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UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERNAL BRANDING IN EGYPTIAN TELEVISION BROADCASTING

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Abstract

Branding has traditionally been a strategy applied in the marketing discipline to influence customer behavior among fierce competition. Yet, such competition between organizations highlights the importance of employees' input and buy-in to the branding strategy. In result, internal branding has become a vital concept in creating a relationship between the brand and employees in hopes of producing loyalty, commitment and delivery of the brand promise. Research indicates not much progress has been made with regards to employee perspective. This article focuses on results from nine interviews conducted with employees from different television channels located in Egypt. Results show that only a few employees understand their organization and brand promise. Other factors affecting internal branding, as stated by the interviewers, are further discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Internal Branding, Branding Strategies, Egypt, Organizational Behavior.

1. Introduction

It is well known that a brand is not just limited to a name, term, sign or design. A brand consists of all these components, with the primary purpose of differentiating a product or service from its competitors (McDowell, 2006). In organizational strategy, brands intend to create emotional connections with all stakeholders.

Scholars and practitioners alike have long been interested in understanding the concept of branding and its implications on organizational success. Therefore, while branding has traditionally been an important strategy utilized to influence customer behavior; it has more recently become an important management strategy with employees.

The brand, and its determined strategy, is considered part of the total product concept that transcends beyond the mere functionality of the bought product. Hence, a brand is portrayed as “the set of human characteristics” (Aaker, 1997, 347), seen as a human face unique only to that brand and is a combination of characteristics that signifies the face (Förster, 2011). While these characteristics represent the brand identity that is communicated to customers (Förster, 2011), the maintenance and communication of the brand identity is also dependent on the employees’ understanding. Such internal understanding is vital in delivering the brand promise to stakeholders, especially in the expanding service sector. However, employees’ knowledge and acceptance of the brand strategy and its link to organizational success has been overlooked (Matanda & Ndubisi, 2013; Terglav et al., 2016). The aim of this study is to explore the effectiveness of internal branding as perceived by employees working in Egyptian TV broadcasters.

2. Problem Statement

Since the beginning of television broadcasting in 1960, the Egyptian government has maintained a monopoly over television stations using such media as a propaganda tool for its political regime. In 2000, the Egyptian government changed the broadcasting regulation allowing for private broadcasters, with certain restrictions, to operate from the free zone and transmit different channels exclusively by satellite (Sakr, 2007). Moreover, in 2001, the Egyptian government for the first time allowed for the privatization of satellite television channels. And later, diminished censorship on media outlets resulting in television channels and other media increasing dramatically.

Technological advancements are another reason for the proliferation of television channels in Egypt minimizing entry barriers. Technology widened the scope of the target audience that could be reached. New competing platforms such as social media and Web 2.0 changed viewing habits of the public, providing an abundance of media platforms to get their information and entertainment (Chan-Olmsted, 2011).

As a result, however, the wealth of broadcasting options caused fragmentation and intensified competition in both viewership and advertising revenue. A crowded landscape forced commercial television channels to use all possible management techniques to attract a large number of viewers and consequently advertising revenues.

Hence, broadcasting companies had to start thinking of new effective management strategies to be successful, and most service segments realized the need to develop brand ambassadors and brand champions among their ranks. In this study, the authors focus on employee perception of internal branding in the TV broadcasting companies operating in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

3. Significance of the Study

Understanding the effectiveness of internal branding is significant for two main reasons. First, the fierce competition between Egyptian broadcasting companies has managers reliant on employees doing things differently thus, creating a competitive edge hard to imitate. As human behavior is not static, receiving the required level of performance and the delivery of a brand promise is hard to sustain. While employees can be the reason behind the fulfillment of the brand, they can also be the reason behind destroying the company's reputation. One bad customer experience can lead to the deterioration of the company's reputation. Second, as employees are different in their behaviors, interactions and reactions, coherence must be achieved to ensure that employees behave similarly and according to the company's brand promise (Sartain, 2005). This confirms the importance of understanding the effects of internal branding, if any, and its impact on the very competitive Egyptian broadcasting landscape.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Employee Brand Knowledge

Early scholars in the 1970 have struggled to curate one single unified concept on internal marketing. More recently, researchers' focus turned to internal branding, agreeing that *internal branding* is a process of activities within the organization that ensures all employees understand the brand concept, commit to the brand and create symbolic associations of the brand (Merrilees & Frazer, 2013; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). The employees' perspective of the brand and its promise has been overlooked despite its importance (King & Grace, 2008; Punjaisri et al., 2008), but the last decade has experienced more scholars emphasizing the importance of branding *internally*. According to Fathya (2021), twenty-two academic journal articles have been published between 2010 and 2019 about brand knowledge, with the majority (68%) appearing in the last of these five years.

Internal branding efforts must first build employee brand knowledge by identifying the values of the brand and what promise the company is making to customers (Baker et al., 2014). Before being able to fulfill any promise, companies must invest in ensuring employees have knowledge about such promises (Boukis et al., 2017). *Employee brand knowledge* is defined as an employee's perception and understanding of what brand and company meanings and promises are and how

employees can convey these meanings and promises to the consumer (Xiong et al., 2019).

Fathya (2021) asserts that not much progress has been made within companies, as many employees still do not understand the promises of their company. Employee brand knowledge appears to be perceived differently among employees (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). For example, employees who remain at a company over time progressing along managerial lines logically gain insight into the overall strategic initiatives rather than simply knowing day-to-day operations. Conflicting results, however, are found in the literature regarding one's tenure at an organization. A recent study found that an employee with a shorter tenure at a company experiences a stronger influence of internal branding than more seasoned veterans (HR Digest, 2020), while an earlier study indicates mid-stage employees having a stronger brand commitment (Modi & Patel, 2012).

In addition, millennials and Gen Z prefer to work with companies that stand for something purposeful (Irwin, 2021); with 64% of millennials not accepting a position unless the company has a solid corporate social responsibility policy. This is an indication that to be successful recruiting top talent an internal branding strategy calls for employee brand ambassadors. In other words, the more employees know what the brand represents the better they can help the company recruit. This drives the researchers in this study to pose the following research question: to what extent do employees in the Egyptian TV broadcasting industry understand what their brand represents?

4.2 Acquisition Tools of Brand Knowledge

It follows that any organization which enhances the brand knowledge among employees consequently affects employees' response to internal branding (Fathya, 2021; King et al., 2012). Jacobs (2003) emphasizes the importance of employees' role in delivering the company's brand promise believing that a company should prepare and energize its employees to believe in the brand. He suggested the most effective tool to guarantee accurate communication between employees and customers is through an effective internal brand management process.

Delivering a brand promise by employees involves not only enhancing brand knowledge, but also embracing the brand's meaning, and acquiring the necessary skills (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Therefore, alignment of brand management initiatives calls for activities such as: commitment from organizational leadership, facilitation of support behaviors, execution of good internal communications across the organization, building a strong internal brand/market orientation as well as implementation of reward, recognition and recruiting initiatives (Irwin, 2021; Mac Lavery et al., 2007; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Wallace et al., (2013) found that organizational leaders' commitment to the branding strategy impacts employees' behavior. Employees mirror their leaders

when it comes to supportive behaviors of the commitment to branding strategies. Punjaisri et al. (2008) argued that internal branding communications is one of the strongest predictors of brand knowledge. This directs the second research question in this article, which is how employees in the Egyptian television broadcasting industry do acquire organizational knowledge to help them carry out their roles and responsibilities in accordance with their brand promise?

4.3 Internalization of Brand Knowledge

Internal branding efforts are challenging because it calls for changing employee attitudes and organizational cultures. As a result, companies must fully integrate a process into all business operations not relying on one-off training activities but implementing an integrated, diverse set of best practices to develop commitment and loyalty to the brand among all employees. All employees must be committed to the brand and share in the company's goals (Jacob, 2003). Raj and Jyothi (2011) argue that there is a significant association between internal branding and employees' delivery of the brand promise to customers. Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) conclude from their study that employees feel that they are important in delivering the correct brand promise to customers, and the brand as experienced by the employees is shown to influence their commitment to the brand (Erkmen, 2018).

Employee performance as the brand promise conveys is influenced by a variety of factors. Studies show that employees believe that internal communications and training are the two most significant mechanisms to use, with consistent internal communication as the stronger predictor of performance than any training efforts (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). In addition, Dhiman & Arora (2020) show that good internal communication enhances employee brand knowledge, reduces role clarity, and improves relationship with the organization. Also, attitudinal factors such as brand identification and brand loyalty have been found to significantly, positively impact an employee's performance (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Therefore, the following research question is posed in this study: what factors are considered by employees in the Egyptian broadcasting TV industry to be necessary to successfully deliver their organization's brand promise?

4.4 Internal and External Brand Management Synergy

An agreement between human resources, marketing and top management to ensure that employees receive the same branding messages and knowledge is required for effectiveness. *Internal brand/market orientation* is a mindset within a company, or the degree to which the organization deems the brand as critical to their success.

Customers need to feel consistency from employees in their interactions; meaning the gap between the expected brand promise and the actual one must be minimized in order to be successful. Failure of brand orientation can lead to devastating

consequences, up to the discontinuation of the product/service activities. For example, C&A chain had to close its stores in the UK at the beginning of the millennium when it failed to deliver its brand promise (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005).

Internal branding has been found as a mediating variable between brand orientation and brand performance (Iyer et al., 2018). The outcomes to brand knowledge generate multiple responses such as increase job satisfaction (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015), developing "brand ambassadors" (Jacobs, 2003), better brand identification and brand commitment (King et al., 2012; Lohndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014), as well as brand enactment (Boukis et al., 2017). In addition, employees' brand knowledge is a mediating variable between internal market orientation and employee knowledge of the brand (Boukis et al., 2017). This drives the researchers to pose the following research question: how does the organization's internal brand/market orientation impact employees' relationship with the brand within the Egyptian TV broadcasting industry?

5. Research Methodology

The authors of this paper utilized the same four questions King and Grace (2008) asked about the importance of companies having an internal branding strategy. The questions were originally written to help service companies better understand an internal branding strategy and its effectiveness, which is the same goal of this study.

A qualitative approach was taken to obtain first-hand description from employees working in several Egyptian TV stations. A total of nine interviews (n=9) were conducted with employees from five (n=5) different television channels. The participants were chosen from two different management levels-managerial level (n=5) and entry level (n=4).

The interviews followed the unstructured interview protocol. Interviewees were encouraged to answer open-ended questions pertaining to the topic as fairly and detailed as possible. The interviewer attempted to let the flow be as natural as possible allowing room for additional questions based on the interviewee's specific experiences. Interviews were transcribed; categorizations were formed based on the interviewers' answers as per the research questions stated. Frequently generated themes were deducted from the transcribed information.

6. Results

The qualitative results show four frequently generated themes in response to the interview questions posed. The frequently generated themes include:

6.1 There is an association between employee brand knowledge and employee position level.

Employees agree about their role in delivering a brand promise, but the results from this study indicate most employees face difficulties in explaining the brand with a slight difference existing depending on the position level of the employee (i.e., managers versus entry level employees) in knowing the branding strategy. Generally, the higher the job position, the more aware employees are about the channel's brand, if it exists at all. 40% of the managers interviewed could clearly articulate the company's branding strategy and the organization's brand promise. These individuals seem aware that branding goes beyond just the logo and physical appearance to include a whole strategic initiative utilized to achieve the organization's goals and promises. One interviewee commented:

"the company needed to maintain the identity of the channel incorporating the brand in its programming".

The remaining managers could define a brand, to varying degrees, but only perceived a brand as a logo, graphical design and/or a slogan. When asked about their organization brand or the brand promise, the managers described only the logo, color, graphic design, slogan and/or the general genre of the channel (e.g., news or entertainment channel). A general awareness of the channel's mission seems to exist, but not any mention of the role programmes and content played in achieving the mission.

Seventy-five percent (75%) of entry level employees believe brands are primarily a marketing tool aimed at consumers and not an internal strategy for employees. These employees could define a brand, but not describe the company's brand. Even after explanation, the entry-level employees did not identify the organization's brand promise nor were able to differentiate the channels' mission from the competitors. All entry level participants emphasized that branding, a brand promise, or anything related to the strategy was never emphasized in their daily work nor in any training by any supervisor. The training only focused on their day-to-day job tasks, detached from any overall mission of their organization.

6.2 Building brand knowledge is not a planned internal process.

Participants acknowledged there were little to no ways of acquiring knowledge of the brand promise. While previous literature indicates internal communications and

training as the most popular tools, this study found that rarely any conversations internally were about the brand, the employee's performance vis-à-vis the mission of the channel, nor its brand promise. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the interviewees recalled having content meetings to develop their channel's coverage for a certain event but never the overall branding strategy of the channel.

One-hundred percent (100%) of the participants emphasized the work environment as a crucial factor for acquiring organizational knowledge. The employees stressed how a good working relationship with their co-workers and supervisors could facilitate the transfer of knowledge and encouragement of job performance. Yet, most managers and entry-level participants agree that learning by practice was the most common method of acquiring information. Only one participant, from both managers or entry level, acknowledged learning about the brand through practical experience, or from their older co-workers, or through trial and error.

Internal communication, albeit one of the strongest predictors in the literature, depended on the level of employment. Managers experience better communication than entry level employees with meetings appearing to be the primary way of internal communications. Results highlighted that more frequent meetings occurred with the managerial level while the number decreased immensely for the entry level employees.

One of the television channels did establish an email platform as a means of communication between all employees and the administration. The strategy was implemented to encourage employees in submitting ideas or suggestions on improvements. While the entry-level employees appreciated the gesture, they seemed to doubt the effectiveness of the strategy.

One-hundred percent (100%) of participants indicated no orientation was held regarding the branding strategy or the overall mission of the channel, yet most channels did provide its employees with some initial training sessions. The frequency and the effectiveness of these trainings differ from one channel to another and from a position level to another. Many employees received some training on the skills necessary to achieve their job initially, but no other training or workshops were provided for continuous development of skills.

6.3 Investing in an internal branding process could enhance employee performance.

The feeling that an organization is investing in its employees, makes employees feel safe and loyal to the organization. Therefore, investing in an internal branding process should be seen as a vital piece of strategy.

In this study, two of the participants (22%) from the entry level acknowledge that brand knowledge of the brand strategy can help deliver the brand promise. One respondent commented:

"We need to have a clear vision of what we are trying to achieve. We need direction to focus our energy towards it. Without knowing the purpose of our work, we feel that our efforts are not utilized effectively."

As stated prior, consistent internal communication has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of employees' performance. Yet, one-hundred percent (100%) of respondents in this study felt a lack of information and knowledge was provided from their organization about the brand and the mission of the company. Even those who are familiar with their organization's brand seemed to acquire this information by practice and not because it was directly provided by the organization.

In addition, most respondents believed coworkers were not dependent as well. Two of the participants (22.2%) explained that knowledge is not transferred from the more experienced employees to the less experienced employees. New employees had to depend on themselves to generate the basic job knowledge needed to perform certain skills. No shortcuts were provided as a result of knowledge from previous employees.

All nine interviewees, both managers and entry level, stated that human resource strategies such as being acknowledged for accomplishments and forms of recognition from their supervisors enhances loyalty to their organization and motivation to work. For example, one of the managers said that even just a pat on the shoulder makes a great difference in performance, while another stated that getting verbal recognition can compensate for the frustration of being underpaid. And 100% of the participants emphasized being promoted within the organization is an essential issue for motivation to work and avoid mistakes. If one employee has a goal to look forward to, it makes someone work harder to reach it.

6.4 Investing in synergy between departments subsequently leads to enhancing the internal brand knowledge within the organization.

All nine (n=9) interviewees acknowledge that their television channels do not engage in an internal branding process. It seems that Egyptian TV broadcasting channels depend more on internal operations of tasks rather than understanding a branding strategy. Meaning, in this industry, the human resources department is mostly concerned with employees' skills and production of work, and the marketing department focused on the customers' perspectives. No synergies between the two areas of business indicated in responses.

There seems to be a direct relationship between the employees' level of commitment, however, with a feeling of stability and security in the company. Participants, whose tenure was longer, felt the company would not lay them off, in result their commitment to the channel was very strong. Employees emphasized a feeling of belonging to the place and the welfare of the channel. However, employees who felt as if they may be let go at any time, do not feel committed to the brand nor the organization. Meaning, these individuals are simply focused on their day-to-day activities. Some stated "that not feeling secure and safe at their jobs, affected their loyalty and commitment to their organization." One-hundred percent (100%) of respondents affirm that insecurity makes them less motivated to exert their best efforts at work.

Another factor that affects the commitment is fairness and equality between employees. Three entry level employees said that unfairness is a killer to them. They feel unmotivated and hostile towards the organization they work for. They feel whatever effort they will do, will not be recognized and will not make a difference. This unfairness occurs when there is no fair distribution of workload, when there is no system for reward and punishment or when they do not get fair compensation for their efforts. All of these factors were mentioned as causes for feeling disconnected.

7. Discussion

Internal branding is a crucial factor in the success for most companies, especially service-oriented companies. Employees' commitment and buy-in to both the brand and their organization is essential. The findings of this paper align with previous research emphasizing the importance of a relationship between internal branding and commitment of employees towards their organization. For example, the results of the interviews highlight that only a few employees understand the brand and the brand promise. And these few individuals seem to feel more positive to the organization than those who cannot identify with their organization's brand promise. Not knowing the brand and the strategic goal of the channel, makes the employees look at the job on a day-to-day basis exerting no extra effort in their work. As a result, employees feel disconnected from the television stations they work in which wastes human capital.

Multiple departments within a company, especially marketing and human resources, must work together to align all communications to help deliver a brand promise. As in most industries, part of managing employees in the television industry is to empower them with knowing what the expectations are from the consumers (Burnmann and Zeplin, 2005). This will enable employees to advance and perform duties better. Employees need to be well informed about the strategic plan and branding of their organization to be able to deliver the accurate brand promise to the audience. Internalization, as a form of commitment, has the strongest influence on delivering the brand promise.

A few of the most common ways of acquiring brand knowledge, from an employee perspective, is through leadership commitment and internal communication. While this study indicated that most learned by practice primarily from their colleagues, and no other internal communication method, it highlights the need for companies to measure brand knowledge among employees. Does improved knowledge actually empower employees? The participants in this study feel that companies do not plan nor manage any such activities commenting that only weak internal communication exists. Punjaisri & Wilson (2007) found that outcomes of good internal communication include employee commitment, loyalty and satisfaction. And employee behaviors change positively in support of the brand (Punjaisri et al., 2008).

Therefore, the lack of good internal communication would then, in turn, affect the loyalty of the employees in a negative light. If employees do not feel connected with the company they work for, most likely they lose their motivation affecting their productivity and quality of work. Scholars like Redmond (2006) showed how the success of a television channel depends on well managing its skilled employees to maintain its competitive advantage. Yet, it was noted that television channels in Egypt still fail to incorporate this strategy. There is still no clear human resource system about employees' rights and their duties nor there is a clear system for punishment and rewards. Many interviewees expressed that this kind of practice de-motivated them and affected their overall performance. If these basic human resource activities were practiced, employees will "better accept and internalize the brand values and align their attitudes and behavior accordingly." (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007, 60). Consequently, it will increase their loyalty to their organization which scholars emphasized that it is a crucial element to better utilize the human capital.

A limitation of this study is the small sample size; future research opportunities include increasing the sample size and examining the generated themes on a wider scale. Given that this study was conducted in Egypt, understanding the culture variables involved is an opportunity for future researchers; seeing how culture plays an important role in internal branding. The frequently generated themes highlighted the importance of investing in employee organizational commitment and how this is related to increasing brand knowledge. Future researchers are encouraged to investigate the relationship between both variables in different cultural settings. Future research opportunities also include examining internal branding strategies and its effect on organizational success. Studies need to investigate further the effect of various demographic variables as well as both attitudinal and behavioral factors. In addition, understanding what situational factors affect internal branding requires more investigations to include culture and possible industry.

8. Conclusion

In such a crowded landscape, branding strategies can make or break a company through differentiation. Albeit branding strategies have traditionally been used to influence consumer behavior, the importance of the employee's perspective has recently been exploited. Employees can become detached and unhappy with an organization if not committed to the brand promise.

Fierce competition calls for creative strategies, and this paper offers several recommendations. First, a coordinated internal branding plan can be a powerful tool if effectively adopted. Alignment between human resources, marketing and the top management must be established to ensure commitment and consistency in the message sent to employees. Secondly, managers of media channels in Egypt should adjust management strategies and adopt brand management techniques that incorporate internal branding. Third, any company that does adopt such internal strategies must use multiple communication channels among all employees at all levels of employment. Forth, both recruiting and recognition programs which provide rewards will most likely enhance employees' efforts of delivering the brand promise.

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