



Developing Brand Ambassadors: The Role of Brand-centred Human Resource Management

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we propose the role of brand-centered human resource management (HRM) in supporting the internal branding initiative toward the development of brand ambassadors in organizations. By brand ambassadors, we mean employees who are not necessarily involved in sales or marketing job, but who are also partly responsible for the promotion of the organization brand to external stakeholders, such as customers. Because the brand ambassadors are expected to live the brand and project the correct image of the company brand, it is vital that they understand and accept the brand value proposition. In order to help them do their job well in delivering the brand promise, it is essential that brand-centered HRM is instituted. Brand-centered HRM refers to the HR-related practices, such as hiring, training and development, performance appraisal, and compensation, to name a few, that are implemented to make employees produce positive attitude and behaviors toward the brands of the firm (Chiang et al., 2012). When the employees are able to play the role of good brand ambassadors to the external customers, it is expected that customers' brand experience will be enhanced, resulting in customer brand loyalty. In essence, brand-centered HRM is key toward the accomplishment of brand success and survival in the marketplace as the external branding and internal branding strategies are aligned.

Keywords: Brand-centered Human Resource Management, Internal Branding, Brand Success

JEL Classifications: M31, M37

1. INTRODUCTION

When a brand is mentioned, our general understanding is that its management is the sole responsibility of the marketing department because it is part of the marketing function. Marketers are responsible for developing an appropriate brand that can sell and be acceptable to customers because they have the necessary knowledge and training about what it takes to make a brand work and successful. Hence, assigning this responsibility to the marketing department seems to be the most appropriate thing to do. However, many scholars and practitioners have begun to question whether such role should be left entirely to the marketing department and employees who directly interact with customers. Do other employees, who are not directly involved in promoting the brand, should be left out? Many seem to agree that the outward looking to brand management is simply insufficient to help a brand successful; hence, many commentators have started advocating the

inward looking where the focus is on the employees in general who are also likely to help promote and sell the brand (Aurand et al., 2005; King and So, 2013; Miles and Mangold, 2004). In other words, while the ultimate and final recipient of brand patronage is the external customers, equally important is the need for the organization to market the brand to its internal customers, who are the employees.

Attempts to "sell" the brand to employees so that they could demonstrate consistent brand work behaviors and attitudes and project the brand image of the organization to external stakeholders are generally called internal branding (Aurand et al., 2005). The key focus of internal branding initiatives is to transform employees to become brand ambassadors or brand advocates. Apart from the sales or marketing personnel, other staff in the organization are, in Gummesson's word (1991), "part-time marketers" because they, too, have an important influence on the customer brand experience.

Because they project the brand image of the organization and represent what the company is to outsiders, it is crucial that other employees play their role well. In order for them to do that, the key assumption has to be met. That is, the employees have to be convinced about the brand value proposition of the company they are representing. When they have accepted the value proposition of the company brand and have the shared understanding of the importance of the brand, it is speculated that they will be enthusiastic and motivated to show the relevant attitudes and behaviors that reflect the brand (Heskett and Schlesinger, 1994), and deliver the brand promise to the customers effectively (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001). In other words, they will be willing to be consenting brand ambassadors or advocates. As a result, the customers' brand experience is likely to be enhanced, which is likely to influence their brand loyalty, which makes a difference to the company's bottom line.

Because employees can either be a brand builder or a brand destroyer, it is vital that the external and internal branding strategies are aligned (Mitchell, 2002). In this paper, we focus on the role of human resource management (HRM) in supporting the organizational branding strategy and initiatives. We adopt the term brand-centered HRM, following Chiang et al. (2012). King and So (2013), on the other hand, used the term brand-oriented HRM. Regardless of the terminology used, the aim of HR in internal branding is "... to make employees produce positive attitude and behaviors toward the brands of the firm" (Chiang et al., 2012: p. 662). We consider the HRM function because its role in developing and promoting the brand value is often neglected despite persistent calls made for the HR department to engage actively in the strategic development and implementation of the brand (Aurand et al., 2005; Boyd and Sutherland, 2006; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005), although in some economic sectors, such as hospitality, aggressive integration between the HRM and internal branding programs have become a norm (Cheung et al., 2014). We stress that the initiatives of the HR department are not stand-alone; rather, in the process of developing brand ambassadors, the marketing department should become an active partner by providing the necessary input and feedback to the HR department. This is because the marketing department knows what it takes to make a brand successful. Such collaborative partnership between the two functional departments is likely to ensure that the alignment in external and internal brand strategies is successful. It is also worthy of note that for the HR department to be able to transform the employees to become the company's brand ambassadors, they HR people themselves need to have embraced and internalize the brand values first. It is based on this assumption that this paper is written.

2. INTERNAL BRANDING

A brand is a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition" (Keller, 2013, p. 3). However, according to Jacobs (2003), a brand is not merely a company logo or tagline, but rather the company's promise about what the brand offers. In this regard, simply wearing a company's uniform is not enough

to project the brand image of the organization, but what the brand value entails and means and how it is delivered to the customers is more important (Erkmen and Hancer, 2015). It is claimed that when the customers have a favorable brand experience, they are likely to develop brand loyalty, which is vital to the success of a business organization (Baldauf et al., 2003). Customers who are loyal to the brand are likely to engage in repeat purchases and recommend the brand positively to others (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). When a brand is perceived to have value, customers are likely to be satisfied and committed to the brand and will not likely substitute to other brands that they are less familiar with (Cretu and Brodie, 2007). Maintaining customers, according to Gallo (2014), is less costly than finding new customers. Because a brand is able to help toward organizational success, brand management and marketing has developed into a distinct field of study that attracts both practitioners and scholars alike in developing relevant branding strategies.

One of the main branding strategies that are likely to affect the organization's bottom line is internal branding. Unlike branding strategies and programs that tend to focus on external stakeholders, internal branding refers to the efforts and initiatives implemented to establish the systems/processes and the consequent employee behavior that are consistent with the external branding efforts (Aurand et al., 2005). The key focus of internal branding initiative is developing employees' work attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with the company brand (Aurand et al., 2005; Heskett and Schlesinger, 1994). In the words of some scholars, the internal branding process is to let employees "live the brand" (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001). Although the construct "living the brand" is vaguely conceptualized, it can generally be understood as the employees being the ambassadors or advocates of the company brand (Xiong et al., 2013) or brand advocates (Kanthavanich et al., 2012). In the words of Schade (2008), a brand ambassador is someone who represents the brand with every move. Similarly, Boyd and Sutherland (2006) defined "living the brand" as employees behaving in a way that is representative of the company's brand, values, and culture. Schade narrated her experience when attending a market research in which she noticed a cellular phone company employee was using a phone made by one of her employer's competitors. When commented about the phone, the employee responded that she did not use the company's phone because it was not reliable. We can speculate from the story that when the employees themselves are not confident about the brand value proposition, they are less likely to accept the brand and, hence, live the brand. As a result, they may be less enthusiastic and motivated to deliver the brand promises to the external customers. It was revealed that successful brand building behavior depends on employees' understanding of the brand (King and So, 2013).

The above narration by Schade (2008) signifies the importance of living the brand, which is reflected in employee brand loyalty. If customer brand loyalty can be used as a guide, employee brand loyalty refers to the willingness of the employee to use the brand in their daily work activities and recommend the brand to other people through the use of word-of-mouth. In this context, it may also mean that the employees display work attitudes and

behaviors consistent with the brand image of the company. Using the company's brand, painting the company's logo in one's car, for instance, may denote brand loyalty. Even though the employees may not directly interact with the external customers, it is through such physical display of brand behaviors and attitudes that they promote the company brand and brand image. However, employee brand loyalty is more than simply the external display of brand behavior. More importantly, to live the brand requires that the employees internalize, embrace, and identify with the brand value, which implies emotional attachment to the brand (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Brand identity and brand commitment are what many companies strive to achieve when developing their employees as their brand advocates or ambassadors. It is argued that when the employees have developed a strong bond with the company brand to the extent that they are passionate about it, they are likely to facilitate customer trust in the brand, thus enhancing customers' brand experience (Cretu and Brodie, 2007).

One of the ways for internal branding to work in internalizing the brand values among the employees is through the implementation of the necessary system or processes. In this paper, we propose brand-centered HRM to support the internal branding initiatives in the organization.

3. BRAND-CENTRED HRM

Although no unified definition exists of HRM, generally scholars tend to agree that it is based on the premise that people should be treated as resources and not assets as they are the backbone of any organization. Human resources are valuable assets because they are unique, irreplaceable, inimitable, and rare (Barney, 1991). Hence, the organization should develop appropriate measures of how to acquire, deploy, develop, and retain them, which are often referred to as the HR bundle practices (Dyer and Reeves, 1995). The key HR practices include hiring, training and development, performance appraisal, compensation, and flexible work arrangements (Huselid, 1995). Although these practices are distinct, they are interrelated. To be effective in the accomplishment of the organizational goals and objectives, they have to be managed as a system (Wright and Kehoe, 2008). According to Dyer and Reeves (1995), HR practice bundles tend to yield sustainable performance outcomes than are individual practices. In a similar vein, Delery and Shaw (2001) maintained that even though certain individual HRM practices are viewed as superior to others, a single superior HRM practice without other supporting practices in the system is inadequate to drive sustainable performance outcomes. They further argued that individual "best practices" must be part of a larger, universally superior HRM system to support sustainable success.

Empirical evidence tends to suggest that good HRM practices are associated with work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Gould-Williams, 2003), and organizational citizenship behavior (Wright et al., 2003). Scholars explain that a good system of HR practices is able to produce the desired outcome through the creation of conditions that allow employees to become highly involved in the organization and work hard to accomplish the organization's goals (Wood and De Menezes, 1998). In this regard, it is possible to speculate

how the HR department can play a major role in the internal branding initiative through the effective implementation of the HRM practices that are brand focused or centered. To reiterate, brand-centered HRM is composed of relevant practices that make employees demonstrate work behaviors and attitudes consistent with the brand value or image (Aurand et al., 2005; Chiang et al., 2012; Hurrell and Scholarios, 2014). We now discuss the relevant HRM practices likely to facilitate the development of brand ambassadors.

3.1. Brand-centred Staffing

The primary objective of staffing practices is to hire employees who fit with the culture, values, and belief system of the organization so that they can make a significant contribution to the organizational performance. There are two types of fit or matches in staffing: Person-job fit and person-organization fit. While the former stresses on the need to hire candidates who have the relevant knowledge, skills, abilities and other capabilities for the job, the latter is concerned about matching the candidate with the overall organizational culture, value, and belief system (Heneman et al., 2012). For internal branding initiative to work, it is argued that these matches are insufficient. In brand-centric organizations, the person-brand fit is another requirement that needs to be fulfilled in staffing decisions which reflects a strong congruence between personal values and brand values (Burmam and Zeplin, 2005). Indeed, a qualitative study by Hurrell and Scholarios (2013), they showed that the person-brand match reduces social skills gaps that allow the hotel employees under investigation to play the role of brand ambassadors effectively.

In order to identify person-brand fit, it is necessary that the HR department knows what brand qualities and characteristics should a job incumbent possess to facilitate the recruitment and selection efforts in the organization. Here, a job description that is brand-focused should be first and foremost developed for all levels of employees. Indeed, it goes without saying that the brand values, mission, and goals should be reflected in the formulation of the brand-centric job description. For the brand values, position, and image to permeate the whole organization, the top management brand vision should not be left out. Since they are the people who chart the brand direction of the company, it is necessary that their brand vision permeates throughout the organization and is internalized by the employees.

Staffing is generally described in terms of recruitment and selection. While recruitment is simply an attempt by the organization to attract as many individuals to apply for a job, selection is an exercise in choosing the best applicants for the job. Various factors have been identified in determining recruitment effectiveness, and they include the recruiter factor, the job factor, and the organizational factor (Chapman et al., 2005). But, the effectiveness of these factors in attracting qualified applicants to apply for the jobs depends much on how they are able to deliver the recruitment message (Heneman et al., 2012). It is at this stage in the hiring process that a message about the brand values and propositions needs to be sent and communicated clearly. By doing so, the potential applicants will be able to select themselves out if they believe that they do not have what it takes to embrace and

internalize the brand values. In order to be effective in sending such message, the HR department needs to be careful about the choice of language, the media used, and the scope of recruitment. Here, the marketing people should also play an active role in giving feedback to the HR department in designing the appropriate recruitment message.

At the selection stage, the internal branding practice becomes more intense as various selection tests need to be conducted to screen the candidates carefully to identify the best and most qualified ones for the job. Here, the logic of prediction prevails in that the best candidates are chosen on the basis of past and relevant job performance (Heneman et al., 2012). It is assumed that those who have performed well in the past are likely to perform well in the future. Thus, the selection tools used should be able to differentiate and discriminate candidates who are likely to embrace and live the brand value and subsequent brand-building behavior (Chiang et al., 2012). Personality tests coupled with situational/behavioral interviews and other selection tools could be used in combination for the said purpose. That is, choosing valid selection tools are key in enabling the HR department to meet the logic of prediction.

3.2. Brand-centred Training and Education

It has been consistently argued that for internal branding efforts to work, educating the people in the organization is prerequisite and paramount (Henkel et al., 2007; King and So, 2013; Miles and Mangold, 2004). Various methods can be used to educate the employees about the company brand and its brand value. Of the available methods available to the HR department, training is generally agreed to be the most important one (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). In their study to examine the role of internal communications and training functions at Singapore Airlines, Chong (2007, p. 200) concluded that these functions “should be treated as the ‘first frontier’ in the battle for the customers because they can help transform key employees such as cabin crew into ‘walking embodiments’ of the core values, and key touch points into opportunities for fulfilling the brand promise.”

Training, whether formal and informal, is basically a program carried out to help employees to learn a new set of skills, knowledge, and abilities so that they can use them to accomplish their job better (Noe et al., 2003). In formal brand-related training, the employees can learn about the value of the brand, and why it is important to accept it, and, hence, deliver the brand promise to external stakeholders by demonstrating the consistent brand work attitudes and behaviors. But attending the training programs alone does not guarantee that training transfer, defined as the application of knowledge, skills and attitudes learned from training on the job and subsequent maintenance of them over a period of time of time (Baldwin and Ford, 1988) will take place. Transfer of training, in this case, being able to live the brand, depends on how the training is conducted, especially when the training purpose is clear. The trainer and trainee factors need to be considered, as well as the training context and environment, such as the module of training (Noe et al., 2003). In order to be effective also, formal training programs need to be carefully assessed and improved. In brand-centered training assessment, multiple sources, such as immediate supervisor, colleagues, customers, etc., should be solicited to

observe whether changes in brand behavior and attitudes have actually taken place. Asking the employees whether they are satisfied or not satisfied with the training program immediately after it is over is simply insufficient. As brand behavior and attitudes take time to change, evaluating the training programs should be done sometime after the programs are completed. If the programs do not produce the desired result, honest assessment and evaluation of the programs should be carried out.

Orientation is another method that organizations can employ to educate employees, especially newcomers, about the company brand. There is a saying in Malay that goes like this, “Melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya,” which is literally translated as, “To bend a bamboo, start when it is still a shoot.” The English equivalent is “Strike the iron while it’s hot.” This proverb stresses the importance of cultivating good values in a very early age. In this context, the newcomers should be educated about what the company brand values are and why they are important in the initial days of their membership with the organization before their understanding is diluted as a result of the socialization process they go through during their tenure in the organization (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006). Studies suggest that employee orientation should focus more on employees and not so much on organizations because allowing them to develop their self-identity and self-expression at work has been found to make them more satisfied (Cable et al., 2013). However, employees should be encouraged to express themselves in ways that are consistent with the brand image of the company. Hence, the orientation for newcomers can be designed in such a way to encourage employees’ self-identity as long as the identity and expression are not in conflict with what the organization expects them to do when it comes to promoting the brand to external stakeholders.

3.3. Brand-centered Performance Management

Performance management is a system that involves multi-faceted activities, ranging from identifying key performance indicators, setting up targets, assessing and evaluating performance, and providing performance feedback to employees (Miles and Mangold, 2004). The system is a powerful tool to check for deviances between the organizational expectations and actual employee work behavior and attitudes (Noe et al., 2003). In the context of internal branding initiative, this system can help reinforce the company brand through the actual exhibition of employee brand-related behavior and attitudes, especially when good work performance is linked to rewards, such as salary raises and job promotion. By building into the system brand-related work criteria and targets, employees will be able to understand their brand role better and how it is likely to help them achieve their personal or career goals in the organization. As performance assessment is also useful in identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, employees can use this information to improve themselves in the future in better delivering the brand value and promises to external stakeholders (Miles and Mangold, 2004). In other words, the system, if effectively designed, is an effective vehicle that allows the organization to assess whether or not and to what extent the employees are good brand ambassadors.

Before assessment of brand ambassadorship takes place, it is first imperative that the employees are communicated clearly

what their role is and how they should play it out. According to several scholars, employee brand performance can be identified by two dimensions: Brand in-role behaviors and brand extra-role behaviors (Morhart et al., 2009). While brand in-role performance relates to employees dependably meeting the standards prescribed by their organizational roles as representatives of the company brand, brand extra-role behavior refers to employee actions going beyond their prescribed roles for the good of the company brand and which are discretionary (Morhart et al., 2009). Even though the latter brand performance is discretionary and may not necessarily be linked to monetary reward, many organizations have realized the benefits of rewarding the employees for demonstrating such behavior (Morrison, 1994). Hence, regardless of whether the extra-role brand behavior is linked to pay, knowing what employee brand behaviors that need to be considered for assessment is key in order to develop a fair performance management system. Chiang et al. (2012) informed that Taiwan's largest and best-service quality-award winning restaurant conglomerate, Wang Steak, develops their brand ambassadors by putting customer response as important performance review criterion, taking as high as 30% of the rating points.

While many organizations rely on immediate supervisors to assess employee performance, the use of multiple assessors is more valid as it is able to give a better picture of the actual behavioral performance of the employees (Brutus et al., 1998). Despite various issues surrounding the use of multiple assessors, such as inter-rater reliability, many scholars and practitioners seem to be in the agreement of the benefits of using such method. Closely related to this is the application of a performance format in assessing employee brand behavior. Various rating scales are available; however, studies have shown that behaviorally-oriented rating formats tend to be more valid in assessing employee performance than trait-based scales (Tziner et al., 2000).

3.4. Brand-centred Compensation

Darlington (2005) refers to a compensation system as a framework of paying employees based on their participation and productivity which resulted in the successful performance of the organization, and the rewards are typically in the form of pay, commissions, bonuses and other incentives. This definition suggests a clear link between performance and pay/reward, which implies that if such link is not to be expected, it can affect employees' behavior. According to the expectancy theory, employees are likely to perform well when they perceive that their work effort results in a positive reward (Vroom, 1964). Thus, as compensation has motivational value, it pays that the organization implements a good and effective compensation system (Huang, 2000).

In the context of internal branding exercise, pay based on employee brand consistent behavior is another powerful reinforcement that organizations can use to help develop brand ambassadors. When employee perceive that their brand consistent behavior is likely to be rewarded, especially if it is formally regarded as the criterion for performance assessment they will be motivated to engage in such behavior. Implicit in this understanding is that employees need to be clearly informed what brand behavior will be rewarded or otherwise as studies showed that employees are not only

concerned about how much compensation or reward they receive (i.e., distributive justice) but also procedural justice, defined as the degree to which the processes used to make a decision are fair (Konovsky, 2000). Here, performance management and compensation systems have to be closely linked for an optimal behavioral performance from the brand ambassadors to be achieved. But, reinforcing the brand consistent behavior by the brand ambassadors should not be limited to formal rewards only. Informal measures of rewarding brand consistent behaviors also need to be used to complement the formal compensation system.

3.5. Brand-centred Participation and Involvement

The importance of allowing employees to participate and get involved in the decision-making process in matters that relate to them is widely documented (Ichniowski et al., 1997; Zwick, 2004). At the heart of this practice is the trust that the employees are masters over their job and, hence, giving them the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making and work processes is beneficial to the organization (Cappelli and Neumark, 2001) as they know what works and what does not. According to Zwick (2004), employee involvement is crucial for various reasons, such as it contributes to personal growth and job satisfaction, protects their interests, and promotes a two-way communication.

Employee participation can take many forms, ranging from the simplest form of casual involvement in which employees and managers communicate on an occasional basis, to more sophisticated schemes of the setting up of employee representation that sits on the company's board of directors (Cotton et al., 1988). Regardless of the various schemes available, the management has to decide what platform is the most appropriate for the employees to take part in the decision-making process by considering the issues involved (Cotton et al., 1988).

In the context of internal branding, employee participation is another HRM practice that can be used to further strengthen the company brand. As employees have to live by and with the brand, their opinion in the brand matters. As living the brand signifies identifying oneself with the brand, employees are likely to feel that they psychologically own the brand (Chiang et al., 2012). Psychological ownership is defined as is the psychologically experienced phenomenon in which an employee develops possessive feelings for the target (Van Dyne and Pierce, 2004). When an individual perceives that he or she psychologically owns the target, he or she will likely to have a sense of responsibility toward it and will be willing to protect and defend it because it belongs to him or her (Van Dyne and Pierce, 2004). Defending the thing owned is, therefore, a natural reaction because it has value to him/her and losing it is likely to be upsetting and disheartening. Chiang et al. (2012) found that brand-centered HRM is able to enhance the brand supporting behavior of employees because the practices are able to develop a sense of responsibility in employees toward the brand.

4. CONCLUSION

Internal branding is argued to be instrumental in influencing employees' attitudes and shaping their behaviors to be aligned with

a brand, by creating employees' understanding of brand values and engaging them in living brand reality (Kotter and Heskett, 1992). Living the brand or product is manifest in brand consistent attitudes and behavior (Chiang et al., 2012; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001). When one internalizes the brand value, delivering the brand promise and experience to the external stakeholders becomes natural and normal (Cushen, 2009). In this context, internal branding is a very powerful tool for attitudinal and behavioral modification in the organization necessary for the brand survival and brand sustainability in the long run (Aurand et al., 2005).

As employees are the company's brand ambassadors and brand advocates, internal systems and processes should be in place so that they can play their role effectively. One of the key internal systems is brand-centered HRM (Aurand et al., 2005; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Chiang et al., 2012), which should be aligned and coordinated well with the marketing activities to promote brand supporting attitudes and behaviors that are key to brand value delivery to external constituents. A good HRM system provides a work environment and a work condition that is conducive to the promotion, reinforcement, and building of brand behaviors through various practices, beginning with the hiring efforts. When the proper system is in place, it is, therefore, possible for the internal stakeholders, i.e., the employees to live the brand and become the brand.

Implicit in the argument for the role of brand-centered HRM, support from top management is crucial (Morhart et al., 2009; Uen et al., 2012). Without consistent support and recognition from the top management about the importance of aligning the internal and external branding strategies, developing brand ambassadors that could deliver the brand promise and value to the ultimate customers is not likely to be effective.

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