

LIVING THE EMPLOYER BRAND: A FRAMEWORK PROPOSITION

DIANA GAVILAN BOUZAS; MARÍA AVELLO ITURRIAGAGOITIA
diana@soleste.es, mavello@emp.ucm.es
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

RESUMEN

Employer branding represents, from a firm's perspective, its efforts to promote, both within and outside the firm, a clear vision of what makes it different and desirable as an employer. From the employee's perspective, it also represents the way in which the brand is experienced by its existing workforce. Prior employer branding research from the employer perspective has received much attention but there is a lack of investigations of employer branding from the employees experiential point of view.

This paper provides a new insight in the conceptualization of employer branding and posits a framework model to better understand the variables responsible of creating employer brand value and its consequences in achieving talent attraction, existing employee commitment and in turn internal and external efficacy.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Employer branding, brand commitment, employer brand value, brand attraction.

1. Introduction

Marketers and practitioners assume that brands are among the most valuable asset for a company (Madden, Fehle and Fournier, 2006). Though, it is not surprising that the branding literature has traditionally paid more attention to the development of effective product and corporate branding strategies in order to increase the value of the company. The goal of such product and corporate branding strategies is always to attract, retain and engage *customers*.

Recently, however, the branding literature has broadened its focus. Considering that a firm's first customers are its own employees, (Edwards, 2010) then, if the staff understand and wholeheartedly endorse the firm's marketing goals, they will take care of the external customers, ultimately the end users. Research suggests a close link between the happiness of customers and that of employees (Davies, 2008). For this reason companies have become increasingly interested in creating success in the external marketplace by first doing so internally.

For this reason and due to the increasingly competitive labour market, firms have realized the importance of building a strong employer brand (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004) and the need to develop effective employer branding strategies in order to become the employer of choice, to retain the talent and to provide a sense of identification and involvement, that is, employer commitment.

Ambler and Barrow (1996) coined the concept *employer brand*. An employer brand is the organization's image as seen through the eyes of its existing and potential employees, and should not be confused with the consumer brand. These authors defined employer brand, as a bundle of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing organization. The main role of the employer brand is to provide a coherent framework for the management to simplify and focus priorities, increase productivity and improve recruitment, retention and commitment of its employees.

Despite the limited research on employer branding, it seems clear that just as a well-known consumer brand can generate attraction, trust, or intention to purchase with customers, a strong employer brand encourages internal and external results. Though in the inside of the firm, employer branding generates involvement and productivity (Knox and Freeman, 2006). This is what Burnman and Zeplin (2009) called brand citizenship behaviour (BCB), based on: willingness to help, willingness for further development and brand enthusiasm. Also, retention and loyalty to the firm have been studied as a consequence of employer brand activities.

Outside the firm, employer branding activities increase the attractiveness of a company as an employer option in the short term and its value in the long term (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Moreover, some authors enhanced the role assumed by employees as brand ambassadors that consequently improve interaction and the perception the customer already has (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2008).

2. Objetivos

Based on the foregoing, the purpose of this research is to introduce a framework which enables firms to study employer branding from the perspective of the employee and its associated marketing strategies to develop a clearly differentiated employer brand value. As the core of this topic is the brand, building its personality, making it "come alive" is key to the success of the company's performance (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009).

The contribution of this paper is firstly, to provide a better understanding of the key factors underlying employer brand value and secondly to contribute to the partially explored existing literature with a framework proposition based on brand value and brand commitment with a deep marketing orientation from the employees perspective.

This orientation together with a wide review of the nearly 15 years of research on this area in the academic field will allow us to suggest new topics to expand this research domain.

3. Framework proposition

Drawing on the discussion of the current importance of the employer brand we map out the relationships of the proposed theoretical model (Fig. 1).

We posit that three key factors: brand awareness, brand image and brand experience address employer brand value (Merz et al., 2009) – a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer. Employer brand value in turn will address brand commitment (Burman and Zeplin, 2009) – extent of psychological attachment of employees to the brand–, and brand attraction (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004) – desirable brand characteristics–. Employees commitment should end up with a higher level of internal and external efficacy (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004) – willingness to help, brand enthusiasm and propensity to work effectively –

Brand Awareness

It reflects the salience of brand in the customer mind (Aaker, 1996). In different contexts, an employer brand can be either a driver of brand choice, or at least a driver of attraction. Successful employer brands are characterized as being ‘known’ and ‘noticeable’ by both existing and prospective employees, as well as by influencers such as recruitment consultants (Moroko and Uncles, 2008).

Brand Image

Brand image consist in the associations held of a brand in ones memory (Keller, 1998). These associations can be seen, from a metaphorical point of view, as the personality of the brand, though we can call it brand personality to refer the holistic view of a brand’s associations (Davies, 2008). Associations are the basis of differentiation, the main goal of a brand. A brand name is more than just a label to differentiate, but differentiation is still the essence of branding (Aaker, 2003). Marketing strategies seek to differentiate the brand by positioning it as superior in one or more attributes relevant to the customer (Keller, 1998). Employees as well as customers like to be associated with a distinctive organization. The role of the employer brand should be then to distinguish the employer in the minds of potential and existing employees by conveying symbolic benefits beyond tangible benefits (Davies, 2008). The ability to differentiate brands has been linked to corporate and consumer brand health and ongoing success and is regarded as a key step in the brand building process (Kapferer, 2004).

Employer Brand Experience

From “Experiential Marketing”, Schmitt (1999), the concept begins to take shape. An experience consists of several private events in response to an external motivation affecting the whole human being. Awareness and image refer knowledge (classifying, analyzing, and reasoning about things) and it is only part of a person’s understanding of the world. In addition to this intellectual knowledge, experiences also represent the way human beings interact with its environment, through physical perceptions, feelings, and emotional dimensions (Dubé and Le Bel, 2003).

Experiences arise in a variety of settings. Marketing, traditionally consider the shopping and consumption environment as the most salient experience provider (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). In the organizational domain experience is even a major factor if we bear in mind that employees not only interact but also live the brand eight hours/day.

The difference between the model we propose in this paper and other theoretical propositions (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004; Burman and Zeplin, 2009; Merz et al., 2009) lays on this experiential approach. From the perspective of the employee the question is neither the culture nor the values but the experience lived by employees in the organization. In other words, as Schmitt (1999) stated, experience is all that makes the employer brand deserve to live.

Brakus et al. (2009), conceptualize brand experience as the subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, communications, and environments.

Brand experience is different from brand associations and brand image (Keller 1993). While associations/personality is based on inferential processes (Johar, Sengupta, and Aaker 2005) where subjects are not sincere or excited about the brand; they merely project some traits onto brands; in contrast, brand experiences are real sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses.

Employer brand value

Employer brand value relates to the effect of brand knowledge, brand associations on consumer response to the marketing of the product (Keller, 1993), plus the experience lived with the brand.

In terms of employer branding, brand value applies to the effect of brand knowledge on potential and existing employees. The sort of awareness and/or associations will differ depending on whether one is already an employee or a potential employee. Employer brand awareness and employer brand associations propels potential applicants to apply.

Further, employer brand value, through its brand personality or attractiveness (Berthon, et al., 2005) and brand experience, should encourage existing employees to stay with, and support the company (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009). Awareness is no longer an issue for existing employees.

Though, employer brand value is the desired outcome of employer branding activities, because it will exert a positive influence on talent employee's attraction, affective brand commitment and on internal and external efficacy.

Brand Attraction

External marketing of the employer brand sets up the firm as an employer of choice and thereby enables it to attract qualified workforce. We assume that the distinctiveness of the brand allows the firm to acquire distinctive human capital (Cetinkaya, 2010).

Affective Brand Commitment

If employees represent a source of brand equity for services, their commitment in supporting the brand should be a priority for top management (Kimpakorn, and Tocquer, 2009). Since Morgan and Hunt (1994), commitment is viewed as a central concept in the relationship marketing literature and defined as employee effort, measured by job performance, and the extent to which employees experience a sense of identification and involvement with the organization. Thus, employer brand commitment can be understood as a construct that joins together the employee to the employer organization and contains at least an affective component and a continuance component (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Literature supports that commitment is an antecedent of the internal and external effects of employer branding (Burman and Zeplin, 2009). Despite its dimensions are not clear, and what drives people's commitment, too.

Internal efficacy

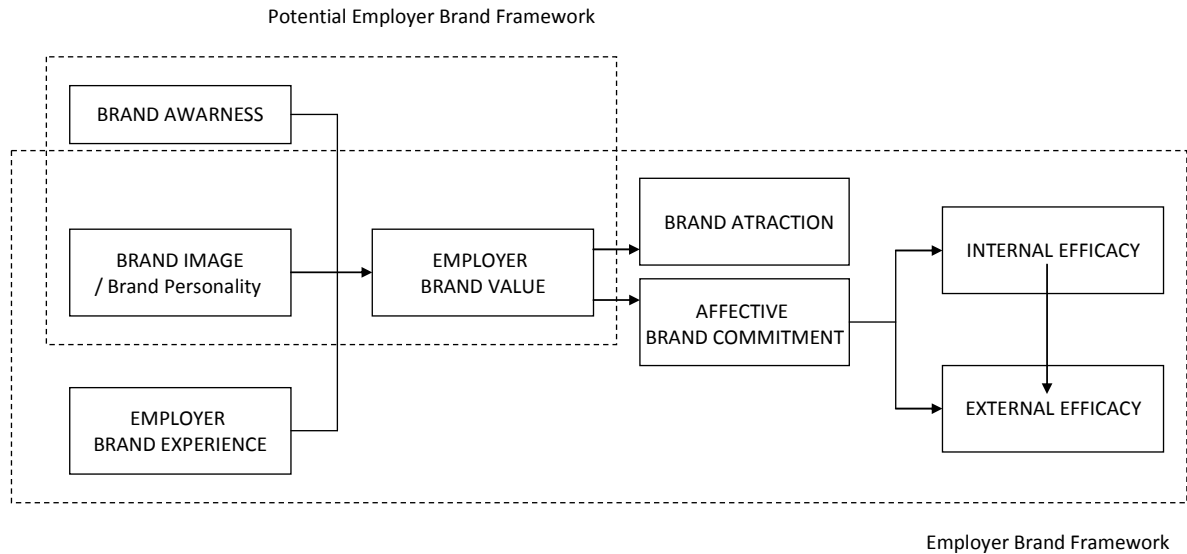
Several are the effects that can be attributed to a proper management of the employer brand value. Backhouse and Tikoo, (2004) coined the construct Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB) to refer to the willingness of employees to help, show brand enthusiasm and a clear tendency to develop further career within the organization. Internal efficacy will also turn in a positive "word of mouth" effect where employees would become real brand ambassadors in both, internal and external context of the firm.

In addition, employer brand strategies will reinforce the concept of quality employment and therefore contribute to employees wishing to stay in the organization (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Affective retention –not by routine, or by resignation– is crucial for the sustainability of the competitive advantage in the generation of real engagement, distinctive, and even unique workforce.

External efficacy

The quality of the consumer experience is the last but main outcome of employer brand management. The key challenge consists in implementing a branding model where employees are aligned with the organization strategies and feel totally committed with them. As a result, a committed employee would transfer its enthusiasm outside the organization resulting once more in positive word of mouth. Committed employees could then ‘bring the brand to life’ since the moment we assume that ‘employees are the brand’ (Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005). Fig. 1, represents the entire proposed model.

FIGURE 1.
Employer Branding Framework Proposition



4. Agenda of further research

This model will provide a better understanding of the link between employees and consumers through the concept of employer brand value. Further empirical research is needed to test validity and reliability of constructs and the suggested causal relationships.

The agenda to fulfil the entire project is the following:

- Research the main drivers responsible of building a sound employer brand in order to align employees with the promise of the brand.
 - Particularly, explore the main differences among business sectors and countries.
- The effect of the employer brand value on the employee behavior and on his/her role as brand ambassador.
 - Carry out a comparative study of the internal vs. external perception of the brand among employees and stakeholders.
- Employer brand value tools: marketing strategies to create, develop and communicate the employer brand value proposition.
 - Measure the efficacy and suitability of the Human Resource Marketing strategies on different professional levels.

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