

Quality Management in Business Relationships: The Role of Brands in an Open Source Environment

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ABSTRACT *This article reviews buyer–seller relationship quality from the viewpoint of the open source phenomenon. It specifically considers the perspective that open source (OS) brands can bring to the quality of buyer–seller relationships in circumstances where relationships are highly networked, not simple, not merely two-way and are non-linear. A discussion of the functions of brands is made. Based on a 2 × 2 matrix, insight is given into how OS positions itself at the final stage in the evolution of brands, and three theoretical frameworks are proposed to help understand this phenomenon. These frameworks assist in our comprehension of the open source brand as an arbiter of relationship quality. It is argued that the OS brand is a post-modern phenomenon and that the brand as an indicator of relationship quality should be understood from this perspective. The article concludes by identifying avenues for future research and implications for managers.*

KEY WORDS: Open source branding, quality management, buyer–seller relationships

Introduction

In conventional, for-profit organisational settings, the quality of relationships between buyers and sellers is dependent on a myriad of factors. At a general level are the obvious issues of product and service quality, and the nature of the interaction between the firm and its customers. At higher levels, well-documented drivers exist, such as commitment and trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), behavioural norms (Heide & John, 1992), and joint action (Heide & John, 1990). Many marketers would argue that brand strength is the ultimate pointer of relationship quality between buyer and seller, for it is the buyer's affinity to the brand that determines their willingness to bond with a seller.

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1478-3363 Print/1478-3371 Online/07/080947–9 © 2007 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/14783360701351043