

Journey of a Successful Local Brand, ‘S-lon’: A Case Study on Building Brand Equity through a Brand Community

Brand Equity

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Weerasekera, S. C.

The Capital Maharaja Organization Limited, Colombo, Sri Lanka

shanweerasekera@gmail.com

Dissanayake, D. M. R.

Department of Marketing Management, Faculty of Commerce & Management Studies,

University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

Abstract

This case study investigates as to how a commodity product in the Sri Lankan construction industry achieved a generic status within the category and gained an edge over the competitors without getting involved in any price war but using a unique strategy to win the hearts & minds of the influencers and at large the consumers. This paper reveals the strength of the brand that could make its brand communities bond with the brand purpose. The core of this brand case study is S-lon brand which is the current market leader of the water management piping system category. The essence of this publication is to explore the corporate journey of the company and how the brand S-lon has been brought up to the current position of the brand leader through different strategies and environmental adaptations. Authors followed the case story method and main case insights had been collected via participative discussion method with the key internal stakeholders, including the corporate leader who was involved throughout the brand journey. Some empirical justifications were cited to amalgamate the case story insights into the relevant empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives. Overall case story was based on the branding strategy, brand equity, brand community and integrated brand communication whilst entrepreneurial insights were also associated. Authors provide learning directions for the readers based on the hands-on case insights and supportive empirical justifications. Additionally, this paper concludes the managerial implications under each of the main sections highlighting the winning strategies followed by the company and the brand S-lon.

Keywords: Brand community, Brand communication, Construction industry, S-lon.



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Background of the Study: History and Evolution of Plumbing for Human Needs

The recorded history of 'Plumbing' has been found in the ancient Minoan civilization which goes back approximately to 2200 to 1400 BC. Initially, they have used 'Terracotta' pipes, to build water management systems in transporting water to 'Palace Knossos'. This is one of the civilizations which was ahead of its time in utilizing advanced facilities such as flushing toilets, drainage, sewerage, and wastewater disposal system, and even rainwater harvesting (Lowell Corporation, 2019).

The plumbing terminology derives from the Latin word 'Plumbum', which means Lead (Pb), used in plumbing materials. Until the 19th century, when the development of modern cities was found, plumbing was rare (Gupta & Thawari, 2016). The ancient empire of Rome found Lead (Pb) to be the most suitable material for water transportation pipes due to its softness and malleability properties which were more desirable to make pipes. Lead (Pb) was the basic element used in that era to make pipes that would not develop pinholes that can lead to leakages. But the main weakness of using Lead (Pb) pipes in potable water transportation was the leaching of Lead to water that can cause health issues, even Dementia (Quam & Klein, 1936).

The need for reliable and safe water distribution piping materials that do not corrode or leach into the water, led to the development of thermoplastic pipes such as PE (Polyethylene) and PVC (Poly Vinyl Chloride). The roots of industrial PVC pipe production run way back to the 1930s in Germany. The first commercially successful pipes were produced in 1934 in the Bitterfeld-Wolfen Chemical Industrial area. These pipes were used for different applications such as potable water, brewery applications as well as industrial pipes for chemical laboratories and plant applications. The capacity of annual pipe production reached about 480 to 600 tons in 1941

Pipes are hardly a topic to set the pulse racing and are a very boring category among the consumers in the building material and construction industry, yet millions of miles of pipework that lie largely out of mind and out of sight are the unsung heroes of civilized societies. They are the arteries and veins through which clean water, gas, rainwater, drainage, and sewage flow. Also used for shield power & telecommunication cables. Pipes have been used for centuries but thermoplastic pipes have evolved over the last ninety years

The introduction of uPVC (Unplasticized Poly Vinyl Chloride) pipes under the brand S-lon to Sri Lanka took place without much deliberation. In 1955, Mr. Haruo Taga of Sekisui Chemical Company Ltd, the largest manufacturer of uPVC pipes in Japan came to the then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) on a holiday. He had sought an appointment with Mr. Rajandram, the Chairman of then Rajandrams Ltd., currently the CMG (The Capital Maharaja Group Ltd) who has referred him to Mr. E L F Gunasekera, a senior Director then at Rajandrams Ltd. There was no major interest or keenness to touch this novel range as the country was not ready to accept plastic pipes in that era where metal and asbestos pipes were popularly being used. But among so many manufacturing and trading companies then, only one company took it as an opportunity and that was the Rajandrams Ltd., who took up the challenge in promoting the plastic pipes to the Sri Lankan consumers way back in 1957. As per the discussion had with the late Mr. Rajamahendran by one of the authors of this case study in June 2021, he mentioned that the

incident had taken place in 1957 and was the revolutionary beginning of the plastic pipes era in Sri Lanka. Alongside, this case study discusses the strategic journey of establishing and developing the S-lon brand followed by a case story flow.

Purpose of and Design of the Study

This study is a case story discussion and authors mainly followed a descriptive investigation method by interviewing the internal stakeholders of the real company 'Capital Maharaja Group (CMG)'. The main author is also an executive employee of CMG and conducted several interviews with the needed approval from the senior management. This study was designed as a case story discussion supported by some empirical sources to connect to the underpinning theories and concepts for readers to connect the real-life case story with related theoretical and empirical contents. As per the nature of the study, main findings have been presented as discussion contents educating readers to grasp how the strategic and operational flows surfaced by the S-lon brand to reach the place where it is right now. The main research tool was the discussion guide and the authors conducted the interviews to build the case story as an interconnected strategic flow of establishing the brand 'S-lon'.

Challenges Faced during the Journey of S-lon Brand

With a large amount of resistance from every direction, it is unimaginable that a brand of uPVC pipes can achieve such success in the plastic pipes and plumbing market that the brand S-lon has reached today. Many professionals in the construction industry then found it was challenging to recommend uPVC pipes over metal pipes. The widely held perception was that plastic pipes are weaker than metals and references of uPVC pipe usage were scarcely available (Boros, 2011). The steps taken by Rajandrams Ltd., though courageous, and visionary, led to severe difficulties in convincing the decision-makers. Early attempts to build a convincing argument looked at a balance of properties such as Ductile strength, resistance to chemicals and flow properties of uPVC pipes, which failed to capture the imagination (Larock, Jeppson, & Watters, 2000). While many commented that it was a mistake that S-lon had entered the market with uPVC pipes too early, but the management then was following a strategy like the 'Blue Ocean Strategy' (Mi, 2015) to penetrate uncharted waters with a significant differentiation. Truly, it was clean, uncharted waters then, where nobody dared to sail (Kim & Mauborgne, 2004). "The challenges of getting into uncontested markets were enormous as no previous learning both in terms of the category, product and the market" was added by Rajamahendran, Chairman of CMG.

In this endeavor, marketers used various methods and tactics in retaining potential customers with their brand and capture new customers. Nevertheless, rivalry too does as much as to retain their customer base and to enhance their market share by penetrating competitor share while acquiring the growth (Ali & Anwar, 2021). As explained by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) in their article "the core competence of the corporation" (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990), Rajandrams Ltd. developed a collective knowledge in coordinating diverse production, distribution skills, and technologies as their core competencies (Soosay, 2005). By this time, Rajandrams Ltd. had already gained knowledge and experience in introducing a variety of products and distributing them across the island using multiple channels. They did extremely well in introducing a novel range of

products to Sri Lankan consumers, namely world-renowned brands like ‘Cutex’ a nail polish, dry batteries with ‘BEREC’, a locally developed brand of toothpaste under the brand name ‘Forhans’ to stationery brands such as ‘Parker Super Quink’ inks. As a diversification strategy, it seemed a good idea for Rajandrams to enter the construction industry by marketing uPVC pipes under the brand S-lon adding a new product category of ‘building material’ to their consumer product basket. However, the task became even more herculean as the company had no previous knowledge of this sector or category mainly due to its technical nature and being an industrial product (Fahimnia, et. al., 2013).

Rajandrams went through a very difficult period in the beginning. S-lon decided to use a different approach to counter the challenge they had faced. They immediately developed a qualified team of Engineers & Designers to convince other professionals such as owners of businesses, architects, engineers, contractors, plumbers, and house builders to use uPVC pipes in plumbing (Nordfalt & Lange, 2013). They even went to the extent of making educational demonstrations in public places where crowds were gathered and by displaying heavy vehicles to run over the pipes to prove the strength as the mindset of that era was that the strength is more important than other properties, thus the metal is the best material for plumbing piping systems. (Krasich, 2003). There were many instances, the technical teams installed pipes free of charge to promote the product with the potential large customers in creating first-hand user experience by trials, mainly in the leisure industry (hotels) which were booming at that time to build trust in the performance of the product. However, by the time, they reached the office after installation (this time gap was only because there were no fast communication systems like mobile phones available at that time), there were messages requesting them to remove the piping system immediately as they had broken those in no time while using. It was generally a case of misuse, rather than the performance of the product. The employees (mainly Room Boys) who attended changing of a bulb as usual by climbing the pipe (unlike today those days’ metal pipes were laid on the surface of the wall not inside and covered) attempted with uPVC pipes too as they were comfortable in doing so on the metal pipes without being bothered to look for a ladder. Unlike in the case of metal pipes, uPVC pipes cannot bear heavy loads especially when they are just hanging without resting on a wall that leads to breaking (Grunwald & Hempelmann, 2010). This was one of the incidents out of many such challenges faced by S-lon professionals during the journey until they aligned and positioned the brand with industry-accepted norms.

Sudden Growth of Competition

The trading business of importing pipes from Japan came to an end when the decision of Rajandrams to invest in a factory at Ratmalana became a reality. An Extruder line was imported from Japan and installed by Japanese Engineers in 1960. This decision opened the eyes of others who had an interest in entering this market. Penetration of rivalry brands began to take place and Rajandrams had to look for new strategies as the ‘Blue Ocean Strategy’ was no longer applicable. Initially, there were many entry barriers to this industry, such as the high cost of machinery, closely guarded production know-how and lack of trained manpower. But competitors reacted to those barriers quite successfully. It was a learning point that strategy should have been relooked

with the micro-environmental dynamics taking place rather than only focusing on rivalry firms' responses.

In 1961, another competitor who had financial strengths decided to enter the market with uPVC pipes under a popular brand name in the building material industry. They were getting an immediate acceptance and easy penetration to the hardware outlets in the sector as the company had gained sufficient popularity by this time, in the building material sector as they were already into some of the prominent building material products. Their entry underpinned one of their most respected products to building material trade which was a locally made Bolts and Nuts range in an era where the imports were restricted. It was an immensely popular product with just a three-letter brand name. They motivated and solicited those dealers who bought Bolts and Nuts to stock the newly introduced uPVC piping system. (Rajamahendran, 2021 January 4). This type of selling strategy could have been possible since there was no any other competitor brand to combat the Bolts & Nuts, they marketed. It became a difficult task for the S-lon team to maintain exclusivity with their network as most of these outlets had trends to stock the above brand's product range. The Bolts and Nuts produced by this company was the only branded product with the highest quality available at that time and it was the most preferred brand among metal workers, garages, and construction companies. This practice gave an edge over the competition for them to leverage their presence in many key building material outlets as well as uPVC piping systems. This new brand became a very strong competitor within a few years by adopting a competitive strategy supported by branding and selling programs.

It could be assumed that this brand was following a result-driven competitive strategy in line with Porter's thinking mainly on differentiation (Porter, 1985). They differentiated only in the shape and range of the product and tried to establish a presence over the traders by maintaining strong negotiation tactics. But in general, such strategy alone could not hold and dominate the market for long as new rivalries too began to penetrate with a vast range of products of similar or better shapes. Building materials in Sri Lanka have employed consumer-focused brand differentiation whilst brand equity is also pushed through the intermediaries (Dissanayake & Munasinghe, 2018). Around the same time, a textile and clothing trader introduced another piping system with the brand name Duro (owned by Duro Pipe Industries (Pvt) Ltd.) who had their clothing outlet closer to S-lon's head office then, its head-on product range like the S-lon. It could have followed a strong market intelligence to examine the activities taking place at t S-lon including sales administration activities. The new competitor also adopted a strategy to penetrate the market with low price, flexible terms and head-on product range that looked like S-lon.

Another competitor who gained immediate penetration by this time was Aztec (owned by Aztec Industries (Pvt) Ltd). They followed a similar strategy, but they developed a large range of injection molded fittings (accessories to join pipes) and square shape rainwater disposal systems, in a time where other manufacturers were mainly supplying fabricated fittings and half-round gutters for rainwater disposal systems with a very limited range of fittings, at a very competitive price not bothering about quality or the final appearance of the product. Thus, it seemed this product sector was mainly driven via pricing and product differentiation options since intermediary dominance was significant.

The impact of macro-environmental factors began to work in favour of the local manufacturing businesses as empirical studies mentioned it as one of the positive drives for any business (Rastogi & Trivedi, 2016). The government then began to restrict imports and promoted local Construction and Manufacturing sector which resulted in an industry boom, creating the appetite for many potential business organizations to invest in the manufacturing industry. As the years passed by many competitors began entering the market. To name a few: 'Kum Kelon', 'Anura PVC', 'Prince PVC', 'Shanko', 'National', 'CIC', 'EMP' 'Excellent', 'Nalota', 'Alicta', 'Royal', 'KML' Arpico, DSI etc. where some of them were into the entire system of pipes and other accessories while others entered only with a selected range. It was a huge task before them to keep the business growing while the number of competitors was growing exponentially by that time. There were many mushroom companies among them though they did not make significant damage as they were good enough to create irritation in certain pockets, categories, or regions in the country.

The entry barriers were falling, and Extrusion Machinery and Injection Moulds were becoming available from additional sources with competitive prices along with the know-how to make a basic product. The industry value chain was well established by then, including sales and distribution models in a much-organized manner. Twenty-seven brands, both local and imported, entered the fray with a common strategy of low prices, flexible terms to the trade, and a wider range of products. Also, some of the imported brands penetrated and competed only in the institutional and project markets.

Strategic Leap of Forming the Maharaja Organization Distribution Ltd

Rajandrams Pvt Ltd restructured the organization and The Maharaja Organization Distributors Ltd, (TMODL) was born in 1967. Then in 1985, the operations were separated to a Strategic Business Unit (SBU) under the name Industrial Sales Division and later S-lon Lanka (Pvt) Ltd., to run its operation with more attention and to take the competition head-on.

As per Porter's five force model analysis, S-lon faced immense challenges from every direction which is almost a challenge that needs to be treated strategically (Great Business Networking, 2016). They faced the threat of rivalry as suddenly there were many companies entering the uPVC pipe business. The power of the Sellers (Raw Material Suppliers) was high as Sri Lanka was not considered as a large potential market such as enamoring countries and contributing to a very small component of their total business. Hence, the prices offered by the suppliers were limited only twice a month and buyers had not much choice to wait for another offer thus to place the order with the given offer for the required quantity. On the other hand, the power of buyers was high as entry barriers to the industry were low and customers and traders were not much educated enough to distinguish between inferior and superior quality products, many of them, looked for lower prices and extended payment terms rather than quality in their purchasing decision. In a market and product category where the differentiation in visual front in terms of appearance by packaging or claiming high quality are not the options available with products or standards making, the life of the seller is more crucial for sustainability or growth. The minimum quality requirement and even the appearance of the product are defined and regulated by the standard authorities. The common yardstick which is imposed by Sri Lanka

Standard Institute (SLS) was compulsory to be followed by all the manufacturers. The appearance of the product was too limited to any shade of grey and no one could create any brand identity with a preferred colour to distinguish respective brands from the rest and it was prone to copy or imitate even the font and printing styles on the product. This was one of the biggest challenges S-lon faced in creating differentiation.

S-lon achieved great height in brand building by achieving the ‘Generic Status’ that many brands could not reach easily. This achievement was only possible with their continuous performance, constantly offering the highest quality in the category, non-compromising of the promise, strong brand personality; strong relationship with the trade and stakeholders, and strong influencer-loyalty could be listed out of many unique activities. Incidentally, S-lon was the only local brand that achieved the generic status so far in Sri Lanka and in the region other than a few multinational brands like Bata, Jeep, etc. (Aaker & Biel, 1993). Despite all these remarkable achievements, traders were promoting many other products as they were enjoying more facilities and margins from the competitors. Further, traders could push them easily as most of these piping systems were having a similar appearance. In the long run, reaching generic status within the category became a disadvantage for the brand in the absence of making enough awareness and creating influence to look for the brand in purchasing decisions. This is the exact phenomenon mentioned in brand equity formation with strong brand awareness and brand association (Aaker, 1996). Some competitors used this scenario to their advantage by giving good margins and attractive terms to the trade using a push strategy to mislead customers to believe that the S-lon is the name of the category and not a brand. Thus, leading to believe any grey coloured pipe as S-lon (Stocchi, Pare, Fuller, & Wright, 2017).). This was one of the main challenges S-lon faced in positioning the physical brand identity known as ‘Brand physics’(Janonis, Dovalienė & Virvilai, 2007).

Insights on Brand S-lon and its Brand Communities

According to Lupinek (2019), the brand community is a group of brand admirers who does not belong to any geographical boundary. Brand communities graduated from the previous concept of customer re-purchase behavior widening to the organizational relationships with consumers. Building a brand community has become very vital in creating a concept of relationship marketing. A brand community is a social set of shared consciousness. Lupinek (2019) explains that the brands are socially constructed objects, taking the example of the Apple brand community providing technical assistance, shares the information among the members such as product releases, maintaining the history and culture of the Apple brand, and providing technical assistance through numerous troubleshooting blogs evident the strength and relationship among the brand communities. Brand community results in effective brand engagement even in online and offline perspectives that ultimately makes the effect of brand tribalism where consumers positively act for brand co-creation (Bandara & Dissanayake, 2021). Further, these communities can be identified only through brand use, impression management, social networking, and engagement (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002).

S-lon hardly believed in countering the competition with better terms or giving only rational reasons to influence the buying decision. S-lon brand was built on emotional bonds and attachments, creating the attachment with Brand Community. The S-lon team decided to focus

tirelessly on educating and creating a 'Brand Community' of professionals as they can become the opinion leaders to recommend the product once they are convinced (Rajamahendran, 2021, January 4). Many highly qualified engineers, designers and trainers were recruited to conduct extensive educational programs to the public and private sector institutes. S-lon engineers worked with various government and private sector professionals in designing their projects with S-lon pipes. They aided in training entire members of the teams involved in those projects by conducting seminars, conferences, and face-to-face training in the factory, on-site, and in the respective offices. Plumbers were given continuous training and exposure in choosing the right product, designing the system to usage technics of pipes and many practical workshops were conducted regularly. Shop Assistants of hardware outlets were continuously educated on identifying and recommending the correct sizes and items as per the different needs of the customers. There were many promotional activities to encourage retailers to stock S-lon pipes. Countrywide distribution network was built to ensure availability and reach. Distributors were appointed to replenish stocks and to enhance the service levels whose management was under close scrutinization of the S-lon team.

In addition to the above, many marketing activities were done to support the brand to be distinguished from cheap alternates. But main competitors were investing only in their perceived differentiators, which did create dissonance in the minds of opinion leaders and consumers.

Perceived Differentiation of S-lon: 'Build a Brand Community' through Trust.

S-lon brand community was built on the premise that the firm and its employees would not sell anything that they could not equally consume or recommend to their closest social connections, parents, children, relatives, and friends in terms of Performance, Quality, Safety, Style, Durability and Price. Building the feeling of trust and respect, normally reserved for the closest relatives, allowed S-lon to form a bond with its stakeholders. Fortunately, it was found that in the 'island culture' of Sri Lanka, there were many similar thinking people in the community. At the first glance, this seemed to be the ideal case of a 'brand community' developing based on, shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Lupinek, 2019).

Having done these brand community activities, S-lon achieved a clear differentiator against the competition as a socially responsible brand. They continuously grew exponentially in terms of top and bottom lines with a large share of the pie and becoming the Market Leader, Brand Leader, and Price Leader (Triple Leadership) while maintaining a large gap with the next in line brands in the sector (Lupinek, 2019). Brand Community alone could not continuously help the brand S-lon to be protected from various activities conducted by the competitors to achieve temporary success with push strategies. They had a few isolated brand campaigns, promotional activities, discounts, price undercuts and extended terms which irritated the market substantially.

S-lon had a very strong and clear strategy that they did not want to compromise their vision only in building a brand community that would be loyal, promote, share their experience, and strongly recommend their brand. In this exercise it was revealed that high-end professionals such as engineers and architects did not go beyond a certain level in being loyal to the brand and

recommending it. However, they found a very good match with their concept of creating a dedicated community that would do anything for the brand and company at large by building a mutual high level of trust and affection among the community of plumbers and dealers or known as hardware outlets.

Transforming Brand Communities to Brand Evangelists

Evangelist marketing as per Sajoy (2018) is the concept that is used to get new customers through word-of-mouth communication. This concept has become more popular in the era of the internet and social media with the trend of consumers using the internet and social media in searching product information to fulfill their purchasing requirements. Business organizations are using this concept as a strategy to build brand communities to make more loyal sets of consumers who will buy, promote their brands, and condemn rival brands. Sajoy (2018) further elaborated that the terminology 'evangelist' originated from the Greek word 'Euangelos' meaning 'bringer of good news' and 'evangelism' means 'good news'. But the usage of this terminology in the modern era is to describe word-of-mouth brand marketing. A brand evangelist is not just a customer who purchases the product repeatedly. The customers who purchase repeatedly become the repeat customer, at the maximum a loyal customer. To qualify as a brand evangelist customer must not only purchase that brand but also must recommend the brand to others to pursue in buying the same brand. Further, they go to the extent of ridiculing the competitor brands. The purpose of developing a brand community of evangelists is to create a set of think-a-likes to spread word-of-mouth and recruit new customers and they follow the same and grow into a large society leading to the growth of the business. Evangelists will create another evangelist and with the continuation of this cycle, brands get protected and continue to grow (Sajoy, 2018).

S-lon decided to create brand evangelists out of their plumbing community. This became the main differentiator against the low-cost brands as they did not have any kind of emotional attachment or trust within this community. This community in the long run realized many companies were misusing them to achieve their short-term selfish goals. S-lon on the other hand was the only brand that worked towards creating social acceptance and looked after the wellbeing of their loved ones and them.

The word 'evangelist' has its roots in the Greek word 'Euangelos' which means 'bringer of good news' (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). The S-lon plumbers were created as a 'bringer of good news' in all their activities. They bring good news to the customer by recommending a reliable product and providing an excellent service to the customers who patronize them: the result is 'Peace of Mind' to the customer which is in line with the S-lon's vision statement too. Water and sanitation are the key to any society to maintain good health. Good health is the key to a happy life. Hence, anyone contributing to good health brings good news to society at large.

S-lon realized that the ones who recommend the brand repeatedly to others and influence to buy are mainly not the customers, contractors, traders or engineers but the 'plumbers' in many aspects. A housebuilder may be a 'once in a lifetime customer' but the repeat customer, and by far the largest user of S-lon piping system, in terms of volume, is the 'plumber'. The plumber is the one who will ensure the performance of the product and buy the product to complete his work. In Sri Lanka, the plumbing community was lumped together with 'odd jobs people', daily

wage earners or 'Bass' (unskilled odd job worker), whose profession was not recognized or respected in the society. But today a trend is taking place, where to fall into a respected professional category; plumbers must acquire some formal technical education. S-lon took the challenge of changing this perception while bringing human qualities and integrity to the forefront of their lifestyle. In this endeavor S-lon launched a 'Plumbers Club' on 21st October 2001 with the affiliation of the National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA) to qualify the plumbing community in Sri Lanka. It was a difficult task in convincing the Public Sector in Sri Lanka to work with the Private Sector. After several discussions, attempts and explanations, S-lon could convince the Chairman of the NAITA then to accept the proposal of upbringing the quality of the plumbing and plumbers in Sri Lanka.

S-lon provided regular training, both in terms of theory and practice and made the trainees face tests conducted by NAITA to become qualified plumbing technicians. S-lon made a maximum effort and changed the way the plumbers thought about the profession. Many were not interested in getting qualified as there was no requirement to prove their qualification to get a job. S-lon had to repeatedly emphasize the importance of being a qualified plumbing technician and the value that they could gain after receiving the training as a professional. Also, it was explained as to how they could get social acceptance by transforming from a basic 'Bass' to a professional plumbing technician. Those who got qualified automatically became members of the 'S-lon Plumbers Club' and were recognized with a membership card which most of them had received for the first time in their lifetime in their community as the club terminology itself was limited to the elite society. With this membership, they were requested to create a plumbers' club community in their locality with a governing society created within the membership. They were supposed to help each other through the journey of ups and downs of their life of respective members. They were seen helping each other as a community during weddings, funerals, or religious activities. Also, they were offered an internationally recognized plumbing license endorsed by NAITA, which many of the plumbers could use to get into permanent jobs in the Private and Public sectors as well as in foreign countries.

S-lon did not stop at making them only technically qualified but also made them more socially responsible citizens with high core values. For this purpose, S-lon arranged many programs on positive attitude, time management, good customer service and integrity. Many of the plumbers had been misled by promoting events in the night and making them intoxicated by the competitor brand as opposed to S-lon Plumbers Club. S-lon always taught them the good side of life, the importance of human values and how cause and effect worked. Many of these plumbers already knew what is right and wrong, but never got an opportunity to practice them as they were used and directed towards the wrong path.

S-lon made sure that they greeted not only the plumbers but also their family members with customized greeting cards for various important events in their lives. S-lon practicing all these activities honestly managed to win the hearts of the whole plumbing community which built strong trust between the brand S-lon and the community.

Most of the members in the plumbing community lived on a daily wage basis and did not have a habit of saving some percentage of their income for future needs. To create a habit of

saving and securing their families, S-lon introduced a life and accident insurance scheme which was found very useful for the spouses on many occasions with the demise of the main income earner of the house. Further, children of the plumbers are given scholarships for higher studies (Grade five to Advanced Level education). Plumbers in this community had access to the top-level management of the company and they were treated with respect and as equals. This gave a line of communication for new product development teams to improve the offerings of the company.

This brand community became the ambassadors of S-lon and represented the brand in every nook and corner of the country. Sri Lankans are not used to the do-it-yourself (DIY) practice as the cost of labour is not as high as in the western world. In Sri Lanka, no potable water, drainage or sewage lines were connected without the support of a plumber as the services of plumbers were affordable and widely available. S-lon has so far created over 7,500 plumbers as their members representing all parts of the country. They are volunteers for all CSR activities of the company. They always buy and promote S-lon while disparaging rival brands despite the company not soliciting them to do so.

Conclusion: 'Fueling Customer Engagements in 360-Degree Approach' for Brand Equity

Brand Community together with Brand Evangelism behavior has created a strong mediating effect on brand engagement in the case of S-lon, resulting in a virtuous circle of continuous improvements in both the customers' experience and the company's knowledge of needed products and services. The fueling effect made for the brand S-lon was able to tolerate many threats of low prices and cheap practices. Unhealthy competition can kill an industry, with unsustainable practices of poor-quality products and spurious materials in the drive for low costs. Brand Community and Evangelism have protected both the company and the industry alike for decades. S-lon enjoys the brand leadership to date with the help of these strategies well placed and continued.

This was naturally influenced and helped by the country's island culture. One of the memorable brand signatures of 'S-lon Bass' in yellow-colored outfits appeared as a plumber made a huge threshold to consumers to notice the brand identity and visibility. It was fully fueled by integrated marketing communication strategies to develop a consistent message to consumers while push promotions were executed responding to competitive forces. Even industrial brands could develop emotional brand equity with the essence of trust and performance. Authors believe the core of the lesson is 'creating a brand connected to consumer life and community is the only mantra of successful brand equity'.

The fruitful and productive journey of this brand has been very successful throughout its existence from 1957. They have ventured into many new product categories and such categories were piggybacked on this iconic brand, S-lon's equity and strength. Today, many of these categories have grown up into independent Strategic Business Units. Authors believe that the equity and the strong reputation created by the brand S-lon, has immensely helped the company in making these lines and brand extensions. The most impressive part is the way in which this brand has been evolving in the water management sector and creating its influences through various activities and developing a brand community who eventually became brand evangelists to

help the brand to stand firm for over sixty-three years, withstanding all the pressures from every other competitor. Be it price or any other attractive trade terms but S-lon had the strength to be inelastic against all the pressure. Further, it is interesting for academics and practitioners of marketing to research as to how a brand who built their equity in water management sector dominate into other categories such as Roofing, Ceiling and Cladding sheets, Tools and its Accessories, Electrical Wiring Accessories and Protection Devices, Fencing, and Decorative Paints. They have been building brand communities and evangelists through plumbers' clubs in the water management sector. Eventually, they use equity and the strength of the brand trust and reliability to create preferences in the other construction materials. In this process, they used their trust and reliability already built among the consumers, influencers, and other stakeholders in the construction industry to recommend the new categories they extended into. The brand community and creating evangelists in all categories have become the core activity of all the other brands introduced by S-lon. They have been successfully creating a brand community of electricians for Kevilton branded electrical range, a brand community of Welders and Blacksmiths for construction tools of PE+ brand and S-lon Guardian branded fencing system, carpenters and fabricators for S-lon branded Roofing, PE+ branded Ceiling and Cladding, and Painters' community for Kansai S-lon branded Decorative Paint range. S-lon Lanka (Pvt) Ltd has been very successful in many of these categories, and they are in the process of localizing many construction materials that are only imported to Sri Lanka today.

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