

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Critical Role of Frontline Service Employees in Internal Branding

Azihan Othman

Department of Customer Service, Shariah-Compliant Bank, Malaysia

Abstract

The cohesion of Vision, Culture and Image (VCI) of a company greatly affects its brand strength where the greater the coherence of vision, culture and image, the stronger is the brand. Organisational employees are important contributors to the creation of corporate brand value ie when employees and organisation embrace the defined purpose of the organisation, they would be more committed to align their energy and initiatives to meet that purpose.

Internal branding, the process of building the corporate brand from within the organization, can shape employees attitude and behavior in line with the organisation's desired public image or brand. Employees are organizational biggest competitive advantage and there is a strong need to better understand the brand identity management process from the employees' perspective.

It is highly essential for organizations to align their HR practices with brand values as it has been shown that employees have a more positive attitude towards the brand when there is HR involvement in internal branding. Of critical importance is the role of frontline service employees, who have direct and close contacts with customers. Failure to properly hire, train, motivate and track performance of frontline service employees who have strong influence on customers perception of the bank, will have huge negative impact on organisation's branding effort.

Keywords: Brand, Image, HR, internal branding, frontline service employees

1. Introduction

Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff in their book called Groundswell(2008), state that – “your brand is whatever your customers say it is”. In order to build positive brand associations, corporations must consistently engage with consumers to forge deep relationships. Branding typically ensures a particular level of quality of the product or service (Wani, 2017) and in the current digitalized world where experiences and reviews are free-for-all and accessible 24/7, any negative review can bring down a brand overnight.

Essentially, at customer level, a brand is the lens through which the words and actions of a company, its competitors, and the environment in general are converted to thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes, etc., about a product (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Branding is an ongoing effort that permeates processes, culture, and development as a business, and it requires dedication and loyalty in order to reflect the effort (Wood, 2018).

A strong and well-managed corporate brand qualifies as a sustainable valuable resource which enable companies to command a price premium, foster greater customer loyalty, as well as support growth and greater profitability (Malmberg, 2008). Frederikson (2017) contends that strong brands require focus, coordinated effort, and consistent resources over time.

Maintaining strong brands can be achieved through corporate brand promotion, product branding, or a combination of the two (Benge, 2018) where a company's reward for possessing strong brands include name recognition that builds trust in the product or corporate brand. This sense of trust builds consumer loyalty that affects final choices in purchasing and establishing a repeat customer base.

According to Madsen (2012), the cohesion of Vision, Culture and Image (VCI), the concept which was first introduced by Hatch and Shultz (2001), greatly affects brand strength where the greater the coherence of vision, culture, and images, the stronger is the brand.

Clearly defining, articulating and follow-through on purpose help transform culture and improve customer trust (Aaker, 2016). Brand purpose can inspire loyalty, convince customers to trust and relate to the organisation, and ensure that fans forgive your weaknesses, sing your praises, and wave your flag (Couchman, 2017). Organisational employees are important contributors to the creation of corporate brand value in which the corporate brand most likely to succeed is one that directly connects strategic vision and organisational culture (Hatch, 2001). When employees and organisation embrace the defined purpose of the corporation, they would be more committed and realign their energy and initiatives to meet that purpose (Adamson, 2009).

In today's socially engaged and networked marketplace, word of mouth marketing and advertising has become a key element in marketing campaigns. Hence the goal is to engage in activities and services that are worthy of customers to talk about to others. Conversations are sparked when consumers are highly aroused. People choose emotionally and then

justify logically (Schultz, 2016). As Becki Hall (2016) aptly states, engaging and aligning employees to the company brand may be the single greatest priority to ensure business success.

2. Internal Branding

Internal branding is the process of building a brand from the inside out. More experts now argue that internal branding is imperative in corporate brand building. With the advent of new media and distribution channels, along with increasing consumer sophistication, there is now greater dependence on employees to deliver brand promise (Schultz, 2002). Internal branding and employee brand commitment have a significant effect on employee brand behavior where employees attitude and behavior can be shaped through internal branding (Jen-Te Yang, Chin-Sheng Wan, 2015).

Whatever industry a company is in, its employees are its biggest competitive advantage (Sir Richard Branson, Founder, Virgin). There is a strong need to better understand the brand identity management process from the employees' perspective. If the employees are cynical about its company's products or do not have the confidence on the organization itself, then it is very difficult to convince buyers to purchase the products. Skepticism should be dealt with as fast as possible as it may start affecting the company adversely (Bhasin, 2017).

A continuous process must be put in place to ensure that employees understand the 'who' and 'why' behind the business proposition. Having a clear and consistent strategy for conveying brand values to employees is the top challenge in internal branding (CMA Study).

To maximize the power of this resource, companies must arm employees with the knowledge and resources they need to be effective brand ambassadors. They must:-

- Know the unique proposition of the organisation in the marketplace
- Understand the brand promise and be able to explain the most important elements of the brand identity
- Be empowered to deliver on the brand promise

3. Role of Human Resource (HR) in Brand Building

In order for employees' behavior to reflect brand values, it is essential for organizations to align their HR practices with brand values (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). Aurand et al (2005) have found that a strong relationship exists between HR involvement in internal branding and the incorporation of the brand into work activities. They also discovered that employees have a more positive attitude towards the brand when there is HR involvement in internal branding HR can become engaged in brand building (Malmberg, 2008) in at least 3 critical points, which are during:-

- Recruitment - to recruit applicants which mostly match the corporate brand identity;
- Training - to incorporate corporation brand values and identity in its induction (orientation) and training programs for new and existing employees; and
- Performance Appraisal - to design performance appraisal and remuneration structures in line with the corporate brand

Employees who are better prepared and more motivated can generate increased profits for the company due to the positive effects on non-transactional behaviour of customers..

4. Critical Role of Frontline Service Employees

According to Cambridge Business English Dictionary © Cambridge University Press, frontline employee is an employee who deals directly with customers. Many companies recognize the importance of a powerful brand and yet they often ignore the critical role employees play in shaping relationships with customers (Yazdanifard, Rashad, Hashim Danbala & Dehi, 2011). Companies are having a hard time communicating the core of their brand identity down to the frontline. If employees don't know the brand promise, they certainly won't deliver on it. (John H. Fleming and Dan Witters, 2012)

Frontline employees ie the people behind the counter, on the phone, in the cloud, and walking the floor, possess a large measure of control over the customer experience as their actions will determine whether a customer becomes a brand evangelist or detractor (Craig LaRosa and Jon Campbell, 2011). For the customer, regardless of the thousands of employees in the organization, the person handling the transaction is the organization (Derek Stockley, 2014). Learning how to perceive and respond to complaints effectively and satisfactorily is one of the key elements of good training for frontline staff. An employee who has not been trained on the right way to handle complaint, may try to avoid conflict by ending the conversation as quickly as possible (Susan Fish, 2016).

Customers who feel they were poorly treated by employee of the organization will tell numerous people, friends, relatives, and neighbors about their experience and each of this individual, in turn, will tell others what the dissatisfaction customer told them. Consequently, just one unpleasant contact between a dissatisfied member of your business and one of your customers can be reported to over one hundred prospective customers influencing their feelings about your company and the people in it which at the end cause your company loss of customer loyalty.

As marketing is more and more shifting towards the exchange of specialized skills and knowledge, value is increasingly created through employee-customer interaction rather than statically embedded in output. Corporations are facing a future where their customers' choices will depend less on functional benefits and more on the assessment of the people behind products and services (Malmberg, 2008). It is therefore crucial to track performance of frontline employees vide analysing:-

- The level of customer engagement
- The level of customer satisfaction
- The level of complaint management ie whether a high level of interaction with customers could turn a negative experience into customer loyalty.

Craig LaRosa and Jon Campbell (2011) present the following four areas to consider when creating a standout customer experience:-

- Frontline employees should be hired based on soft skills, the pleasant personality traits and attitudes that can't be taught. Those with good soft skills are naturally social and enjoy interacting with others. They display energy and enthusiasm, as well as highly adaptable to change, possess strong initiative and curiosity (Susan Fish, 2016).
- Empowering employees to address problems benefit both the customer and the employees. Giving frontline employees the ability to solve problems put them in the position of power that can boost self-esteem and the feeling of being valued. Employers should also listen closely to their frontline staff, who may be the best-positioned people in the organization to know what customers care or are concerned about(Susan Fish, 2016).
- Most important role of a Manager is to ensure that employees feel respected and valued by setting the tone for customer service and reinforcing good behavior. While changing the role of the manager may take time, the practice of reinforcing good employee behavior can be quickly implemented.
- Designing for skill sets and clear career advancement motivates employees and improves retention at which can ultimately enhance the customer experience. Clear expectations for each role encourage the appropriate behavior within a particular position while providing a path for promotion to which employees can aspire.

5. Summary

Strong brands enjoy a high level of consumer awareness and receive increased attention from consumers. Companies must hire, coach and teach employees to create a customer experience that align with the desired image. Customers' experiences must back up the brand in order to achieve best visibility and acceleration possible: word-of-mouth referrals from delighted customers to their friends. Successful corporate brands are built when there is a strong relationship between the organization, employees and the brand.

Internal branding cements the foundation of a company and HR plays a crucial role to internalize the brand in employees' daily activities.

Employers should capitalize on the role of their frontline employees as their best consultants. Employees who are closest to serving and supporting the customers are the ones who get unfiltered views of how customers interact with a product or service. These frontline employees are the best sources on customers' feedback. They must be carefully hired with special emphasis on soft skills, equipped with the right knowledge of the products and their performance and interaction with customers closely monitored to ensure that the intended brand and image of the company is well showcased and deeply preserved.

6. References

- i. Aaker, D. (2016). How Barclays Defined Brand Purpose while regaining customer trust.
- ii. Adamson, A. (2009). Define your brand's purpose, not just its promise.
- iii. Benge, V. A. (2018). Corporate Branding vs. Product Branding.
- iv. Bernoff, C. L. and J. (2008). Groundswell. Harvard Business Press.
- v. Bhasin, H. (2017). Internal branding and its importance to an organization. Marketing 91.
- vi. Couchman, H. (2017). What's The Purpose Of Brand Purpose? Everything You Need To Know.
- vii. Craig LaRosa and Jon Campbell. (2011). Your Frontline Employees Are Your Brand. How Do You Hire The Right One.
- viii. Derek Stockley. (2014). Frontline staff - critical to customer service success (CRM article).
- ix. Frederikson, L. (2017). Strong Brand, Weak Brand: 5 Brand Killing Beliefs You Must Avoid.
- x. Hall, B. (2016). 5 ways to build your internal branding strategy.
- xi. Hatch, M. J. (2001). Bringing the corporation into corporate branding.
- xii. Jen-Te Yang, Chin-Sheng Wan, C.-W. W. (2015). Effect of internal branding on employee brand commitment and behavior in hospitality.
- xiii. John H. Fleming and Dan Witters. (2012). Your Employees Don't Get Your Brand.
- xiv. Keller, K. L., & Lehmann, D. R. (2006). Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities, 25(6), 740-759. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1050.0153>
- xv. Madsen, E. (2012). VCI Model by Hatch and Shultz.
- xvi. Malmberg, M. (2008). Contributions of Internal Branding Practices to Corporate Brand Success.
- xvii. Schoultz, M. (2016). Marketing Strategy: How can a small new bank build credibility to attract deposits?
- xviii. Schultz, M. (2002). Introduction : The Challenges of Corporate Branding.
- xix. Susan Fish. (2016). First impressions matter: The importance of front-line staff.
- xx. Wani, Z. A. (2017). Impact of Brand on Consumer Buying Behavior.
- xxi. Wood, C. (2018). Where Marketing Ends, Branding Begins.

- xxii. Yazdanifard, Rashad, Hashim Danbala, W. F. W. Y. and N. N., & Dehi. (2011). The Influence of Employee Attitudes and Company Brand on Customers loyalty in global market. In 2011 International Conference on Computer Communication and Management.