
DYNAMICS OF EMPLOYEE BRANDING

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Abstract: The article traces the importance of employee branding. It discusses corporate culture and its bearing on employee branding. It reiterates on communication of the organization's key positioning and brand messages to employees, with a view to building the internal brand. It further enumerates a few examples of how corporate culture has influenced employee branding in a few leading business enterprises. Also, a few techniques for transforming employees into brand ambassadors are highlighted.

The article concludes by summarizing that to successfully create a strong network of employee ambassadors (as a move towards employee branding), companies must establish a communications component that involves both employee education, and sound feedback mechanisms. Companies should engage in employee branding and encourage the employees to believe in its brand values. Behaving consistently with the brand values will help them to make decisions while dealing with customers, suppliers, and external stakeholders.

Keywords: Employee branding, brand image, transforming employees, brand ambassadors, engaged employees, corporate culture.

Introduction: Employee branding is the process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents.

According to authenticorganizations.com, “Employee branding is all about influencing the behavior of organization members. It is the practice of ‘aligning’ an employee’s behavior and often the employee’s point of view with the image that the organization wants to project to its customers and external stakeholders.” In simpler terms, Employee Branding denotes what an employee projects about himself and the organization culture. The employee should be able to serve as a brand ambassador with a strong sense of affiliation towards the organization.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To understand the dynamics of employee branding and its importance.
2. To discuss some of the techniques for transforming employees into brand ambassadors.
3. To examine a few organizations that utilize employee branding and make it a part of their corporate culture
4. To increase awareness of the dual role of employees in building brand image.

Methodology and Sources of Data: The study is conceptual and uses secondary data. The secondary data used consisted of surveys from Edelman Trust Barometer, Coalition for Brand Equity reports by Daniel Cable, Francesca Gino and Bradley Staats published in Administrative Science Quarterly , “Employee Engagement,” report by Dilys Robinson and Sue Hayday, ,”Internal Branding in an Indian Bank: An Initial Exploration”, a report by Patlal&Pandit, “Innovations in Employer Branding Strategies in India”, a report by Shivedasani&Bhaskar, Asian Journal of research in social sciences and humanities and various websites.

Importance of Employee Branding:

- 1. Authenticates the message of the brand through its employees:** Employee branding takes the brand built by the organization and

makes employees aware of it. It is a strategy for generating 'on brand' behavior. This is the behavior of the employee that expresses, presents and performs the attributes that the organization wants as part of its reputation or brand. The idea is that an organization can strengthen its claim to the attributes of its brand when employees demonstrate these attributes.

- 2. Brings on the possibility of premium pricing:** Companies strive to have a strong brand because very often sales volume is paired with premium pricing. For most companies, the stronger the brand, the higher the premium they can charge for their products and services. Why do customers pay Rs 150 for a coffee from Starbucks when it would cost them Rs 20 from the cafe down the street? With a strong brand, a company can also increase its product lines with ease, thrive during economic downturns, gain leverage in partnerships, and attract the best talent. The best leaders realize that, strong brands aren't built by the marketing department alone; *every* employee in *every* department has a role to play.
- 3. Reflects in the firm's ability to attract, develop and retain talented people:** Needless to say, strong employee branding positively reverberates with the company image in all areas. Take Google, for instance. The Internet search engine giant has carved out a great brand image. One of its distinguishing elements has been the skill to attract and maintain talent, and to be seen as a great place to work. This has a resounding positive impact on its brand image.¹
- 4. Helps to reinforce that engaged Employees Build Strong Brands:** Many companies focus all their branding efforts on marketing activities such as advertising campaigns and packaging, yet the fact remains that one of the most powerful brand assets the company has is its employees.

Regardless of the industry, building a strong brand requires that all employees feel connected to the corporate brand and understand their role in turning brand aspirations into reality. According to the 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer "Employees rank higher in public trust than a firm's PR department, CEO, or Founder. 41% believe that employees are the most credible source of information regarding their business."

Corporate Culture and Employee Branding: Major corporations have set up a variety of programs and structures to communicate their key positioning and brand messages to employees. Almost universally, "corporate culture" is part of the equation. But the term corporate culture can be quite ambiguous. One way to define corporate culture is within the context of communications. Corporate culture is the sum total of the conversations that a company holds within itself. In other words, it is the image these conversations create within the corporate family.

The following are examples of how corporate culture has influenced employee branding:-

- **Procter & Gamble:** Consider Procter & Gamble, one of the world's largest consumer product companies. Procter & Gamble has traditionally separated its corporate name and activities from its brands. A few years ago, however, Procter & Gamble itself began to become one of its own most important brands. While it still insists that its individual brands stand on their own feet, today, the image and reputation of Procter & Gamble visibly stands behind those brands. So the corporate culture, and the P&G employee, has become more central to the company's overall communications strategy.

P&G employees take pride in both the company and the role it plays in the community. Employees get an enormous amount of satisfaction out of the fact that they work for P&G and it affects the way they relate to their

jobs and to customers and suppliers.

Also, as P&G is a promotion-from-within company, the future of the P&G brand depends on the people the company recruits for entry-level jobs. Developing those people is a major responsibility of P&G managers. To sum up, it could be said that the P&G culture is, in a sense, the brand. And to the extent that employees are imbued with the qualities and principles that constitute the culture, they too work as brand ambassadors, whether they are out marketing the product or managing a plant.

- **Avis:** At the other end of the spectrum is a company like Avis, the number two car rental company, and a company selling service, not products.

For Avis, "We Try Harder" isn't just a tag-line. The company has always built its brand identity on the concept of superior employee effort. But in 1987, Avis implemented an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) that transferred ownership of the company to its employees. At that point "We Try Harder" became a way of life. Although ESOPs have since become common, The Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) which was used to transfer ownership is considered to be a role model in the corporate world for other companies considering a similar program. And while other companies have implemented such programs, the stake held by employees rarely matches the stake held by Avis's employees. This development took the idea of "employee-oriented" to a higher level.

Another key in the transition to employee-ownership were Avis's Employee Participation Groups (EPGs). These groups were set up to meet regularly to discuss every aspect of the business, how to improve it and how to serve customers better. Employee representatives are elected by their co-workers to attend monthly district meetings, quarterly zone meetings, semi-annual regional meetings and a national meeting once a year. That process has been very successful in eliciting employee input on every

aspect of Avis' operations.

- **Continental:** The story of Continental Airlines, demonstrates how employees can really make or break an identity program. Interestingly, the Continental story reflects a somewhat different strategy used by the airline to engage employees in the identity program.

A few years back, Continental Airlines had a goal of achieving the status of a top-tier carrier. To that end, it was making a significant investment in improving its operations, quality of service and employee morale. To underscore these changes, the airline decided to completely revise its positioning and presentation in the marketplace. Research at that time showed that employees, customers, and travel agents all believed that Continental was changing for the better but was not yet a top-quality airline. Lippincott³ recommended that Continental adopt an image management strategy to present a world-class airline, consistent and professional in operations and service, yet personable, dynamic and responsive.

For a new image to emerge, employees had to feel a sense of ownership for all the changes that were being instituted, from internal operations to external communications. To ensure that the developing program reflected employee opinions—and that they believed in Continental's vision—they formed the Image Advisory Group of pilots, ground crews, flight attendants and ticket agents. The communications plan reflected the Group's input and called for an "inside-out" approach to gain employee understanding of and support for the program well before its introduction to the public. The Image Advisory Group played a key role in shaping the ultimate execution of the entire identity program.

Research revealed that the airline's employees had a tendency to be apologetic and self-effacing prior to the new image initiative, which included new uniforms and new plane interiors

and exteriors. But the changes improved employee pride, morale and confidence. Employees believed that they were perceived as more professional in their new uniforms and, accordingly, customers believed that they were more professional.

Once the new identity was rolled out, employee perceptions were aligned with the image attributes that Continental wanted to project. Employee enthusiasm spilled over to the way they serviced customers, and the entire program was a major success. J.D. Powers⁴ now ranks Continental #1 in baggage handling and #2 in on-time performance among the 10 major carriers. Business First, Continental's first class for business, is ranked as the premier first class experience.

- **Godrej Consumer Products Limited (GCPL):** For over a century now, the Godrej brand in India has evolved from being identified with locks, then cupboards and now consumer goods. As far as brands go, it's as Indian as it gets. Their talent strategy, which in turn helps them to build their employee brand, is about having three objectives i.e., amazing careers, competitive rewards and a nurturing work environment, enabled by enduring values, tough love philosophy and a sound competency model. What has been communicated to Godrejites, is that the bar gets higher as people rise and expectations rise. Managers are expected to play a strong role in development and rotation of talent. The process of cascading goals and aligning them to the respective teams helps in continuous improvement. GCPL has also been differentiating in terms of rewards and compensation, as far as performance is concerned.
- **HCL Technologies:** HCL Technologies launched and sustained various campaigns that drive the positioning of HCL's employer value proposition. They have positioned themselves as an *employer of choice*. Through

their employee branding ventures, they strategize and execute to deliver the brand promise – 'license to ideate'. This, in turn, impacts their talent sourcing mix, partner influence, engagement and geo marketing to attract talent.

As part of their "employees first" principle, they strive to attract and foster employees who believe in "ideapreneurship". Ideapreneurship is the attitude or ability to drive grassroots-based, business-driven and customer-focused innovation in an entrepreneurial environment. In order to make sure that their prospective job candidates and current employees embody this tenet, a lot of time is spent working on employee branding.

Techniques for Transforming Employees into Brand Ambassadors:

1. **Promote Self Discovery – Personal Branding:** According to a report by Daniel Cable, Francesca Gino and Bradley Staats published in Administrative Science Quarterly, "Cornell University research shows that to maximize employee satisfaction, new employee socialization should focus on personal, not corporate, identity. When employees can be their 'authentic best selves' in the workplace, productivity and retention increase." Telling new hires that they should feel lucky to be working for the firm can backfire. It communicates arrogance, which repels. The goal is to attract so that the new brand ambassadors will feel authentically drawn to the firm's brand. Helping employees unearth their greatest strengths and integrate them into everything they do is essential for the success of the firm.
2. **Make Brand Awareness a Priority: Corporate Branding 101** Gallup asked more than 3,000 randomly selected workers to assess their agreement with the statement "I know what my company stands for and what makes our brand different from our competitors." Shockingly, only 41% of

employees strongly agreed with this statement.⁷ This statistic indicates that more than half of those surveyed were not fully aware of their company's brand positioning and differentiation. Employees cannot deliver on the corporate brand promise if they aren't clear about what it is.

3. Connect the Personal and the Corporate:

When employees are clear about who they are and what makes them exceptional (a process that can be easily implemented by promoting self discovery), and they have been educated with an understanding of the corporate brand objectives, they can apply their unique skills and expertise to activate the corporate goals. The most successful companies help employees understand their personal brands, capitalizing on the integration of these individual traits with the broader corporate objectives. It's called applied personal branding, and is a powerful strategy. Think *consistency*, not *conformity*. A consistent brand does not emerge from conformist employees. Each individual needs to determine how he or she can deliver on the corporate brand promise in a way that's authentic, leveraging the corporate identity with what ignites them and makes them exceptional.

4. Accommodating the brand identity in behavior:

Once employees have been taught how to project the brand's attributes they are theoretically able to accommodate these attributes in their everyday work behavior, and they can accommodate the brand identity without accepting brand attributes personally or adopting them as self-defining (Kelman, 1958). Making it easier for employees to accommodate brand identity in their behaviors is the presence of other employees who are also performing brand identity work. Other employees' brand identity work demonstrates different ways to translate brand attributes into behavior. An

employee can observe other employees, can mimic their brand identity behaviors, and adopt what works for them (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), expanding their own repertoire of brand behavior.

The Dual Role of Employees in Building Brand Image:

In an annual report of any major corporation there is bound to be a reference to employees. They are often called the "finest and most dedicated" in their industry and the real source of the company's competitive advantage. Companies recognize the value of their employees and they know the difference an able, committed employee force can make.

The road to customer loyalty runs directly through customer service and brand image. The value of customer loyalty is not absolutely quantifiable, but according to the Coalition for Brand Equity, it costs four to six times as much to win a new customer as it does to retain an old customer. For most companies the major factor in keeping existing customers happy is the service they receive, and the responsibility for providing that service falls squarely on the shoulders of employees.

Whatever their position, employees have two jobs—one is the work they perform, the other is conveying the corporate image. That second job is their role as "brand ambassadors," primary agents in communicating a company's corporate identity to the outside world. The image of the company that employees, who are the brand ambassadors, project to customers is whatever those employees "believe" that image to be.

Conclusion: To successfully create a strong network of employee ambassadors (as a move towards employee branding), companies must establish a communications component that involves both employee education, and sound feedback mechanisms. They should include employees in decision-making and engender a sense of empowerment and ownership. Only when employees understand their roles as brand ambassadors receive recognition for their roles

and are rewarded appropriately, can they be integrated successfully in corporate image programs.

Customer satisfaction, loyalty and perceptions regarding the company are interrelated to branding. Companies should therefore engage in employee branding and encourage the employees to believe in its brand values. Behaving consistently with the brand values will help them to make decisions while dealing with customers, suppliers, and external stakeholders.

Leadership too plays a defining role in internal brand building and the two tasks for leaders in organizations are: developing a clearly defined brand vision, and facilitating social interaction via verbal and non- verbal communications. (Patlal, Shahaida & Pandit, ebyani). Empowering Employees, providing adequate and a fair system of rewards and recognition and finally sound training support and growth opportunities can be the initiatives taken towards building employee branding.

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