

Where is the Brand?

Multiple Level Brand Meanings in Retail Brands

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Where is the Brand? Multiple Level Brand Meanings in Retail Brands

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Abstract:

The alignment of employees around the corporate brand has emerged as a major area of study in corporate branding literature generally and in the service branding literature in particular. Simultaneously, corporate brand scholars are focused on achieving coherence in brand expressions. Traditionally focus has been on using corporate communication to align employees around the corporate brand to achieve this. Through in-depth, longitudinal, ethnographic research this paper suggests that coherence can only be achieved by understanding the complex interplay of identities between occupational groups and management levels in the organisation. It is argued that responsibility for brand expressions should be more decentralised.

Keywords: Corporate Branding, Ethnography, Identity, Communities of Practice

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Where is the Brand? Multiple Level Brand Meanings in Retail Brands

1. Introduction

The alignment of employees around the corporate brand has emerged as a major area of study in corporate branding literature generally and in the service branding literature in particular (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2007). The value of corporate brands has been particularly recognised for brands with high intangible elements, as is the case in service and retail brands (de Chernatony et al, 2004; Burt & Sparkes, 2004). Employees are recognised as important carriers of the brand (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001), playing the final part in the delivery of consistent, coherent and clear moments of truth that differentiate one brand from another and thus provide the source of competitive advantage. In the management of retail and service brands, the role of the employee is posited as central to the delivery of unique and authentic brand experiences (Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2006; Normann, 1984; Carlzon, 1989); they are also important sources of capabilities individually and collectively that enable the organisation to perform and deliver value creating activities to their customers and other stakeholders. More basically, employees are what make up an organisation; without employee cohesion the organisation risks falling apart (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

A growing literature is emerging looking at the role of internal brand building in aligning employees around the corporate brand. Models have particularly focused on the impact of gaps as a source of inconsistency: gaps in identity (Balmer & Greyser, 2002), between identity and reputation (De Chernatony, 1999), and between vision, culture and image (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). More recent studies have focused on the role of leadership (Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2006) and on individual employee's commitment to (Burmman & Zeplin, 2005) and enactment of the brand (Wallpach & Woodside, 2009). However there remains a paucity of research on the interplay of organisational, brand and professional identities and how this impacts of the implementation of internal brand management.

This paper examines internal brand management in relation to corporate service (retail) brands. It critiques the current approach to the management of brand meaning amongst organisations' internal stakeholders. Through an ethnographic case study it highlights the complex interplay between organisational, team and professional identities within the frame of teams and highlights the role of HRM in the process of internal brand building.

2. Background

The role of the corporate brand in achieving coherence in brand delivery is a subject that has achieved a good deal of focus in the corporate brand literature. Hatch & Schultz (2001) and later Schultz & Hatch (2003) suggest that the main focus of corporate brand initiatives is to reduce gaps between top management vision or the company, internal culture and external image. Whilst there are many attempts in the literature to look at communication gaps and the integration of the firms corporate communications through IMC (eg. Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Balmer & Grey, 2003; Schultz & Patti, 2009), there have been fewer attempts to consider the impact of this communication on internal stakeholders.

Whilst the role of the employee in the delivery of the brand is widely discussed in the literature, in much of this work staff are seen as exogenous to the corporate brand process (for exceptions see Barrett, 1998; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). In the field of corporate branding Brexendorf & Kernstock (2007) develop a model that differentiates corporate behaviour and corporate brand behaviour. They see employees as central to the corporate brand building process but suggest that the relevance of the corporate brand, for the individual employee, diminishes the further away from top-management one moves. Thus front line staff, they found, are more likely to be interested in product and service brands (see also O'Loughlin, Szmigin & Turnbull, 2004). This poses a

challenge for corporate brand managers in their efforts to achieve coherence in the corporate brand expressions.

De Chernatony (2002) suggests that the triangular relationship between company vision, organisational culture and individual employees values is an important source of tension in achieving corporate brand coherence thus highlighting an important issue: that of centralisation versus decentralisation. Kapferer (1997) argues that it is top management who have responsibility for the brand and its delivery. But is this the case for corporate brands? Can we be so explicit about the lines of responsibility? For many companies the corporate brand introduces a dynamic tension between customers', management's and employees' conception of brand meaning (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2009). This produces barriers to the implementation of the corporate brand. Therefore, the central question raised in this paper is: How do employee's professional and group identities influence the consistent brand delivery and what are the managerial implications?

3. Theory

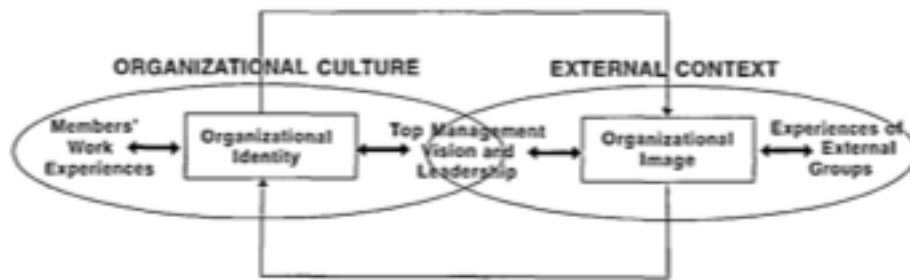
Burmann & Zeplin (2005) define brand commitment as the extent of psychological attachment of employees to the brand, which influences their willingness to exert extra effort towards reaching the brand goals — in other words, to exert brand citizenship behaviour. Three drivers are identified: compliance, identification and internalisation.

“An individual strives for self-congruity and therefore acts in a way that is consistent with the selfconcept due to intrinsic motivation. Internalisation is developed through organisational socialisation if there is not already a high congruence between the individual's values and the brand values before the new employee's entry into the organisation.” (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005: p. 285)

Here they recognise the role of intrinsic (as opposed to extrinsic) motivation. However they fail to address the existence of often strong internal cultures (Aaker, 2008). Dedicated to this view, organisational identity is viewed as a relational concept constructed in interface between strategy, organisational culture and image in the corporate branding toolkit (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Here the key task of corporate brand managers is the reduction of gaps between top management vision for the company, its culture referring to “internal values, beliefs, and basic assumptions that embody the heritage of the company and are manifest in the ways employees feel about the company they are working for” and the image as reflected in the views of its various external stakeholders. To reduce the gap between the desired corporate brand identity and the image of the company among stakeholders, employees in service jobs play a crucial role in the impression management process. However the model does not explain: 1. how a branding strategy is socially and organisationally constructed within organisational structure, and; 2. how organisational routines and HR practices influence corporate image.

In other work Hatch & Schultz (1997) have emphasised the relational nature of identity within and external to the organisation. In their model of the dynamics of organisational identity, they stress the interrelatedness of the concepts of organisational identity and image. Organisational identity is in this model introduced as a relational concept, but organisational behaviour is dealt with on an organisational or a macro-level. The intricacies of members work experiences and more importantly the sources of their work identities (plural) are overlooked. Overemphasising the brand as essence, the brand literature seems to both simplify and forget its role in shaping relationships in the internal market. We need to understand the ways in which individuals' work identities are formed in relation to their brand commitment (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005) and their professional and group identities.

Figure 1: The Dynamics of Organisational Identity



Hatch & Schultz, 1997

4. Rejuvenation of a Retail Brand: Kvickly

The empirical work takes point of departure in a cultural study of Kvickly owned by Coop Denmark/FDB. FDB is a consumer cooperative which promotes important consumer issues in fields such as social ethics, the environment, health and safety. The organisational heritage is expressed by the values of the Coop organisation: Caring, innovation, honesty and influence. The values are meant as guidelines for organisational behaviour.

After years of reengineering, downsizing and now facing new market challenges and has launched a brand rejuvenation campaign based on a positioning strategy internally and externally focused on the key values. Kvickly has launched a new branding strategy "Kvickly 08" internally with focus on new in-store design, new product assortment and quality customer service. The primary focus of this paper is on the role of the butcher in the relationship building with the customer.

The internal branding strategy chosen to change behaviour had a cross-functional perspective, integrating HR and marketing. The goal was to make work communities see their identity as a team and their practices in a broader context, i.e. the brand identity and market development. Visible artefact as clothing, interior design, assortment and written, rule-based change in work processes was central HR tools. In addition, special designed education programs were addressing a dual focus on both an apprenticeship in institutional demands, pushing the boundaries of the self-image of the different work communities, and balancing the fulfilment of professional work identities, leaving room for testing, sharing and negotiation new practices within the high commitment paradigm of the 'flattered' organisation based on self-directed work-teams.

5. Method

The study was carried out as an embedded single-case study combining Yin's (2003) types of case studies: Explorative and explanatory. This perspective is introduced as a perspective called explorative-integration (Maaløe, 1996), which is a process of continuous dialog between field research and the researchers' theoretical preconceptions. The data collected pertained three levels of analysis: Strategic (Top management), tactic (middle management) and operational/functional level (work communities) within each supermarket. Most data is based on field notes from observation of daily work activities and (non-)participation observation in formal meetings, ethnographic interviews, internal newsletters and mail exchanges. The analysis uses Goffman's (1959) idea of the context within which social interaction takes place to study the sense-making processes (Weick, 2001) that emerged in mutual engagement between members of a team and between teams (Wenger, 1999). The analysis is based on employees' own stories about their job.

Stories are an important part of engagement in communities' activities, as well as cultural artefacts for in-group and outgroup distinctions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and for how work communities interpret meaning in organisational setting (Schein, 1992).

6. Research Findings

The focus of the study is on butcher's emotional reaction to their changing role in the company's new brand strategy, expressed in behavioural conflicts, as an object of analysis. Two key findings emerged. A key element of the rebranding strategy in moving butchers "front stage" represented by the slogan: "The Best Butcher in Town" accentuated their professional identity. However, the implementation of a quality assurance system and automatisisation of ordering systems devalued their education and skills as a professional craftsman.

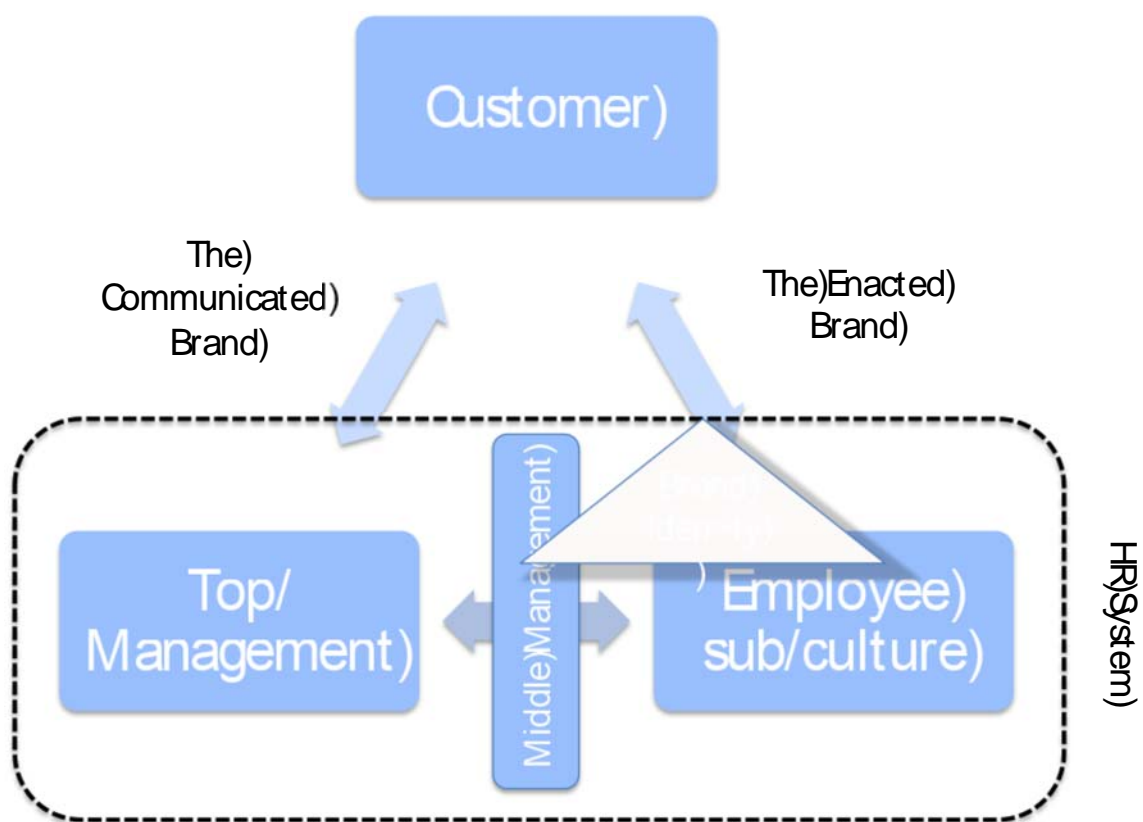
The new strategy required that butchers become more front stage, by being physically present in the customer - brand interaction. They were required to focus more on customer advice in regards to the preparation of meat, rather than staying back-stage in the butchery. After initial prevarication, associated with the upheavals of internal organisational routines and role changes, moving front stage enhanced their professional identity as they lived out their role as the "local" butcher. This was enacted through a set of symbols: their uniform, a stage in the form of a corner in the meat department and a new set of specialised products. This enactment, centrally managed by the corporate brand managers, extended to the staging of interactions between the individual butcher and the customer, as expressed by one corporate director: "You are not buying meat from Kvikky, but from Brian." Our findings indicate that the enactment of professional identities through "The Best Butcher in Town" campaign was however strained both in terms of the relationship between management and the butcher and between the interaction between the butcher and the customer. Management's objectives were driven by a customer service logic that saw customer satisfaction as the ultimate goal. For butcher the enactment of their identity was channels through a tightly controlled theatre of customer experience. Only slight divergence from the script defined by top management was accepted. This was accentuated in the interaction between the butcher and the customer. Here the butcher's own professional knowledge was played down in favour of the dictum that "the customer is always right."

We found the butchers' new-found identity was further compromised in the implementation of new quality assurance measures (and cost reductions). A key focus in the identity of butchers as craftsmen lay, firstly, in their education and secondly in their production of "home-made" specialities. Butchers differentiated themselves from "employees in the floor" in relation to the length of their training. The automatisisation of production and ordering processes and the perceived trivialisation of key butchery skills undermined the self-esteem and status of the butchers. "Home-made" products became side-lined in favour of centrally ordered "specialities" in the interests of brand consistency. For brand managers (centralised at the company's headquarters) quality assurance was an important part of the brand rejuvenation. The implementation of a centralised and standardised form of "use by" date marking was seen as undermining the professional integrity of the butchers and their ability to intuitively assess the quality of the meat on display. In this situation the middle managers became squashed between demands of central management and the butchers. Their response to continued disregard for the new rules by butchers was to "look the other way". It became clear that they were constantly evaluating the demands of central management with the need to allow butchers to "perform" as professionals.

Figure 2 illustrates our analysis of the relationship between top-management, middle management, employees and customers. Unlike Hatch & Schultz (1997;2001), we argue that where brand delivery is dependent on the individual behaviours of employees, brand identity is formed in through the negotiation between top-management and employees, mediated through middle management. What do we mean by this?

The study revealed that intergroup conflicts were a barrier for the implementation of the brand as independent by top-management. This study indicates that brand rejuvenation is a local sense-making process motivated by the self-concept of a work team - rather than motivated by managing the organisational image (e.g. Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Close to the customer in daily work, brand delivery is born out of common experiences among work peers, putting focus on the way the subcultures shapes and changes the brand meaning, expressed in abstract values, in a local context. What emerged was a strong focus on employee's self-concept in relation to the organisational brand as the "spinning wheel" in the dialog between the customers and the employees as ambassador of the brand.

Figure 2: The Emergence of Brand Identity



The decentralisation of the brand meaning forces a new paradigm that challenges the idea of the brand values as unique, central and enduring and forces the management to understand and embrace the sub-cultural reality when setting the brand strategy and at the same time planning the change processes through the formal HR system necessarily to align brand strategy and employee behaviour (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). In this system, which is essentially a triangle of negotiation, brand identity is a compromise between top management brand strategizing, employee's professional identities and customer expectations. Where the employees behaviours are central for the articulation and staging of the brand, middle managers play an important role as mediators in these negotiations; their role is to buffer and interpret top-management aspirations and to translate these into ideas that fit into employees own self image and work practices.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The affective commitment of employees needs to be understood on several levels of Identification: role, subculture and organisation. The key to brand delivery lies in the creation of meaningful experiences that create unique value for employees and allowing them to explore their own identity in the role they fulfil within the coherence of the brand. The shop floor employee and the customer are at the delivering edge of the brand – in between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the physical demarcation of the organisation - making the "moment of truth" (and the image) a source of brand identification internally.

How do we manage this apparent lack of brand coherence? It becomes apparent that there are three levels of management action that are relevant to ensuring coherence across the organisation: Top management, Middle Management and the Employee. Whilst the corporate branding literature has focused on top-management's role in forming the brand, less attention has been focused on the role of the employee as the co-creator of the brand. The existence of strong structures of identity in parallel to any brand identity structures suggests that the management of the brand must incorporate these to create meaning for employees in order for them to deliver meaningful and authentic brand performances.

Whilst this paper is just one case, its findings suggest that we as managers and corporate branding scholars need to understand the complex roles within the organisation in order to fully understand the barriers, and also the opportunities associated with implementing corporate brands across organisations. Importantly, each of these roles requires different levels of decentralisation. This project makes it clear that local expert roles and identities need to be respected within the framework of the corporate brand and that local identities must be allowed to be played out within the context of the corporate brand. Brand coherence becomes therefore a cultural negotiation between top and middle management and employees where each other's understanding of their own and other's identities changes during the brand rejuvenation process.

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