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Author

King, Ceridwyn, Grace, Debra

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Examining Employee Disparity in Response to Brand Knowledge

Ceridwyn King, Debra Grace, Griffith University

Abstract

The significance of employee brand awareness enhancing their ability to deliver the brand promise has fuelled the emergence of internal brand management in both academic and practitioner arenas. Awareness requires the dissemination of brand knowledge, while delivering the promise requires employee confidence with respect to their roles and responsibilities. Such confidence is represented here as *role clarity* and *brand commitment*. However, group dynamics reflect a diversity of roles, which influence responses to stimuli. Therefore, this study examines the effects of *brand knowledge dissemination* on employees' *role clarity* and *brand commitment*, investigating the impact that hierarchical roles have on employees' response to internal brand management. The results suggest the employee market is not homogenous in their responses. Therefore, organisations expectations of employees as well as allocation of internal brand management resources should reflect this diversity.

Introduction

While Burmann and Zeplin (2005) argue that all employees play a crucial role in brand management due to the fact that they are responsible for making brand related decisions, employees are considered particularly significant in the brand management of services (e.g. de Chernatony et al., 2006). It is argued that service brand success can be only realised if the employee market is participatory, exhibiting positive attitudes and behaviour (Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006). As such, de Chernatony et al. (2006) advocate influencing employee behaviour through the internal communication of brand values. In turn, such communication results in brand values being comprehended by employees, as well as being accepted and internalised so as to shape future employee behaviour. In fact, de Chernatony and Cottam (2006) promote the driving force for a successful brand is the underpinning provided by an informed and highly brand literate employee market. So as to enhance current internal brand management practice and to further inform the marketing literature, this study examines the impact of *brand knowledge dissemination* on employees. In particular, given the heterogeneous characteristic of an organisation's human resource as a result of functional roles and responsibilities, this study considers whether there are any differences across hierarchical roles when responding to internal brand management initiatives.

Literature Review

According to Keller (1998), brand knowledge consists of a brand node in the memory with a variety of associations linked to it. The organisation of these brand nodes in one's memory has a significant influence on how brand information is recalled, which ultimately influences an individual's behaviour as well as brand related decisions. While Keller (1993; 1998) relates brand knowledge to the consumer, it is equally relevant to the employee. That is, the key to employees being able to deliver the brand promise is brand knowledge. Consistent with the consumer view, if employees are void of brand knowledge, they are not able to behave in the manner desired by the organisation, nor are they able to make brand related decisions. Such employee behaviour, in contrast to the consumptive behaviour of consumers, is manifested in work related behaviour centred around delivering on the brand promise.

Therefore, in the context of this study, *brand knowledge dissemination* is concerned with providing the context with which the brand identity is made relevant to each employee (Lings and Greenley, 2005). Given that employees require relevant and meaningful data to exhibit desired behaviours in the context of their roles and responsibilities, the dissemination of brand knowledge is believed to be important. Drawing on the content provided by the organisation's brand identity, *brand knowledge dissemination* is concerned with equipping employees with knowledge to satisfy customer expectations that are formed as a result of the brand's communicated identity. Communication of information with respect to the service offering, customers needs and wants, product and service benefits and characteristics as well as the corporate aims and strategies (Lings and Greenley, 2005), all contribute to the clarification of employees roles within the work environment. *Brand knowledge dissemination* is, therefore, defined as *the extent to which an employee perceives brand knowledge is transferred from the organisation to the employee, in a meaningful and relevant manner* for the successful execution of employee roles and responsibilities. Receiving information about the brand has been found to contribute to the provision of employee direction (King and Grace, 2005) as well as a commitment to the brand that is lacking when only technical, job related information is provided (King and Grace, 2008). Therefore, brand knowledge from an employee perspective is believed here to consist of two dimensions that ultimately affect the way that employees respond to the brand, namely *role clarity* and *brand commitment*.

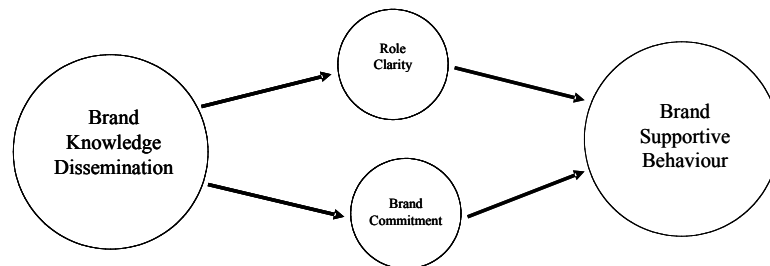
In the context of this study, *role clarity* can be defined as *the level of clarity an employee has of their role as a result of having brand knowledge*. Providing employees with clear guidance and direction, as premised through the provision of appropriate brand knowledge, has the potential for role conflict and confusion to dissipate. As a result, increased job satisfaction and organisational commitment is realised (Jones, Busch, and Dacin, 2003). If an employee believes that information that is important to fulfilling their performance expectations is not widely distributed, employee's role ambiguity increases (Babin and Boles, 1996). Given that employees having brand knowledge is considered to be important for providing direction with respect to their role (King and Grace, 2005), *role clarity* is considered a relevant outcome upon which to assess employee brand knowledge.

Furthermore, to ensure that employees also have a genuine desire to deliver the brand promise, the level of employee *brand commitment* is considered an important outcome of the dissemination of brand knowledge. In recognition of the relational or exchange association that exists between the employee and the organisation, the importance placed on such a relationship from an employee's perspective, is commensurate to the effort desired to maintain it (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In other words, if the employee perceives the relationship with the organisation to be a positive one, worthy of maintaining, then the employee has a high level of commitment to the brand. Commitment, in this sense, is considered to be a key variable in determining organisational success (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) as employees feeling of belonging influences their ability to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to achieve the organisation's goals (Castro, Armario, and Sanchez del Rio, 2005). *Brand commitment*, therefore, is defined as *the psychological attachment or the feeling of belonging an employee has towards the brand*.

This study proposes that as a result of the dissemination of brand knowledge, employees' *role clarity* will increase. Furthermore, employee comprehension of brand values and organisational intentions increases the potential for employee attachment i.e. *brand commitment*. It is, therefore, proposed that *role clarity* and *brand commitment* are important measurable outcomes of an internal brand management strategy. Ultimately, however, the

benefits of these outcomes can only be realised in the exhibition of employee behaviour. As such, consideration as to the effect of such *role clarity* and *brand commitment* on employees provides for a more holistic appreciation of the impact of internal brand management. Therefore, employees' exhibition of *brand supportive behaviours* is considered an important construct worthy of inclusion. *Brand supportive behaviour* is defined as 'extra role', or non prescribed employee behaviour that's consistent with the brand values of the organisation. Appreciation of the relationships between the constructs previously discussed is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The Effect of Brand Knowledge Dissemination



When considering the effectiveness of internal brand management practices, the population of interest should naturally reside in an employee domain. However, despite some of the internal brand/marketing literature capturing both management and front line employees perspectives (e.g. de Chernatony and Cottam, 2006), limited comparative analysis within the employee group has been conducted. This is somewhat surprising given the innate internal structures of an organisation, both organic and prescriptive, as well as the hierarchical roles apparent in all organisations. While it has been hypothesised, and somewhat supported, that employee perceptions of the organisation are influenced by variables such as tenure and function (e.g. Naude, Desai, and Murphy, 2003), limited research has been conducted to appreciate the impact of such differences in the context of internal brand management. Research that has endeavoured to assess the perceptions of employees within different hierarchical positions has found that perceptions often differ between front line or lower level management and that of senior managers (Zhou, Li, and Zhou, 2004). In light of this finding, the research question that guides this study is

Research Question: To what extent do responses to the dissemination of brand knowledge differ between front line and management employees?

Research Design

The research methodology chosen was quantitative in nature. A survey instrument was developed and executed in an on-line format. Employment of a non-probability, purposive sampling technique was deemed to be appropriate as the population of interest was employees that work in a service industry. Online surveys have been found to be useful in reaching busy professionals, who generally have a low response rate with respect to mail surveys (Deutskens, de Jong, de Ruyter, and Wetzels, 2006). As the population of interest in this study was employees, a similar rationale was adopted. A national database of individuals that had 'opted in' to receive and participate in market research projects was used to access respondents. A selection of respondents from this database was identified based on an employment industry classification criterion. 371 surveys, representing an 18.5% response rate, were completed, predominantly by female participants (i.e. 76.5%) with a spread of age group representation (e.g. 18 – 25 largest representation 18.5%, 46 – 50 smallest representation 10.1%). There was almost consistent representation between respondents that

held entry-level positions (46.2%) and middle level management positions (42.1%), with only 11.7% of respondents holding senior management positions. In relation to job classification, the majority of the sample was in full time employment (50.8%) with casual and part time employment representing 20.5% and 28.7% respectively. Data, divided into two groups, namely front line employees (n = 170) and management employees (n = 198), was initially analysed using Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis. Data was then subject to further examination, equivalent to a t-test (Chin, 2002), to assess the strength of the relationships across the two samples.

Results and Discussion

In consideration of the proposed relationships presented in Figure 1, the analysis revealed all paths to be significant. Furthermore, the calculated R² for each endogenous variable indicated that the exogenous variable explained a significant proportion of variance in each latent variable. For example, the average variance accounted (AVA) for the front line employee model was .51 with the management employee model accounting for .49 of the variance. Comparison of the structural paths across the two models revealed that management employees had a stronger path coefficient from *brand knowledge dissemination* to *brand commitment* in contrast to front line employees who had stronger path coefficients from *brand knowledge dissemination* to *role clarity*, *role clarity* to *brand supportive behaviour* and *brand commitment* to *brand supportive behaviour*. Table 1 reflects these results.

Table 1 Comparison of path coefficients via t-tests

Paths	Front Line		Managers		t value	Result
	Paths	St Error	Paths	St Error		
BKD - RC	.71	.04	.68	.04	7.17	Significantly stronger for front line*
BKD - BC	.62	.05	.70	.04	-17.04	Significantly stronger for management*
RC - BSB	.30	.08	.24	.07	8.15	Significantly stronger for front line*
BC - BSB	.59	.06	.55	.07	6.07	Significantly stronger for front line*

Indicates support for both paths being significant*

BKD – Brand Knowledge Dissemination; RC – Role Clarity; BC – Brand Commitment; BSB – Brand Supportive Behaviour

The distinction between management and front line employees is best illustrated when looking at the path coefficients emanating from *brand knowledge dissemination*. The stronger path for front line employees was *brand knowledge dissemination* to *role clarity*. Inspection of this path demonstrates the very pragmatic, rational and, subsequently, simplified way front line employees approach their jobs, particularly in contrast to the more relational or affective emphasis of managers. When employees are provided with brand information (*brand knowledge dissemination*) they engage with the information, resulting in an increased understanding of their role in delivering the brand promise (*role clarity*).

Where as management employees place stronger emphasis on their level of *brand commitment* as a result of *brand knowledge dissemination*, frontline employees place more emphasis on the influence *brand knowledge dissemination* has on *role clarity*. Frontline employees expectation that relevant and meaningful information will be provided to them is based on the need to understand who they need to service and how the should service them. As a result, they achieve a level of clarity with respect to their role (*role clarity*). Being able to satisfactorily complete the task that they are paid to do is the primary focus. In contrast, management employees place a stronger emphasis of the dissemination of brand knowledge on their sense of attachment or feeling of belonging to the organisation (*brand commitment*). *Brand knowledge dissemination* has a richer context for management employees as they

expect the who, what, where, why and how answers to be provided, whereas, at best, front line employees are really only interested in the who and the how.

However the results of this study do reveal that organisations should continue to aspire to realise front line employee *brand commitment*. Front line employees exhibited stronger path coefficients from both *role clarity* and *brand commitment* to *brand supportive behaviour*, highlighting the importance of addressing *both* cognitive (*role clarity*), and, affective (*brand commitment*) responses. This finding supports King and Grace's (2008) assertion that to realise 'pro' brand employees, organisations need to go beyond the traditional, job specific information and training. While *brand knowledge dissemination* is not as strong a driver for front line employee *brand commitment* compared to managers, *brand commitment* and *role clarity* is a stronger driver for front line employees to exhibit *brand supportive behaviour*. Front line employee access to brand related information is essential to knowing how to execute their jobs correctly (i.e. *role clarity*), but equally compelling is the front line employees having a genuine desire to act in a productive, brand enhancing manner (i.e. *brand commitment*).

Conclusion

The differences in management and front line employees' response to *brand knowledge dissemination* are best explained by the level of involvement within each hierarchical position. Management employees, simply by the nature of their job, are more involved in the whole organisation, as opposed to just their department. As a result, their requirements from internal brand management activities are more complex. In contrast, the role of a frontline employee is more simplified and not as demanding with respect to the provision of resources for successful role execution. Simply knowing to who and how to direct ones energies is sufficient for front line employees to deliver the brand promise. Given that management often have to implement brand management strategies as well as deliver the brand promise, their information needs, and therefore expectations, extend beyond the two dimensional, who and how, approach, towards a multifaceted, who, how, what, where and why approach.

As a result of different roles and responsibilities within the organisation, employees develop a psychological contract, which is based on different expectations. Such differing expectations suggest front line and management employees should not be considered a homogenous group, particularly with respect to the dissemination of brand information. While the dissemination of brand knowledge is considered paramount for all employees to deliver the brand promise, care must be taken to ensure the expectations of the audience are considered. For example, front line employees see this information as a means to understand organisational expectations of them, whereas management employees use this information to engage with the organisation on a higher level. A blanket approach to brand knowledge dissemination is not only ineffective, it also has the potential to represent a waste of scarce resources as organisations dump irrelevant information onto the employee market, which, in turn, is subsequently discarded. However organisations are cautioned against thinking that front line employees do not want to 'buy in' to the organisation in lieu of just doing their job. Such 'buy in' and the ability to execute the functional requirements of their job are strong contributors to front line employees exhibiting brand supportive behaviours. Based on the findings of this study, it is proposed that the level of detail and the amount of content disseminated is commensurate with the employee's level of responsibility within the organisation. In turn, such a tailored approach should ultimately manifest itself in an employee group that knows how, and is committed, to behaving in the manner to which the organisation intends.

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