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Brand Attainment: A Strategic Management Level or General Employee Pre-Eminence in Zimbabwe Tourism Sector

Farai Chigora
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Business Administration, University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Graduate School of Business and Leadership, Westville Campus, South Africa
Lecturer, Faculty of Commerce, Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe
Clever Vutete
Lecturer, Zimbabwe Open University, Harare Region, Zimbabwe

Abstract:
The study was based on finding the most dominant custodians of brand supremacy between strategic level managers and general employees in Zimbabwe tourism branding progression. The study used a mixed sequential qualitative to quantitative research design. In-depth interviews were used to establish success branding determinants as perceived by experts and senior level managers in consultancy and brand management practitioners. Questionnaire distribution was used to get responses on the relationship between brand attainment determinants to both strategic and general level management effort. The results of the study revealed general employees are the foremost curators of brand success in the Zimbabwe tourism sector. This has been attributed to their direct relationship with the customers and other stakeholders whom they deal with in their day to day activities. The research recommended that general level employees should be consulted in strategic brand formulation issues. Also there should be clear two-way lines of communication between the strategic level managers and their low level operators. Senior managers should ensure that welfare and motivation of low level employees are taken care of so as to encourage their constructive participation in the branding process.

Keywords: *Branding, tourism, strategic management, general employees, Zimbabwe*

1. Introduction

The Zimbabwe tourism brand performance has become a cause of concern with various researchers trying to come up with the most effective ways to rejuvenate and position it a prime identity. Historically, Zimbabwe tourism industry has contributed immensely to the development and economic growth of the country. In early 1980's Zimbabwe tourism sector has attracted tourists from various global lucrative markets especially in the United Kingdom, Germany and United States of America. The government assisted by other designated bodies in the public and private sector formulated strategies and policies meant to sustain the development and prolonged growth of the tourism sector. Amongst these tourism destination tools is branding which has been used to give and improve identity of the sector, its products and offerings to the world. Tourism business is ranging from the accommodation to travel and resort sectors have been represented by a single destination brand beside them having their multiple brands. The current tourism brand used in Zimbabwe is "Zimbabwe a World of Wonders" which was introduced in the year 2011 (Chibaya, 2013). This brand replaced two other since the country's political independence in 1980. First was the "Discover Zimbabwe" in the early 1980s which was then replaced by "Africa's Paradise" in 1996 before inception of the current one (Ndlovu, 2009). Re-branding can be appreciated as a simple facelift in reaction to global competition but this has not been the case for Zimbabwe tourism destination. The drive towards re-branding in Zimbabwe can be related to crisis and catastrophic impediments making it more of a reactive measure rather than an augmentation. The country's tourism brand has faced challenges from various environmental difficulties which transpired in the country mainly political squabbles (Ndlovu & Heath, 2013). However, besides knowing the operational deterrence and having countering measures, the Zimbabwe tourism brand has not achieved the prime and glamour it reflected in the early 1980s.

Every operating business is driven by two main parties who have been classified for the sake of this study as strategic managers and general level managers. These can be regarded as drivers of excellence in the success of a tourism destination together with its brand. Strategic level managers are the key drivers who direct the business towards its vision (Alkhafaji, 2003). On the other hand, low level employees play an implementing role in order to make dreams of the strategists achievable. Within the thin line separating the two parties has developed barriers, classifications, labels, subordination, superiority and segregation of duties which affects coordination

and overall success of the business goals. The effect of the two parties in Zimbabwe tourism brand success has received little attention over the years yet this might be another reason for Zimbabwe tourism brand demise. The study therefore investigated the dominance of both strategic level managers and general employees as tourism business custodians in the success of Zimbabwe tourism brand.

2. Statement of Problem

The Zimbabwe tourism destination has faced brand challenges of the years. Efforts have been made by various bodies including the government to resuscitate the Zimbabwe tourism brand but still the tourism destination is failing to achieve its peak moments as attained in the 1980's.Branding is regarded as a strategic management issue which must go through the normal strategic management cycle. It is believed that the strategic managers own and direct the branding process which will be implemented and practiced by lower level general employees. However, even with appreciation and moving with the same bandwagon success of Zimbabwe tourism brand is at a slower pace. In order to find the reasons for Zimbabwe tourism brand failure, the study investigated on the most dominant owners of brand success between the strategic managers and general employees so as to recommend on the parties driving tourism brand success in Zimbabwe.

3. Literature Review

Tourism destination branding is growing as a philosophy to improve identity and a positioning of tourism destinations on the global market (Pike, 2010). The success of a tourism destination brand is seen from the brand equity it carries (Keller, 2013). This brand equity is a combination of improved brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and association (Florek & Kavaratzis, 2014). A tourism destination that carries positive brand equity is therefore seen from the tourist inflows and improved receipts. Zimbabwe as a tourism destination and its brand has faced a decline in tourists' arrivals over the years. There are many stakeholders who are responsible for the success of a tourism destination and its brand globally. These can be classified into two; those within the internal environment and those in the external environment. Those in the internal business environment are mainly the strategists and the implementers. Strategic level managers are responsible for giving visionary direction of the business towards profitability (Alkhafaji, 2003).It is the duty of general level or general employees to implement and practice instructions and guides delegated to them by the strategic level management. General employees should be considered as key contributors to tourism brand success such that their involvement should be considered to be of prime value in the branding process/development. In light of this perspective, there is also need to consider the importance of stakeholder involvement and participation in the formulation and development of a tourism brand (Chigora & Zvavahera, 2015). Zimbabwe tourism brand "Discover Zimbabwe" has been reported to have failed because it did not consult key and pertinent stakeholders in its formation (Ndlovu, 2009).Involving the crucial stakeholders helps in improving brand awareness as they help each other and amalgamates with a common purpose showcasing/selling the brand to all possible markets. Brand awareness is therefore needed in order to attract and improve equity of a tourism destination(Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011). Also it should be accepted that not all brand awareness that leads to improved brand equity (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011). Some known destinations in the world have become popular because of negative awareness they reflect to the world which even reduced tourists' visits.

Strategic management has been reckoned as a key driver in improving tourism brand equity (Keller, 2013). There is also a need to understand the importance of every stakeholder in the strategic development of a tourism destination brand (Chigora & Zvavahera, 2015). However, from the existing literature there is no clear convincing conclusion on the relevance of general employees in brand success of tourism destinations and Zimbabwe in particular. It was therefore the main driver for this research to inform in the literature gap the most dominant custodians of a Zimbabwe brand success focusing on the two main business contributors which are the strategic managers and general level employees.

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative to quantitative sequential mixed method using in-depth interviews as instruments to obtain qualitative data and survey questionnaires for quantitative data. In-depth interviews initiated the research as they were used to obtain themes for research by getting views, opinions and guide from senior experts and consultants in branding practices. Their views were then used as a guide to design a survey questionnaire that was distributed to respondents who have been selected from the accommodation, travel and resorts sectors in Zimbabwe. The total population for the study was 85 respondents comprising of 5 experts and consultants in branding, 35 employees in the accommodation sector, 30 employees in the travel sector and 15 employees from Zimbabwe tourism resorts.

5. Findings and discussions

The responses from in-depth interviews with experts and senior consultancy in consultancy and brand management revealed that the most dominant determinants of brand success are improved customer care, efficiency in service delivery, high leadership skills, perceived quality of products and services, increased product and service awareness, effective organisational structure, advertisement and marketing and effective communication channels. These determinants were then tested so as to see their dominant practitioners between strategic level managers and general employees through survey questionnaire distribution. The results from the survey are a shown in Table 1 below.

Brand Success Determinants	Custodians of the determinant		Agreed source
	Strategic Managers	General employees	
1. Improved customer care		√	General employees
2. Efficiency in service delivery		√	General employees
3. High leadership skills	√		Strategic management
4. Perceived quality of products and services		√	General employees
5. Increased product and service awareness	√	√	Both
6. Advertising and marketing	√	√	Both
7. Effective organisational structure	√		Strategic management
8. Effective communication channels	√		Strategic management

Table 1: Responses on the brand success determinants and responsible custodians
Source: Research Survey (2016)

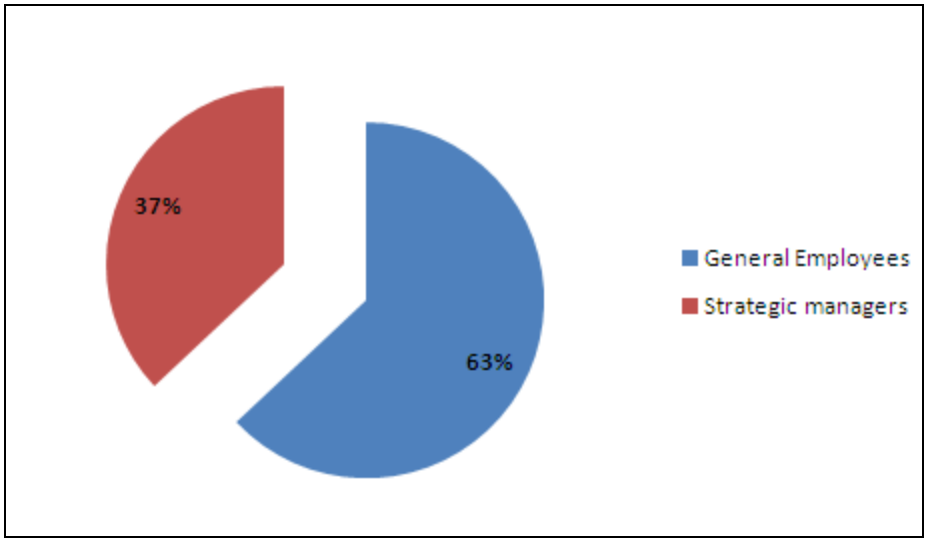

Figure 1: Composite responses on the real custodian of Zimbabwe tourism brand success determinants
Source: Research Survey (2016)

The findings from the research as presented in Table 1 and 1 shows that general employees are the most active parties in the success of Zimbabwe tourism brand. Absolutely the influence improved customer care, efficiency service delivery, perceived quality of products and services.

5.1. Improved Customer Care

As presented in Table 1 general employees are the ones who have been agreed by the respondents that they are the custodians of customer care in order to improve the state of Zimbabwe tourism brand. The reason for this agreement can be directed to the close relationship that exists between lower level employees and the customers. They directly interact with the customers and serve the needs of customer at any point in time. Their behaviour towards customers therefore influences the acceptance or rejection of the tourism brand by the customers. A bad behaviour in their interaction will discourage consumption such that customers will patronise a relatively friendly brand somewhere else. Conversely a good and acceptable behaviour will help to sell the tourism brand as a friendly and attractive brand. This will lead to more loyal customers who will patronise and associate with the brand for a life time. Strategic managers can be viewed as drivers of a vision who establish acceptable ways and practices to be followed by their subordinates. Their role is more on the directing side such that they are rarely seen closer to the customers. In fact, they delegate customer relationships to their low level implementers. However, for a brand to be successful there is need to know what the customers want and then serve the correct requirements and even use brand statements and themes that are expected and please the customers. Many tourism organisations do not recognise the great influence that is provided by the low level employees in the success of their brand. They think it is a role of the strategic managers only who are then regarded as formulators not implementers of the brand.

5.2. Efficiency in Service Delivery

The responses in Table 1 also show that the lower level managers are the most vibrant source of good service delivery in the Zimbabwe tourism industry. Tourism business belongs to a service sector. The challenge of selling a service is that it cannot be seen or touched because of its intangible nature. This makes the tourism service inseparable from the providers. The low level managers are the ones who carry the label and recognition of a service from the way they interact and associate with the customers. A tourism brand performance if measured by the quickness and reliable service delivery. The senior strategic managers can help in introducing structures and systems that are followed by their subordinates but cannot directly influence the day to day services that are provided in

the organisation. It is the empowerment, focus and excellence of low level general employees that determine efficiency of service delivery. There should be a change in the way low level managers are viewed from a service delivery perspective as they actually own it compared to strategic managers. A brand that is related to inefficiency in service delivery will not survive the new global market pressures associated with intensive cutthroat competition.

5.3. Perceived Quality of a Service or Product

Also the responses in Table 1 shows that perceived quality of a service or product is improved and derived from the low level employees rather than the strategic managers. In the brand equity determinants, perceived quality has been regarded as one of the uplifts. The only problem with quality is that it cannot be easily measured as it is highly subjective and viewed different from one individual to another. The way low level general employees dress, talks and co-ordinate issues determines the quality of a tourism destination brand. It is in the satisfaction and appreciation of the ambience and services by the customers that make a tourism destination brand of high quality. The reason that strategic managers are always away from the customers makes them poor custodian of brand success when measuring based on perceived quality.

Brand success in Zimbabwe tourism destination can be directed to a balanced effort of both strategic managers and general employees. As shown in Table 1 a balanced effort from both parties can help in the overall marketing, advertising and raising awareness of the Zimbabwe tourism brand. The reason might be that marketing cannot be done without budget approval by the strategic level managers and also it is a whole organisation effort. However, the composite in 1 above shows that the majority (63%) of the respondents agreed that general employees have a big stake in the success of the Zimbabwe tourism brand in comparison to the minority (37%) who were in favour of the strategic level managers.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends that the top level strategic managers should recognise and support the effort of general level employees in their day to day work efforts. There should be clear two way lines of communication between the strategic managers and their subordinates. Also general employee involvement in the brand formulation as a strategic level should be considered. This is because it has been proven that general level employees have and input in the way the brand is perceived by customers emanating from their role in service delivery and brand quality. The low level managers need to be motivated through various mechanisms so as to support their concerns in making the tourism brand a success. Owners and managers of tourism businesses in Zimbabwe should appreciate that general employees are a critical internal stakeholder for the success of their brand performance.

7. Conclusions

The study concludes that the general level managers are a critical stake in the success of the Zimbabwe tourism brand.Their contribution in service delivery, perceived quality and customer care is a strong driver to the identity and positioning of a tourism brand. The strategic managers are there to formulate and direct the tourism business and its brand but should also consider the need to support low level general employees in their concerns and work efforts. The study therefore strongly recommends open two way lines of communication between the two parties and participation of low level managers in strategic brand formulation.

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