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The role of social interactions in building internal corporate brands: Implications for sustainability

Christine Vallaster^{a,*}, Adam Lindgreen^b

^a Institute of Entrepreneurship, University of Liechtenstein, Fürst Franz-Josef Straße, 9490 Vaduz, Liechtenstein

^b Cardiff Business School, University of Cardiff, Aberconway Building Colum Drive, Cardiff CF10 3EU, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article examines internal brand building, which is defined as the alignment of a corporation and employees around a brand. The notion of social interactions may provide a valuable perspective on brand-related interactive space, in which top management communicates brand-related information to employees and employees share brand-related information. Depth interviews, observations, and documentary analysis reveal how a social interaction-based, internal, brand-building process influences employees' actions and perceptions of the branded environment. Social interactions might generate brand commitment and shared brand beliefs in certain conditions. These findings have key implications for sustainability.

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We have all our corporate brand values set out and written down; and we have communicated these values to our employees. Actually, we poured a lot of money into internal communication. Yet the experiences of our customers with our sales staff tell a different story. It seems that information somewhere gets lost.

–Branch supervisor

1. Introduction

Internal brand building aims to align “an organization around a brand” according to a cluster of values (Tosti & Stotz, 2001, p. 30; see also Mitchell, 2002; Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright, & Khan, 1999) and thus facilitate delivery of the external brand experience. Through this process, three perspectives on corporate branding come into alignment (for a review and interdisciplinary framework, see Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; Simões, Dibb, & Fisk, 2005): actual (how the corporation views it), desired (how the corporation wants others to perceive it), and external (how others perceive it) (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Balmer & Soenen, 1999; Kapferer, 2004).

Minimizing the gaps among these three perspectives has strategic importance, because stakeholders experience a corporate brand's values through its products and services, as well as at every touch point (Balmer & Wilkinson, 1991). Especially in service

industries, in which encounters depend on the attitude and motivation of the corporation's employees (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007), employees constitute a key resource. The perceived qualification, friendliness, and responsiveness of employees, as well as how well they “live” corporate brand values, help customers develop trust in service encounters (Berry, 2000). In this sense, companies need to embed their corporate brand within employees, such that it gains “standardized, categorized, generalized meanings” (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004, p. 643).

Existing brand literature stresses the need for employee commitment to delivering brand values (Thomson et al., 1999). It identifies communication and social interaction as key facilitators of employees' commitment to the brand and shared brand beliefs. To the best of our knowledge though, few studies adopt a cross-fertilization approach and examine communications and social interaction simultaneously (de Chernatony, Drury, & Segal-Horn, 2006). Yet social interaction – which we define as “the integration of social, environmental, and economic concerns into an organization's culture, decision-making, strategy, and operations” (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2007) – may provide valuable insights into the brand-related interactive space that exists throughout the employee hierarchy and ultimately clarify a corporation's sustainability.

Our study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, facilitating brand-supportive behavior is a complex, difficult undertaking, strongly influenced by both vertical and horizontal dynamics. In our study, we attempt to understand how employees develop, employ, and change the brand-related information they possess. Second, this approach reveals methods that management

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: christine.vallaster@uni.li (C. Vallaster), LindgreenA@cardiff.ac.uk (A. Lindgreen).

can use to influence brand-related social interactions and thus induce brand commitment and shared brand beliefs among employees (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009). Both the facilitation of brand-supportive behavior and influences on brand-related social interactions have important implications for sustainability literature. Internal branding relates to the development of a corporate brand, and better communicated values could improve the workplace environment, which would nurture social aspects of a corporation's sustainability. For example, if employees understand and appreciate what the organization's brand stands for, they may perceive their workplace as more meaningful. Third, customers buy from service providers that they perceive offer the best value (Best, 2004). Determinants of this perceived value include quality of the services offered, the staff that delivers the service, and the brand image the corporation communicates (Doyle, 2000; Kotler & Keller, 2000). If customers trust their service providers, they tend to continue purchasing from them and offer much greater net present value than other customers (Reichheld, 1996). Therefore, these findings have key implications for the economic side of corporate sustainability.

We structure the remainder of this article as follows: we outline key concepts by building on related research fields to define the conceptual anchors of brand commitment and shared brand beliefs; we also discuss how social interaction in general, and communication in particular, may facilitate their development; and we briefly discuss sustainability. After we discuss our methodology, we report on and discuss our study findings. We conclude with implications for sustainability, some study limitations, and avenues for further research.

2. Literature review: key concepts

To understand the related concepts of the corporate brand, internal brand building, brand commitment, and shared brand beliefs, we detail similarities and distinctions among them.

2.1. Corporate brand

A corporate identity refers to the distinct attributes of a corporation and "is fundamentally concerned with reality, [or] 'what an organisation is'" (Balmer & Gray, 2003, p. 979). Graphic designs (Abratt, 1989; Balmer, 1995), employee behavior (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998), and corporate communication with internal and external stakeholders (Argenti, 1998) give texture to the corporate identity. Balmer and Gray (2003, p. 979) propose that corporate identity differs from, yet still overlaps with, a corporate brand, because "the identity concept is applicable to all entities. Yet, not every entity has, plans to have, wants or even needs a corporate brand. As such, a corporate identity is a necessary concept whereas a corporate brand is contingent". Accordingly, a corporation's brand values constitute a supra-level set of values that may characterize one or several corporations.

The corporate brand derives from corporate values, which must be reflected in the brand promise and the value-driven behavior of the staff (de Chernatony, 2010). A corporate brand develops through the projection of the corporate identity and the related promise to stakeholders, who ascribe meanings to the company through their experiences (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Schultz, Hatch, Larsen, & Van Riel, 2002). Through communication that supports corporate identity and offers promises, these meanings stabilize (Davis & Dunn, 2002), so a brand image develops. Employee behavior offers a form of communication at all touch points and thus influences perceptions of the corporate brand.

2.2. Internal brand building

Internal brand building attempts to turn employees into brand ambassadors (de Chernatony et al., 2006). The challenge is delivering consistently satisfying customer experiences that encourage the development of a strong corporate brand. Research into employee attachment to an organizational ideology (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Mowday, 1998; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986) links successful internal brand building to employee commitment and identification. That is, internal brand building engenders commitment and identification among employees (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005), and social interaction processes explain, encourage, and reinforce appropriate, brand-supportive staff behaviors, which in turn create value for the organization (Brodie, Glynn, & Little, 2006).

2.3. Brand commitment

Research into organizational commitment has a notable history (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday, 1998; van Dick, 2001), including Allen and Meyer's (1990) distinction among affective, continuance, and normative forms of commitment. These reflect employees' attitudes toward the company and motivation to invest effort to remain part of the group. Affective commitment refers to feelings of belonging and a sense of psychological attachment; continuance commitment notes the perceived costs of leaving; and normative commitment describes employees' attitudes toward the organization and feelings of obligation to it (Wasti, 2003).

In a meta-analysis of relevant antecedents, correlates, and consequences, Meyer et al. (2002) find that affective commitment has the strongest and most favorable link to organizational outcomes, such as citizenship behavior. Such behavior is facilitated through personal characteristics, including "a central life interest in work" (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 70) or "a need for achievement, affiliation and autonomy" (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 69), and satisfying work-related experiences, such as organizational support, relevant information, or beliefs that the organization cares about employee well-being (Meyer et al., 2002).

In an internal brand building context, employees should demonstrate brand-consistent behavior and thus perform roles as brand builders (de Chernatony et al., 2006). As a means to gain a competitive advantage, affective commitment is a relevant construct pertaining to internal brand-building dynamics. Analyzing the building blocks of brand commitment, Burmann and Zeplin (2005) advance Meyer and Allen's (1991) work by identifying culture fit (e.g., values of an organization that meet individual needs), structure fit, employee know-how, and disposable resources (as they relate to work experiences) as key.

Our discussion of commitment would be incomplete though if we ignored the overlapping notion of organizational identification¹: as Lipponen, Helkama, Olkkonen, and Juslin (2005) point out, organizational identity researchers often emphasize cognitive, self-definitional aspects of identification (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Pratt, 2000; van Knippenberg, 2000). Allen and Meyer's (1990) conceptualization of affective commitment as identification, emotional attachment, or involvement seems similar to this conception, because it acknowledges the cognitive component while also including affective and evaluative components (Tajfel, 1978). Moreover, the degree of social involvement in an organization relates to organizational identification (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982).

The idea of nested identities suggests that people express different levels of the self in organizations, ranging from work-group or department (organizational) identities to corporate or

¹ We use corporate and organizational identity interchangeably.

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