



DEVELOPING A BRAND IN THE SOLAR PANEL MARKET: Case Sons of solar Oy

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Examiner: Post-doctoral researcher Heini Vanninen

ABSTRACT

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Developing a brand in the solar panel market: Case Sons of solar Oy

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The purpose of this bachelor's thesis is to research brand development in the Finnish solar panel industry by utilizing the case company Sons of solar Oy. The theoretical background of this thesis is based on the key concepts of brand development and their definitions. The goal of the theoretical background is to give a sufficient basis for successfully analyzing the results of this thesis.

The empirical part of this thesis was conducted as a qualitative case study. Research material was gathered by interviewing key personnel from the case company Sons of solar Oy. The interview material was analyzed through content analysis using a deductive approach. The results of the analysis enable the utilization of the interview material in developing the target company's brand.

The findings of this thesis showcase the thoughts of Sons of solar Oy's personnel about the brand's current situation, the brand vision and the necessary measures related to brand development. The results of this thesis can be utilized when developing a brand strategy for Sons of solar Oy.

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Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoitus on tutkia brändin kehittämistä Suomen aurinkopaneelimarkkinoilla hyödyntämällä kohdeyrityksenä toimivaa Sons of solar Oy:tä. Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys perustuu brändin kehittämisen keskeisiin käsitteisiin ja määritelmiin. Teoreettisen viitekehysten tavoitteena on tarjota riittävä pohja tutkielman tulosten analysointiin.

Tutkielman empiirinen osio toteutettiin laadullisena tapaustutkimuksena. Aineisto kerättiin haastattelemalla kohdeyrityksen henkilökuntaa. Litteroidun haastatteluaineiston analyysi toteutettiin deduktiivisena sisällönanalyysinä. Analyysin tulokset mahdollistavat haastatteluaineiston hyödyntämisen kohdeyrityksen brändin kehittämisessä.

Tutkielman tuloksena esitetään Sons of solar Oy:n henkilöstön ajatuksia brändin nykytilanteesta, brändivisiosta sekä tarvittavista brändin kehittämiseen liittyvistä toimenpiteistä. Tämän tutkielman tuloksilla luodaan edellytyksiä Sons of solarin brändistrategian kehittämiseksi.

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1. Introduction

The traditional definition for a brand refers to the external factors signifying the seller of a product or a service, such as a products name, symbol, design, or a combination of these (Kotler, 2018). In a complex world both consumers and businesses are faced with an endless stream of options, many of which seem to be of the same value. Branding gives the opportunity to simplify decision making, by communicating to the end consumer why a certain product or service matters. It is important to note that in today's world the definition of a brand has in many ways broadened. A more modern definition of a brand refers to anything that has created reputation, awareness or prominence towards a product or a service in the marketplace. (Keller, 2003)

A brand provides clear value for a customer since it can work as a risk reducer by signaling the quality of the product to the end customer. Brands are equally valuable to businesses, as they can offer a firm means to legally protect certain unique features and an opportunity to signal the level of quality to the potential customer. Firms that possess a strong brand gain competitive advantages and financial returns as a result for their successful brand. (Keller, 2003)

The Finnish Solar panel industry is a highly competitive market. Even relatively large and well-established companies find it difficult to obtain clear competitive advantages in the market (Oinonen, 2023, s. 17-18). In every geographical location there are numerous firms offering the same products and services with a similar level of service. All players in the market have similar products with similar guarantees (Oinonen, 2023, s. 31-32). This has led to a situation where every firm in the market is constantly striving to differentiate themselves in some way to achieve more sales. Some firms in the market are competing with price, others are attempting to gain competitive advantage by positioning themselves as premium and quality focused. The solar panel industry in Finland is still very heavily focused on the B2C market. From the 27 500 new solar plants that were installed in 2022, 92% were installed to households (Aurinkoenergiayhdistys, 2023). Heavy focus on consumer sales means that the companies are constantly meeting new clients and facing the offers of competitors. This gives a firm in the market repeated reality checks on its value and position in the local market. If a firm cannot keep up with competition, the negative results will soon be visible in the form of decreased sales. The same principle is also true the other way around. Successful differentiation procedures can allow a company operating in this industry to gain competitive

advantage in a relatively short time. Researching brand development in this industry by utilizing the Case company Sons of solar is therefore exceptionally interesting. Developing a successful brand strategy for Sons of solar Oy has the potential to produce real results as soon as this year.

The firm currently has clear brand related problems that this thesis aims to help solving. First and foremost, Sons of solar wants to concretize its brand vision. To create a successful brand strategy, the firm must know what they want to achieve with their brand, and what do they want the brand to represent. This thesis is intended to be used in defining the brand strategy of Sons of solar.

1.1 Research Goal & Research Questions

The goal of this thesis is to research brand development in the Finnish solar panel industry by utilizing the case company Sons of solar Oy. The research material of this study will be gathered by interviewing personnel from the case company. This thesis aims to clarify Sons of solar brand vision and the brands current situation. This thesis will delve into the literature involving branding and brand development, to create a proper theoretical framework that can be utilized in the empirical section of this thesis. This thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

Main research question:

How can the brand of Sons of solar be developed to match the brand vision?

Sub-research questions:

What does the brand of Sons of solar represent now?

What is the brand vision of Sons of solar?

1.2 Delimitations and Research Method

This thesis will be conducted as a qualitative case study. This research method serves the goals of this thesis well, since it allows the researcher to accumulate a diverse understanding of the research

topic. This study will be focused on the case company and its brand. The empirical part of this study will require interviewing the company's core personnel.

1.3 Research Structure

This thesis will address brand development in the Finnish solar panel industry in five main chapters. The introduction of this study aims to give the audience an overview of the topic of discussion and give some arguments to why it is important. Additionally, the introductory chapter presents the goals, research questions and delimitations of this study. The second chapter of this study will address the theoretical framework of brands and brand development. In the third chapter the case company of this study will be presented along with the research material and method of analysis. The fourth and fifth chapters will present the research results and conclusion of this thesis.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework of this study will be based on the Brand Resonance Model developed by Kevin Keller. This academically recognized framework describes how to utilize a firm's competitive advantages in a way that creates active, intense, and loyal customer relationships. The brand resonance model gives a firm clear sequential steps towards building a successful brand. Following the described steps is a vital part of the model since each step is contingent on successfully completing the previous step. From the brand developers' point of view, this model can be described with four sequential steps. Additionally, each of the steps represent a question that a customer asks about a brand. (Keller, 2020)

1. Defining brand identity: The first step is focused on creating the desired brand identity in the mind of the customer.
2. Defining brand meaning: This step focuses on the two main types of brand meaning: Brand performance and Brand Imagery.
3. Defining brand responses: Awakenning the desired brand responses in the customer.
4. Defining desired level of brand resonance: Converting brand responses to customer loyalty.



Figure 1: Brand Resonance Model (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020)

In this study the Brand Resonance Model will be utilized in chronological order. The Brand Resonance Model is a good fit for this study, as it offers a fitting framework for answering the main research question. The Resonance Model is focused on building strong relationships between the brand and its customers. It emphasizes building intense and active loyalty relationships with the firm's customers. This model also forces the company to develop a brand that aligns with the firm's brand vision. (Keller, 2020)

2.1 Brands & Brand Development – Previous Research

The history of brands can be traced to the etymology of the word “brand”. Over 4000 years ago in the Indus Valley farmers were faced with the issue of cows wandering off the property of their owner. Retrieving missing cows was therefore a common occurrence, but even though a cow could be retrieved, defining the owner of the missing cow often proved to be quite impossible. Farmers came up with the innovative solution of using a branding iron to burn the owner's insignia onto the cow. After this procedure the owner of the animal was rather easy to identify. Branding animals with the owner's insignia was the start of the “Information Era” of branding. During this time period

the role of brands was to decrease customer uncertainty and risk, by associating a producer with a certain brand. As time went by the concept of brands started to broaden, first to tangible product attributes such as taste or reliability and later among other things towards more intangible factors such as brand authenticity and brand personality. (Oh, et al. , 2020)

Brand equity is a highly relevant concept in the context of brand development. The concept of brand equity refers to a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add or subtract the value provided by a service or a product to a firm and its customers. Developing a brand is therefore closely related to the management of brand equity. Managing brand equity refers to investing in creating and enhancing in the assets linked to a brand. Brand equity is a hypernym, that categorizes everything that a brand can provide to a firm and its customers. (Aaker, 1996)

The concept of brand equity is a well-researched topic, with many established scholars such as Aaker and Keller having conducted extensive research on it. As the theoretical background of brand development and brand value generation in the form of brand equity has been thoroughly researched, a study focusing on brand development in the solar panel market in Finland has a good theoretical background that the study can be based on. For example, Kevin Keller's research on brand equity gives this study a clear overview of what factors regarding brands are relevant when creating a brand mainly focusing on the B2C market. Keller's research suggests that a firm that is mainly focused on selling to consumers should develop a brand that has the potential of creating real emotional connections and loyal customer-firm relationships. In the minds of the customer, vital concepts in a brand are factors such as brand image, brand awareness and brand resonance. These concepts and reciprocally branding concepts that are more relevant from the firm's point of view will be reviewed more comprehensively later in this study. (Keller, 2016)

Brand development in the Finnish solar panel market is a topic that lacks research. Researching the solar panel market is important, as the industry is growing at a very rapid pace. Surging energy prices and geopolitical tensions drastically improved the business case of solar panels in the year 2022. When comparing with 2021, the 27 EU member states achieved a growth of 47% in solar energy produced. The growth added up to 41.4GW energy produced, with Germany, Spain and Poland forming the top 3 of solar energy producing countries in the EU. Finland did not fit into the top 10 solar energy producers, but the solar panel industry is still experiencing a lot of growth in Finland as

well. Even before the energy crisis in 2021, the solar energy produced in Finland grew by over 100MW when compared with 2020 (Energiavirasto, 2022). During the next four years the solar panel industry is expected to grow between 11-29% per year. Continued growth will mean more business opportunities in the industry. Therefore, it is useful to conduct research on what kind of brands succeed in the Finnish solar panel market. (SolarPowerEurope, 2023)

2.2 Brand Resonance Model

The first step of the Brand Resonance Model is involved in creating Brand Salience. Brand salience refers to the target demographics awareness of a certain brand, and more specifically how often and easily the brand is thought about in various circumstances and situations. A firm that has high brand salience has a customer group that can recall their brand with ease and with relatively minimal cues. The customer group is highly aware of the brand and what needs it is designed to satisfy. (Keller, 2020)

The Brand Salience level of the Brand Resonance Model includes two highly relevant concepts: Brand Identity and Brand Awareness. The concept of brand identity refers to the mental associations about the organization held by organizational members. Brand identity is concerned with the viewpoint of the organization. It aims to answer the question “Who are we as an organization?”. All answers to this question are not equally relevant regarding brand identity, even though all answers are from organizational members. A member of an organization might have an idea of what does the brand of his organization represent. In the context of brand identity, the mental association of the organizational member is only relevant if the association is central, enduring, and distinctive (CED) in respect to the identity of the organization. An employee might have an idea that the brand of his organization represents luxury. Even if the firm’s product would in some way be associated with luxury, the employee’s mental association of luxury does not impact the identity of the organization if luxury is not a central part of the organizations brand identity. Mental associations that are CED construct the brand identity of an organization. (Brown et al. , 2006)

Brand Awareness gives identity to a product or a service of an organization by linking brand elements to a product category and consumption, purchase, or usage situations. Brand Awareness involves two spectrums: depth and breadth. The breadth of brand awareness refers to the range of

usage and purchase situations in which the brand comes to mind. The depth of brand awareness explains how likely it is for a brand element to come to mind and how strong of a cue is needed for evoking the desired thought. A beer company that has high brand awareness has a customer group that thinks about their product every time they think of purchasing an alcoholic drink. (Keller, 2020)

The second step of the Brand Resonance Model is focused on Brand Meaning. This step involves creating a brand personality and brand associations that resonate with the target customer group and assist in creating a deep and emotional connection with the brand. The goal of this step is to establish the desired brand image in the minds of the customer group. Even though the second step of the brand resonance model is mainly focused on the viewpoint of the customer, the concept of brand vision is a highly relevant part of this step of brand development. Defining the organizations' brand vision ensures that the brand will be developed in the direction that was originally intended. (Keller, 2020)

Brand performance refers to the ways in which a brand meets or exceeds customer expectations. Relevant factors regarding brand performance are quality, reliability, and effectiveness of a brand's product or services. Having a strong brand performance can lead to positive brand associations and customer loyalty. Mutually, poor brand performance can damage a brand's reputation and lead to customer dissatisfaction. (Keller, 2020)

Brand Imagery is a crucial part of generating brand meaning. The concept relates to how people think about the brand in an abstract manner. Brand imagery refers to more intangible aspects of a brand such as user profiles, purchase situations and user experiences. A brand's imagery is the way in which a brand conveys its identity and visual elements to create an image in the minds of consumers. The main goal of brand imagery is to create a strong and favorable brand identity that resonates with the target audience and sets the brand apart from competitors. A brand might aim to evoke certain feelings, thoughts, and mental images in the minds of customers when they are provoked to think about a brand. For example, a brand like Rolex, has positioned itself as a luxurious brand. When people think of a luxurious watch, Rolex is often the first that comes to mind. Rolex is an example of a brand that has created the intended usage imagery in the minds of their existing and potential customers. (Keller, 2020)

David Aaker defines brand vision to be the ideas behind a brand that define the brand's trajectory in the future. A well-defined brand vision serves several stakeholders of a firm. Brand vision differentiates from competitors, resonates with the target audience, empowers, and inspires employees, while simultaneously reflecting and supporting the business strategy of the organization. When a firm is missing a vision regarding their brand, the firm might find themselves drifting aimlessly without a clear sense of what they represent. (Aaker 2014)

The third step of the brand resonance model is focused on brand responses. Successfully implementing this step leads to eliciting the proper customer responses to the brand. Brand responses refer to what customers think or feel about a certain brand. Brand responses can be divided into brand judgments and brand feelings. Brand judgments refer to a customer's evaluations and personal opinions regarding a brand. Customers form brand judgments by putting together all perceived brand imagery and performance associations. Judgments can concern any aspect of a brand but judgments concerning quality, consideration, superiority, and credibility are the most important. Perceived quality is an exceptionally important factor since research suggests that the perceived quality of a product or service greatly influences a customer's decision-making process, meaning that a customer that judges a brand to be of quality is more likely to purchase if the customer doesn't take note of the quality ingrained in a brand (Anwar & Andrean, 2021).

Brand credibility refers to how credible customers see a firm regarding three dimensions: brand expertise, brand trustworthiness and brand likability. These dimensions describe how customers see a firm as a competent player in its market, can a firm be trusted to take care of their customers and is a company just plain likable. Brand consideration refers to how relevant the customer group sees a brand in the context of purchase and usage. A brand might be thought provoking and inspiring, but if customers do not consider the brand when making purchases and planning what to consume, a low level of brand consideration can cripple even a great brand. Brand superiority defines the extent to which customers see a brand as unique and better than competitors. If customers believe that a brand offers unique advantages in relation to competitors, they deem the brand to be superior. When striving to create meaningful, active, and intense customer relationships, it is crucial to create a sense of brand superiority in the minds of the target customer group. Brand superiority is very dependent on the number and nature of unique brand associations. (Keller, 2020)

Brand feelings is a concept that refers to the emotional responses that customers have in reaction to a brand. Evoking brand feelings involves a huge opportunity of creating passionate and loyal consumers. Through brand feelings, companies have the opportunity of creating “trustmarks” that emotionally bind a company with certain desires and aspirations of a customer. In today’s competitive markets, it is not always enough that a brand is respected. A brand can be respected, but huge potential lies in the concept of a brand being loved. Evoking emotions and feelings like love in the minds of customers is a process that firms are becoming more interested in. Important feelings regarding brand building are for example Excitement and Security. An exciting brand uplifts their consumers by making them feel alive. The brand evokes excitement and makes the consumer feel like he is experiencing something special. A brand striving to evoke feelings of security in their customers should create a customer experience that takes their customers problems away, and leaves them feeling safe, comfortable, and self-assured. The most important factor regarding brand feelings and brand judgments is positivity. Brand responses should be favorable for the brand, and well internalized so they come to mind when thinking of the brand in question. (Keller, 2020)

The final step of the model focuses on Brand Resonance. Brand Resonance refers to the intensity of the psychological bond between a brand and their customers. Apple is a good example of a brand with high brand resonance. Their customers express brand loyalty, attitudinal attachment, and some even feel like they belong to a sort of Apple community. Customers that are loyal to a certain brand go out of their way to use the brand and consume their product’s whenever it is possible. A highly brand loyal customer prefers a brand over all the competing brands and feels their choice is the only brand they want to associate with. Attachment to a brand is a form of emotional connection. Attitudinally loyal customers can go as far as acting as brand evangelists since they feel the brand is special and more than just a product. Harley Davidson has managed to create a community around their brand, as people that buy their products identify with other Harley users and can even feel like part of a “Harley club”. An important factor regarding brand resonance is also the amount of engagement that the customer group expresses in relation a brand. In the context of brand resonance, active engagement refers to customers’ willingness to invest time, energy, and money in a brand beyond the original consuming situation. An example of active engagement is customers choosing to join a club centered on a brand. Some customers can even buy branded merchandise to express their loyalty to a brand. (Keller, 2020)

3. Research Implementation

This thesis will be conducted as a qualitative case study. In the next section of this paper, the case company Sons of solar Oy will be presented. The goal of this section is to give the reader a basic understanding on what Sons of solar is, what industry does it operate in, and what does its brand represent. The history and story behind the case company will also be presented, to give some background to the brand of Sons of solar. Additionally, the company presentation will also include information on previous actions taken in brand development in the case company. In this section of the thesis the research method and the materials for this research will also be presented.

3.1 Case Company: Sons of solar Oy

Sons of solar Oy is a company focused on solar panel sales and installations, founded in Turku Finland. The company was founded in 2018 and it has since been on a high growth trajectory. In 2022, Sons of solar employed over 20 people, and over doubled its revenue from 2021. Sons of solar serves both industrial and household customers. Up until 2022, the company operated mainly in southwestern Finland, focusing heavily on the city of Turku and nearby municipalities. In 2022, Sons of solar founded a subsidiary office to Helsinki, and started fulltime operations in the province of Uusimaa. The company has continued expanding, and in 2023 Sons of solar has expanded to Lappeenranta and Pori.

Sons of solar operates in the heavily competed Finnish solar panel sales and installation market, where players in the market are constantly looking to improve with all imaginable factors such as price and products. Right from the start in 2018, the company has faced fierce competition, and it has therefore had to find its own factors of distinctiveness to thrive in a heavily competed market. These factors of distinctiveness have grown to be a vital part of the brand of Sons of solar. Young entrepreneurship and customer-oriented way of business are factors that are heavily ingrained with the firm's brand. From the start, environmental values and sustainable business have also been a crucial part of Sons of solar.

As the business has grown bigger over the years, the question of what does Sons of solar represent, has become a relevant topic of discussion. The market position of Sons of solar has become stronger, and in 2022 the demand for the firm's services reached a new and unforeseen level. For the first time in its history, Sons of solar had more potential customers than what the firm had the capacity to serve. This led to a situation, where the company had to choose who it wanted to serve. Clients have always been in the center of Sons of solar, with a heavy focus being on exceeding customer expectations. This level of service requires a certain amount of effort. The excess time and resources that are spent on each customer have sometimes led to a situation where the firm has not been able to serve every customer on a sufficient level. To thrive in a growing industry, the company wants to continuously develop to remain competitive. Therefore, it has become relevant to develop a brand strategy for Sons of solar.

3.2 Research Method and Materials

The empirical part of this thesis will be conducted as a qualitative study. Qualitative research is seen as an umbrella term that covers a wide array of interpretive techniques that are designed to describe and translate the meaning of phenomena that occur in the social world. Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people make sense of the world they live in. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

The material for this thesis will be collected by conducting interviews. Interviews conducted in academic research differ dramatically from some more formal ways of interviewing, such as in talk shows or social media. Research interviews are conversations that have a clear purpose and often a defined structure. The goal of an interview is to find out matters that the interviewer cannot directly observe. The structure of interviews in qualitative research ranges from informal and unstructured open interviews to highly structured interviews such as written surveys. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

The interviews conducted in this thesis will be semi-structured. A semi-structured interview means that the interviews will have a defined series of questions that the interviewee will respond to. The interviewees have freedom to answer the questions in their own words. This leaves room for the interviewee to bring into attention whatever angles they see as relevant. Therefore, the entire

interview process possesses the capability to produce broader, and more representative results than a more structured interviewing method. For example, to create a brand vision that is relevant for the case company, it is crucial to get a comprehensive representation from the companies' employees about what do they believe the brand represents. (Leavy, 2014)

From Sons of solar, the interviewed people include the Founder, CEO, Installation Manager, and a Salesperson. The interviews were conducted in November 2023 through Google Meet as online meetings. The interviewees were not familiar with the questions before the interview, and they did not receive any information about the answers of other respondents. Each individual was interviewed separately. This method of interviews was chosen because opinions about brand identity are highly subjective. The goal of the interviews was to gather genuine and diverse information about the brand identity of the case company to get the best possible vision about the brand. Each interview lasted for an hour. Longer interviews were chosen, because the case company is still relatively small, so each respondents answers are highly relevant for this research.

3.3 Analysis Process

Since the researcher is a research instrument in qualitative research, the analysis of the actual material starts at the same time as the collection of the research material. The researcher's subjective information about the research topic inevitably affects the gathering and the analysis of the research material. The goal of the analysis process is to portray, interpret and understand the phenomena that is being researched. The conducted interviews were transcribed, to assist in the analysis process of the research material. In total, the transcribed material from the interviews was 20 pages. (Puusa, 2020)

In this thesis the method of analysis will be content analysis. This method of analysis allows the researcher to analyze the material systematically and objectively. Content analysis organizes the research material for the conclusions of the research. The goal of content analysis is to organize the research material into a compact and clear form, without losing any of the information that it includes. The analysis aims to increase the value of the gathered information. Content analysis is based on logical deduction and interpretation, where the material is divided into parts,

conceptualized, and gathered into a logical combination. In qualitative research, analysis is present in every part of the research process. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018)

4 Research Results

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the results of this thesis. This chapter concretizes the state of Sons of solar's brand now, the firm's brand vision, the interviewees' thoughts on concrete steps needed to develop the brand of Sons of solar.

4.1 The current state of the brand

The first section of the interviews focused on finding out the current state of the brand of Sons of solar. The interviews revealed that the interviewees had similar views of the current state of the firm's brand. Every interviewee mentioned the term "young entrepreneurship" when describing what does the brand represent now. Sons of solar is seen as a community for young entrepreneurially minded individuals that share similar values and passions.

"Sons of solar is more than just a company. We share the same values and strive towards our goals, even though we are also friends"

The relatively long operating period of the company has made its brand quite ambiguous. Originally, the founder of Sons of solar created the company around three values: Honesty, Quality & Sustainability. The interviews reported that during six years of operation the company's original vision has gotten lost along the way. The core values are still present, but currently Sons of solar is missing a well-defined brand identity and a clear brand vision.

"Consistency is lost, the company does not currently have a coherent identity."

The interviews confirmed that Sons of solar was and is still a solar energy expert focused on delivering high quality solutions. The emphasis on quality was a factor that several respondents mentioned when describing what does the brand represent.

“We are a solar energy professional that has been in business for a long time, we strive to deliver solar plants that are at the forefront of technological development”

The second step of the interviews was focused on analyzing brand performance, more specifically on how Sons of solar currently answers the needs of the customer group. This section of the interviews produced similar results in all the interviewed people, with all answers focusing on the need-oriented sales process of Sons of solar. The interviewees described that the customer encounters have always been developed around the idea of genuinely listening to the customer, with the goal of finding out their true needs.

“I would say that our sales process digs the needs up, we have always had the goal of actually listening to the customer with our ears wide open during the sales and order process”

The gathered information is then used to tailor a customized package that addresses each customer's specific needs. A large product mix was seen as a vital part of being able to answer customers' needs effectively. A few well satisfied needs were repeatedly mentioned, such as the customers need to be understood and heard. Sons of solar has often created a safe atmosphere for purchasing a solar plant, by offering a complete energy solution, that is easy to understand and fit for the specific needs of the customer in question. One theme was repeatedly mentioned: Failure to maintain a high level of service during a period of high growth. A growing industry, and a customer-oriented sales process has brought the firm immense growth, but the same process has also resulted in issues, as the company has sometimes lacked the resources to answer exceptionally high demand.

“During the most busy period in 2022 we had some issues, the need of being listened to, being seen, these were matters that were briefly not met on a sufficient level. The amount of growth surprised us.”

The third step of the interview focused on brand responses, more specifically on brand judgments and brand feelings. Interviewees had many similar viewpoints in this category. The interviewees believe that in its current state, the brand of Sons of solar creates interest, sometimes even

confusion because the brand is quite ambiguous. Customers are often intrigued with the firm's name, and in some cases the name might even produce amusement.

"Some are amused by our name and by the fact that we are young guys"

"Sons of solar is in a way a quite exceptional name, customers might expect that behind the name would be a well defined brand"

The name and brand of Sons of solar is currently seen as something that grabs the customers attention but fails to fully capitalize on its potential. The material displays that positive brand judgments are also quite common. The interviewees believe that Sons of solar is often seen as a group of young, entrepreneurially minded group of individuals, that set the bar high and strive to answer the customer groups needs as well as possible.

"I believe they (customers) often have feelings of trust about us. Positive spirit and a high level of professionalism has to evoke feelings of trust, and it has."

This opinion also resonates to the reported brand feelings. The company has over 60 customer reviews on Google, with numerous people thanking the firm for exceptional service and emphasizing their satisfaction with their purchase.

"Very professional and friendly staff, both the salesman and the installers." -2021, 5/5

"The installation team was very professional and customer service-oriented. The high level of professionalism was visible as everyone knew what they were doing, and things were well-organized, and everything went exactly as planned, without any "complications". -2023, 5/5

During the last year the brand has also received some hits in the form of negative brand responses. Most of the negative feedback relates to installation delays, and communication issues. Customers feel that sometimes they have not been kept informed.

"Room for improvement in communication. Delays are understandable, but they need to be communicated and justified." -2023, 4/5

The last section of the interviews focused on brand resonance and customer relationships. During its entire operating period, Sons of solar has generally succeeded in forming productive customer relationships. Many customers have expressed customer loyalty by recommending Sons of solar to a friend, purchasing an additional solar plant or by simply writing a highly positive public customer review. During the peak of solar interest in end of 2022, the emphasis on exceptional client relationships started fading as the company simply did not have enough resources to serve everyone on the same high level as before. Currently, the company still lacks a clear vision on the current desired level of client relationships, which has resulted in a decline in positive customer reviews. New customers are satisfied, but the company is not currently striving for exceptionally high customer satisfaction.

4.2 Brand Vision

The interviewees were quite unanimous regarding the current state of the company's brand vision. The material reveals that currently the firm lacks a clear and well-defined brand vision. The founder of the company had a clear vision of what the brand used to represent, but as the firm has undergone some personnel changes, and experienced high growth, resources have been focused heavily on supplying demand, and the original vision has gotten lost in the process.

"Were sort of inbetween, currently we dont really know what we are"

"Brand should be defined and a brand strategy should be developed"

When asked with what should Sons of solar represent, factors such as reliability and distinguishability were frequently mentioned. The interviewees would like to see Sons of solar as the go-to partner for solar energy solutions. "A trustworthy companion, that makes getting into solar easy, and reasonable". A lot of potential was seen in the name and brand of the company. Sons of solar is seen as a thought provoking, even provocative brand that has the potential to delight and even enrage. The interviews proved that Sons of solar wants to capitalize on this potential and turn the brand into something that grabs the customers attention but serves you with respect and quality in mind.

To guide the brand vision in the right direction, the interviewees were asked with potentially unsatisfied needs of the customer, or what needs could be satisfied even better. Respondents mentioned that the brand could communicate to the customer more effectively. In some instances, customers currently get too little information, which sometimes leads to negative feedback. The interviewees stated that Sons of solar could also serve the needs of customer on a wider geographical area. Currently the company is not able to answer quotation requests from outside Southern Finland.

When asked with potential brand judgments and feelings in an optimal scenario, factors such as trustworthiness and memorability were frequently mentioned. Sons of solar wants to be a brand, that is seen as strong and stable, a partner that supports you now and in the future. A clear emotional reaction was also something that would be seen as valuable. *“A distinctive brand would be a clear advantage, in the end people make emotion-based decisions, and therefore we want to provoke a positive emotional reaction in the mind of the customer”*. Sons of solar would especially like to generate feelings of trust and being respected in the mind of the customer.

Optimal brand resonance was the last topic regarding brand vision. The interviews revealed that in an optimal scenario Sons of solar forms loyal customer relationships that produce more sales and positive visibility. The company wants to receive recommendations from their customers, to receive more sales with less effort. Customer reviews are also seen as highly beneficial, and they are seen as a potential benefit from establishing loyal customer relationships. The interviewees want the customer experience to be exceptional, such a positive reaction that some of the customer group would even act as brand ambassadors for the company. Indications of such behavior are already present, as some customers are clearly proud of their purchase from Sons of solar. They publicly write positive reviews and keep in touch with their salesperson even years after the installation. These kinds of customer relationships are what Sons of solar wants more of.

4.3 Brand Development

The third part of each interview theme was focused on possible brand development steps, that would be needed to reach the brand vision. A commonly occurring theme in the responses was that

Sons of solar needs to clarify the firm's mission and vision. Several respondents stated that after creating a clear brand strategy, marketing and external communication should be developed in order to actively engage the customer with the firm's core values. Sons of solar has succeeded in gaining attention in for example TikTok, but engaging the actual core customer segment has not yet been sufficiently successful.

To reach the brand vision, respondents suggested actions that would increase the brand's credibility. The founder suggested that customers and other stakeholders of the company should be made more visible in the company's marketing efforts. Sons of solar currently has a large amount of highly satisfied customers, but they are not utilized effectively in the brand's marketing. Displaying customer stories and employee development journeys, were mentioned actions that the interviewees believe that could make the brand of Sons of solar more credible. Sustainability efforts conducted by the company, such as donations towards climate action should also be displayed to the firm's stakeholders more effectively.

To answer the issues that have surfaced during the last year, the interviewees believe that Sons of solar could minimize future potential brand disadvantages by automating certain parts of communication towards the customer. The interviewees believe that this could help establish a more professional image of Sons of solar in the minds of the customer, since the company's brand has received some setbacks because of poor communication regarding for example installation dates. The interviews reveal that a clear goal seems to be that mistakes made during the highest era of demand in 2022 want to be avoided in the future, to preserve Sons of solar's brand as a highly customer-centric company.

Enhancing customer relationships gathered ideas that the whole sales process could be modified in a way that would produce better and more productive customer relationships. Communication with the customer could be begun before the actual sales appointment. This would give the salespeople an opportunity to engage customers with the firm's brand even before the actual sales appointment.

"In this industry the sales process is a huge part of the interaction with the customer, and therefore a huge part of the company's brand. Developing our sales process could greatly enhance our brand by positive customer feedback."

One clear goal of Sons of solar's brand vision is lowering the barrier of purchase, by making it as easy as possible to start utilizing solar energy. One interviewee believed that the company should develop their entire sales process with the goal of simplifying solar panel purchases for the customer. The interviewee in question mentioned several possible actions to achieve this, such as finding better financing options for the customer and making the purchasing process less about technology. Concrete steps for this were missing, but one interviewee wanted the firm to start taking steps towards "packaging solar energy in such a simplistic way, that the benefits are so clear that it would be stupid not to do it".

Regarding brand resonance and customer relationships, the interviews revealed that Sons of solar needs to define the target customer experience. The interviewees see highly loyal, active, and even brand ambassador like customer relationships as highly productive, but they also recognize that not every client is loyal or produces additional sales no matter how well you serve them. Therefore, the interviewees believe Sons of solar should pay more attention on what customers are possible brand-ambassadors and focus more than average resources on them. Client satisfaction is a goal with each client, but to be resource efficient, salespeople cannot spend extensive resources to every single client.

5 Summary

This thesis has been focused on researching brand development in the context of the case company Sons of solar Oy. Comparing the brands current state to the brand vision reveals what matters should be focused on when the case company develops their brand to the next level. This chapter will focus on answering the research questions and consider possible factors that would require further research.

5.1 Research Results and Conclusions

The main research question of this thesis was *How can the brand of Sons of solar be developed to match the brand vision?* This thesis answers this question with its three subsequent sub-questions focusing on the brands current state, the brand vision, and possible steps for brand development.

What does the brand of Sons of solar represent now?

Opinions about the brands current state were quite coherent. Each respondent mentioned the term “young entrepreneurship” when answering the question. All the respondents believed that the brand of Sons of solar is currently unorganized. The handprint of the company’s founder is still visible in the firm’s brand, but this original vision was reported to not be as relevant in this time. Interview responses were justified with the company having undergone periods of high growth, which have led to the original vision and values of the company getting lost in the process.

In brand development it is crucial to focus on matters that increase brand equity. Brand equity can be defined as a set of assets that increase the competitive advantages of a brand. Major asset categories can be divided into four categories: Brand name awareness, Brand Loyalty, Perceived Quality and Brand Associations. The interviews revealed that currently Sons of solar possesses brand equity in the categories of Brand Loyalty, Brand Associations, and Perceived Quality. The lack of resources and busy environment that has been caused by high growth, has left major room for improvements in all these categories. Other than Southwest Finland, especially brand name awareness is currently on a quite poor level as the company is barely known in the rest of Finland. (Aaker, 1996)

When researching the brands current performance, it came apparent that a major competitive advantage for Sons of solar brand has been its level of customer-centricity. During the firms entire operating period, its strength has been making the customer feel heard, valued and lowering the barrier of purchase. Keller’s research suggests, that in B2C markets a brand that creates real emotional connections and loyalty, has the best potential to succeed (Keller, 2016). The interviews revealed that this has been something that Sons of solar has previously succeeded in, but the amount of success in this department has gotten relatively smaller, since rapid growth has occasionally resulted in Sons of solar not having enough resources to keep up with the desired level of customer centricity. This was another finding, that supports the argument that Sons of solar’s brand needs to be redefined, and that implementing an actual brand strategy is necessary.

Researching Sons of solar's brand responses revealed highly relevant information for the brand's future development. The written customer reviews paint a picture of a highly satisfied customer base, that especially values the professionalism and high level of customer service that they have had the opportunity to enjoy. The more recent reviews also contained some negative feedback, mostly related to communication towards the customer. This supports the picture that interviews have also given. The actual implementation, installing the solar panels rarely ever gets any negative feedback, but the difference between the value proposition and what the client receives is something that has produced unfortunate results during the past year.

What is the brand vision of Sons of solar?

In an optimal setting the interviews paint a picture of Sons of solar as a distinguishable company, that generates feelings of trust, safety, and joy in the mind of the customer. The interviewed people would want to see Sons of solar as the go-to partner for all solar energy solutions, providing a high level of service, and making it effortless to start utilizing solar energy. Potential is seen in the name and the current brand of the company, as it can sometimes provoke mixed feelings. Some see Sons of solar as a sort of a "boy-band", and others as a group of solar energy professionals. This dichotomy is seen as an opportunity to create a truly distinct brand. Sons of solar wants to be a brand that makes you intrigued about what it is, and then capitalizes on the attention by providing exceptional customer service and high-quality solar energy solutions.

The interviewees would like for the customer to see who is behind the operation and share with them how passionate the team really is in serving its customer base in the best possible way. Many respondents would like to see Sons of solar developing to a brand that once again creates even brand-ambassador like customer relationships. This is not a scenario that is sought after in each encounter, since the interviewees recognize that not every customer can even be converted into a highly brand loyal individual. Nevertheless, customer-centricity is a value that the respondents want to see being reincorporated to the core value of its brand. Additionally, Sons of solar wants to continue the path of being an organization that is a mirror of its employees. A young and dynamic community of growth-minded individuals, that want to take themselves and their professional efforts, to the next level.

How can the brand of Sons of solar be developed towards the brand vision?

When researching possible steps for developing the brand of Sons of solar to match the brand vision, the range of answers was wide and comprehensive. A theme that repeated in many of the interviews was that the company should draft new mission and vision statements. From time to time, the core values of Sons of solar have not been present in everyday operations since they have not been defined. Defining the direction of Sons of solar, greatly impacts the brand as well, as it forms as a combination from everything that the company does.

Regarding more specifically the brand of Sons of solar, the interviewees agreed that the company should define a clear brand strategy, to regain a sense of self. After drafting a strategy, the respondents believed it would be important to develop marketing, and all forms of external communication to display to the stakeholders what does Sons of solar represent. One example from the founder, was making the actions towards sustainability more visible. Sons of solar has gifted over 10 000 € towards environmental protection during the last 2 years, but communication regarding these efforts has been nonsufficient. Other ideas from the interviewees were making different stakeholders more present in marketing. One interviewee suggested creating customer reference videos, to increase the interest of new customers.

To address the negative brand responses that Sons of solar has received in the past year, the interviewees believe it would be important to spend more time on the sales process, project coordination and customer aftercare. Other matters, such as more efficiently managing the firms' personnel were mentioned, since the interviewees believed that the company lacks systematic procedures that ensure sufficient client satisfaction.

The interviews revealed that Sons of solar wants to increase their brand resonance by creating more active and loyal customer relationships. These intensive relationships are not the goal with every single customer since resources are limited and some customers are not possible to satisfy on such a high level. The company wants to focus their additional efforts to the customers that produce additional sales and positive visibility when served with an exceptionally high level. This is a theme that used to be a vital part of the company's sales process, and it is something that the interviewees

see as worth bringing back. Additionally, Sons of solar wants to develop the company's sales process into a more active direction, in order to engage the customer with its brand and unique selling points before and after the actual sales appointments.

5.2 Trustworthiness and further research topics

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence in the methods, data and interpretation used in a study. The trustworthiness of a study can be evaluated by reviewing its transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. The transferability of a study refers to the extent to which the findings can be utilized by researchers in other settings. The credibility of a study refers to the degree of confidence in the truthfulness of the study. The dependability of a study refers to how stable the data and conditions of the study are over time. The confirmability of a study refers to repeatability, the degree to which findings can consistently be repeated. (Connelly, 2016)

This thesis has emphasized trustworthiness by following the standardized procedures that proper qualitative research requires. Additionally, trustworthiness has been maximized by presenting the research process as transparently as possible and by justifying the decisions made in this study. In qualitative study the researcher needs to recognize his subjectivity, as he is a research instrument in the research that he conducts (Puusa, 2020). In this study the research topic has been examined as objectively as possible, by recognizing the researcher's subjectivity.

The research material for this study was collected by conducting interviews. Interviews possess some issues regarding trustworthiness, since the interviewees own experiences or beliefs can impact their responses in a way which effects how they understand the topic in question (Puusa, 2020)

This thesis gives the case company relevant data, that can assist them in drafting a brand strategy. A highly relevant topic for further research would be a study, that would research the drafting, creation, and implementation process of Sons of solar's up and coming brand strategy. Since the scope of a bachelor's thesis is restricted, the viewpoint of the customer had to be cut from this thesis in order to keep the scope of research relevant to a bachelor's thesis level. This thesis gathers

information on the current state of Sons of solar's brand, clarifies it's brand vision, and highlights possible steps of brand development for reaching a brand that respects the company's vision.

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Attachment 1: Interview Questions

1. What is your position at Sons of solar?
2. What does the brand of Sons of solar currently represent?
3. In an optimal setting, what would the brand of Sons of solar represent?
4. What should be done in order to reach this goal?
5. Do you feel that the company currently meets the needs of customers? What needs?
6. Are there any needs that could be met better or that are not being met at all at the moment?
7. What should be done to better serve these needs?
8. Do you feel that the company currently has a brand vision?
9. What conclusions do you believe customers make of Sons of solar?
10. What conclusions would you like customers to make of Sons of solar?
11. What should be done in order to reach this goal?
12. What feelings does the brand of Sons of solar evoke in customers right now?
13. What feelings would you want the brand of Sons of solar to evoke in customers?
14. What do you think should be done to evoke these feelings in customers?
15. What kind of customer relationships does Sons of solar currently form?
16. What concrete things would you like to achieve with the help of customer relationships?
17. What kind of customer relationships would Sons of solar form in a target situation?
18. What should be done in order to reach this goal?