The Penguin's Window: Corporate Brands From an Open-Source Perspective

Leyland F. Pitt  
Simon Fraser University

Richard T. Watson  
University of Georgia

Pierre Berthon  
Bentley College

Donald Wynn  
George Zinkhan  
University of Georgia

The open source (OS) movement allows us to re-vision corporate branding from a corporate to a coproducer perspective. Corporations own their brands and unilaterally determine their positioning and evolution. Power and control are centralized and hierarchical: producers produce brands, which customers then consume. With OS, power and control are radically decentralized and heterarchical: producers and consumers coalesce into "prosumers." The authors introduce marketers to the OS phenomenon and develop a typology of brand aspects that can be "open" or "closed": physical, textual, meaning, and experience. The authors elaborate new dimensions for brands and revisit the functions that brands perform and link these to the evolutionary trajectory of branding, arguing that OS represents a final phase in the evolution of corporate brands from closed to open brands. The article concludes with a research agenda.

Keywords: brands; open source; brand typology; prosumer; brand function; brand evolution

One of the world's most successful companies in the past two decades, one of the world's best-known brands, and one of the world's most ubiquitous products may be under threat. Having endured trial by governments; onslaughts by large computer manufacturers such as IBM, Apple, and Sun Microsystems; and flanking attacks by similar software companies such as Oracle, Microsoft finds itself most vulnerable to a new form of competition: the open-source (OS) software Linux (Roberts 2003). Linux's portly penguin mascot is becoming a brand icon nearly as well known as Ronald McDonald or the Pillsbury Doughboy, and it is peering into Microsoft's Windows. Linux programmers contribute their skills without receiving payment and give away the operating system. There are no shareholders to compensate; no marketing costs to carry; and indeed no formal organization in the traditional sense to plan for, control, and administer. Linux is OS software,¹ but Linux is also a brand like any other. For its customers and users, it fulfills the same functions...