end users is just as important. In terms of managerial implications this has often led to vague recommendations in crafting a “perfect blend” between push and pull strategies.

These recommendations constitute a status quo, where marketing managers in manufacturing firms have been placed in between two strategies without clear recommendations on how they work independently of each other. This status quo is a problem in both academic research and managerial practice since distribution channel relationships are seen as an increasingly important source of competitive advantage. As a result, the theoretical foundation of a blended strategy might be reprioritized in advantage for better relationships with distribution channel members, which in effect make push efforts the prioritized channel for manufacturer brand management.

This master thesis gives all its attention to channel push branding and provides essential insights into how a brand is built in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a channel-push strategy. A single case study design is used, investigating a telecom-brand focused solely on a channel push strategy. The investigation concerns the brand identity as well as interviews with distributors, resellers and end-users. The studied brand is analyzed through Aaker’s (2002) conceptualization of consumer based brand equity, consisting of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. Although an equity model is used, the goal is not to assess brand value, rather to investigate how brand equity is built through a strict channel push strategy.

Although this case illustrates both challenges and limitations, I strongly argue against the assertion that strict push strategies are something of the past. The studied brand is filled with relevant associations and functional attributes and has only suffered minor diversities between different intermediaries and regions. However, this case also shows that channel push branding is a complex procedure that requires careful and specific considerations. Main areas which should be considered are; limitations in awareness creation, difficulties in building brand associations, dependence of interpersonal relations and the activity of the end-user-brand relationship. My main contribution with this case study is a rich description of the underlying phenomena which constitute these considerations. Distribution channel relationships are an increasingly important source of competitive advantage, and I believe that this case provides a new perspective on channel push branding, both to practitioners and to researchers.
Acknowledgements

I owe a special thanks to the marketing team at Konftel for making this study possible. I am grateful for their support and interest in my work, and I hope that this study has contributed to their work with the Konftel brand.

I would also like to thank my supervisor Zsuzsanna Vincze, for her encouragement and guidance while writing this thesis. Finally, I would like to thank all interviewees taking time to participate in this study.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Centuries ago craftsmen marked their goods with imprints as a mean to distinguish the goods from one producer from those of another. When livestock became an important resource this imprint were burned into the cattle and the concept of branding was born (Keller 2003:3). Over the years this phenomenon has changed from being simple identification marks to powerful marketing tools affecting decision making and social behavior all around the world (Ossipenko 2008:11). Brands provide several important advantages for both consumers and companies, the main advantage is that brands reduce the buyer’s perceived risk, which enables the seller to offer more expensive products (Parment 2008:253; Kapferer 2004:20; Keller 2003:9). The 1980s marked a turning point for the brand concept when companies realized that a great deal of the company value lied in the minds of consumers, not in their tangible resources (Kapferer 1998:15). Since, brands have become recognized as one of the core strategic assets of a firm (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000:7).

This asset has since the 1900’s been established and conceptualized through the concept of brand equity. Both brand research and managerial practice are today in one way or another concerned with building, managing or measuring brand equity (See, for example, Kapferer 2004; Keller 2003; Aaker 2002). In the literature, two approaches are identified, one is to produce financial measures and assess the brand in monetary terms and one is to understand the brand strength through the consumers (Kapferer 2005:9). The latter approach does provide various aspects of how the brand is perceived by the customers and is thus highly interesting from a brand management perspective (Ossipenko 2008:18). This approach is referred to as consumer based brand equity, and it argues that the power of a brand lies in the minds of the consumers (Keller 2003:59). The most widely acknowledged model for consumer based brand equity is developed by Aaker (2002) (Ossipenko 2008:19; Pappu, Quester & Cooksey 2005:144), and consist of brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty (Aaker 2002:9). This conceptualization provides an understanding about how each dimension underlines brand equity and the building, managing and measuring of brand strength.

Despite the common acknowledgement of brands as a crucial strategic asset in the minds of consumers, there are not until recently research has recognized the importance of branding in business-to-business markets (Mudambi 2002:527; Kotler & Pfoertsch 2007:358; Davis, Golicic & Marquardt 2008:225). This interest in B2B branding has in turn raised questions concerning manufacturer branding and the role of brands in a distribution channel context. For a brand to be successful in a marketplace it is important that the customers know where and how to get hold of the manufacturer’s products. In today’s global and increasingly complex economy these products often reach their customers through distribution channel systems (Gorchels, West & Marien 2004:3; Vinhas, Chatterjee, Dutta, Fein, Lajos, Neslin, Scheer, Ross & Qiong 2010; 284), and as a result these systems have become an increasingly important source of competitive advantage (Neves, Zuurbier & Campomar 2001:518; Gorchels et al. 2004:3). Manufacturers using distribution channel systems are relying on independent downstream intermediaries to sell their products effectively to other channel members and ultimately to the end-users. These intermediaries often represent multiple product lines, and the challenge for manufacturers is
motivating these intermediaries to allocate more resources on behalf of their products relative to competitive products (Hughes & Ahearne 2010:81). As a result, we have seen a significantly increased understanding of distribution channel relations during the last 40 years, with research mainly focused on interaction between channel members and their power, trust and commitment toward each other (Frazier, 1999:226; Chiou, Wu & Chuang 2010:431; Gupta, Melewar & Bourlakis 2010A:396). Brand research focused on the distribution channel has however, until lately, been absent.

The role of branding in building distribution relationships has attained increased attention in the marketing literature lately and several studies have showed that branding is an effective tool for building strong relationships between manufacturers and their distribution channel system (see, for example, Chuang et al. 2010; Hughes & Ahearne 2010; Perment 2008; Glynn, Motion & Brodie 2007; Gorchels et al. 2004; Webster 2000; Frazier, 1999). Strong brands have been proven to secure consistency, viability and profitability within the distribution channel (Perment 2008:260) as well as facilitating trust, loyalty and satisfaction between manufacturers and channel members (Chiou et al. 2010:437; Glynn et al. 2007:406). Additionally a recent study by Hughes and Ahearne (2010:91) establish that resellers’ salespeople identify to varying degrees with manufacturing brands and that their sales effort towards a particular brand increases as their identification with the brand strengthens. Interpersonal relationships are an essential part of branding in business markets, where major communication efforts are done through direct one-to-one communication between business customers and sales representatives (Gupta et al. 2010A:66; Mudambi 2002:527). This interaction provides an opportunity to personify the brand through a human representative and by that influence and strengthen the reseller’s brand preference (Gupta, Melewar & Bourlakis 2010B:401). These findings are also supported by the general brand literature arguing that strong brand relationships emerge when the brand is considered as an organization or a person, rather than a product (Aaker 2002:103). Accordingly the value of a manufacturer’s brand is to a great extent dependent on strong brand relationships within the distribution channel system.

Despite the established importance of strong brand relationships within the distribution channel it is assumed within the brand management literature that a maximized brand value is dependent on communication to end-users. Several authors (see, for example, Chiou et al. 2010:437; Gorchels et al. 2004:17; Perment 2008:262 and Webster 2000:22) argues that a well managed manufacturer brand requires careful coordination between communication programs targeted to end-users and a relationship strategy targeted to distribution channel members. This balance between communication strategy targeted to end-users and relationship strategy targeted to distribution channel members can be conceptualized as a consumer pull- and a channel push strategy. A pure pull strategy enables the manufacturer to devote all resources to motivate brand preference at the user level, while a pure push strategy enables the manufacturer to devote all resources to motivate desirable behavior at the next vertical level of distribution (Frazier 1999:235; Gorchels et al. 2004:17). Hence, the push strategy is focused on support and relationship building with distribution channel members, while the pull strategy is focused on extensive communication efforts to increase end-user awareness and preference.

The concept of push and pull branding and their relationship to each other has lately been investigated by Chiou et al. (2010) who states that an adequate execution of communication
efforts to the end-users significantly improve the reseller’s perceived value of selling the manufacturers brand. This is achieved since an increased awareness and demand from the end-users not only increase resellers’ sales but also their trust and loyalty to the manufacturer and the manufacturer’s brand (Chiou et al. 2010:437, 38). Accordingly, it is important that the manufacturer make use of the end-user pull force in order to facilitate distribution channel relationships and increase their perceived value of selling its products. These findings further establish that strong brand relationships within the distribution channel not only concern branding to distribution channel members, but also branding to end-user markets. On top of this, many intermediaries are representing multiple brands, and thus have a competing relation to several brands in the same product category (Hughes & Ahearne 2010:81). Thus, it is evident that distribution channel branding is a difficult procedure and a great headache for marketing managers in manufacturing firms.

The understanding of how brand managers in manufacturing companies should tackle these problems and build strong brands is, as I previously indicated, stuck to the interplay of consumer pull- and channel push strategies. On one hand, it is asserted that close interaction between brand representatives and distribution channel members is a prerequisite for strong manufacturer brands, while it on the other hand is asserted that direct communication to end-users is just as important. In terms of managerial implications this has often led to vague recommendations in crafting a “perfect blend” between push and pull strategies (see, for example, Chiou et al. 2010; Parment 2008; Webster 2000; Frazier, 1999). I argue that these recommendations constitutes a status quo, where marketing managers in manufacturing firms have been placed in between two strategies without clear recommendations on how their interplay should be tackled in practice. This status quo is a problem in both academic research and managerial practice since distribution channel relationships are seen as an increasingly important source of competitive advantage (Neves et al., 2001:518; Gorchels et al. 2004:3). I would argue that a well managed distribution channel could be so effective that the manufacturer brand spreads beyond their ability to reinforce it with a pull strategy. The potential customer base will simply be too large and widespread to effectively reach through pull efforts. As a result, the theoretical foundation of a blended strategy might be reprioritized in advantage for better relationships with distribution channel members, which in effect make push efforts the prioritized channel for manufacturer brand management.

The concurrent research focus on a blended strategy has resulted in a weak understanding of how the push strategy works independently of the pull strategy when it comes to building strong brands. We know little about how a manufacturer’s brand equity is built, in the minds of distribution channel members and end-users, without the involvement of manufacturer led pull efforts. Manufacturer brands are becoming increasingly important, and it is thus time to separate the concepts of push and pull and learn about them independently from each other. This study will focus on the push perspective of branding and provide a starting point for further advancements in the field of manufacturer brand management. Although focusing on the push strategy this thesis concerns three out of five brand research streams that have been identified by Keller and Lehman (2006), these are “integrating market channels and communications”, “developing brand positioning” and “assessing brand performance”. Accordingly I would argue that the scope of this thesis is broad, concerning several brand research topics, while the context is focused, concerning only the push strategy in manufacturer brand management.
The empirical study will be conducted through a case study in a telecom-company focused solely on a global channel push-strategy. This could be described as an extreme case, i.e. a case with an extreme value on one variable of interest (Gerring 2007:101). The variable of interest is the push strategy, and it is extreme since it is the sole strategy, lacking support from additional pull efforts. With this said I am strongly convinced that this case in reality is more typical than given credit for in the literature, and it is thus important to give voice and attention to these types of companies and their branding strategies. The previously mentioned equity model developed by Aaker (2002) will be used as a theoretical framework in this study. It is a consumer based equity model and consists of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty (Aaker 2002:9). Although an equity model is used, the goal is not to assess brand value, rather to investigate how brand equity is build through a strict channel push strategy. Hence, Aaker’s conceptualization will provide an understanding about how equity is built through the distribution channel, within each brand equity dimension.

1.2 Research Purpose

The purpose of this master thesis is to provide a starting point for the theoretical advancement of channel push branding. A manufacturer’s ability to combine consumer-pull and channel-push efforts is seen as a prerequisite for maximized brand equity. Nonetheless, distribution channels are gaining in importance as competitive advantage and it is therefore crucial to understand branding from a strict channel push perspective. This master thesis will give all its attention to channel push branding and take a first step towards a clarification of the current status quo between push and pull strategies. The research will also provide essential insight for brand managers in manufacturing companies to create stronger brands. The research purpose is achieved by:

1) Investigating how a manufacturer’s brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a strict channel push strategy.

2) Evaluating the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on Aaker’s (2002) consumer based brand equity dimensions.

1.3 Limitation

As described in the background this thesis only concern manufacturer branding from a channel push perspective. This approach, i.e. to investigate the push strategy independently from the pull strategy, is crucial to the purpose of this study. Nonetheless it is important to emphasize that this is a limitation, seen from the perspective of manufacturer branding. If the entire reality of manufacturer branding should be covered, my findings must be viewed in relation to additional research concerning pull strategies. The vast research community interested in communication targeted to consumers (see, for example Journal of consumer research, Journal of advertising research) was the main reason why I wanted to give attention to channel push branding. This literature could however provide a starting point for future research investigating how distributed brands are influenced by pull strategies independently of push strategies. My hope is that this thesis will induce other researchers or students to tackle this challenge and compliment my study.
1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of this thesis can be described through Yin’s (2009) case study process, including planning, designing, preparing, collecting, analyzing and sharing. Seen from this perspective, each stage in the research process is represented by one or two chapters in this research report. Hence, when reading this report, you are also presented to the entire procedure in which this case study was conducted, from the discovery of a problem to conclusions and theoretical contributions. Figure 1.1 illustrates the structure of this report as well as my research process.

Figure 1.1: The research process represented as chapters in this report (Adapted from Yin 2009:1)
2. Research Approach and Methodology

This chapter provides a background of my scientific ideals and the basic methodological premises of this master thesis. I will start by describing the choice of study and how my preconceptions may have influenced the research process. Then, I discuss my research approach and argue for the choice of a qualitative case study. The chapter is concluded by a description of my literature search process.

2.1 Choice of Study

In the first months of 2011 I had the opportunity to be an intern at one of northern Sweden’s biggest advertising agencies. During this internship I worked with several brand consulting assignments where push and pull strategies where a subtle but constantly present factor in discussions concerning brand communication strategies. Although, I have gained good understanding about the interplay between these strategies during my master studies, I did not have the knowledge to fully understand branding from a strict channel-push perspective. As a result, I decided to examine the problem further and evaluate whether it could be an interesting topic for my master thesis.

An evaluation of prior research showed numerous vague recommendations in crafting a “perfect blend” between push and pull efforts, where a manufacturer’s brand equity was asserted to be dependent on the ability to combine consumer-pull and channel-push efforts (see, for example, Chiou et al. 2010; Parment 2008; Webster 2000; Frazier, 1999). This discovery provided a gap in knowledge on how the push strategy works independently of the pull strategy when building a manufacturer brand. Hence, my main motivation behind the choice of study was my aspiration to contribute to the development of knowledge and provide a starting point for the theoretical advancement of channel push branding. Not only to address a gap in the academic research, but also to exert value to organizations and people working with brands in a distribution channel context.

Further investigation into this subject showed that my intention to conduct this study was supported by one of the advertising agencies clients, Konftel, an international telecom-company selling conference phones through a multi distribution channel system. We discussed ideas and intentions with an eventual cooperation, both from my academic perspective and their interests. We decided that this was a suitable opening for a case study within their distribution channel system and I was given free hands to develop and conduct a study concerning several of the company’s distributors, resellers and end-users. The access to Konftel’s customers provided a unique opportunity to conduct an in depth case study and investigate how a manufacturer’s brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a strict channel-push strategy. It is no doubt that this study is beneficial for the involved company since they will gain insight into how their own brand is built. It is however important to mention that Konftel has as much interest in an accurate result as I do, and has thus nothing to gain in influencing the outcome of this study.
2.2 Preconceptions

The choice of subject for this study was largely influenced by my own interest in branding as well as dilemmas I have come across, both at university and in practice, concerning the prioritizing between channel push and consumer pull strategies. I have previously studied some aspects of brand management in various courses within my master’s programme at Umeå School of Business. Consequently my knowledge about branding in general was considerable. I have also studied the interplay between push- and pull strategies during my master studies, although nothing about branding from a strict distribution channel perspective. It is well known within the methodological literature that researchers embrace and interpret various scientific issues differently, dependent on their own background and experiences (Solvang 1991:151). Thus, it is likely that my methodological assumptions as well as my choice of study have been affected by my previous knowledge about branding as well as other experiences. However, instead of being ashamed of these elements of subjectivity, Gummeson (2006:178) argues that it is important to let them out of the closet and use them as assets. This view is also crucial to my interpretive perspective, in which these experiences are seen as natural, as long as I am aware of them and will consider the impact these preconceptions have on the study (Patel & Davidson, 1994:28; Gummeson 2000:20). For this reason I have tried to be as transparent as possible and describe all steps in the research process, both concerning my own mental processes and how they are connected to the methodological choices made throughout the work with this thesis. My ambition is that this report will provide enough information about me, my values and the research process, making it possible to evaluate my findings, not only based on what I have found, but also how and why I have found it.

I make no secret of my generally positive attitude towards brands as a core strategic asset in marketing. This has, as I previously mentioned affected my choice of study, but probably also the way in which the study was conducted. From this perspective it is important to mention that this study has accepted the view of brands as a successful tool in marketing, influenced by empirical and theoretical findings (see, for example, Keller 2003; Kapferer 1998; Aaker 2002), as well as my own marketing beliefs and preconceptions. It is likely that this attitude has affected my interpretation of brand strength during the case study. My awareness of this attitude and its eventual effects on my findings has however sharpened my own reflections during the research process. It is however not only these specific values that has affected this research. More important is my scientific believes in social research and the generation of knowledge. Thus, I will in the next section describe my research approach, both in terms of my scientific ideals and the particular approach used in this thesis.

2.3 Research Approach

My choice of study and research approach is largely influenced by my interpretive view of science and social research. In an historical analysis Stern (2006: 221) describes a semiotic confusion between the brand as a real world entity and the brand as a mental representation. Several renowned institutions are focused on a real world entity where a brand in principle is created simply through the creation of a logo, name or symbol (see, for example, AMA 2011; European Parliament 2008:26). The brand in managerial practice is however often referred to a mental representation, defined in terms of its awareness, reputation and prominence in the marketplace (Keller 2003:3). These different views highlight a central concern in this study.
What is a brand and can it really be observed, measured, or conceptualized? From the perspective of interpretative social research these questions refer to ontological and epistemological matters, whether the studied object is objectively real in the world and if I, as a researcher can generate or discover knowledge about it (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2006:6).

From my interpretative point of view, a brand is not a real world entity possible to objectively capture or measure. I believe that a brand is very much a social construct that exists only in the minds of people that have experienced it. Based upon this standpoint it is important to recognize that human behavior has meaning, which make it hard to examine through the same lenses as nature sciences and the epistemological view of positivism (Bryman & Bell 2005:29). According to these interpretive beliefs one must focus on the meaning that humans give to the environment, not the environment itself (May 2001:14). Instead of striving for hard knowledge about the brand in terms of sales figures and financial measures this thesis aspires to understand the brand as a mental representation, and thus seeking the underlying meaning of the studied brand, based on awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty. It would however be naive to believe that a social construct can be conceptualized by such a simple model as the consumer based brand equity framework used in this study. However, being scientific is largely about reflecting to a particular orientation toward the world, which naturally involves making claims about the subject of study (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2006:6). Seen from this perspective, the brand conceptualization used in this study guides me to be scientific, grounding my approach and interpretation on previous research findings highlighting certain kinds of questions and perspectives that should be considered. Consequently I do not consider the concepts of meaning and structure as contradictive.

The theoretical framework used in this study is provided as guidance in understanding this particular phenomenon, not to be empirically tested or refuted. I have through an inclusive literature review observed a weak understanding of strict channel push branding. Based on this observation I will through an inductive approach address this gap and explore how a manufacturer brand is built in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users through a strict channel push strategy. Consequently, research comes before theory and I seek to generate theoretical propositions about the social construct of branding from my empirical data (May 2001:32). According to my interpretive view I am also, as previously discussed, largely acceptant toward preconceptions, as long as I will consider the impact these preconceptions have on the study (Patel & Davidson, 1994:28). This is of course a vital concern in inductive research since interest has guided my decision even before the research itself is conducted (May 2001:33). It is thus my own preconceptions that have lead me to the observed knowledge gap, not a neutral recording instrument that has scanned the entire field of branding research.

Based on the inductive approach and my ambition to develop the understanding of channel push branding it is clear that I am seeking insights into the general nature of channel push branding. This insight concerns a contemporary set of events through the distribution channel, over which I have no control. What I can do is to observe and explore the nature of these events and develop an increased understanding of branding from this perspective. This is a research situation, in which a case study has a distinct advantage (Yin 1989:18-20), but also a relatively flexible and unstructured approach in which qualitative methods is seen as highly suitable (Aaker, Kumar &
Day 2004:75). The next section will discuss my decision to tackle this research problem through a case study research strategy and a qualitative method.

2.4 Research Design

I have in this master thesis provided an important internal logic in why distribution channel branding should be investigated independently from the manufacturer’s consumer pull efforts. When reflecting upon this gap of knowledge, there are two ways to develop an understanding of channel push branding. One is to study several brands, and the other is to study one brand. Within the limited time that this study is conducted one cannot expect as much insight about one particular brand if I would choose to consider several brands. The central issue should however not be the amount of cases, rather the researcher’s ability to understand and describe the social context of each case. The descriptions should be rich and understandable and allow theory generation in relationship to the social context (Dyer & Wilkins 1991:616). Since only limited theoretical knowledge exists concerning this phenomenon I have chosen to conduct a case study with the ambition to analyze the depth of one particular brand. This focus will allow an in depth understanding about how this brand is built through a strict channel-push strategy and facilitate a more coherent and credible story. This approach is used to gain as much insight into channel push branding as possible (Gerring 2007:7; Yin 1989:20), motivate and illustrate this as an important knowledge gap, and inspire for new ideas addressing this gap (Siggelkow 2007:21). The main purpose with this case study is thus to advance in knowledge and take a first step towards a clarification of the current status quo between channel push and consumer pull branding.

In doing this I have been fortunate to find a company focused solely on branding through the distribution channel. This could be described as an extreme case, i.e. a case with an extreme value on one variable of interest (Gerring 2007:101). The variable of interest is the push strategy, and it is extreme since it is the sole strategy, lacking support from pull efforts. As a result, this case provides a great opportunity to investigate the push strategy independently from the pull strategy and thus draw inferences about what impact the push strategy has on the studied brand. As a result, the choice of case is not in any way selected randomly. It is selected because it is special in the sense of allowing me to gain insights that other brands would not be able to provide (Siggelkow 2007:20). With this said I am strongly convinced that this case in reality is more typical than given credit for in the literature, and it is thus not entirely fair to call it an extreme case. An important function of this case is thus to illustrate and give attention to a strict channel push branding strategy. Dyer & Wilkins (1991:617) argues that great cases are good stories, not merely clear statements of a construct. Good stories act as clear examples of new phenomena that current theory and theoretical perspectives have not captured. A focus on one brand allows me to describe a rich story that demonstrates the knowledge gap as well as the theoretical advancements developed in this study.

A case study should however not be defined by a distinctive method of data collection (Gerring 2007:11; May 2001:173). As I previously has discussed I believe that a brand is a social construct that exists only in the minds of people that have experienced it. Based upon this standpoint it is evident that this study will explore and interpret reality through an examination of people’s experiences. Such studies are not possible to conduct through quantitative measures and I am thus taking a qualitative research approach in this study (Holme & Solvang 1997:76; Patel
The qualitative approach is also justified through the limited theoretical knowledge within the field of channel push branding (Creswell 2003:75; Patel & Davidsson, 2003:12). Although I am using a conceptual framework grounded in previous research I have no guarantees that my framework will include all important issues raised in my observations. As a result this study requires a certain amount of exploration in capturing information, which calls for the use of a qualitative research design. Interviews are one of the most important sources of case study information (Yin 2009:106) and a widely used method to generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences (Silverman 1995:91). Hence, interviews are an appropriate tool to understand the brand as a social construct. The aim with these interviews is to provide a mix of structure and flexibility. Participants should be able to express themselves in their own words and raise important issues not contained in the schedule, while a certain amount of structure facilitates my interpretation and analysis through the dimensions of awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty. In addition to interviews documentation is often a relevant source of case study information (Yin 2009:101). Documentation from Konftel is used to investigate the brand identity, which serves as the starting point for my investigation in how the brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users. Further information about the case study is provided in chapter four.

2.5 Literature Search

The choice of study is, as I previously discussed, a result of my curiosity in branding from a channel-push perspective. At an early stage I decided to examine this area and evaluate whether it could be an interesting topic for my master thesis. This was initially done through a broad literature scan, where I found numerous studies concerning the interplay between push and pull strategies. Studies focusing on channel push branding were however harder to find, and as a result I decided to carry out a more detailed literature review addressing this gap in knowledge.

The initial broad literature scan provided me with adequate knowledge to develop a specific research problem and discuss the fundamental purpose of this thesis. This purpose led me to a detailed literature review focused on scientific articles in the fields of distribution channel branding, business to business branding as well as channel push and consumer pull strategies. My ambition was to review important findings in manufacturer branding and argue why it is important to investigate how the push strategy works independently of the pull strategy when building a manufacturer brand. This literature search was foremost done through the Business Source Premiere database, which I had access to via Umeå University’s Library. I focused on peer reviewed articles from scientific journals, including for example Journal of Marketing and Journal of Business Research. Peer reviewing is the single most important criterion distinguishing what scholars refers to as serious research and non serious research (Bailin & Grafstein 2010:8). My strategy in finding relevant peer reviewed articles was to search for interesting references, rather than searching with keywords. Serious authors use serious references and this strategy led me to a network of interesting articles and authors. Initially I did not stress the year of publication, but as it turned out most articles within my scope was published in the 21 century, with a clear increase in interest during the last three years (see, for example Chiou et al. 2010; Hughes & Ahearne 2010; Perment 2008; Glynn et al. 2007). I have assumed that these articles are highly credible since they are published in peer reviewed scientific journals. Nonetheless I have criticized them for vague recommendations in crafting a “perfect blend” between push and pull efforts, a criticism that is central to this thesis. With this
said, my criticism of these articles is concerned with their structural focus and vague recommendations, not individual results or conclusion. This reasoning and my criticism to the “perfect blend” movement is elaborated in the literature review, section 3.3, page 14.

The second part of my literature search explored a theoretical foundation to investigate and evaluate the studied brand as well as methodological issues related to the case study. This literature search began with identifying renowned brand authors and screening their bibliography. David Aaker and his book *Building strong bands* (2002) is the most cited source in this thesis, and my evaluation of the studied brand is grounded in his consumer based brand equity framework. Kavin-Lane Keller (2003) is another frequently cited author who provided additional perspectives on the brand equity conceptualization. Initially this search concerned books through Umeå University’s library service Album. Books often lack the process of peer reviewing, and the credibility is thus more about the credentials of the authors (Bailin & Grafstein 2010:8). Both Aaker (2002) and Keller (2003) are prominent authors in branding research, and most of their factual statements are referenced to scientific articles. In some cases I used these references to gain deeper understanding and elaborate my discussion. The purpose was not to evaluate or questioning Aaker’s (2002) model and its construct, rather use it as a foundation to evaluate the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on brand strength. The criticism of the consumer based brand equity conceptualization is thus focused on how specific constructs should be interpreted in a practical setting, mainly the interplay between perceived value and perceived quality. This reasoning is elaborated in the literature review, section 3.5, page 19.

In addition to these two main phases of literature search I have continuously searched for methodological literature, both for guidance in basic methodological premises and practical implementation of the study. Main methodological guidance was provided by May (2001) and his description of issues, methods and processes in Social research. This textbook was complimented by more specific literature, concerning for example branding research, case studies and qualitative data. The purpose with this literature search has been to build a strong foundation for the research process, not only to enable credible findings, but also clear descriptions of how and why I have found what I have found.
3. Literature Review

Based on findings from previous research this chapter develops a theoretical framework of the main concepts applied in this study. The theoretical review starts with a brief overview of the brand concept, moving on to a more detailed description of branding in a distribution channel context. The theoretical review is concluded with an inclusive discussion of the consumer based brand equity concept which will be used as a foundation to investigate and evaluate the studied brand.

As the global competition has become fiercer, the brand concept has gained an increased interest in both managerial practice and marketing research (Mudambi 2002:525). This trend together with a considerable use of complex distribution channel systems (Gorchels et al. 2004:3; Vinhas et al. 2010; 284) has led to an increased attention to the role of brands within the distribution channel. Recent studies have showed that branding is an effective tool for building stronger relationships between manufacturers and their channel members. Strong brands have been proven to secure consistency, viability and profitability within the distribution channel (Perment 2008:260) as well as facilitating trust, loyalty and satisfaction between manufacturers and channel members (Chiou et al. 2010:437; Glynn et al. 2007:406).

Efforts to promote the brand within the distribution channel are in the literature referred to as a channel push strategy, in which the manufacturer is devoting efforts to encouraging sales through the channel down to the end-users. This in contrast to a consumer pull strategy in which the manufacturer promotes brand preference to end-users, encouraging the end-user to pull products through the distribution channel (Gorchels et al. 2004:17; Frazier 1999:235). Manufacturer branding is, as I will discuss more in detail on page 15, in general viewed as a mix between push and pull efforts (Chiou et al. 2010; Parment 2008; Gorchels et al. 2004; Webster 2000). As a result the concept of branding is largely underresearched from a pure channel push perspective, both within the distribution channel system and at an end-user level. In order to investigate this gap further it is essential to first understand the brand concept and its underlying construct.

3.1 Defining the Brand Construct

To fully understand the branding phenomenon, it is important to consider different approaches used to examine the brand construct and define a brand (Tybout & Carpenter 2001:76). Over the years, an increased understanding and broadening of the brand concept has led to a complex terminology, and the term “brand” has become so overdefined that its meaning is highly diluted and variable (Stern 2006:216).

American Marketing association (2011) is defining the brand as “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.” This definition is similar to the strict legal definition of a trademark, which consists of “any signs capable of being represented graphically, particularly words, including personal names, designs, letters, numerals, the shape of goods or of their packaging, provided that such signs are capable of distinguishing the goods or services of one undertaking from those of other undertakings” (European Parliament 2008:26). The academic definition has been investigated by various researchers (see, for example, Brown, Dacin, Pratt & Whetten 2006; Stern 2006) and it is
clear that the term can be viewed from several different perspectives. In an historical analysis Stern (2006: 221) describes a semiotic confusion between the brand as a real world entity and the brand as a mental representation. The AMA and EU definition is focused on a real world entity where a brand in principle is created simply through the creation of a logo, name or symbol. The brand in managerial practice is however often referred to more than that, often defined in terms of its awareness, reputation and prominence in the marketplace (Keller 2003:3). These two approaches to the brand definition could be related to the brand equity movement. The financial equity approach strives to assess brand value in monetary terms, seeing the brand as a real world entity that adds financial value to companies. In contrast, the consumer based brand equity approach strives to evaluate the brand from the perspectives of the consumers, seeing the brand as a mental representation. These two approaches are necessarily not in direct conflict to each other, and several brand equity researchers have argued for a combination (See, for example Kapferer 2004; Aaker 2002).

However, when it comes to a universal brand definition Kapferer (2001:65) argues that the brand is a deceptively simple construct that anyone can understand and exemplify but few can define and that each definition thus seems to be incomplete. I agree with Kapferer, and in my opinion definitions often tend to embrace more questions than they answer. It is however important to define the perspective in which I will investigate and evaluate the studied brand in this master thesis. As I previously have discussed on page 8, this thesis takes an interpretative social research approach where the brand is seen as a mental representation. Thus, I do not view the brand as a real world entity, such as a product name or logo, rather as a mental representation in the marketplace, i.e. “...what people have learned, felt, seen and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time” (Keller 2003:59). Accordingly I will investigate how the brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users.

3.2 Different Streams in Branding Research

The increased relevance of brands, both in managerial practice and in marketing research has lead to a wide variety of topics and streams within brand research (Ossipenko 2008:14). One of the most recent efforts to map this comprehensive field was done by Keller and Lehman (2006). They identified five main topics in brand research, which also correspond to five necessary steps in the managerial decision making process. These topics are (Keller & Lehman 2006:740);

- Developing brand positioning – brand intangibles, brand personality, brand relationships, brand experience, corporate image and reputation.
- Integrating brand marketing – integrating brand elements, integrating market channels and communications, combining company controlled and external events.
- Assessing brand performance – measuring brand equity, the marketing mix and brand equity, relationship of brand equity to customer equity.
- Growing brands – new products and brand extensions.
- Strategically managing the brand – brand architecture, co-branding and brand alliances, cross cultural and global branding, branding and social welfare.

Based upon this classification it is clear that this thesis will provide an increased understanding within the field of “integrating market channels and communications” since it will investigate
branding from a channel push perspective. Additionally this thesis will provide cross-disciplinary understanding within the topics of “Developing brand positioning” and “Assessing brand performance”. Brand positioning because it will investigate the brand in the minds of the customers and brand performance since it will evaluate the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on Aaker's (2002) consumer based brand equity dimensions. Consequently I would argue that the scope of this thesis is broad, concerning several brand research topics, while the context is focused, concerning only the push strategy in manufacturer brand management. A detailed review of this context, i.e. distribution channel branding is described in the following section.

3.3 The Brand in a Distribution Channel Context

For a manufacturer to be successful in a marketplace it is important that the customers know where and how to get hold of the manufacturer’s products. In today’s global and increasingly complex economy these products often reach their customers through distribution channel systems (Gorchels 2004:3; Vinhas et al. 2010:284). Manufacturers using distribution channel systems, are relying on independent downstream intermediaries to sell their products effectively to other channel members and ultimately to the end-users. These intermediaries often represent multiple product lines, and the challenge for manufacturers is motivating these intermediaries to allocate more resources on behalf of their products relative to competitive products (Hughes & Ahearne 2010:81). A distribution channel is typically defined as "a set of interdependent organizations involved in the process of making a product or service available for consumption or use" (Stern, El-Ansary & Coughlin 1996:1). Accordingly, distribution channels are represented by a set of organizations and because of this it is important to first understand brands in a business-to-business (B2B) context before I go to discuss branding in a distribution channel context.

3.3.1 The Brand in a Business-to-Business Context

The differences and similarities between consumer and business markets have for long been a topic for debate in the marketing literature. Some traditional assertions are that consumer markets offer relatively unsophisticated and standardized products through impersonal relationships with buyers focused on tangible products and intangible attributes. This in contrast to business markets where complex and customized products are offered through personal relationships with sophisticated buyers who focus on tangible products and augmented services (Mudambi 2002:527). These asserted differences have long resulted in branding skepticism by business-to-business managers who view brands as irrelevant assets in B2B marketing (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2007:357). It is clear that branding differ in importance depending on company, customer and purchase situation. Purchases characterized by routine and low risk are less influenced by brands than risky and highly important purchases (Mudambi 2002: 532,33).

Despite of these restraints and in opposition to the traditional view of B2B-branding, recent branding research indicates an increasingly important role of brands in business environments (Mudambi 2002:527; Kotler & Pfoertsch 2007:358; Davis et al. 2008:225). Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007:358) discuss two important factors to why branding has spread beyond the consumer goods market into almost all industries. First of they emphasize the explosion of choices in virtually all areas, from specialty steel to software applications, too many for buyers to recognize, let alone to try or examine. Secondly brands do not only reach consumers, but all
stakeholders including investors, employees, partners, suppliers, competitors, regulators and the local, national and sometimes international community. From this perspective a strong brand can facilitate business in more ways than just sales (Kotler and Pfoertsch 2007:358).

Traditionally B2B brands are mainly communicated through tangible values such as product features and performance. Empirical findings do however indicate that B2B brands also facilitate intangible and emotional features (Lynch & Chernatony 2004:408, 415) and thus have a similar function in B2B markets as they do in consumer markets (Anderson and Narus, 2004:140). Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007:357) support these findings and confidently ask themselves if “anybody really believe that people can turn themselves into unemotional and utterly rational machines when at work? We don’t think so”.

3.3.2 The Brand in a Distribution Channel Context

Distribution channel systems have become an increasingly important source of competitive advantage (Neves et al., 2001:518) and research findings shows that strong relationships between channel members is a crucial factor in creating and sustaining a competitive superiority (Gupta et al. 2010B:396; Frazier, 1999:226; Cannon & Perreault 1999:439). The role of branding in distribution channel systems has lately attained increased attention in brand research, and there is no doubt that brands play an important role in distribution channels (see, for example Chiu et al. 2010; Hughes & Ahearne 2010; Perment 2008; Glynn et al. 2007; Gorchels et al. 2004; Webster 2000; Frazier, 1999). The research do however provide two perspectives in which the brand is important; 1) to increase the demand from end-users, and 2) to encourage channel members to sell the branded product. Accordingly this research diverges from the general B2B-brand literature in the sense that it investigates branding in the context of several intermediaries as well as the end-users.

In this context branding is not only about satisfying the buyer, but also satisfying the end-user through the same brand (Webster 2000:17). In the book Manager's Guide to Distribution Channels Gorchels et al. (2004) are emphasizing the end-user as the most important consideration for manufacturers, despite that they actually are selling their products to distributors or resellers. This ambiguous relationship between distribution channel contra end-user satisfactions has been a central focus in the distribution related brand research. On one hand, it is asserted that direct interaction between brand representatives and distribution channel members is a prerequisite for strong manufacturer brands, while it on the other hand is asserted that direct communication to end-users is just as important (see, for example, Wu & Chuang 2010; Hughes & Ahearne 2010; Perment 2008; Glynn et al. 2007; Gorchels et al. 2004; Webster 2000; Frazier, 1999). These approaches are in the marketing literature often referred to as consumer pull and channel push strategies. A pure pull strategy enables the manufacturer to devote all resources to motivate brand preference at the user level and strengthen the relationship to the end-users, while a pure push strategy enables the manufacturer to devote all resources to motivate desirable behavior at the next vertical level of distribution and strengthen the relationship with the distribution channel members (Frazier 1999:235; Gorchels et al. 2004:17).

A push strategy is highly focused on support to distribution channel members so that they, in turn can develop stronger relationships with their customers. From this perspective it is in the best interest of the manufacturer to increase the level and quality of communication with the
distribution channel, whether in written form or by rules and procedures (Mangin, Koplay & Calmès 2008:61). In terms of marketing this is often done through cooperative advertising, customer promotions and collateral material. Cooperative advertising refers to financial arrangements in which a manufacturer contributes to the payment of local advertising and promotion undertaken by the reseller. The effects of these arrangements in a competitive environment are however unclear since it constitutes a prisoners dilemma for manufacturers to financially support resellers representing competing brands (Karray & Zaccour 2007:165). If distribution channel loyalty is based solely on financial support, it is clear that each manufacturer is forced to induce their resellers with an ever increased amount of financial support. Customer promotion is a somewhat different arrangement which refers to special deals and customer contest that the manufacturer can initiate to facilitate reseller sales. Collateral material is often called “pass-through material” and can be catalogues, videos, product sheets etc. that can be used by both resellers and end-users to communicate product and organizational features as well as brand values (Gorchels et al. 2004:18, 145). For example a manufacturer may provide a comprehensive template of their company, their products and their values to distributors, which are adapted in order to function as sales support to resellers, which in turn are adapted to be handed out as promotional material to end-users. It is plausible that such communication is challenging for brand building since different intermediates may build their own brand according to their specific believes about the brand and the market. The uncertainty of how such communication influence brand building is a great practical example of why it is important to develop the understanding of channel push branding.

While promotional efforts are valuable tools in a push-strategy, the most important factor is interpersonal relations (Gupta et al. 2010A:66; Ballantyne & Aitken 2007:367; Gorchels et al. 2004:18, 145; Mudambi 2002:527). The objective with this interpersonal interaction is to provide sale, product and technical support to distributors and resellers (Gorchels et al. 2004:18, 145). This support is often provided through sales managers from the manufacturing company, who has superior knowledge about the brand and its products. They can for example train resellers on how the products should be demonstrated, which sales arguments that should be used or provide continuous support concerning specific questions. This interaction provides an opportunity to personify the brand through a human representative and by that influence and strengthen the brand preference (Gupta et al. 2010B:401), and it is thus argued in the literature that a strong brand relationship often emerge when the brand is considered as an organization or a person, rather than a product (Aaker 2002:103). Hence, interpersonal relationships are an essential part of branding in business-to-business markets where major communication efforts are dependent on dialogical one-to-one communication between business customers and sales representatives (Gupta et al. 2010A:66; Ballantyne & Aitken 2007:367; Mudambi 2002:527). These B2B findings are also supported by research indicating that branding is as an effective tool for building stronger relationships between manufacturers and their distribution channel members. Strong brands have been proven to secure consistency, viability and profitability within the distribution channel (Perment 2008:260) as well as facilitating trust, loyalty and satisfaction between manufacturers and channel members (Chiou et al. 2010:437; Glynn et al. 2007:406). Additionally a recent study by Hughes and Ahearn (2010:91) establish that salespeople identify to varying degrees with manufacturing brands and that their sales effort towards a particular brand increases as their identification with the brand strengthens.
Although interpersonal relationships are proven to create strong channel relations and strong manufacturer brands it is weakly understood how this works through a strict push strategy. This is a result of the general assertion within the brand management literature that a maximized brand value is dependent on communication to end-users. This includes advertising, public relations, and trade show activities that the manufacturer performs to gain awareness and preference at an end-user level (Gorchels et al. 2004:17). It is argued that a well managed manufacturer brand requires careful coordination between communication programs targeted to end-users and a relationship strategy targeted to distribution channel members (Perment 2008:262; Webster 2000:22). This reasoning has lately been developed by Chiou et al. (2010) who states that an adequate execution of communication efforts to the end-users significantly improve the reseller’s perceived value of selling the manufacturers brand. This is achieved since an increased awareness and demand from the end-users not only increase the reseller’s sales but also their trust and loyalty to the manufacturer and the manufacturer’s brand (Chiou et al. 2010:437, 38). Accordingly, it is important that the manufacturer make use of the end-user pull force in order to facilitate distribution channel relationships and increase their perceived value of selling its products.

These findings further establish that strong brand relationships within the distribution channel not only concern branding to distribution channel members, but also branding to end-user markets. Although, I am not challenging these findings I believe that they have contributed to a status quo between channel push and consumer pull branding. An increased amount of blend recommendations and a view of pure push or pull strategies as something of the past (Chiou et al. 2010:437; Webster 2000:22) has resulted in an knowledge gap addressing how a modern manufacturer brand is built in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users without the involvement of manufacturer led pull efforts. This knowledge gap is problematic from a practical point of view since business in general and marketing in particular is all about prioritization. Distribution channel relationships are seen as an increasingly important source of competitive advantage (Neves et al., 2001:518; Gorchels et al. 2004:3), while the brand competition at an reseller level has increased (Hughes & Ahearne 2010:81). As a result, the theoretical foundation of a blended strategy might be reprioritized in advantage for better relationships and stronger support to resellers, which in effect make push efforts the prioritized channel for brand communication. Whit this in mind it is crucial to understand how a manufacturer’s brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a strict channel-push strategy. This study will take a first step towards this understanding and evaluate the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on consumer based brand equity.

3.4 Brand Identity, Brand Image and Brand Equity

A brand involves both a sender and a receiver, the sender is the brand owner and the receiver is the target audience (Aaker 2002:69; Kapferer 1997:94). The brand identity refers to how the owner wants the brand to be perceived and the image concerns how the brand actually is perceived by the target audience (Nandan 2005:267; Aaker 2002:71; Kapferer 1997:99). In other words the brand message is ‘packaged’ in terms of brand identity, and ‘unpackaged’ by the consumer in the form of brand image (Nandan 2005:268)

Brand identity serves to provide direction, purpose and meaning for the brand (Aaker 2002:68) and thus help the brand to stay true to itself by stating goals that are different from other brands
and resistant to change (Kapferer 1997:91). In this study, the brand identity is developed and owned by the manufacturer. When this identity is communicated through the distribution channel it will be turned into an image in the minds of distribution channel members and ultimately end-users. Brand image is the result of the audience decoding all signals emitting from the brand and the interpretation of them (Kapferer 1997:94). These signals are not only emitting from the brand identity, but also from other extraneous factors that speaks for the brand, regardless of whether actually being related to it. These factors are referred to as “noise” and could for example be competitors, world of mouth or incidents linked to the brand (Kapferer 1997:94; Keller 2003:70).

The main theme in both brand identity and brand image is the creation and presence of brand associations. Aaker (2002:68) argues that brand identity should be built on a unique set of brand associations that the brand owner aspires to create and maintain within the target audience. These associations and their strength, uniqueness and favorability are in turn crucial elements in the brand image (Keller 2003:70). Consequently, brand associations play an important role in brand strength and have been proven to interrelate with brand awareness, perceived quality and brand loyalty (Pappu et al. 2005:151; Ossipenko 2008:45). These four assets, i.e. brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty, are according to Aaker (2002) the components of consumer based brand equity. This equity concept is closely linked to brand image and argues that the power of a brand lies in what customers have learned, felt, seen and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time (Keller 2003:59).

This view of brand equity should be distinguished from the financial approach in which economic measures are produced to assess the brand in monetary terms (Kapferer 2005:9). While this approach is more useful in accounting contexts providing hard measures and monetary values, the consumer based view is more useful in marketing and brand management since it provides various aspects of how the brand is perceived by customers (Ossipenko 2008:18). Aaker (2002) and Keller (2003) are two prominent spokespersons of the consumer based brand equity approach and although they provide different models, both define brand equity from a consumer perspective based on consumers’ brand associations. In fact the majority of conceptual studies on consumer based brand equity agree that awareness and associations are important dimensions of consumer-based brand equity (Christodoulides & de Chernatony 2010:47).

The consumer based view of brand equity has been widely accepted in both brand research and in managerial practice (Pappu, Quester & Cooksey 2005:144; Christodoulides & de Chernatony 2010:49:59), arguing that “there is value to the investor, the manufacturer and the retailer only if there is value for the consumer” (Cobb-Walgren, Beal & Donthu 1995:26). Accordingly, consumer based brand equity provides an established and suitable framework for investigating how a manufacturer’s brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users. The conceptualization used in this study is based upon Aaker’s (2002) multi dimensional model. The final chapter in this theoretical review will describe this multi dimensional model and thus build a clear foundation for the empirical study.

3.5 The Conceptual Model of Consumer Based Brand Equity

The conceptual model used in this master thesis is grounded in the consumer brand equity model developed by David Aaker (2002). According to Aaker brand equity is defined as “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the
value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers” (Aaker 2002:7). Aaker is labeling them assets, simply because they are important assets for the brand and the firm, I will however call them consumer based brand equity dimensions. These dimensions are brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. This model has been widely tested and questioned, both in B2C and B2B contexts (see, for example, Gill & Dawra 2010; Christodoulides & de Chernatony 2010; Ossipenko 2008; Pappu et al. 2005), and stands as one of the most inclusive models of consumer based brand equity.

The relation between brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty is weakly addressed by Aaker (2002), more recent studies have however found an interrelationship between these four dimensions (Ossipenko 2008; Pappu et al. 2005). These findings indicate that Aaker’s (2002) model can be considered as a four-dimensional model with associative relations between all dimensions. Research also indicates the existence of a hierarchy structure addressing the development order of these dimensions (Gordon, Calantone & Di Benetto 1993). Such hierarchal discussions are quite frequent in the marketing literature with the so called hierarchies of effects as a prominent example (Lavidge & Steiner 1961). The hierarchies of effects consists of believes, affect and behavior, and is a model used to analyze consumers response to marketing activities (Solomon et al 2008:142). I argue that this model is related to the dimensions of consumer based brand equity, where believes is similar to awareness, affect to associations and perceived quality, and behavior to loyalty. The hierarchies of effects have in several studies been showed to develop differently depending on context (See, for example, Barry 2002:46; Vakratsas & Ambler 1999:32), and I would be surprised if this was not the case with brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. This study is thus not assuming a specific order, or hierarchy between the dimensions, only that they are all interrelated to each other.

![Figure 3.1: Interrelationships between brand equity dimensions (Pappu et al. 2005)](image)

In addition to the conceptual model of consumer brand equity, Aaker (2002:319-33) proposes several measures of the four main dimensions that is applicable in different markets, for both goods and services. These measures include the following elements Aaker (2002:319); 1) Awareness (recognition and recall), 2) Associations (perceived value, personality, organization), 3) Perceived quality (perceived quality and perceived leadership), 4) Loyalty (price premium and satisfaction).

Aaker (2002) do however lack a clear line of argumentation on how these underling measurements relate to each other and to the overall brand strength. I will therefore in the following section discuss each dimension, its underlying elements and its application in this study. I will then conclude the theoretical review with a conceptual model that will be used in
this study. Finally it is important to emphasize that this thesis do not have the purpose of evaluating or questioning Aaker’s model and its construct, rather use it as a foundation to evaluate the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on brand strength.

3.5.1 Awareness

Brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand’s presence in the minds of consumers. Familiarity has been shown to result in a more positive feeling toward nearly anything, whether it is music, people or brands (Aaker 2002:10). The creation of brand awareness is mainly associated with consumer pull efforts, such as advertising, public relations and sponsorship (Aaker 2002:16; Keller 2003:69). However, as discussed earlier, awareness has also been showed to influence the distribution channel system in improving the reseller’s perceived value of selling particular brands (Chiou et al. 2010:437, 38). The interrelation between awareness and associations has been questioned in the brand equity literature and in some studies argued to be integrated into one dimension (Pappu et al. 2005:151; Yoo & Donthu 2001:6). Although the two constructs are clearly correlated, both Aaker (2002) and Keller (2003) distinguish between brand awareness and associations. Moreover Christodoulides & de Chernatony (2010:57) argue that the two dimensions are not synonymous since one can be aware of a brand without having a strong set of brand associations linked in memory.

Both Aaker (2002:10) and Keller (2003:67) describe brand awareness through brand recognition and brand recall. Recognition refers to familiarity with the brand, i.e. the ability to confirm prior exposure, while brand recall refers to consumers’ ability to retrieve the brand from memory when given the product category, or specific associative cues. Although a general awareness might be important for some brands it is more important to gain a strategic awareness among the target audience, i.e. to be remembered for the right reasons. Niche brands do also not necessarily need high recognition among a substantial group of customers, if they have high recall among their respective loyal customer groups (Aaker 2002:12, 17). The awareness dimension in this study is somewhat special since the study concerns existing channel members and end-customers. From this perspective one could argue that they already are aware of the brand since they sell or use the product. Moreover it will be hard to perform an accurate measure of awareness since the interviewees will be aware that I am questioning them about Konftel. The awareness dimension in this study is thus mainly about the awareness in relation to competing brands and its influence on distribution partners and the channel push strategy.

3.5.2 Associations

Perceived Value

Attributes directly related to the purchase or the use of a product provides the basis of the perceived value of the brand. These attributes are linked to the brand’s value proposition, which consists of functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits for the buyer (Aaker 2002:81). The functional benefits, particularly quality, is the most important value, both in a B2C and B2B environment (Aaker 2002:17; Mudambi 2002:527; Kotler & Pfoertsch 2007:357). The relation between perceived quality and perceived value is however somewhat unclear in Aakers (2002) model, and although Aaker (2002:17) refer to quality as an association, it is placed as one of the four main dimensions, alongside brand associations. I find it unfortunate that this relation is not explained more in detail by Aaker (2002), and I have thus made my own interpretation. In this study I refer to value as the value of distance meetings, i.e. the service which the product
enables, and the quality about the functional attributes of Konftel’s conference phones. I will therefore go more into detail on quality and functional attributes within the dimension of perceived quality, 3.5.3, page 22.

Although functional attributes are essential they have their limitations. Some are easy to copy, others fail to differentiate, and all require rational decision making behavior (Aaker 2002:96). These limitations can be bridged by expanding the value proposition to emotional benefits. The emotional benefits are asserted to be less influential in business-to-business purchases, but this assertion has lately been questioned and research findings indicates that emotional benefits, are highly influential in a B2B markets (Lynch & Chernatony 2004:408, 415; Kotler and Pfoertsch 2007:357). These benefits give the buyer, or user, a special feeling linked to the brand, for example safety and Volvo or pleasure and BMW, which provides experiences that adds depth to the brand and facilitate differentiation (Aaker 2002:96). Another way to achieve value associations is to successfully associate the brand and the product with use occasion or user (Aaker 2002:81). It could for example be associations to specific situations, such as a meeting or to activities such as talking on the phone. A classical and extreme example from the consumer market was when the Hoover brand became synonymous with vacuum cleaners, and thus became the English word for vacuum cleaning.

**Organizational Associations**

B2B branding has traditionally been associated with corporate brands, even if product brands are becoming increasingly common in business markets (Mudambi 2002:527). Christensen & Askegaard (1999:311) argues that corporate identity and image is symbolic representations of organizational realities, and that such symbols must be credible and persuasive in order to be successful. The basic premise is that these symbols are linked to organizational values, culture, people, programs, assets and skills (Aaker 2002:115). From this perspective brand associations linked to an organization becomes more enduring and resistant to competition than if they were linked to a product. It is impossible to copy an organization but it is also hard for competitors to demonstrate an advantage over, for example innovativeness. Attributes such as being innovative, concerned for customers and quality focused is much more intangible than for example speed and power. It is therefore generally assumed that strong brand relationship often emerge when the brand is considered as an organization or a person, rather than a product (Aaker 2002:103). Many brands are however cross functional, representing both an organization and specific products (Aaker 2002:83). The Konftel brand studied in this thesis is cross functional since the organization and the products are communicated under the same brand. The products do however have product specific names, for example “300”, but the company name is the core brand symbol.

**Personality Associations**

Brand personality is generally seen as a set of human characteristics associated with a brand (J. Aaker 1997:347). The brand personality facilitates a rich and more interesting brand identity that is hard to achieve through product attributes. Personality traits can be self-expressive and help the buyer to express their own personality (Foumier 1994), but it has also been showed that brand personality can strengthen product attributes, for example when sport celebrities promote healthy drinks or food (Aaker 2002:84; Kapferer 1998:101). When it comes to distribution channel systems, brand personality has been showed to be a crucial factor in relationship building (Gupta et al. 2010B:401).
Gupta et al. (2010A; 2010B) have studied the relationship between brand personification, brand knowledge and brand selection by resellers. These studies show that brand personified through human representatives creates a differentiation for competitiveness in the eyes of resellers (2010A:401). When the brand is personified as a human representative, it becomes an interface that helps in developing an emotional bond between the resellers and the brand. These findings indicate that the key to brand personification in business-to-business markets is field management with a human representing the brand and differentiating it from traditional marketing (Gupta et al. 2010B:73). Although that human representatives are an essential part of the brand personification in a distribution channel context (Gupta et al. 2010A; 2010B), it is far from the only source brand personality communication. Aaker (2002:145) is naming several indirect brand personality drivers, for example product category, package, price, attributes, user imagery, sponsorships symbols, age and origin.

Jennifer Aaker (1997) has developed a brand personality framework to facilitate a consistent and systematic assessment of brand personality. The framework is called the big five, brand personality scale and consist of five personality factors, that has been showed to explain over 93 percent of the observed differences between brand personality (Aaker 2002:143). This scale will be used in this study and presented below, with an extended set of traits to further describe their scope.

- Sincerity (Down-To-Earth, Honest, Wholesome and Cheerful)
- Competence (Reliable, Intelligent and Successful)
- Excitement (Daring, Spirited, Imaginative and Up-To-Date)
- Sophistication (Upper Class and Charming)
- Ruggedness (Outdoorsy and Tough)

3.5.3 Perceived Quality

Perceived quality is according to Aaker (2002:17) the most important brand asset and the most important value, both in a B2C and B2B environment (Aaker 2002:17; Mudambi 2002:527; Kotler & Pfoertsch 2007:357). Many firms consider quality as the primary strategic asset and total quality management as well as quality management standards such as ISO 9000 has been a central strategic consideration for many firms during the past decade (Aaker 2002:19).

My major criticism towards Aakers (2002) conceptual model is that he never defines quality. For example he describes perceived quality as a brand association (2002:17), as a separate main dimension of brand equity (2002:9), as closely related to the functional benefits of a brand (2002:19), as well as to the brand value (2002:81). Quality is thus an elusive concept in Akers conceptual model and unfortunately also unclear in other relevant business literature concerning quality (Wicks & Roethlein 2009:82). Most definitions of quality are emphasising customer satisfaction (Wicks & Roethlein 2009:87) and thus referring to quality as an overall assessment of the product based on costumer perceptions. I am however arguing that the quality of a product is harder to separate from functional benefits such as, performance or design, than it is to separate from value associations such as safety or pleasure. Garvin (1984:42), endorsed by Keller (2003:238), has a similar view of quality and promotes seven characteristics underling perceived quality. These attributes are closely linked to the user experience and the functions of the product, and will in this study be used to assess perceived quality.
• Performance (*levels at which the primary characteristic of the product operates*)
• Features (*secondary elements of a product that compliments the primary characteristic*)
• Conformance quality (*if the product meet specifications and is absent of defects*)
• Reliability (*consistency of performance over time, and from purchase to purchase*)
• Durability (*expected economic life of the product*)
• Serviceability (*ease of serving the product*)
• Design (*appearance or feel of quality*)

Perceived leadership is a measure that Aaker (2002:325) proposes as a complement to quality since he argues that the perceived quality measure lack sensitivity when it comes to the innovativeness of competitors. This measure is highly interesting in this study since the distribution channel members represent competing brands in the same product category. The leadership element will assess which brand they perceive as a market leader, not solely based on market share, but also on popularity and perceived innovation.

3.5.4 Loyalty

Brand loyalty is according to Aaker (2002:21) a key consideration in brand equity since a loyal customer base generates predictable profit and represents a substantial entry barrier to competitors. According to Aaker (2002:320) loyalty is best measured through consumers’ willingness to pay a premium price for the brand’s products. He actually argues that the price premium may be the best single measure of consumer based brand equity (Aaker 2002:321). A Price premium measurement does however require that the brand has similar competitors and price in different markets (Aaker 2002:322). Konftel’s price scheme and its relation to the competitors is too varied and complex to investigate through the premises of this study and will therefore not be used to measure brand loyalty.

Furthermore Aaker is proposing satisfaction as a direct measure of brand loyalty. The relation between satisfaction and loyalty is well understood in the marketing literature, where satisfaction is seen as a necessary step in loyalty formation, although not equal to loyalty (Oliver 1999:42). Satisfaction has also been showed to be an antecedent of brand loyalty in a distribution channel context, where satisfaction is seen as dependent of perceived value, trust, and specific asset investment between the manufacturer and distribution channel members (Chiou et al. 2010:437). In similar, Oliver argues that satisfaction, as a driver for loyalty, is dependent by synergistic effects of perceived product superiority, personal fortitude and social bonding. These findings indicate that customer satisfaction regarding several brand dimensions, are an important driver for brand loyalty. It is however, important to mention that satisfaction, as previously discussed, is closely linked to perceived quality. This relation support previous research stating that Aaker’s (2002) model can be considered as a four-dimensional model with associative relations between all dimensions (Ossipenko 2008; Pappu et al. 2005).

Keller (2003:92) provides a different perspective of brand loyalty, which he refers to as brand resonance. This concept includes the intensity and activity of a brand-customer relationship. In other words, not only the satisfaction, but what the customers are doing, in terms of behavioral loyalty such as re-purchases, and the personal attachment to the brand such as being actively engaged in brand communities and activities. The loyalty dimension in this study will be
grounded in both the satisfaction based view of loyalty and the behavioural view. I will follow previous research stating associative relations between all dimensions, in other words viewing loyalty as the overall satisfaction of brand awareness, associations and quality. Furthermore loyalty will concern how this satisfaction is influencing the activity of the brand-customer relationship, in terms of behavioral loyalty and the active personal attachment to the brand.

3.5.5 Conceptual Model of Consumer Based Brand Equity

The following model will be used as a framework for investigating how a manufacturer’s brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a strict channel-push strategy. In doing this I will also evaluate the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on the four main dimensions illustrated below. As discussed in section 3.5 this is a multidimensional model with associative relations between all dimensions (illustrated through dotted lines). The main four dimensions and their underlying elements will however function as a guide in constructing, performing and analyzing this study. Although I am studying the brand as a whole I am using this structure to achieve consistency and comparability between all observations. A more detailed discussion about their relation to the interview guide is provided in chapter four, 4.3, page 30.

Figure 3.2: Conceptualization of consumer based brand equity (Adapted from Aaker 2002).
4. The Case Study

This chapter describes the case study and how it is conducted. I will start by describing the logic of the case and then go into detail on how the research is conducted in practice. This will be described according to three layers crucial to the case; the unit of analysis, the observations and the dimensions. The chapter is concluded with a scientific quality assessment of this study.

The main purpose with this case study is to advance in knowledge and take a first step towards a clarification of the current status quo between push and pull branding. In doing this I have been fortunate to find a company focused solely on branding through the distribution channel. In methodological terms this could be described as an extreme case, i.e. a case with an extreme value on one variable of interest (Gerring 2007:101). The variable of interest is the push strategy, and it is extreme since it is the sole strategy, lacking support from pull efforts. As a result, this case provides a great opportunity to investigate the push strategy independently from the pull strategy and thus draw inferences about what impact the push strategy has on the studied brand. With this said it is evident that the choice of case is subjective, selected because it is special in the sense of allowing me to gain insights that other brands would not be able to provide (Siggelkow 2007:20).

It is important to emphasise that the unit of analysis in this study is the manufacturer brand, not the manufacturer company. The purpose of this study will be achieved through two objectives, 1) Investigating how a manufacturer’s brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a strict channel-push strategy, 2) Evaluating the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on Aakers (2002) consumer based brand equity dimensions. Accordingly this case study does not only concern the manufacturer, but also distributors, resellers and end-users. The collection of data from these participants will be done through several observations, in this case interviews and documents. These observations are in turn interpreted through Aakers (2002) consumer based brand equity framework, and thus each observation is divided into several dimensions (Gerring 2007:20). As recommended by Gerring (2007:182) these relations are illustrated below, explaining the logic of this case study.

![Figure 4.1: Illustrative diagram of the case (Author)]
As this figure describes I will follow how the manufacturer’s brand is built, according to four dimensions, through the distribution channel down to the end-users. This approach could be referred to as process tracing, where I seek to make sense of a multitude of disparate evidences, each of which sheds light on a single outcome, in this case the manufacturer brand (Gerring 2007:178). While other methods can be understood according to quasi experimental properties, process tracing rests upon a more complex logic, almost analogous to detective work. The rules of this detective work will rest upon assumptions about the world and the context in which the study is performed (Gerring 2007:180). These assumptions will in this study be grounded in the theoretical review, highlighting previous findings in distribution channel branding and consumer based brand equity. The above figure describes the logic of this case study and are, together with the theoretical review an explicit statement of the arguments on which this case study relies.

4.1 Observations – The Manufacturer

While the investigation of distributors, resellers and end-users concern how the brand is perceived, the investigation of Konftel concerns how the brand owner wants the brand to be perceived. As discussed in the literature review 3.4, page 17, this is often referred to as the brand identity. Konftel’s brand identity is a starting point in my case study, and a first step in investigating how the brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users. In order to achieve consistency and comparability between all observations, the brand identity is studied and presented through Aaker’s (2002) consumer based brand equity framework. The dimensions of brand awareness and brand loyalty do however concern how the brand is perceived by the market, not how the brand owner wants the brand to be perceived. As a result these dimensions will not be taken into consideration when investigating the identity. The investigation of the identity is mainly based on promotional and marketing material. For case studies, the most important use of documents is to confirm evidence from other sources of information (Yin 2009:103). Hence, it was important to confirm and elaborate this information with additional sources. This was done through notes from a workshop with all regional sales managers as well as a continuous dialogue with the marketing department at Konftel.

The promotional and marketing material that I have used includes the website, products leaflets and internal marketing documents. According to Scott (1990 cited by May 2001:189) documentary research should be evaluated through authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. These criteria are all met since I have received the information directly from Konftel and later verified my results with the marketing department. A brand workshop with all regional sales managers was held 3d of February 2011. I participated in this workshop as an intern at Konftel’s advertising agency, taking notes for further analysis. The information taken from this workshop is based on these notes. Finally, I have elaborated some issues with the marketing department, who also have read and verified the entire presentation of the company and the brand. As previously discussed, I consider the brand identity as a starting point for my investigation. The presentation of the company and the brand is therefore separated from the interview results, presented in a separate chapter devoted only to Konftel. The company background and the brand identity are presented in chapter five, page 34.
4.2 Observations – Distributors, Resellers and End-Users

As I previously has discussed I believe that a brand is a social construct that exists only in the minds of people that have experienced it. Interviews are a widely used qualitative method to generate data which yield rich insight into people’s experiences (May 2002:120; Silverman 1995:91) and thus an appropriate tool to understand the brand as a social construct. The aim with these interviews is to provide a mix of structure and flexibility, where participants can express themselves in their own words, while a certain amount of structure facilitates my interpretation and analysis through the conceptualization of consumer based brand equity. I will in the following section describe the choice of participants and the interview method.

4.2.1 Choice of Participants - Companies and Interviewees

The empirical study was conducted through 18 interviews, divided upon distributors, resellers and end-users. The choice of participants was grounded in the condition of accessibility, both from an intellectual and practical perspective. The intellectual accessibility determines the interviewees’ relevance to the purpose of the study, and their ability to access and recall information which I am seeking. This is a crucial condition when conducting interviews (Moser & Kalton 1983; cited in May 2002:128) and the most important factor in the choice of interviewees (Creswell 2003:185). As a result I wanted the participating companies to have an active relation to the Konftel brand. This because I wanted to avoid interviews were the interviewee had limited experience with the brand and thus few actual opinions. It is important to mention that I wanted opinions, not necessarily favorable opinions. It is however plausible that such a condition could produce a slight bias towards favorability, since it is preferred to stay in favorable relations and leave those that are unfavorable. The favorability of the brand is however not a main concern in this study. The purpose is to investigate how the brand is built through the distribution channel, not to assess an actual value relative to other brands.

It was also necessary to include accessibility from a practical perspective, in other words a condition designed to include relevant interviewees who are available to the researcher when and where the study is conducted (Bryman & Bell 2007:197; Holme & Solvang 1007:183). This barrier was quite easily overcome since the studied brand promotes conference phones and distance meetings. All participants had access to an advanced conference phone which facilitated the interviews. As a result, time was the only barrier. Distributors and resellers were in general keen to devote 30 minutes to my interview. The end-users were significantly harder to convince, and many end-users declined to participate. This non-response is analysed in 4.2.2.

The choice of participants was managed by me through a list from Konftel. I asked for a list of distributors, resellers and end-users, spread over the five main markets, who had an active relation to the Konftel brand. In turn they provided me with following material; seven distributors where chosen by the marketing department, 32 resellers were chosen by sales representatives, and 30 end-users were chosen from a database with registered end-user accounts. From these lists, I randomly selected companies to contact, in achieving interviews with three distributors, six resellers and nine end-users. The number from each group was determined by how many interviews that realistically could be conducted and analyzed during the thesis course. The logic in the relative amount between distributors, resellers and end-users is the general
structure of a distribution channel system, i.e. that the amount increases from a few distributors, to several resellers, and even more end-users.

The actual interviewees participating from these companies were chosen by the same criteria as the companies. They should be able to access and recall information which I am seeking (Moser & Kalton 1983; cited in May 2002:128) and be available to the researcher when and where the study is conducted (Bryman & Bell 2007:197; Holme & Solvang 1007:183). My assumption was that these individuals were found at a middle manager level, having knowledge about both strategy and sales tactics. Konftel helped me to find these individuals, who turned out to be mostly key account managers working for distributors and resellers, and mostly IT-managers working for the end-user firms.

4.2.2 Non-Response

The non-response is quite large in this study. As seen in the table below it was easier to achieve cooperation from distributors than from resellers and significantly harder to achieve cooperation from end-users. This is an important consideration, and an indication that a strict channels push strategy creates a certain distance between manufacturer, resellers and end-users. This indication will be further elaborated in the analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mailed</th>
<th>Called</th>
<th>Responded</th>
<th>Declined</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distributors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resellers</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End-users</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4.1: Companies contacted and the non-response*

The distributors were all eager to participate and were keen to devote 30 minutes to my interview. The resellers were more diverse, some keen to devote time while others were sceptical. Some thought that it would be hard to conduct the interview in English, while others did find the interview too long for their tight schedule. The end-users had the highest rate of decline. In fact I had to expand the list with end-users, since I only managed to get eight interviews from the first 30 on the list, this is why the table shows that I called more companies than I mailed. The contacted individuals were often IT-managers who had a varying degree of knowledge and experience with Konftel and conference phones. Some respondents had only installed Konftel’s products and thought they would not be able to answer my questions. Other saw me as a salesman and was eager to hang-up and keep on with their work. I would argue that the participating end-users were all highly enthusiastic IT-managers, interested in conference phones in general or Konftel in particular. The rather positive response to Konftel that is showed in this study should therefore be analysed with caution. But as I have discussed before, the favorability of the brand is not a main concern in this study. The purpose is to investigate how the brand is built through the distribution channel, not to assess an actual value relative to other brands.

4.2.3 Planning and Conducting the Interviews

When I developed the interviews I considered two aspects. First to what extent they should be structured and secondly to what extent they should be standardized. The structure deals with how much freedom the interviewees have to express themselves, while the standardization refers to
how much the interviews differ from one another (Patel & Davis 1994:60-61). This study aims at investigating how a manufacturer’s brand is built in the minds of those experiencing it. From this perspective it is important to gain as comprehensive answers as possible where the interviewees are given considerable freedom to formulate their own responses. This study does however also aspire to evaluate the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on Aaker’s (2002) consumer based brand equity dimensions. From this perspective it is important that the study follows a specific structure, enabling an analysis of all dimensions addressed in Aaker’s conceptualization. Finally these interviews aim at observing three different types of organizations; distributors, resellers and end-users, and trace how the brand is build in their minds. From this perspective it is important to address organizational differences between these companies while maintaining a consistent structure facilitating tracing of the brand building process. All these conditions led to a middle course in which a main structure is used, with small tweaks adapted to the different organizational types. This structure is sustained through semi structured interviews, which according to the literature (May 201:123; Bryman & Bell 2005:482) allow interviewees to answer more on their own terms than in standardized interviews, but still provide a greater structure for comparability than unstructured interviews. The interview template follows the conceptual framework discussed in the literature review. The main four dimensions and their underlying elements are used as a guide in constructing, conducting and analyzing the interviews. Each dimension consists of underlying questions that is addressed in the interview to clarify and elaborate the reasoning (May 2002:123). These were either follow-up questions or in depth questions intended to expand or narrowing the scope of the interviewee's reasoning. A discussion concerning the interview schedule is presented in section 4.3, page 30.

According to Moser and Kalton (1983; cited in May 2002:128) there are three important conditions for successful interviews. I have previously discussed accessibility in my choice of participants. While access is important when deciding upon whom to interview, cognition and motivation are important when communicating with the interviewees. Cognition refers to the understanding by the person being interviewed of what is required of them and motivation refers to the feeling that their participation is valued. The main instrument to achieve these conditions is the researcher himself since all qualitative research requires certain amount of social skill in developing relationships with participants (Lyons & Doueck 2010:25). My ambition has been to be clear and professional in my communication with the interviewees. A mail was sent by Konftel to all listed companies informing that I would call them to schedule a 30 minutes interview concerning the Konftel brand. The opportunity to win an iPod was promoted by Konftel as an incentive to participate. Furthermore it was emphasized that the study was independent and that all answers would be handled confidentially, encouraging the participants to feel free to speak their minds. A week later I called the selected companies asking if they were willing to book a date and time for an interview. At this point, I informed the participants about the study and the interviews, ensuring that the contacted person was the right person to interview and that he or she had time to participate.

The interviews were recorded to facilitate a fluent interview. These recordings are highly advantageous since they enable a repeated and detailed examination of the interviews, which extends the range and precision of my observations. In addition, these recordings permit a direct access to the data, thus making it possible to analyze and verify my interpretation (Heritage 1984:238, cited in Silverman 1995:119). The disadvantage is that a recording may be uncomfortable for the interviewee, which may influence the answers. I was therefore asking if it
was okay that the interview was recorded, which none of the interviewees opposed. Since the studied brand concerns distance meetings and conference phones, all participants had access to an advanced conference phone which facilitated the interviews. I also utilized a webinar application which enabled me to show questions and pictures on the participant’s screen continuously during the interview. This was a very important tool to facilitate a fluent discussion and minimize linguistic misunderstandings. Because of technical difficulties three interviews was performed without this application. These interviews was possible to conduct, but became shorter and less detailed. Although a misfortune, it confirms that on screen questions with keywords to discuss facilitated in depth reasoning and inclusive interviews.

4.3 Dimensions - The Interview Schedule

As previously discussed this study will utilize Aaker’s (2002) consumer based brand equity framework, in investigating and evaluating the studied brand. The main four dimensions and their underlying elements will function as a guide in constructing, performing and analyzing the interviews. Although that I am studying the brand as a whole I am using this structure in order to achieve a consistency and comparability between all interviews. The distributors, resellers and end-users all have different purposes in why they have come in contact with the studied brand. As a result three different interview schedules were required. They were all based on Aakers conceptualization with minor tweaks to address their specific perspective and relation to the brand. This section will describe how the interviews proceeded, how the structure is used in the interviews and explain differences between different schedules. The complete interview schedules can be found in Appendix 1, page 64.

4.3.1 Introduction

The interview began with an introduction of me and the study as well as a couple of short questions concerning the interviewee and his/her company, providing a straightforward description of the participants. Distributors and resellers were asked about their position in the company, the scope of their product portfolio and how many conference phones they sell per month. The end-users were asked about their position in the company, how many conference phones they have and what business sector they act in.

4.3.2 Brand Awareness

The brand awareness dimension is divided into two questions relating to brand recognition and brand recall. Recognition refers to the ability to confirm prior exposure, while brand recall refers to consumers’ ability to retrieve the brand from memory when given the product category, or specific associative cues. These concepts are however somewhat modified in this study since the participants are existing customers who knows that I am interviewing them about the Konftel brand. The awareness dimension in this study is thus not applied to investigate market awareness of the Konftel brand, rather to investigate this awareness in relation to competing brands and its influence on distribution partners and the channel push strategy.

First the interviewees were asked to name two additional brands of conference phones. This question was used to investigate brand recall and map the two main competitors in the minds of the interviewees. This was followed by two pictures of conference phones provided on screen, one from Konftel and one from the main competitor Polycom. The interviewees were asked if they recognize these products and their brands. These pictures were used to investigate if the
interviewees recognize the appearance of the Konftel brand in relation to the main competitor. In addition to these questions the end-users were asked how they first came in contact with the brand.

4.3.3 Brand Associations

The associations dimensions are made of three underlying elements; the perceived value, organizational associations and personality associations (for a detailed explanation, see chapter 3, page 20). The perceived value was investigated through keywords on screen which the interviewees were asked to reflect freely upon. These values had been developed in cooperation with the marketing department at Konftel. The reasoning was elaborated by questions about their relative importance, the communication of these values and how these values influenced them buying or selling the Konftel brand. They were also asked if they had other values to add. Halfway during the study, I discovered that most interviewees recognized saving time first, which also was the first key value on screen. As a result I changed the order of all keywords in the interview schedule, but this had no noticeable effect on the answers. The key values were; saving time, saving traveling costs, environmental friendliness, professional practice, and ease of decision making.

This reasoning was followed by a question about user and usage associations. To distributors and resellers in term of their typical customer and how they believe that Konftel products are used, while the end-users where asked about their actual usage and associations to typical users. Moreover distributors and resellers were asked to value the brand in terms of margins, other incentives and ease to sell Konftel’s products. This question was used since perceived value by distributors and resellers is closely linked to the fact that they are buying the brand to resell rather than to use.

The organizational associations were investigated through an open ended question about what the interviewees knew about Konftel, for example origin, size and company culture. This question was followed by key statements on screen which the interviewees were asked to reflect freely upon. The statements were; Konftel is a company that I can trust, Konftel is a company with a broad portfolio of products, and Konftel is an innovative company.

The personality association was investigated through both actual interpersonal interaction and the overall brand personality. The interviewees were asked about their interpersonal contacts related to the brand, which company they have been in contact with and their impression. The end-users were asked in general terms, while the distributors and resellers were asked specifically about sales support (leads, training), marketing support (co-advertising, promotions) and product support (technical support, warranty handling).

This was followed by a brand personality scale provided on screen. This scale was used to facilitate a consistent and systematic assessment of brand personality. The interviewees were asked to reflect freely upon these personality factors based on their attitude and contact with the Konftel brand. The brand personality scale included; sincere, competent, excited, sophisticated, and rugged.
4.3.4 Perceived Quality

The perceived quality is investigated through seven attributes underling quality. These attributes was provided on screen and the interviewees were asked to reflect freely upon them, if possible in relation to competing brands. The reasoning was elaborated by questions about their relative importance, the communication of these attributes and how they influenced them buying or selling the Konftel brand. Each attribute was explained on screen, grounded in the literature review, page 22. The key attributes were; performance, features, conformance quality, reliability, durability, serviceability, and design

As a compliment to these functional attributes the interviewees were asked who they saw as the market leader. This is a highly interesting question since distribution channel members represent competing brands in the same product category. The question was elaborated beyond market share, including both popularity and innovation.

4.3.5 Brand Loyalty

The loyalty dimension is in this study grounded in satisfaction and behavioural based loyalty (for a detailed explanation, see chapter 3, page 23). The satisfaction is investigated through a straightforward question about the interviewees’ satisfaction, but also through an analysis of the overall satisfaction of brand awareness, associations and quality. Behavioral loyalty is investigated through different questions in different schedules. The end-users were asked about their willingness to buy a Konftel on next purchase occasion as well as their willingness to recommend the brand to others. The resellers were asked if they have a favorite brand or model and how they are motivated to recommend a particular brand or product. The distributors are more interested in the wholesale of conference phones and were thus only asked how they are motivated to market a particular brand or product.

4.4 Quality Criteria

I have throughout this report continuously discussed the quality of my research while describing all steps in the research process. This section is a recap of these considerations assessed through the concept of validity and reliability. The use of these concepts in qualitative research has been widely discussed in the methodological literature (Ryen 2004:136). I have chosen to ground my assessment on recommendations by Yin (2009:40), since he emphasizes specific criteria, as well as tactics dealing with them in case study research. A case study should, according to Yin (2009:40) be judged through construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability.

4.4.1 Construct Validity

Construct validity concerns the identification of the correct measures for the concept being studied, in this case channel push branding. Construct validity is especially challenging in case study research since it often is difficult to define relevant concepts and find a sufficiently operational set of measures to match them (Yin 2009:41). I do however strongly argue that the inclusive literature review presented in this thesis, identifies relevant concepts and operational measures needed when investigating channel push branding. The overview of the brand in a distribution channel context established several important issues and concepts that had to be considered in this study, for example that the brand should be considered as a mental representation in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users. According to this concept, I
decided to use Aaker’s (2002) consumer based brand equity model as a framework to evaluate the studied brand. Shortcomings with measures included in this framework are discussed in the literature review, 3.5, page 18. The ability to trace important findings and conclusions backwards is important for both construct validity and reliability in scientific case studies (Yin 2009:123). From this point of view it would be preferable to identify all participating companies and interviewees, enabling a more detailed link between specific observations (Yin 2009:181). Distribution partners may however feel restrained when participating in the interviews if they knew that their answers would be analyzed by Konftel, both due to personal reasons and business strategy. The apparent risk of participants not speaking their minds would thus be significantly more problematic for the quality of this study than the anonymity. Hence, all interviewees are anonymous. My ambition has however been to establish a clear chain of evidence for the reader to observe, both through an inclusive description of the case study and a comprehensive presentation of the results.

4.4.2 Internal Validity

Internal validity concerns casual relationships whereby certain conditions are believed to lead to other conditions, distinguished from spurious relationships. Such relationships are mainly a concern for explanatory case studies, where specific events and relationships should be explained (Yin 2009:42). This case study is foremost exploratory, where I am seeking insights into the general nature of channel push branding. This insight concerns a contemporary set of events through the distribution channel, over which I have no control. What I can do is to observe and explore the nature of these events and develop an increased understanding of branding from the perspective of the Konftel brand. Nonetheless, it is evident that my analysis concerns certain inferences about the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on Aaker’s (2002) consumer based brand equity dimensions. Since this is a single case study it is difficult to exclude that my observations and conclusions are influenced by unknown conditions not addressed in this study. The approach to investigate a brand solely built through a channel push strategy is my tactic to avoid that unknown conditions are derived from a parallel branding strategy. I can thus investigate the push strategy independently from the pull strategy and draw inferences about what impact the push strategy has on the studied brand. With this said, there may still be other unknown conditions which have influenced the results. The brand loyalty is for example difficult to analyze because of the size and structure of non-responding customers. I have therefore, as recommended by Yin (2009:134), discussed rival explanations of the results when I suspect that other conditions are involved. Most prominent in the loyalty analysis, 7.4, page 53.

4.4.3 External Validity

External validity refers to the problem of knowing whether the findings from this study can be generalized beyond this specific case. It is often asserted that single case studies offer a poor basis of generalization, while large sample surveys are seen as the superior research design to achieve generalization. This is, according to Yin (2009:43) incorrect, since surveys relies on statistical generalization while case studies, as well as experiments, relies on analytical generalization. The analytical generalization does in this case concern important considerations that I have strived to discuss and raise in a broader context. Some can be linked to previous research which increases their generalizability (Yin 2009:41), while others are unique to this case study. To further investigate these findings and prove their relevance in a larger context I have recommended future investigations on several competing manufacturer brands through a
multiple case design. I believe that this approach is crucial in the understanding of channel push branding, and I am discussing specific issues for future research in chapter 8.2, page 58.

4.4.4 Reliability

The objective with reliability is to demonstrate that a study can be repeated with the same results (Yin 2009:45). I have in this report described all procedures in this case study, from planning to conclusions. This documentation makes it possible to evaluate my findings, not only based on what I have found, but also how and why I have found it. This documentation is also a prerequisite in actually being able to conduct the same study all over again (Yin 2009:45). In the case of interviews one could also argue that my personal interpretation of specific answers is crucial to the result. My ambition with the presentation of both Konftel and the interviews has been to incorporate as much quotes as possible, ensuring both an accurate and rich presentation, with limited interpretation through me. It would however be stupid of me to state that this presentation is entirely objective. After all, I have an interpretive view of science and social research. I make no secret of my generally positive attitude towards brands as a core strategic asset in marketing, which probably has influenced my interpretation of the studied brand. This influence is difficult to avoid, but I believe that my awareness of this attitude and its eventual effects on my findings has sharpened my reflections during the research process. In addition it is entirely possible for another investigator to audit my interview recordings and through these judge the results as well as my interpretation.
5. Konftel

The brand identity is a starting point in my case study, and a first step in investigating how the brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users. The presentation of Konftel’s brand identity is grounded in three sources; 1) promotional material, 2) a workshop with all regional sales managers 3) and discussions with the marketing department. The chapter will start with a short background of the company.

5.1 Company Background

Konftel is a small manufacturer of conference phones, located in Umeå, Sweden. The company has a long history, dating back to 1988 when a bank manager needed a conference telephone installed in the bank’s new office. Twenty years later, Konftel is Europe’s leading manufacturer of conference phones, with 35 employees - 29 located in Sweden and six located internationally. In January 2011 the company was acquired by the telecom giant Avaya, and is now a wholly-owned subsidiary of Avaya Inc. Konftel has nine models in their current product portfolio, including both analogue and digital phones, all equipped with a patented audio technology called “Omnisound”. Konftel has, according to the market intelligence agency Frost and Sullivan (2009), challenged the trend of an increasingly competitive and price sensitive market. The company has grown steadily and progressively approached the world market leader Polycom, both in terms of market share and business strategy. Frost and Sullivan are emphasizing three contributing factors to Konftel’s success:

- An unrelenting focus on building strong, productive and long-term relationships with strategic distribution channels in both Europe and North America.
- Extending the scope of international sales distribution, Konftel has also invested significantly in sales and marketing effort.
- Heavy investments in the vital research, development and design which underpin its portfolio of innovative audio conferencing products.

As seen in both Frost and Sullivan’s (2009) report and Konftel’s own business strategy, a main focus is the international distribution channel system. The strategy is to grow together with skilled distribution partners and as a result channel push efforts are the prioritized marketing strategy. The communication with end-users is limited, in practice mainly achieved through the website and few support errands. Konftel has numerous distributors and resellers worldwide, serving end-users in five main markets; 1) United Kingdom 2) United States, Canada 3) France, Spain, Italy, Benelux (FSIB) 3) Germany, Austria, Switzerland (DACH) 5) and Scandinavia. As a result, the brand is mainly built through the distribution channel system, a characteristic that is crucial to the purpose of this study and the main reason why I chose to study the Konftel brand. I will in the following section describe the brand identity.
5.2 Brand Identity

In order to achieve consistency and comparability between all observations, the brand identity is studied and presented through Aaker’s (2002) consumer based brand equity conceptualization. The dimensions of brand awareness and brand loyalty do however concern how the brand is perceived by the market, not how the manufacturer wants the brand to be perceived. As a result these dimensions are not considered in the brand identity presentation.

5.2.1 Brand Associations

The value of distance meetings and conference phones is according to Konftel primarily about saving time. Arguing that it is “fast and simple to hold spontaneous meetings without leaving the office or losing precious work time” or a great solution to “avoid traffic jams and delayed flights” (Konftel 2011). The use of conference phones is however also linked to a reduction in travelling costs, environmental friendliness and ease of decision-making. According to Konftel, these values provide the foundation of distance meetings, and the very purpose in why a business would need a conference phone. “Some meetings can be replaced with an audio conference, which is an easy and spontaneous way to meet. It has a lot of advantages such as time and cost savings as well as reduced carbon emissions” (Konftel 2011). When asked about the relative importance of these values, the marketing department emphasizes saving time and traveling costs as the most important values in today’s business climate.

In addition conference phones could be seen as a professional practice, a solution that all innovative and up-to date business must have. This is an association that Konftel aspires. Minor product placements have been featured in movies and success stories are published on the website. For example it is said that “The Konftel 300 played a discreet but key role in the presentation of the Nobel Prizes for physics, chemistry and economics in December 2009” (Konftel 2011). Overall Konftel communicates a quite clear image of how and by whom their products are used. A simplified description is white-collar businessmen holding conference meetings in their office with a Konftel in the middle of the conference table. This is a consistent description in the promotional material, confirmed by both sales managers and the marketing department.

The organizational identity is an extremely important part of Konftel’s brand identity. The origin of the company is described in a book, called The Sound of a Company – the history of Konftel (Konftel 2008) and provides a detailed description of the founders, the company and the organizational culture. The marketing department do however believe that the communication of the organization and its origin could be improved, and the sales representatives argue that such associations should be utilized more to differentiate the company in an international perspective. Another core value for Konftel is trust. Distribution partners should feel confident in their choice of manufacturer and the end-users should feel confident in their choice of conference phone. The organizational size and culture are seen as a key in achieving trust, Konftel perceive themselves as “…a big company that doesn’t feel big. We are good at listening. We think that is the key to success” (Konftel 2011). Both the marketing department and sales managers emphasize flexibility and the willingness to go “the extra mile for the customer” as superior attributes to bigger more administrative competitors. The company is also highlighting the importance of a
broad portfolio of products, which is illustrated through the company catchphrase “conference phones for every situation” (Konftel 2011).

Brand personality is not greatly emphasized in the promotional material. The marketing department does however refer to the personality as a “humble cockiness”, which is best translated into competent and sincere out of the five brand personality types. Konftel is in other words aspiring to be perceived as successful in their market, reliable, and knowledgeable and at the same time honest, down to earth and cheerful. Interpersonal relations are an important part of the brand identity and a crucial element in the business strategy. The focus is relationship building with distribution partners. “Our strategy is to grow together with skilled partners on the markets in question – not to be leviathans who dictate terms” (Konftel 20011). These relationships are nursed continuously in the daily business, but also boosted through events combining business and pleasure, targeted to important distribution partners. Sales managers are present in all major regions building regional relationships with both distributors and resellers. These relationships concern sales support, marketing support and technical support.

5.2.2 Perceived quality

Konftel is highly concerned with the functional benefits of their products. The marketing department and the promotional material emphasize sound quality as the main benefit of Konftel’s conference phones. All models are equipped with the Omnisound audio technology, which is said to provide a “crystal clear sound”. This technology is frequently promoted and the key attribute in the promotional material, “Good sound quality is critical for keeping concentration levels high and meetings efficient” “It is essential to have top-quality sound for efficient and confusion free meetings” (Konftel 2011). Other important benefits are flexibility, additional features and warranty handling. Additional features are for example functions that facilitate user friendliness as well as functions that provide enhanced value, for example the ability to record conference calls.

The relative importance of these benefits does according to the sales representatives differ in different markets. The sound is for example emphasized by the Scandinavian sales manager, while additional features and warranty are emphasized in the North American and German market. This is according to the sales managers an adaption to the competition, where the main competitor Polycom is seen to own the sound benefit in North America and Germany. Both the marketing department and the regional sales managers agree that the warranty is handling important and unique to Konftel, this is also emphasized on the website where it is said that “Konftel offers the best warranty in the market. If your Konftel product is defective simply return it and we’ll gladly replace it with a new one” (Konftel 2011).
6. Presentation of Interviews

This chapter presents all interviews divided into groups of distributors, resellers and end-users. The presentation follows the same logic as the brand equity framework to ensure that the empirical data is synthesized and follows a clear line of argumentation. To ensure anonymity all interviewees are referred to a she, while all names mentioned in quotes are referred to Sven.

6.1 Distributors

Three distributors were interviewed, two from the Scandinavian market and one from the DACH market. One is promoting several brands of conference phones, while two only promote Konftel. Their sales of conference phones differ significantly, one distributor selling about 70 units per month while another sells over 500 units per month. All of the interviewees had the position of key account manager.

6.1.1 Brand Awareness

All distributors mentioned Polycom first when asked to name two additional brands of conference phones. The second brand varied, two naming ClearOne and one Cisco. When presented with two pictures of conference phones all recognized both the brands and the models. The answers were quick and without hesitation. The recognition seemed to be easy and the interviewees said “oh, of course” or “that’s easy” referring to the pictures.

6.1.2 Brand Associations

When presented with key values on screen, all distributors gave their first attention towards saving time. One interviewee stated “I would say that saving time and cost is important, with recession and so on”, while another said, “I don’t know if it is easier to take decisions but it is definitely faster”. One interviewee argued that it is a “mix of all of them” and that saving time is an overarching value while saving costs, professional practice and, ease of decision making are derived from the fact that you save time. Environmental friendliness is the least emphasized value, but one interviewee argued that “environmental friendliness can be important to specific customers that are into that”.

All distributors held that they often discuss these values with the resellers - “they need some arguments to discuss with the end customers”. Two interviewees did however slide towards functional attributes when discussing their communication to resellers, with transitions such as “but I would say that sound quality is more important”. When reflecting upon the typical Konftel user and usage situation, size was clearly emphasized - “it is more a question of the size of the company” - “probably quite large corporations with several different branches”. The use was assumed to be spread over a wide variety of sectors, but one interviewee thought it was slightly more popular in legal and financial businesses. All distributors did however agree that conference phones probably was used more to communicate internally between different offices than to customers.

When asking about their value of selling Konftel one interviewee emphasized that “we value Konftel very high. Konftel is a very good business for us, they have good margins”. The other two were somewhat less enthusiastic, but said that the margins are “OK” and “good”. The
products are seen as somewhat difficult to sell. One interviewee argued that resellers “have other businesses that are more important to them, so conference phones are not their priority”. Another stated that “I actually believe that most of our sales comes from enquires, I mean when the customer comes to the reseller”, she continues “I believe that the resellers are quite bad in selling to more people than those actually asking for it”.

The knowledge about the company is inclusive. Two of the interviewees had read the book about Konftel, and one of them seemed to remember a lot, for example the story about how the company was founded. All distributors knew that the company focuses on conference phones and that the head office is located in Umeå. One interviewee gladly said “I know some people there” while another said that Konftel has several international sales offices. All interviewees were confident that they could trust Konftel - “no question about that”, one referring to a specific sales manager, “I know I can trust Sven”. The opinions were more restrained when elaborating the product portfolio and the innovativeness. After some thought one interviewee said ”I mean it’s not rocket science, they have stood still for some time”, while another argued “they have been quite slow on the development side, keeping up with the market, but they are going in the right direction”. Referred to the product portfolio one interviewee argued that “they should remove some models, in consideration to the technology movement” while another said that “it might be ok in terms of audio, but I believe that there are some products missing, especially video conferencing”. None of the distributors had a clear preference for the relative importance of these statements, but when I insisted trust seemed to be slightly more important than innovativeness and a broad product portfolio.

All distributors said that they have a close relationship with Konftel, mentioning specific individuals - “Sven is the first I call when I have a problem” - “Sven and I have a personal conference meeting each week”. The general experience with sales support, marketing support, and product support is good. When thinking about it for a while, two interviewees would like to see more leads, while the third would like more co-advertising. When discussing their communication with resellers one distributor deviates significantly, with an extensive enthusiasm in helping their resellers. “We did an end customer survey last year to scan the market...we try to try to hook up resellers with customers; we give them a lot of leads”. The other two interviewees argued that they try to help their resellers as much as possible, but are clearly not as enthusiastic when talking about it. Co-advertising together with resellers is in general seen as positive, but not without problems - “We do help resellers with advertising, but not that much. It can be effective but is also hard to get it right” - “it has been good; maybe not in short-term, but seen in the long run”.

When presented to the personality scale, competence was addressed first and without hesitation by all interviewees. As a second choice two choose sincere and one sophisticated. Again specific individuals were mentioned - “Sven is competent” and it was clear that the choice of personality type mostly concerned interpersonal relations with representatives from Konftel.

6.1.3 Perceived Quality

The overall experience with the function of Konftel’s products was positive. Two interviewees praised Konftel’s sound quality while one argued that “most of my resellers would give Polycom the number one place in terms of sound quality, but I think that Konftel is better in all these
attribute except performance”. This distributor also deviated from the other two in emphasizing additional features as the most important attribute when talking to resellers, specifically mentioning the conference manager and the ability to record. The other two clearly stated that performance and sound quality were significantly more important than other attributes - “The sound quality is extremely important, and Konftel has exceptionally good sound”. The design was mentioned by one distributor as important when discussing with resellers. Conformance quality, reliability, and durability were significantly less discussed and one interviewee summarized them by stating “regarding these attributes I have nothing to mark on”.

It is clear that functional benefits are widely discussed with resellers. Two distributors have continuous contact with their resellers - “we discuss this a lot...we need to discuss the USB (unique selling point) with our resellers”. The third interviewee is more reactive - “we discuss this when the resellers come to us with enquires about their needs”. These attributes are now and then discussed with representatives from Konftel, but not nearly as often as they are discussed with the resellers. When it comes to the market leader, two interviewees mentioned Polycom, at least in popularity. One of them is insecure and argues that it might be Cisco or Siemens in terms of market share. One distributor clearly stated that “Konftel is the market leader in our market, definitely”.

6.1.4 Brand Loyalty

All interviewees are satisfied with their overall experience with Konftel, two interviewees state that they are “very satisfied” and one that “it is a great supplier”. Konftel is described as a company with fast service - “always ready to help”. One distributor does however mention that it would be beneficial if Konftel had been more active in their communication to end-users - “their presence at an end-user level could be better”.

The demand from resellers and end-users is mentioned as the most important motivation to market a particular brand or product. One of the interviewees who only promote Konftel argue that “Konftel is well known among our resellers and if we would sell for example Polycom they must add something really extra and provide much higher margins...we would destroy our own advantage if we put Konftel in competition with another brand”. Another distributor has the same motivation but choose to promote several brands - “Polycom is the market leader and Konftel is number two. So we market them”. This interviewee does however emphasise that she in reality would like to recommend Konftel more often - “If the resellers are open in their choice I always recommend Konftel... but unfortunately a lot of resellers only offer Polycom equipment”.

6.2 Resellers

Six resellers were interviewed; one from each of the five main markets, except Scandinavia with two participating companies. Two resellers promote several brands of conference phones, while four only promote Konftel. Their sales of conference phones differ significantly, two selling fewer than 10 units per month, two selling 20-50 per month and another two selling 50-80 per month. Among the interviewees, four have the position of sales director, while two have the position of office manager.
6.2.1 Brand Awareness

Five resellers mentioned Polycom first and without hesitation when asked to name two additional brands of conference phones. The second brand varied, two mentioned clear one, while the others mentioned Avaya, Cisco and Panasonic. One reseller only knew Konftel. When presented with two pictures of conference phones five resellers recognized the brands and two both models. In most cases the answers were without hesitation, for example one that rapidly stated “yes of course, it is a Polycom sound station and a wireless Konftel 300”.

6.2.2 Brand Associations

When presented with key values on screen, five resellers gave their first attention towards saving time or travelling costs, while one first addressed environmental friendliness. These three values were at some point addressed by all interviewees - “obviously this is what we intend to push, especially saving travelling costs” - “I know it’s a big thing this environmental friendliness, but saving time and travelling costs is more important these days for our customers”. Only one reseller reflected upon ease of decision making arguing that “we use it ourselves and ease of decision-making is the best value for us”. Conference phones as a professional practice was also only addressed by one interviewee, stating that “the sound is professional”.

One reseller does not use these values at all when selling conference phones and was thus sliding more towards the functionality - “customers that want to buy a conference unit have often already established one of these values by themselves. I position Konftel with the overall quality of the product”. Five resellers said that they communicate these values to end-users, but with some restrictions - “I discuss the travelling and saving time, but most of the time our customers know what they want anyway”. Three resellers stated that they at some point have discussed these values with the distributor, but it is definitely not a major topic - “I remembered once when we discussed the travelling cost”. When reflecting upon the typical Konftel user and usage situation, all resellers emphasized companies with multiple locations - “I believe that it’s mostly conferences between different office locations” – “I would say that it’s about communication oversees to other offices”. Size was emphasized by four interviewees, two mentioning large companies, and two small to medium companies. The use was assumed to be spread over a wide variety of sectors, with government institutions mentioned by all resellers. Other sectors mentioned where banks, legal firms, consultants and healthcare corporations. One reseller did however clearly emphasize the wide variety of usage - “I’ve actually sold them to some church communities; they use conference calls to get the word out...to take it into the home of elderly people”. Furthermore four resellers specifically emphasized that conference phones probably was used more to communicate internally between different offices than to customers - “communication with other branches oversees is definitely the main usage”.

When asking about their value of selling Konftel five resellers stated that they were satisfied with the margins, while one stated that “Konftel doesn’t offer the best margins; we get better conditions from Polycom”. Two interviewees did however specifically complain about the competition from web shops - "I am doing all the work and they get all the profit”. The ease of sell was in general the most important value - “the biggest factor for me is the ease of sale overall”. Konftel’s products were seen as rather difficult to sell, mainly because of low awareness, both in terms of conference phones as a concept and Konftel as a brand - “If the customers listens and understands the USB it is easy to sell Konftel, otherwise Polycom is easier
because everyone knows that model” - “Konftel is a difficult sell; it is tie on price and some people get use to a brand name (referring to Polycom)”. One of the Scandinavian resellers was satisfied with the awareness and argued that “it is easy to sell Konftel to customers wanting a conference phone… it is more difficult to convince people that they actually need one”.

The knowledge about the company is inclusive. All resellers but one knew that Konftel is a Swedish company and two knew that the head office is located in Umeå. Two of the interviewees had been working with Konftel for over 10 years, and had also read the book about Konftel. Accordingly they knew a lot about the company - “I have worked with Konftel for many years. I know Konftel quite well, I know the background and how they work. What do you want to know?” Three resellers said it was a small company and two mentioned the recent acquisition by Avaya. All resellers were confident that they could trust Konftel - “I know I can trust Konftel, they have always stood by your values”. Four interviewees referred to a specific sales manager - “I can certainly trust Sven. It is the key…I don’t like to carry products that I can’t trust in the manufacturer”. The opinions were more restrained when elaborating the innovativeness, with only two resellers confidently stating that Konftel is innovative. One skeptical interviewee stated that “they are not exceptionally innovative, and it has been the same stuff for quite some time now” while another said “I am waiting to see what they are going to do on the video conferencing side”. Only one reseller agreed that the company had a broad product portfolio. On the other hand most of the resellers placed the broad portfolio as the least important of these statements - ”It’s not that important, it’s not a product category where you need a lot of different units” - “it’s not the widest portfolio but it is cleverer…all products they have, there is a need for those products…that’s a good way of thinking”. In terms of the relative importance of these statements, trust was in general seemed to be the most important value, while innovativeness in general was slightly more important than a broad product portfolio. One interviewee did however place a broad product portfolio first and innovation last.

All resellers said that they have a good relationship with Konftel, foremost concerning specific individuals - “Sven, I really like that guy, he is honest, straight forward and creative” - “I meet with Sven about once a month”. The relationship with distributors is however often closer than with Konftel. Contact with the distributor is quite frequent and concerns daily business, while contact with Konftel often concerns bigger issues. One interviewee told that a certain manager recently left their distributor, and sadly stated that “we lost a lot of knowledge when he left…we want to go as close to the distributor as possible, but the distance increased when he left”. The overall experience with sales support and marketing support is seen as acceptable, but not superior. All resellers are complaining about few leads, both from Konftel and the distributor - “leads are so effective, but we only get a few” – “we hardly get any leads from Konftel or our distributors, maybe one or two a Year. If we got those more often I would get the feeling that they trust us more”. Two interviewees did however mention that they had visited customers together with a sales manager from Konftel - “Sven and I talked market opportunities, and he visited these opportunities with me…maybe it wasn’t the most best financial transaction, but feelingwise it was a very good transaction”. Moreover three resellers were sceptical towards the marketing support - “I don’t know anyone to talk to regarding marketing…I would like to see a direct touch marketer” - “honestly I hope to see a little bit more support on the marketing side. I expect people to not passively, but actively send materials to me…Supporting me and teasing me to do a campaign, not wait for me to do it”. Co-advertising was appreciated by three resellers - “we have done co-advertising together with the distributor, it was quite successful…but we have
hoped to see a bit more funding, we need better brand name recognition”. Two resellers had deliberately avoided co-advertising - “we don’t advertise, that’s not how we work”, “co-advertising hasn’t been effective for us”. Support and warranty handling is often done in direct contact with Konftel and the overall experience is very good - “We have never had a negative experience” - “No problems on the warranty side, all problems are solved immediately”. One interviewee is however somewhat restricted and states that “local support does sometimes not have the expertise needed”. In general product support is seen as slightly more important than sales- and marketing support, with several interviewees arguing that they prefer to sell products in which “you know you don’t need to spend time on angry customers, warranty discussions and such things”.

When presented to the personality scale, competence was addressed without hesitation by all interviewees. As a second choice four choose sincere and two sophisticated. The choice of personality type seemed to be based both on products and interpersonal relations, some referring to Konftel employees being “honest”, “loyal” and “competent”, while others referred to the products as “sophisticated”, “professional” or “competent”.

6.2.3 Perceived Quality

All interviewees had inclusive knowledge about the function of Konftel’s products, and the overall experience with them was positive. The sound quality was mentioned as the most important attribute by four resellers. Some interviewees praised the sound - “it has great sound compared with Polycom...people can be further away from the unit” while others said that Konftel was “alongside other brands” or “equal to Polycom” in terms of sound quality. Other emphasized attributes were additional features, design and warranty. In fact conformance quality, reliability, durability, and serviceability were all discussed alongside the warranty. All resellers appreciated the warranty, and several interviewees referred to it as “superior to the competition”. Additional features were seen as an important attribute to three interviewees – “I always push the features...that’s the good thing about Konftel”, while the remaining found them as minor benefits - “we love these features, but actually I don’t think it’s that important to the customers, it’s more about sound”. The design was mentioned by four resellers, and often compared to the design of Polycom - “It’s it an unusual shape compared to the normal ones” (referring to Polycom) - “it has great appeal, I love the design of Konftel over the one of Polycom”.

All resellers stated that they frequently discuss these issues with their customers. One interviewee confidently stated “Oooh, yes, a lot, when the customers are interested in it I always point out these benefits”, and another said “Yes of course that’s what we do”. Four resellers have continuous contact with their distributors regarding functional discussions – “we have scheduled meetings where we discuss this, among other things” while two have limited contact - “If I see a new product and ask about it they tell me, but that’s about it”. One interviewee argued that “we don’t talk much about this with our distributors, but sometimes with Konftel”. The contact with Konftel regarding functional matters was otherwise limited. All resellers said that they had discussed it, but only on a few occasions - “maybe when a new product comes out”. When it comes to the market leader, five resellers argued that it is Polycom, while one Scandinavian reseller held that it was Konftel. Awareness and popularity were often assumed to be closely linked - “Polycom is the strongest brand in our market. People buy it because they know it, they
don’t look outside that brand” - “they only chose Polycom because they know it...that’s painful, in that situation I would rather sell Konftel to be honest”.

6.2.4 Brand Loyalty

All resellers are satisfied with their overall experience with Konftel, several interviewees gladly state that they are “very satisfied”, and one even said that “Konftel would get 95 out of 100. I am extremely satisfied”. When elaborated, two resellers criticized the competition from internet shops and argued that “Konftel must change strategy in this aspect”. Two other resellers would like to have more direct contact with Konftel, arguing that “They should have customer meetings twice a year...I think it would help to have a bit inside information from both sides”. Warranty, margins and awareness is frequently mentioned issues when it comes to the motivation to recommend a particular brand or product. Margins were addressed by all resellers, but not in any way as a determinant factor - “the margins can be sky high, but if we need a lot of service it is not worth it”. Several resellers thought of the warranty as an assurance that Konftel is a trustworthy partner - “we were tired to run around with warranty handling with Polycom...and not only did Konftel say that they were better at that, they followed through on it”. The awareness and the demand from end-users is also a frequently mentioned motivation. All resellers but one argued that Polycom is far ahead in that aspect - “People want what they are familiar with”. One interviewee was extraordinary harsh when he said “don’t take this wrong, but I am like a hooker. I chose the brand with the easiest sell, and for the moment that is Polycom. If someone is unknown with conference phone, my heart lies with Konftel”. In fact all resellers, including those promoting several brands, held Konftel as their favourite brand. However, many of them argued that it often is easier to sell a brand that most people recognize - “about 60 percent of my customers are known to conference phones and these customers often want a Polycom...to the 40 percent that is new to this business, I always recommend Konftel, and they like it”. Although Konftel was their favourite brand, none of the interviewees had a favourite model. Most interviewees said that they recommend the model that suits the user needs, and that this often end up to be 300W or 300IP.

6.3 End-users

Nine end-users were interviewed; one from UK, two from North America, one from FSIB, two from DACH and three from Scandinavia. The participating companies are operating in several different sectors, including, law, financial, media, manufacturing and utility services. The majority had 2-5 conference phones in their office, while two companies only had one unit, and another two six or more units. Among the interviewees, seven have the position of IT-manager, while two have the position of office manager.

6.3.1 Brand Awareness

Seven end-users mentioned Polycom when asked to name two additional brands of conference phones, these answers were quick and without hesitation. Even when thinking for a while only three interviewees could come up with a second brand; two named ClearOne and one named Panasonic. Two interviewees did only know Konftel. When presented with two pictures of conference phones all end-users recognised Konftel, while six recognized Polycom. About half of these could also name the specific models. The confidence in these answers varied, some answered without hesitation – “yes I’ve had both, it’s a Polycom sound station and a Konftel 300”, while others almost guessed – “hmm, could that be a polycom? I think so”. Three
interviewees have known Konftel for over 10 years – “I first used Konftel 15 years ago, when we searched for this solution at my previous company, since then I have only used Konftel”. The majority has however only known Konftel for one or two years. Among these half of them found it on the internet and half had been recommended to it by a reseller - “We were looking for a conference phone and we asked our normal supplier if they had one, and they sent us information about Konftel”.

6.3.2 Brand Associations

The first spontaneous response from all interviewees indicated that the single most important value provided by conference phones is the ability to talk to partners and other branches. When presented with key values on screen, several interviewees had to stop and really think about these values - “this is a natural part of our business. I have never thought about these values such a way, but of course its saves us a lot of time”. When reflecting upon these values, all interviewees emphasized saving time and travelling costs, but several interviewees did also mention the convenience with less travelling – “our management don’t want to fly so much”. Ease of decision making was also often addressed in relation to saving time - “in the financial industry it is very, very important that you can spread your information fast. Then conference phones are great, I mean it takes two minutes to set a conference meeting”. Professional practice and environmental friendliness was sparsely discussed and seemed to be significantly less important relative to saving time, travelling costs and ease of decision making.

Only one end-user said that they had discussed these values with their reseller. Most of the end-users described that they discussed these issues within the organization, followed by a decision to search for a suitable conference phone - “I did not discuss this with our reseller, all the travel cost talk was in house” – “we did not discuss this with the reseller. We contacted them and said; we need a conference phone”. The typical usage situation varied within the companies, most meetings were said to include two people in the room with two or three connections, while it on rare occasions could be over ten people in the room and several connections. Most of the connections were to individuals speaking in ordinary phones, but some connections were also made to similar units in another conference room. The frequency was varied, with everything from several times a day to once a week – “we have conference meetings about twice or three a week” - “it differs from region to region, some has five a week and others five a day”. Only two end-users said that they were communicating with clients and customers through conference phones. All others clearly emphasized other offices and individuals– “we use them every day, we are a multinational company with several offices” – “We have a lot of employees in different places that we need to keep in touch with”.

The knowledge about the company foremost concerns the location. After some consideration all end-users knew that Konftel is a Swedish company, but only one, mentioned northern Sweden. Two interviewees stood out with a somewhat more detailed reflection. One elaborated the business focus and said that “they only sell conference phones. I think that’s important. It is not a warehouse with a lot of different products; it’s the professionalism of conference phones”. Another interviewee considered the question carefully and said - “I know it’s Swedish, with several international offices. I have looked through the website...I had more information in my head before, sorry, but I know I felt confident to buy this equipment”. When presented with three statements about the company, all end-users were somewhat restricted. Five interviewees clearly
stated that they had too limited knowledge to discuss these issues – “Actually I don’t know. I have never been in contact with the company”. Out of the four end-users that had an opinion all felt that they could trust Konftel - “yes, what I have experienced” - ”they seem trustworthy, we have had no issues”. The opinions were more restrained when elaborating the innovativeness and the product portfolio. Only one end-user confidently stated that Konftel is innovative - “I have read that the sound quality is really innovative, its advanced technology behind their latest models”. Many comments were rather indifferent – “It’s not a company that launches a lot of new products, but when they bring a new product they are very innovative professional” - “It feels like they are keeping up with the technology, but I can’t say more than that”. All four interviewees that had opinions about the company felt that they were satisfied with the product portfolio at the time of purchase, but none of them stressed the importance of abroad portfolio – “I had a few possibilities when I bought the product, but nothing overwhelming” - “Not that broad, I mean its relative, it is definitely a niche company”. In terms of the relative importance of these statements, trust and innovativeness was equally emphasized. The interviewees did however often slide towards the product when talking about these statements, for example one stating that “oh, yes. We feel that we can trust Konftel. That’s important...we have never had any issues with our phones”.

All interviewees had visited the website, either to download updates or to search for information or support (Author: It should be mentioned that the contact list I have used concerns customers that have registered their products through the website). The experience with the website was good and mentioned by several interviewees when talking about the company – “I have downloaded updates, which worked really well” – “the support at the website is terrific”. Two interviewees had been in personal contact with Konftel. One concerned a particular order - “Konftel helped me to order phones to these offices, and it was a fast and very nice and helpful contact” and one concerned both information and support –“I have actually called them three times...for support and information about new products. It worked very well”. The end-users’ contact with resellers varies significantly. About half of the end-users have a key account reseller where they purchase all IT-equipment. These relationships are often quite close – “we speak with them quite often and has a great contact”. One of the interviewees even went to the reseller in person to test Konftel in their conference room – “They used the same phone in their conferences. So I had a speech with my manager from there and we thought that the sound quality was very good”. The other half bought it online, except one who had been contacted by the reseller. These interviewees had limited contact with their resellers – “it works and everything is fine so we don’t need to talk to them”. One interviewee did even argue that they avoided talking with resellers altogether – “Our last purchase of conference phones (another brand) was from a reseller, and that was a huge failure. It felt like it didn’t add any value, so we decided to buy it from an internet-shop”.

Most end-users were somewhat restricted when presented to the personality scale – “oh, it’s hard to see a personality” - “really, I don’t know about that”. When I insisted that they should choose one or two, competence was the most frequently selected personality. Three end-users were more confident in their choice; among these the two interviewees that had known Konftel for more than 10 years. These three did all choose competence and sophistication, foremost based on the products - “I would say competent and sophisticated, the phone looks smart” – “Competent and sophisticated are key words, that’s a good description”.

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6.3.3 Perceived Quality

The knowledge about the function of Konftel’s products was good, and two interviewees could also compare with their previous experience from Polycom. The overall experience was positive and all interviewees were satisfied with the product - “For me as an IT-manager, the best thing I can say about an equipment is that it works and Konftel works well without any problems” - “We are extremely satisfied...the president of the company was testing it out and everything was right on the money”. The most frequently mentioned functional attributes were the sound quality and the usability. Sound quality was mentioned by most end-users, and their experience were solely positive – “the sound quality is great, it is very clear on both sides” – “we are really dependent on the quality of the call and Konftel is very good in that respect”. Several interviewees also emphasized the usability, since their work became easier if all employees understood the equipment - “it is very much easier than Polycom...we had two Polycoms and that was hell for me, now it is a five minute job, not a 30 minute job as it was with Polycom”. Additional features were in general not seen as a determinant factor, but the ability to record, the wireless connection as well as the IP connection was addressed by several interviewees as great features. The design was only mentioned briefly by four end-users and they referred to it as “expensive”, “smart”, “a little bit spacey”, and “not apple, but ok”. When conformance quality, reliability, durability, and serviceability were touched upon it concerned the warranty. Four end-users mentioned the warranty as an assurance that the quality is good - “Konftel back their products twice as long as the competitors”.

Five end-users said that they had discussed these issues with their reseller - “It had high recommendation from the reseller” – “They said that it was the best on the market in terms of sound” – “I tested it at the reseller’s office and we talked about it”. Four interviewees described a purchase process in which they personally searched for conference phones on the internet, followed by a simple order from the reseller without any discussion - “I read some reviews and Konftel 300 series had really good recommendations” - “I did not discuss anything with them since I called them up, it was more of a straight buy from my side”. These end-users primarily found their information on internet shops, but three interviewees said that they visited Konftel’s own site before purchase and one of them also called Konftel to retrieve more information – “I prefer to talk directly to the manufacturer”. When it comes to the market leader, six interviewees said it is Polycom while two said it is Konftel. One end-user did only know Konftel. Their choice was foremost based on awareness – “most people know Polycom here” “Konftel is well known here, they have been around for a while”. One interviewee compared Polycom to Kleenex, a brand that has become the generic description of tissues in several countries. “Everyone here associates conference phones with Polycom, it’s like Kleenex... but I’m not a Kleenex kind of guy, I do not need to go with the most popular one”.

6.3.4 Brand Loyalty

All end-users are satisfied with their overall experience with Konftel, and several interviewees are particularly enthusiastic – “very satisfied, I can’t come up with anything negative right now” – “we and especially the management who works with it are very happy about Konftel” – “very satisfied. I have nothing to mark on”. After a while, two interviewees mention the price as somewhat expensive – “Konftel is rather expensive, at least for small companies”. Another interviewee argued that “I was expecting that they would have more contact with customers...this was the first contact I got from Konftel after my registration and that was two years ago. They
should at least once in a year inform about the status regarding their products”. This was however the only negative comments regarding the overall experience. All end-users confidently stated that they would contact the same reseller and by a Konftel when they need a new conference phone – “Yes of course...if we had more conference rooms I think we would buy a second and a third one” - Yes, I would, definitely”. Moreover they are all keen to recommend Konftel to others and three interviewees has already actively done that. “In discussions regarding conference phones I have always mentioned Konftel” - “When I say that we use Konftel, people ask me what Konftel? Then I give them the link, and many people say; oh that’s cool, its look better than Polycom. And I say that it also is a better phone”.
7. Analysis

I will in this chapter present my analysis of the Konftel brand, from the brand identity, through distributors and resellers, down to end-users. The analysis is grounded in empirical observations from the brand identity and the interviews as well as linkages to previous research presented in the literature review. The presentation follows the same logic as the brand equity framework to ensure a clear line of argumentation.

7.1 Brand Awareness

The awareness dimension is somewhat unusual in this case study since it only concerns existing distribution partners and end-customers. The awareness dimension is thus not applied to investigate market awareness of the Konftel brand, rather to investigate this awareness in relation to competing brands and its influence on distribution partners. The fact that Polycom is mentioned by almost all interviewees shows that Polycom has strong recall across distributors, resellers and end-users. The recognition of both Polycom and Konftel is also obvious to most interviewees despite that many of them only sell or use Konftel. These findings indicate that Konftel has a weaker global awareness compared to the main competitor Polycom. The awareness in the Scandinavian market is however significantly stronger, and this is an indication that it is possible to achieve strong awareness and a market leading position through a strict channel push strategy. An inclusive analysis of the differences between these markets is beyond the purpose of this study, but it is safe to assume that Konftel’s presence in the Scandinavian market is more intense and mature compared to international entries, combined with a weaker competition from alternative brands.

The lack of awareness compared to the leading brand is perceived as a problem to both distributors and resellers. These findings are coherent with Chiou et al. (2010) who state that increased awareness and demand from the end-users significantly improve resellers’ perceived value of selling a manufacturer brand. This study does however highlight a more complex relation between awareness and the ease of selling a minor brand. According to the resellers it is more difficult to sell a minor brand when the customer is known to the product category, i.e. conference phones, while it is significantly easier to sell a minor brand to a customer that is new to conference phones. Such behaviour implies that people known with the product category are aware of Polycom, while people unknown to the category lack any kind of brand recall or recognition, which make them more responsive to reseller recommendations. This behaviour do also emphasize that conference phones are a niche business and that the awareness, as for today, is limited to people known with the product category. A potentially effective course of action for a minor brand in this situation would be to target new customers in a growing market, rather than convert experienced customers from a competing brand.

Brand awareness is often asserted to be achieved through consumer pull efforts, such as advertising, public relations and sponsorships (Aaker 2002:16; Keller 2003:69). Konftel’s extensive scope of international distribution has however resulted in a potential customer base that simply is too large and widespread to effectively reach through wide-ranging pull efforts. However, niche brands do not necessarily require high recognition among a substantial group of customers, if they have high recall among their respective loyal customer groups (Aaker
I am therefore arguing that a strict channel push strategy is more suitable for niche brands, than for brands requiring substantial recognition, for example fast moving consumer goods. Leads, seems to be of major importance for distribution partners since it offers direct business opportunities and short term revenues. Awareness is however not created by such sales support, and it is therefore important to push marketing support to distribution partners that triggers and facilitates their marketing initiatives. Although product and sales support are the focus, marketing support is appreciated by most distribution partners in this case, not only in terms of co-advertising, but also active assistance in expertise and information. Seen from the perspective of a minor brand in a growing market, this should be a suitable strategy to gain awareness from customers, previously unknown to the product category.

7.2 Brand Associations

A brand should be built on a unique set of associations that the brand owner aspires to create and maintain within the target audience (Aaker 2002:68). The strength, uniqueness and favorability of these associations are in turn crucial elements in how the brand is built in the minds of customers (Keller 2003:70). This study indicates that brand associations are difficult to communicate through a strict channel push strategy. The value of conference phones has, in general, been overshadowed by functional attributes, while the brand as an organisation and a person grows within the distribution channel, to eventually weaken in the communication to the end-users.

First of all, it is important to mention that the overall communication seems to be quite consistent. Although limited efforts devoted to the actual value of conference phones both Konftel and distribution partners seem to have a similar main focus, namely saving time and travelling costs. A consistency does however not necessarily imply a deliberate course of action, rather as likely an unaware consensus that saving time is the most important value. So, why is the value overshadowed by functional attributes? Many customers have already discussed these values before contacting the reseller, which make functional attributes the prioritized topic of discussion. The functional focus is natural and suitable in these individual cases, but can be problematic seen as a whole, especially for a minor brand in a growing market. I have argued that it probably is more effective, for a minor brand, to target new customers, rather than convert experienced customers from a competing brand. This strategy will however be difficult to achieve if the actual value of the product is overshadowed by functional attributes. Although functional attributes are essential they have their limitations. Many are easy to copy, others fail to differentiate, and all require rational decision making behavior (Aaker 2002:96). We also know that emotional and intangible values are highly influential, also in B2B markets (Lynch & Chernatony 2004:408, 415; Kotler and Pfoertsch 2007:357). The inability to effectively communicate these values could thus prove to be a critical problem in a strict channel push strategy.

Organisational associations are in general well achieved in the distribution channel. These associations do however tend to fade in the communication to end-users. All end-users knew that Konftel is a Swedish company, but less than half of them could elaborate their reasoning further. Trust is the organisational attribute that has been best achieved through distributors, resellers and end-users. This is also in general the most important organisational attribute, both to Konftel and to the interviewees. Trust seems to be closely linked to interpersonal relationships and the brand
as a person. Although limited attention on brand personality in the promotion material, all distribution partners confidently point out competence as a main brand personality. This in contrast to the end-users, who were somewhat restricted when presented to the personality scale. This indicates that interpersonal relationships within the distribution channel automatically create brand personality associations. The end-users do not possess these relations and are thus much more reluctant in pointing out a brand personality. This finding is further strengthen by the fact that two of the end-users that had been in direct contact with Konftel, also were more confident in discussing the brand personality. These findings are coherent with current research stating that brands can be personified through human representatives which influence the brand preference (Gupta et al. 2010B:401) and strengthen business-to-business branding (Gupta et al. 2010A:66; Ballantyne & Aitken 2007:367; Mudambi 2002:527). This study shows that interpersonal relationships are the cornerstone of brand building in a strict channel push strategy, in which the brand is sustained through personal interaction. This reasoning is reversed to recent findings arguing that strong brands facilitate identification, trust, loyalty and satisfaction between manufacturers and channel members (Ahearne 2010:91; Chiou et al. 2010:437; Glynn et al. 2007:406). I am not saying that brands are unable to facilitate these relationship traits, but I am saying that these relationships are more important to the brand than the brand is to the relationships.

The broad product portfolio and the innovativeness have not been as successfully communicated as trust. The interviews shows highly varied reflections about Konftel’s achievements in these areas, which is surprising since the importance of a broad and innovative portfolio is illustrated through the company catchphrase “conference phones for every situation” (Konftel 2011). This phrase is highly exposed in the promotional material, but has neither been achieved among distribution partners nor among end-users. This is an indication that it is easier to build brand associations which can be directly performed by individuals while other intangible organizational, and product oriented values requires deliberate promotional efforts. This could explain why trust and competence is a consistent brand association in this case study, while, perceived value, innovativeness and a broad product portfolio are weak and inconsistent associations. I would thus agree with Gupta et al. (2010B:73) in stating that the key to brand personification in business-to-business markets is field management with a human representing the brand and differentiating it from traditional marketing (Gupta et al. 2010B:73). For example, Konftel emphasize the willingness to go “the extra mile for the customer”, when followed through this is an extremely effective approach in building trust. Innovativeness on the other hand cannot simply be shown by brand representatives without being deliberately argued and discussed upon within the relationship.

Most distribution partners in this study prefer to communicate their own preferences over manufacturer promotion. So, if distribution partners are somewhat indifferent to an association such as innovativeness or a broad portfolio, they won’t communicate it to their customers. This behavior highlights a major difference between channel push and consumer pull efforts, namely the limited control a manufacturer has over what is communicated by their distribution partners. Pull efforts, especially advertising, are easy to control in message and execution, while push efforts are dependent on values, believes and behaviors within the distribution channel system. This study indicates that these values, believes and behaviors are dependent on interpersonal
relations in a strict channel push strategy. Field management with human representatives should thus not only include performance, but also promotion.

A strict push strategy is in the literature review described to “enable the manufacturer to devote all resources to motivate desirable behavior at the next vertical level of distribution and strengthen the relationship with the distribution channel members (Frazier 1999:235; Gorchels et al. 2004:17)” . However, based on this case study, I would not only emphasize the motivation of a desirable behavior, but also the motivation of desirable believes and values within the distribution channel. I believe that such motivation is difficult to achieve in practice without direct communication to important distribution partners. This study shows that direct communication from the manufacturer is appreciated by resellers. This contact provides an opportunity to promote and argue for desirable believes and values about the manufacturer brand, without dependence on the distributor. I believe that this is a realistic and cost effective approach to minimize the gap between manufacturer and reseller, which in effect also would decrease the gap to end-users.

7.3 Perceived Quality

The quality is without doubt the strongest brand dimension in this study, coherent with previous research stating that functional benefits is the most important value, both in a B2C and B2B environment (Aaker 2002:17; Mudambi 2002:527; Kotler & Pfoertsch 2007:357). Attributes, linked to the functions of the product are a main focus to distribution partners. Konftel, as well as both distributors and resellers state that this is an important topic when communicating to their customers. Functional attributes are in fact seen as the natural approach in promoting Konftel, mainly associated with sales, rather than marketing. The knowledge is inclusive among all distribution partners, even though some resellers complain that they would like to have more contact with both Konftel and distributors regarding these matters.

Although minor deviations between different interviewees are confirmed, this study shows a quite consistent perception of the quality. Sound quality is the major focus, while warranty and additional features are enhancing benefits. Design and appearance was important to some, but seemed to be a visible attribute rather than discussed or promoted. Moreover usability was important to most of the end-users since their work as IT-managers became easier if all employees understood the equipment. Although Konftel’s products were perceived as very user friendly, this attribute was less emphasised by Konftel and the distribution partners than it was by the end-users. The relative focus on different functional attributes is according to the sales managers an adaption to the competition in different regions. This reasoning is coherent with the interviews, where Scandinavian partners are most enthusiastic about the sound, while European and North American partners lean more towards additional features and warranty. This structure is less obvious at an end-user level where the sound satisfaction is high across all regions. The fact that all end-users are satisfied with the function of the product indicates that the product has met their expectations. The adaptation has in other words kept a consistency between promises about the product and experiences from the product. A certain amount of adaption to the quality focus should therefore be seen as beneficial in terms of penetration and sales figures. Regional sales managers are experts in their own markets and should be able to tweak their communication to better suit regional demands. Nonetheless, this could be dangerous if the adaption concerns core values in the brand identity, given that the identity should provide a
consistent direction, purpose and meaning for the brand (Aaker 2002:68). I have in the literature review discussed the elusiveness between Aaker’s dimensions of quality and associations, and sound is in this case a good example of an elusive attribute. Although not treated as an association in this study, sound tends to be perceived as a core value rather than a functional attribute by both Konftel and distribution partners. However, if sound is viewed as a core association it should be built consistently to all customers, and not pulled back in markets where Polycom has established their sound.

About half of the end-users in this study had bought their Konftel units without much discussion with resellers. Instead, they personally searched for conference phones on the internet, followed by a simple order from the reseller. These end-users are already familiar with conference phones and thus mostly concerned about the quality of the product. In searching for information they have mostly been visiting internet shops, but also Konftel’s own website. A few had even contacted Konftel directly, which shows that a limited dialogue with the reseller necessarily not mean a lack of interest in the manufacturer. Nonetheless, this is a problematic behavior for traditional resellers and should be a main concern for Konftel in their distribution channel strategy. One course of action for traditional resellers to address this problem is to shift focus from aware customers and a sales oriented quality focus, to potential customers and a marketing oriented value focus. This shift does however require a devotion to overcome difficulties in building brand associations addressed in this study.

7.4 Brand Loyalty

Branding in a distribution channel context is not only about satisfying the buyer, but also satisfying the end-user through the same brand (Webster 2000:17). Konftel has according to this study achieved this with great success, and the customer satisfaction is strong among both distribution partners and end-users. The relation between satisfaction and loyalty is well understood in the marketing literature, where satisfaction is seen as a necessary step towards loyalty (Oliver 1999:42). Accordingly, Konftel should possess an exceptionally loyal customer base. But is that really the case?

In the view of a large non response, I strongly believe that such conclusions should be made with caution. The exceptionally high satisfaction rate is probably a response bias, where satisfied customers interested in the brand are more likely to devote 30 minutes of their time to talk about it. As discussed in the none-response analysis it was easier to achieve cooperation from distributors than from resellers and significantly harder to achieve cooperation from end-users. This behavior could be linked to loyalty, since it is argued that brand loyalty includes the intensity and activity of a brand-customer relationship (Keller 2003:92). The non response structure implies that distributors have a more intense and active relation to the brand than resellers, while end-users in general has an inactive relationship to the brand. This is an important consideration, and an indication that a strict channels push strategy creates a certain distance between manufacturer, resellers and end-users. One alternative reason to this distinct pattern would however be that participation was closely linked to the actual job description at a distributor level, while it was somewhat less linked at a reseller level and not at all linked at an end-user level. It is difficult to elaborate the non-response reasoning further due to limited data, but nevertheless it is an important notion that should be taken into consideration when evaluating the brand loyalty in this study.
Based on the observations that actually have been done, it is evident that the current strategy has been able to create strong brand loyalty among customers. Margins are an important factor in achieving an active loyalty among distribution partners, but surprisingly not a determinant factor. It seems like loyalty cannot be bought simply by offering high margins. More important is brand awareness and end-user demand. I am thus, in contrast to previous research (Karray & Zaccour 2007:165), arguing that financial support to resellers in terms of, for example co-advertising, constitutes a limited risk of being a prisoners dilemma where each manufacturer is forced to induce their resellers with an ever increased amount of financial support. It is not the financial aspect of the support that is important, rather the brand it creates. Although all distributors and resellers held Konftel as their favourite brand, many argued that it is easier to sell a brand that most people recognize. This is, as I earlier have discussed, in line with recent research findings stating that increased awareness and demand from the end-users significantly increase the reseller’s trust and loyalty to the manufacturer’s brand (Chiou et al. 2010:437, 38). The awareness is thus not only important in reaching customers, but also in retaining loyal distribution partners.

All end-users gladly stated that they would contact the same reseller and buy a Konftel on next purchase occasion. In addition they are all keen to recommend Konftel to others, and some interviewees have already actively done that in discussions with colleagues. This satisfaction is probably achieved much thanks to the actual product, but trust and competence in combination with fair communication of functional qualities cannot be neglected in achieving this rate of loyalty. It is therefore difficult to judge how brand loyalty has been built in this case study. On one hand the non-response pattern points towards mediocre customer-brand relationships at a reseller, and especially end-user level. While the satisfaction, showed by actual interviewees, points towards a strong loyalty across both distribution partners and end-users. I can merely state that the current strategy obviously has created loyal customers, with reservation that many resellers and end-users might have declined to participate because of a weak relationship to the brand.

A further finding from this study is that the Konftel only know a fraction of their end-users, namely those registered on the website. This, per se, is an indication of a certain distance between manufacturer and end-users, and as a result it is impossible to strengthen their loyalty through customer relationship management. A first step to bridge this gap is thus to identify more end-users, for example through expanded registration.
8. Conclusion

This chapter presents the conclusion of this master thesis. I will highlight conclusions that have emerged, explain the study's contribution to the field of brand management, describe important managerial implications and suggest on how my findings can be developed through future research. To clarify the study's scope, I will start by describing the research purpose with this study.

The purpose of this master thesis is to provide a starting point for the theoretical advancement of channel push branding. A manufacturer’s ability to combine consumer-pull and channel-push efforts is seen as a prerequisite for maximized brand equity. Nonetheless, distribution channels are gaining in importance as competitive advantage and it is therefore crucial to understand branding from a strict channel push perspective. This master thesis will give all its attention to channel push branding and take a first step towards a clarification of the current status quo between push and pull strategies. The research will also provide essential insight for brand managers in manufacturing companies to create stronger brands. The research purpose is achieved by:

1) Investigating how a manufacturer’s brand is built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a strict channel push strategy.

2) Evaluating the impact that a strict channel push strategy has on Aaker’s (2002) consumer based brand equity dimensions.

The investigation of a brand solely built through channel push efforts has enabled me to describe and evaluate branding from a strict channel push perspective. Although this case illustrates both challenges and limitations, I strongly argue against the assertion that strict push strategies are something of the past. This case study confirms that a brand can be built, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a strict channel-push strategy. The studied brand is filled with relevant associations and functional attributes communicated from the manufacturer, through distribution partners, down to end-users. Core brand values remain quite consistent and the brand only suffers from minor diversities between different intermediaries and regions. With this said, this case also provide insight into several important areas in channel push branding which require consideration and further investigation.

The creation of brand awareness is not only a challenge in channel push branding, but also a limitation. It is unrealistic to create awareness among a substantial group of end-users without using communication efforts directly targeted to the market. I am thus arguing that a strict channel push strategy is more suitable for niche brands, such as Konftel, with a geographically broad market and a focused target group. The main challenge when it comes to awareness is to provide relevant marketing support to distribution partners and gain their interest in promoting the brand to a wider audience. Such initiatives would also increase their loyalty, since brand awareness is shown to be the most important motivation in marketing and recommending a particular brand. Consequently, the loyalty of distribution partners could not simply be bought by high margins. The end-user loyalty is strong in this case study, but should be considered with caution because of the structure and size of non-responding customers. The non-response actually indicates that a push strategy creates a certain distance between manufacturer and end-
user, which in effect impede the creation and maintenance of an active brand-customer relationship.

Further challenges in channel push branding concerns the communication of brand associations. The value of conference phones has, in this case, been overshadowed by functional attributes, while personality and organisational associations grows within the distribution channel, to eventually weaken in the communication to the end-users. Brand associations are in this case sustained by interpersonal relationships which mainly build associations that can be performed by individuals. As a result, associations that needs to be argued or promoted, becomes weaker. The dependence on interpersonal relationships could also be problematic when communicating to end-users, since associations sustained through interpersonal relationships will disappear in transactions without this bond. This case do however illustrate that interpersonal relations do provide great possibilities to build strong associations within the distribution channel and should therefore be considered as an important tool in channel push branding.

The dependence on interpersonal relations highlight an important difference between channel push and consumer pull efforts, namely the limited control over how the brand is communicated within a distribution channel. In this case, distribution partners prefer to communicate their own preferences, rather than the manufacturer’s preferences. So, if distribution partners are somewhat indifferent to a certain aspect of the brand, it won’t be communicated to their customers. The role of brand representatives is therefore to perform and promote the brand through interpersonal relationships, influencing not only the behavior but also values and beliefs within the distribution channel. Based on this case I am also arguing that these relationships are more important to the brand than the brand is to the relationship. Finally, this case shows an intense focus on perceived quality. Focus on functionality is suitable in sales oriented situations, and many end-users in this case came to the reseller with an inquiry to buy a conference phone. However, it is plausible that this focus has been achieved at the expense of brand associations. Previous research clearly emphasise that functional benefits has obvious limitations, while emotional and intangible associations are highly influential, also in B2B markets. Putting too much emphasize on functional attributes is thus an evident danger to the brand strength, in a strict channel push strategy.

Based on this case study, it is evident that channel push branding is a complex procedure that requires specific considerations. I have argued that the concurrent research focus on a blended strategy has resulted in a weak understanding of how the push strategy works independently of the pull strategy when it comes to building strong brands. This case study has given all its attention to channel push branding and thus provided essential insights into how a brand is build in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users, through a strict channel-push strategy. Building a brand through channel push efforts is possible, but requires an understanding of specific limitations, possibilities and challenges that may arise. My main contribution with this case study is a rich description of the underlying phenomena which constitute these considerations. Distribution channel relationships are an increasingly important source of competitive advantage, and I believe that this case provides a new perspective on channel push branding, both to practitioners in building strong manufacturer brands and researchers in expanding the field of brand management.
8.1 Managerial Implications

I have previously stated that channel push branding is a difficult procedure and a great headache for marketing managers in manufacturing firms. This case study has however highlighted several important considerations that might be of use for managers in their ambition to create stronger manufacturer brands. The analysis of the brand through Aakers (2002) consumer brand equity dimensions has enabled me to identify important limitations, possibilities and challenges in channel push branding. The following section clarifies these findings and their implication in managerial practice.

8.5.1 Limitations with Channel Push Branding

First brand managers must understand that a strict push strategy has limitations, mainly linked to the awareness. The creation of brand awareness to a substantial group of customers is traditionally achieved through pull efforts. The extensive scope of international distribution has however, in this case resulted in a potential customer base that is too large and widespread to effectively reach through wide-ranging pull efforts. Global push efforts would be an immense undertaking and I am therefore arguing that a strict channel push strategy is most suitable for niche brands like Konftel, with a geographically broad market and a focused target audience. Brand awareness is important, not only to increase brand favourability among end-users, but also to increase the motivation from distribution partners to market and recommend the brand. Due to awareness limitations it will be difficult for brands with a wide target audience to achieve sufficient brand loyalty from distribution partners. I argue that marketing support is the best way to achieve awareness among relevant end-user groups in a strict channel push strategy. Active marketing support to distribution partners should include expertise, up-to-date information, and earmarked funds which encourage them to promote the brand to a wider audience. These efforts are especially suitable seen from the perspective of minor brand in a growing market, such as Konftel. This case indicates that it is significantly easier to sell a minor brand to a customer that is new to the product category, lacking recall or recognition to the major brand. A potentially effective course of action would in this situation be to target new customer in growing markets, rather than convert experienced customers from competing brands. This strategy does however require more emphasize on associations than shown in this case.

8.5.2 Possibilities and challenges with Channel Push Branding

This case illustrates that brand associations easily can be overshadowed by quality and functional attributes. The focus on functionality is often suitable since many customers come to the reseller with an inquiry to buy a conference phone. In these sales oriented situations it is natural that the topic concerns functional attributes rather than overarching associations or values. Nevertheless, it is known that emotional and intangible values are highly influential, also in B2B markets, and it is thus important to make room for these values when building the brand through the distribution channel. Brand associations are in this case sustained through interpersonal relationships. These relations provide great possibilities to build strong associations. Nonetheless it is important to understand that this dependence is a huge undertaking, and interpersonal relations should thus be managed in accordance with the brand identity. Field management with human representatives should thus not only include encouragement of performance, but also promotion. Another important consideration for managers is that the dependence on
interpersonal relationships could be problematic when communicating to end-users. Hence, it is important that these associations are backed up by promotional efforts emphasizing not only the function, but also core brand associations. In essence, it is crucial to find a balance between sales and marketing efforts in a strict channel push strategy. Push can easily be interoparated as a sales focused approach, but I argue that manufacturers must challenge this view and communicate marketing oriented messages, such as values and associations, both in promotional material and in distribution partner relationships.

Loyalty within the distribution channel has in this case not simply been about high margins, but rather about end-user awareness. Challenges concerning loyalty are thus closely linked to awareness efforts. Marketing and sales should therefore not only be seen as a tool to increase awareness and sales, but also increase the loyalty from distribution partners. The main challenge concerning brand loyalty among end-users is to maintain an active brand-customer relationship. The first step in doing this is to identify end-users, for example through registration programs and incentives. The non-response in this study indicates that a push strategy creates a distance between manufacturer and end-user. Registration programs with relevant follow up activities could bridge this gap, strengthening the end-users-brand relationship as well as gaining valuable feedback on products. After all end-user registration made this study possible.

8.2 Recommendations for Future Research

This case study should be seen as a starting point for the theoretical advancement in channel push branding. Aaker’s (2002) consumer brand equity conceptualization has provided an inclusive framework when investigating a brand solely built through a channel push strategy. This case shows that all dimensions are relevant in channel push branding, and all information obtained in this case could also be related to one or more dimensions. I would thus, despite minor critique addressed in the literature review, recommend the use of these dimensions in future research concerning brands in a distribution channel context.

The next step in the theoretical advancement of channel push branding should be to investigate several competing manufacturer brands through a multiple case design. This could either be done by investigating brands with different strategies or competing brands with similar strategies. For example I would recommend a study of four competing brands through some of the following approaches; 1) four push, 2) two pull and two push, 3) one pull, one push and two blended. The analytic benefits of having multiple cases may be substantial (Yin 2009:61), and will enable comparisons on how brand equity is built through the distribution channel and which factors that constitutes a successful channel push strategy in terms of brand strength. Qualitative studies on numerous companies could of course also be conducted, but I believe that the understanding, as of today, is too limited for extensive qualitative approaches. I recommend that future research concerning channel push branding should consider following areas;

- Brand associations are in this case sustained through interpersonal relationships, which make them difficult to build and control in the distribution channel. An important question is if this is a general characteristic in all push strategies, or if some distribution systems build associations through other activities. Based on this case I am also arguing that relationships are more important to the brand than the brand is to the relationship. This statement would probably be questioned by several brand researchers (see, for
example, Ahearne 2010; Chiou et al. 2010; Glynn et al. 2007) and thus an interesting issue for further research.

- The loyalty dimension is difficult to judge in this case study since the structure and size of non-response may have affected the rate of satisfaction. The distance between manufacturer, channel members and end-users is therefore an important topic for future research. How can a manufacturer with focus on vertical communication create and maintain an active brand-customer relationship with end-users?

- Finally, it is important to investigate how distributed brands are influenced by pull strategies independently of push strategies. Judging by this case, it is likely to have implications for end-user awareness and distribution partner loyalty. However, I am particularly interested in how consumer pull efforts influence brand associations, independently from push efforts, in the minds of distributors, resellers and end-users. The vast research community interested in communication targeted to consumers could provide a starting point for such a study, while further investigation preferably could be approached through a case study design.
9. References


AMA Dictionary (2011) “Brand”
[Downloaded 2011-03-14]


Appendix

1. Interview Schedule - Distributors

Awareness
- Can you name two additional brands (manufacturers) of conference phones? *(Except Konftel)*
- Do you recognize these two phones, can you name the brands? *(Show one picture of Konftel300-serien and one of Polycom)*
- How many conference phones does your company sell per month?

Associations

Perceived value
- What is your attitude towards distance meetings and conference phones in general? I would like you to reflect upon following values: *(Would you like to add one or more additional values?)*
  - Saving time
  - Saving traveling costs
  - Environmental friendliness
  - Professional practice
  - Ease of decision making

- Are you using any of these values when selling conference phones? When selling Konftel's products?
- What kind of user and usage situation do you associate with Konftel? *What is the typical Konftel customer?* *(Size of business, industry, demographic characteristics)*
- How do you value Konftel’s products in terms of margins, other incentives and ease to sell?

Organizational associations
- What do you know about Konftel? *(Origin, size, etc.)*
- I would like you to reflect upon following statements:
  - Konftel is a company that I can trust
  - Konftel is a company with a broad portfolio of products
  - Konftel is an innovative company

Personality associations
- What kind of contact do you (your company) have with Konftel, respectively the resellers?
- What is your impression of this contact and following functions;
  - Sales support *(Leads, training)*
  - Marketing support *(Co-advertising, promotions)*
  - Product support *(Technical support, Warranty handling)*
- Based on your attitudes and your contact with Konftel, how would you describe the Konftel brand personality?
  - Sincere *(Down-To-Earth, Honest, Wholesome and Cheerful)*
  - Competent *(Reliable, Intelligent and Successful)*
  - Exciting *(Daring, Spirited, Imaginative and Up-To-Date)*
  - Sophisticated *(Upper Class and Charming)*
  - Rugged *(Outdoorsy and Tough)*

Perceived quality
- How do you value Konftel’s products in terms of function? I would like you to reflect upon following benefits and their relative importance *(if possible in relation to alternative brands):*
- Performance (levels at which the primary characteristic of the product operates)
- Features (secondary elements of a product that compliments the primary characteristic)
- Conformance quality (if the products meet specifications and is absent of defects)
- Reliability (consistency of performance over time, and from purchase to purchase)
- Durability (expected economic life of the product)
- Serviceability (ease of serving the product)
- Design (appearance or feel of quality)

- Are you using any of these benefits when selling Konftel’s products to resellers? Have you discussed these functions with Konftel?

- Which company do you see as the market leader in audio conferencing products?

Loyalty

- Are you satisfied with your overall experience with Konftel? (What could make it easier for you to understand and explain Konftel for your customers?)

- What motivates you to market a particular brand or product?

2. Interview Schedule - Resellers

Awareness

- Can you name two additional brands (manufacturers) of conference phones? (Except Konftel)

- Do you recognize these two phones, can you name the brands? (Show one picture of Konftel300-serien and one of Polycom)

- How many conference phones is your company selling per month?

Associations

Perceived value

- What is your attitude towards distance meetings and conference phones in general? I would like you to reflect upon following values: (Would you like to add one or more additional values?)
  - Saving time
  - Saving traveling costs
  - Environmental friendliness
  - Professional practice
  - Ease of decision making

- Are you using any of these values when selling conference phones? When selling Konftel’s products?

- What kind of user and usage situation do you associate with Konftel? What is the typical Konftel customer? (Size of business, industry, demographic characteristics)

- How do you value Konftel’s products in terms of margins, other incentives and ease to sell?

Organizational associations

- What do you know about Konftel? (Origin, size, etc.)

- I would like you to reflect upon following statements:
  - Konftel is a company that I can trust
  - Konftel is a company with a broad portfolio of products
  - Konftel is an innovative company

Personality associations

- What kind of contact do you (your company) have with Konftel, respectively the distributor?

- What is your impression of this contact and following functions;
- Sales support (Leads, training)
- Marketing support (Co-advertising, promotions)
- Product support (Technical support, Warranty handling)

Based on your attitudes and your contact with Konftel and distributors, how would you describe the Konftel brand personality?

- Sincere (Down-To-Earth, Honest, Wholesome and Cheerful)
- Competent (Reliable, Intelligent and Successful)
- Exciting (Daring, Spirited, Imaginative and Up-To-Date)
- Sophisticated (Upper Class and Charming)
- Rugged (Outdoorsy and Tough)

Perceived quality

- How do you value Konftel’s products in terms of function? I would like you to reflect upon following benefits and their relative importance (if possible in relation to alternative brands):
  - Performance (levels at which the primary characteristic of the product operates)
  - Features (secondary elements of a product that compliments the primary characteristic)
  - Conformance quality (If the products meet specifications and is absent of defects)
  - Reliability (consistency of performance over time, and from purchase to purchase)
  - Durability (expected economic life of the product)
  - Serviceability (ease of serving the product)
  - Design (appearance or feel of quality)

- Are you using any of these benefits when selling Konftel’s products to your customers? Have you discussed these functions with Konftel or the distributor?
- Which company do you see as the market leader in audio conferencing products?

Loyalty

- Are you satisfied with your overall experience with Konftel? (What could make it easier for you to understand and explain Konftel for your customers?)
- Do you have a favourite brand or model that you usually sell to your customers?
- What motivates you to sell/recommend a particular brand or product?

3. Interview Schedule - End-users

Awareness

- Can you name two additional brands (manufacturers) of conference phones? (Except Konftel)
- Do you recognize these two phones, can you name the brands? (Show one picture of Konftel300-serien and one of Polycom)
- When (where, from who) did you first hear of the Konftel brand?

Associations

Perceived value

- Why does your organization use conference phones?
- What is your attitude towards distance meetings in general? I would like you to reflect upon following benefits and their relative importance. (Would you like to add one or more additional values?)
  - Saving time
  - Saving traveling costs
  - Environmental friendliness
  - Professional practice
  - Ease of decision making
- Why did you choose Konftel? Did some of these values influence you in choosing Konftel? Did the reseller discuss these values?
- What kind of usage situation do you associate with Konftel?
- Where do you most often hold your distance meetings (Type of room, participants, frequency, connections)?

Organizational associations
- What do you know about Konftel? (Origin, size, etc.)
- I would like you to reflect upon following statements:
  - Konftel is a company that I can trust
  - Konftel is a company with a broad portfolio of products
  - Konftel is an innovative company

Personality associations
- Have you been in contact with Konftel? How? What is your impression?
- What kind of contact have you had with Konftel’s resellers? What is your impression?
- Based on your attitudes and your contacts with Konftel and resellers, how would you describe the Konftel brand personality?
  - Sincere (Down-To-Earth, Honest, Wholesome and Cheerful)
  - Competent (Reliable, Intelligent and Successful)
  - Exciting (Daring, Spirited, Imaginative and Up-To-Date)
  - Sophisticated (Upper Class and Charming)
  - Rugged (Outdoorsy and Tough)

Perceived quality
- How do you value Konftel’s products in terms of function? I would like you to reflect upon following benefits and their relative importance (if possible in relation to alternative brands):
  - Performance (levels at which the primary characteristic of the product operates)
  - Features (secondary elements of a product that compliments the primary characteristic)
  - Conformance quality (If the products meet specifications and is absent of defects)
  - Reliability (consistency of performance over time, and from purchase to purchase)
  - Durability (expected economic life of the product)
  - Serviceability (ease of serving the product)
  - Design (appearance or feel of quality)

- Why did you choose Konftel? Did some of these values influence you in choosing Konftel? What functions did the reseller discuss?
- Which company do you see as the market leader in audio conferencing products?

Loyalty
- Are you satisfied with your overall experience with Konftel?
- If you need a new conference phone in the future, would you contact the same reseller that sold you the Konftel phones? Would you buy a phone from Konftel?
- Would you recommend Konftel to others?