EMPLOYEE BRANDING FOR MARKETING BRAND: A BRAND POSITIONING STRATEGY THROUGH ALIGNING CULTURE AND HRM PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Customers' perception of a brand is critical and is shaped by organizational branding strategies, both external and internal. Over time, "Employee Branding", an internal branding mechanism, has evolved as a vital concept that acknowledges the role of employees in building the reputation and trust of a brand. For a company to be successful in marketing, it is incredibly essential to align its company operations and workforce around its core values for greater accountability and clarity. Through employee branding, the organization aims to instil the brand's mission and values in the workforce, which is possible through the interventions of organizational culture and HRM practices so that employees personify the brand by acting as brand ambassadors and promoting the brand's core value to attract customers and talent pool. The organization market their brand through employees' behaviour to avail benefits in hiring, retaining, and engaging the workforce that upholds the brand reputation to attract and retain customers resulting in increased productivity. The brand experience is founded on the customers' experiences driven by the employee's experiences. As the global business landscape keeps on evolving, organizations must create competitive advantages through the branding of their employees. The article aims to analyze the concept of employee branding and the role organizational culture and human resource management play in achieving the goal of branding. Human resource managers help build the company's brand and prepare personnel, while organizational culture sets a precedent for how the company should "do things". For effective employee branding, organizational Culture and HRM needs to completely allign with brand value to insure a brand conducive environment to foster employee branding.

Keywords: Employee Branding, Brand Values, Brand Positioning, Organizational Culture, Human Resource Management, , Value Congruency.

INTRODUCTION

Branding has evolved into an essential part of our daily routine. Branding helps a product or company differentiate itself from its competitors, facilitating customers to choose amongst the world of choices available to them. Everything from which shoe brand to purchase, which cafe to visit, or which pair of sunglasses to purchase is mainly influenced by Branding. As a result, given Branding's unrivalled eloquence, it is foreseeable that it plays a significant role in deciding which companies we work for. Brand management is a crucial function for many firms as one of their most important and valuable assets for an organization is their brand (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Branding is an integral part of strategic management, providing a solid identity and competitive advantage. An established brand is one that customer favours and employees aspire to work with. Employee Branding is likely to raise the degree of commitment among employees, contribute to strong and effective brand reputation management, increase staff motivation and productivity, contribute to customer engagement, and help recruit and retain the best-qualified people, among other benefits.

Initially, branding was focused on attracting customers; later, with the rising "war for talent", employer branding became a strategic goal for many organizations to entice prospective employees. Later, the branding concept further evolved to realize that employees' behaviour and ideology differentiate the organization. Therefore, it became imperative to integrate the employees into the brand-building system. Employee branding is the internal branding of the employee so many times referred to as Internal branding (Miles and Mangold, 2005). The brand management function is no longer focused on external projection but understands the importance of internal integration. Thus, it can be stated that the corporate brand's power directly correlates with the personnel brand's effectiveness. Therefore, "Employee Branding" has become a necessity in today's world since customers show their loyalty towards such an organization where employees are positive towards the brand ideology and represent the brand. Thus, employee branding has been dubbed the "*new catchphrase for building brand loyalty*" (Ghosh et al., 2016). Employee branding strategy involves internal marketing techniques for the external projection of company image. Before projecting the chosen image from employees to others, organizations must develop and instil the preferred image in their employees' minds if they want to be successful at employee branding strategy (Saraswathy and Balakrishnan, 2017). This preferred image develops from values and vision espoused by the top management and enacted in the system, influencing the employee's behaviour. Espoused and enacted values should completely align to promote the brand values in a true sense. This review article aims to surface how Organizational culture and HRM practices can create the necessary condition for value congruence between the espoused brand value, enacted value, and personnel values of the organization, becoming an essential requirement for an employee branding exercise. The contribution of a brand supportive organizational culture and brand consistent HR practices are also discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Branding

Employee branding refers to employees' image through their actions, attitudes, and other activities in the business world. Employees play a vital role in brand creation (Miles et al., 2005; Ind, 2003; Simoes, 2005), according to numerous studies, and it is employees that truly establish the company's image in the eyes of consumers and other external stakeholders (Ind, 2003). According to Miles et al., 2004, a strategic plan should establish the ideal brand image among all employees, regardless of whether only a section of the workforce interacts with clients. Sandra et al. (2005) assert that to set up its intended brand image, an organization must use employee branding to strengthen its employees and consumers. Employees who have been magnetized to the intended brand image and are driven to project that image to clients and other organizational components can assist a company gain a competitive edge when appropriately performed.

Employee branding is not about sheer projecting an image but encouraging emotional connection with the organization and among employees. Employee branding has the most significant impact on fostering a sense of "*oneness*" among employees (Punjaisri and Wilson 2011). Employee branding complements the employer branding process, attracting employees to the organization as it makes more sense to potential employees when the current employees share a positive image. In addition, it informs potential employees about its operations, ethos, and benefits (Ghosh et al., 2016). Interestingly, employee branding can develop from the employer branding process as employer branding creates attractiveness and engages employees. Employee engagement eventually promotes employee branding (Saraswathy and Balakrishnan, 2017). This interconnectedness means the employer and

employee branding support each other and are interdependent. Together, they recruit top talent from the labour market and ensure they remain part of the organization.

Although the concept of Employee Branding can have a remarkable influence on all organizations operating in any industry, it seems more acknowledged in the service sector industry. This assumption is supported by observing a noticeable interest of researchers in studying the concept of internal branding in service sectors like Bank (Basetsana Taku et al., 2021, education institutions (Miles and Mangold, 2005; Thamaraiselvan et al.,2018) Hospitality sector (Xiong et al., 2019; Dhiman and Arora, 2020), IT sector (Saraswathy and Balakrishnan, 2017), and Telecommunication (Bhasin et al., 2019). In these sectors, employees have direct interaction with the customers, and it is necessary to reflect the desired brand image through the workforce at each touchpoint. Therefore, the success of an organization in the service industry, particularly the success of the corporate Brand, depends on the effectiveness of employee branding (Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002).

Employee Branding: A Cross-Functional approach Involving Marketing and HR

The concept of "*employee branding*" is a strategic approach that has a base in marketing. Developing effective employee branding requires coherence across various activities, specifically HR and Marketing. HR managers can apply marketing techniques to buy in talented employees called "*recruitment marketing*" and can then use various HR techniques to integrate them into the company's culture and align them with the organization's goals and objectives. (Memon, 2012). The marketing team's responsibility is to inform the HR manager about the brand objective and significance so that the HR can incorporate it into the HR processes, like formulating the right training program and encouraging employees to deliver the Brand's promise. Coordination of marketing and human resources efforts in an organization is essential to ensure that workers' behaviour is consistent with brand values (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Employee Branding may fail due to a lack of synergy between marketing and HR. (Aurand, 2005). Due to the cross-functional nature and orientation of the assignment and the task itself, the executive team, human resource management, and marketing teams have been assigned this obligation. Because when both departments are active in consumer and employee engagement, this partnership seems to be a perfect fit.

Employee Branding: Connect with Promotional Marketing through an Interface with Social Media

Employee branding is an acknowledged positioning strategy that promotes the organization's image through employees' values and behaviour. Increasingly, businesses are attentive to marketing their brand image on online channels, mainly social media. Employee branding behaviour via social media can affect consumer-based brand equity and employer attractiveness. It can serve as a tool for managing the entire business brand and an excellent medium to attract talent, providing a cost-effective approach for organizations to fulfil their recruiting ambitions. On the other hand, negative employee brand engagement on social media can have severe ramifications for the organization's reputation. Employees who work for top-ranked organizations exhibit more optimism (expression of support for the organization's ideas) and commonality (reflection of agreeableness with the values of the organization) in their social media reviews. Therefore, it would be pertinent for organizations to review employees' behaviour over social media to assess how aligned they are with the employer's values and refine their internal branding approach accordingly.

On the strategic level, Organization Culture and HR system involvement are significant in delivering the Brand image an organization wants to project. On the tactical

level, chosen brand values should be incorporated into the HR policies and practices Well-designed brand identities are vain attempts unless staff generates genuine consumer images (Aurand, 2005).

Organizational Culture

Culture gives identity to an organization and guides members' behaviour. According to organizational culture defines boundaries and regulations for behaviour. The organization's vision, values, standards, structures, symbols, language, assumptions, views, and practices are components of the culture (Needle, 2004). A comprehensive set of corporate culture policies can accomplish a great deal, from laying the groundwork for a healthy corporate culture to establishing ethical standards for employees. Customers also intend to engage in ethical organizations that live the brand values. Employees require a conducive work environment and positive interpersonal interaction to perform at their highest levels. Cultures within organizations aid them in achieving this goal. Employees may feel a sense of purpose and responsibility for contributing to the organization's core goal due to the company's culture. Strong business culture is tremendously beneficial for hiring and retaining excellent staff. According to Glassdoor Economic Research, 2019, 77 per cent of workers look at a company's culture before applying, and nearly half of employees would quit their current job for a lower-paying chance at a company with a superior culture. Furthermore, an organization's culture, crucial to employee happiness, keeps more than two-thirds (65%) of employees in their current roles. Every company has a unique culture, and preserving such characteristics is essential to the company's success.

Aligning Organizational Culture for Employee Branding

Organizational culture has irrefutable involvement in this employee branding exercise. Organizational values are the building block of the culture. These values form the organization's culture's basis and evolve from modes of conduct, communication styles and decision-making styles and are vital to brand creation. Organizational Values serve as a guiding principle to the employees encouraging employees to exhibit behaviour accordingly. Espousing the value to represent the Brand and living these values impacts employees' behaviour. Empirical evidence supports those organizational values significantly influence employee branding. Espoused values are senior management aspirations regarding what they want their organization, employees and stakeholders to believe and what image they want to create. Often, a gap exists between what the organization espouses and what it practices in terms of how it runs its business or treats its employees. Such incongruency can affect the employee perception of organizational integrity, thus affecting their affective commitment (Gopinath, 2018) and eventually, the organization will fail to create the desired brand image and brand supportive employee behaviour. So, choosing the desired values and embedment those values in the culture can support the branding objective.

Organizations need to be thoughtful in selecting the values and mission to portray the right image. As Miles and Mangold (2005) emphasize, the foundation of employee branding lies in the company's mission and values. It states the organizational purpose and describes its desired brand image, which must be effectively communicated to employees, informing its attitudes and behaviours. Perfect message design and consistent delivery across all communication channels are necessary to succeed. It aids in the development of a firm's desired brand image among its workforce and preserves the employee-employer psychological contract, which is a mental agreement about the terms and conditions of their employment. As part of employee branding, the psychological contract influences employees'

trust in their employers and their motivation to serve customers and co-workers highlighted that psychological contract is influenced by the information employees receive, and culture can be considered an informal source of information that influences the branding process. When brand-aligned information is derived through the cultural influences that maintain the employees' psychological contract, the employees can create the right image.

Organizations need to see that the culture is supportive of the desired image. When brand values are cognizant of its core values, organizational culture may provide a competitive advantage (Hatch and Schultz, 2003) by promoting the congruence between perceived corporate image and authentic organizational culture; as a result, all stakeholders will be informed of the enterprise's true identity and principles. (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). Organizational culture influences employee behaviour, so supportive culture is required for developing an organization's Brand that enables desired behaviour. In addition, organizational culture can serve as a bridge between employees and organizations. According to the research, employees are drawn to organizational cultures consistent with their ideas and expectations. Employees seek congruency between the organization's values and offerings and their values and expectation. Furthermore, research indicates that corporate culture can influence employee job satisfaction, dedication, and inclination to stay at work. For this employee branding to be effective, it must ensure employees are satisfied (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). Dissatisfied employees cannot display a good brand image. In reality, employee branding exercises can thrive in a supportive work environment where expectations are communicated clearly, and employees are constantly motivated. Organizations that resolve to build a compelling brand should see that organizational culture components exist. Brand philosophies, brand leadership, brand-focused HRM, brand supportive HRM are the five major components of internal branding that should be present in a Brand supportive corporate culture.

According to Simoneaux et al. (2014), organizational culture influence how employees communicate and connect with external stakeholders. It functions as the binding agent resource to foster collaboration and high performance. Internal communication informs brand knowledge and advises the right attitude and behaviour to support the brand promise. In addition, internal communication can lead to a shared vision, brand loyalty, employee satisfaction and commitment. (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007).

An organization's cultural change is desirable if it is not paying off, which can be led by the participation of senior leaders (Aurand, 2005). When culture is not supportive, a cultural change activity needs to be initiated, followed by a complementary HR strategy. For example, if organizations want to be acknowledged as Diversity supportive organizations, an inclusive culture is desired. A culture audit can help analyze the culture and help the organization devise the process. The organization must first espouse the value, then inform the member and reinforce it through the policies and practices. Culture can be modulated through cultural change interventions. Flexible organizational culture is the need of time since it can help the organization respond to the external world better and create its brand image accordingly. Employee commitment is significantly and directly influenced by an organizational culture defined by high flexibility (Taylor et al.,2008) desirous for an employee branding mechanism.

Human Resource Management

An organization's human resources are effectively and efficiently managed through human resource management (HRM) policies and practices to help it acquire a competitive advantage. Incorporating formal HRM practices has numerous advantages, including attracting and retaining top talent, training employees for demanding roles, enhancing

employees' competencies, and fostering teamwork. It also enhances employees' quality of life, evolves amicable labour relations, and creates better employment opportunities. The HRM has evolved to support the organization in accomplishing its strategic goals as a business partner. Their focus is to add value to the organization. Organizations are now seen outsourcing the traditional administrative role of HRM to a third party and are attentive to strategic requirements. One such strategic aim is Brand management, where HRM tries to engage, facilitate, and motivate employees to represent the Brand by inculcating the organization's values.

Additionally, HR managers are also responsible for maintaining a consistent flow of qualified candidates and retaining talented employees where brand image plays a significant role.

Aligning HRM for Employee Branding

Claim that the world's most prominent and leading brands are constructed on knowledge and insight into the human experience and natural phenomena. In today's era of the brand explosion, companies must specialize to compete, which is possible by preserving a positive perception of the Brand and its associated persona. Employee branding aims to create a persona or perception in employees' minds that empowers them and aligns their actions with the Brand's promise to delight its customers. There HRM plays the role of coordinating and directing employees' efforts toward a common goal (Macky and Boxall et al., 2008). Human resource management could significantly narrow the gap between what an organization projects to its external stakeholders and what the internal system believes and practises by aligning the HR policies and practices, like hiring, performance evaluation, training, acknowledgement and others, with the company's brand values and seeing the brand values are also infused in work practices and employee's attributes. Therefore, ensuring that internal and external branding initiatives are congruent and aim at creating the desired brand image (Gotti and Wilson; 2001).

Brand-centred HR activities (where brand values are infused into every practice of HRM) are considered among the best practices that generate employee brand commitment that helps employees create a psychological attachment with the Brand, propelling them towards organizational goals. Brand commitment can also lead to brand citizenship behaviour where an employee voluntarily contributes over and above the role expectation without expectation of any financial reward. Such behaviours immensely contribute to organizational performance (Burmana and Zeplin, 2005). It has been shown that brand-centred HRM improves brands' psychological ownership and citizenship behaviours. Customer satisfaction is favourably affected by organizational brand citizenship actions. (Chang et al., 2012).

Memon (2012) proposed 4E's model, which is more relevant to the service brand industry, to explain base employee branding on four components: Engagement, Empowerment, Education, and Equity Training. For HR managers, this framework serves as a starting point for understanding the relationship between HR and brand management. Engaged employees adhere to its core principles and have a passion for its work and organization. Empowerment gives more authority to employees, making them accountable by fostering a shared understanding of the company's long-term vision and goals. Education and training are vital for employee development and understanding the Brand's expectations. Finally, cherishing Employee brand equity enhances trust in brand and employee worth. HRM can contribute to all these aspects that further contribute to employee branding. HRM should mainly aim at enhancing employee engagement. Employee engagement precursors and internal branding characteristics may be viewed as two sides of the same coin (Suomi et al., 2021).

According to (Chiang et al., 2012); and (Burmann et al., 2005), a successful human resource management system generates a work environment and settings suitable for encouraging, validating, and forming brand behaviours through numerous practises, starting with the hiring activities. The objective of aligning the brand value with HRM activities is to get employees to embrace the Brand's values. Burmann and Zeplin (2005) termed it *Person-Brand fit*, similar to Person organization fit; here high degree of alignment between personal values and brand core values is emphasized. Employees may live and embody the Brand if a strong structure is in place. The selection techniques involved should be able to distinguish and discriminate between applicants who are more likely to embrace and embody the brand value and engage in brand-building behaviours (Chiang, Chan, & Han, 2012). The desire to look for employee congruency with the Brand should be sought right from the recruitment stage, and then those values should be enforced persistently.

Training Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) discovered that training was perhaps the essential human resource management activity for developing and reinforcing brand-supporting behaviours in the workplace. Employees may be regularly re-educated about the Brand's value and why it is vital to embrace it. In this context, the orientation of new employees is critical since it is the first official instruction provided by the HR department about the Brand. Brand training and orientation programs, both structured or unstructured, can affect brand commitment by endorsing suitable behaviour.

The brand ideology and expectations should reflect in the career development programme and training initiatives. As a result, people seeking to advance their careers inside the business must display the attitudes, behaviours, and values consistent with the Brand's image. The firm's mechanism to foster brand-supporting behaviours and attitudes is implementing a brand mentorship programme Alshuaibi (2016).

Employees will be more likely to uphold the Brand's image if they get incentives and promotions. Employees will feel more connected to the Brand due to this acknowledgement. Internal branding efforts should communicate brand-centric news and actions to employees consistently. In order to establish a positive employee brand image, regular assessments of employee performance on brand image delivery through other stakeholders should be conducted regularly.

Employees' characteristics also help them better connect with the organization and reflect the brand ideology. Individual values boost employee branding, particularly employee commitment, emotional intelligence, and moral intelligence. Organizations can improve employee commitment by engaging them effectively, providing better support and growth opportunities, and reinforcing emotional intelligence by rewarding it Cho et al. (2013) revealed that HRM practices positively impact employees' perceptions of their organization and the quality of their work.

Meanwhile, the workplace is continually evolving due to a younger generation workforce influx. The shift in workforce demographics is influencing the rules of engagement. Changes in engagement approaches require the adjustment of HR policies and practices (Ozcelik, 2015). Therefore, the organization must address intergenerational distinctions in the traits and aspirations of the different cohorts to support the Brand's living. Executive leadership and HR departments must comprehend and accommodate the expectations of new generations. Changes in the market, technology, or organizational structure may need a new brand identity, which necessitates the adoption of new human resource management initiatives (Aurand, 2005). Brand management is a continuous process that keeps evolving due to the challenges posed by internal and external environmental changes indicating cultural changes and modifications in the way human resource management operates (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005), (Dahle et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Employee branding foundation lies in aligning employees' values and behaviour with the brand's core values. These core values have the potential to bring clarity to many aspects of the company's operations, including recruitment, strategy development, business solutions, community engagement and marketing, among others. Customers appreciate organizations that stand by their values. It benefits the organization in building brand image in front of customers, prospective employees, present employees, and as well as on society. An employee who thoroughly believes and imbibes the brand's core values and upholds the brand image with pride is an asset to an organization. Espousing the desired value and creating an employee's value fit with the culture and through HRM practices is desirous for promoting employee branding. It is advantageous for organizations to look for Person-Brand fit from the selection stage. Brand-centred HRM initiatives and a supportive climate and culture will facilitate the talent to thrive as brand ambassadors. This branding strategy involves marketing and HRM joint efforts. The promotional activities formulated by marketing teams should be aligned with employees' emotional attachment strengthened by HR initiatives and cultural influences. In fact, every practice of HRM should align with the Brand's values. HR should invest time and resources in devising brand-centred training and orientation that significantly impacts employee brand. Leadership support is also desirable. Leader-member exchange might well affect the internal branding process. Social media is an influential platform for building brand image at a low cost. Leveraging its benefit through employees' positive engagement will undoubtedly influence the Brand image.

Organizations worldwide have recognized employees' contribution to building a "Brand" and strive to raise an employee's sense of belongingness for their company. Ideas to engage employees in branding activities can be derived from the actions of big established brands. Organizations encourage employees to participate in marathons, sports competitions, and technology events to represent the brand. They facilitate employees undertaking educational programs, applying for patents, certifications and other activities. They even promote internal contests and reward and recognize the winners. This voluntary participation is the outcome of employees' emotional engagement with the brand. Employees are often seen wearing T-shirts with the organization logo showing their level of attachment. As a part of branding or otherwise, employees must be motivated to participate in CSR initiatives that create a positive message for the company and provides employees with a sense of fulfilment. Organizations need to adhere to high ethical standards, a significant factor for brand impression. Employees appreciate the sustainability efforts of organizations. These initiatives engage employees and help them develop an emotional bond with the brand so that employees positively relate to the brand and display brand consistent behaviour. Organizations can leverage employee branding through these activities.

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