EMPLOYEES’ BRAND KNOWLEDGE: EVIDENCE FROM MALAYSIA

Hasnizam Shaari, Salniza Md Salleh, Zolkafli Hussin
Senior Lecturer
School of Business Management, College of Business
University Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok Kedah Malaysia
zamree@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Brand knowledge studies had gain considerable attention from both practitioners and scholars. The understanding of brand knowledge could be translated into favorable attitude and behaviors that guide marketers in formulating appealing marketing strategies. However, much study had focus on customers’ brand knowledge and little is understood on how employees’ understand the brand. Employees’ brand knowledge is importance as they are the brand deliverers, hence deemed necessary for them to master the brand. Therefore, this study aim to examine on how employees perceived and understand the organizations’ brand beforehand. The study among 199 employees from hotel industry revealed that almost 60% of the respondents were well understood of the organizations’ brand meaning, expectation and roles of them as brand deliverer. These employees believed to behave accordingly to the brand promise that later could delight customer. Conclusion and recommendation also discussed at the end of this article.

Field of Research: Brand Knowledge, Employee Branding, Internal Branding

1. Introduction

“You tell customers what makes you great. Do your employees know?” (Mitchell, 2002: p.99). This statement leads to the main motivation of this study. Previous brand literatures adequately highlighted the importance of customers’ brand knowledge that later contribute to positive customer-based brand equity (CBBE) (Keller, 1993). However, little is known the employees’ state of brand knowledge specifically in internal branding perspective. As brand predominantly refers to promise of performance, employees that stand behind the brand play a crucial role in delivery such promise. This is concurred with Devasagayam et al. (2010) and Miles and Mangold (2005) that employees first need to understand and have knowledge of the brand before they can fulfill the brand promise to the customers.

Studies by various brand consultant groups consistently mentioned the lack of employees’ understanding on the organization’s brand i.e. brand knowledge prior to brand delivery. The Brand Consultancy Knowledge Board [BCKB] (2002) surprisingly revealed that over 90% of the employees did not understand how to effectively represent their organization’s brand, 70% did not support their company’s brand initiative, and 50% did not know what a brand means. Based on the statistics, it is critical for internal branding to be successful as it emphasizes employee’s brand performance. If employees are not ready and unable to understand the brand, they will not be able to deliver the brand promise in a consistent manner.
Therefore, this study aims to examine employees’ level of brand knowledge especially in Malaysian context. For the purpose of the study, employees from hotel industry were surveyed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Knowledge Defined

In the context of internal branding management, employees’ brand knowledge is defined as ‘the sense of how do employees acquire organizational knowledge to help them carry out their roles and responsibility in accordance with the brand promise’ (King & Grace, 2008, p. 7). Likewise, Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2009) have extended the understanding by operationalizing brand knowledge as the extent to which employees understand their organization’s brand meaning, their knowledge of customers’ needs and expectations, and employees’ understanding of their responsibility to deliver the brand promise. While Burmann, Zeplin and Riley (2008) refer brand knowledge as brand know-how. Hence, this study employed the definition by Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2009).

2.2 Why employees’ brand knowledge?

Devasagayam et al. (2010) argues the need of uniform understanding of the brand among the employees. The researchers refer it as brand community (i.e. employee’s brand identification, brand support, brand interaction and affinity, and brand satisfaction) and found it is relevance among employees because such brand community is critically important for the overall internal brand success. In addition, Heaton and Guzzo (2000) noted that employees are unable to deliver the brand promise because of several barriers such as (1) inadequate staffing and training, (2) inefficient business processes, (3) lack of information, (4) misaligned incentives, and (5) poor communication. But they assert that the main reason is about failure to provide adequate brand-related information/knowledge to employees.

Commander, Wilson, and Seidel (2007) also stressed the importance of employees’ brand knowledge in influencing their brand attitude and behavior. According to this consultant group, employees and their brand knowledge can be grouped into four main categories namely (1) brand advocates, (2) brand believers, (3) brand learners, and (4) brand resisters. Table 1 summarizes how these categories can affect employees’ brand attitude and behaviors. Given the earlier statistics on employees’ brand knowledge, it can be concluded that most organization’s employees are still at the ‘brand resisters’ and ‘brand learners’ categories, which is far below the brand advocate/brand ambassador category.

Therefore, it is important to conclude what is the level of employees’ brand knowledge specifically in the Malaysian context because this brand knowledge would later influence employees’ brand-related attitude and behaviors. While brand knowledge in customer behavior study leads to the brand preference and/or brand adoption (Keller, 1993), it is postulated that in relation to employee’s behavior, employees’ brand knowledge will be translated into employees brand-consistent attitude and behaviors.
### Table 1: The Relationship between Brand Knowledge, Attitude and Behavior

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<th>Stage of Brand Advocacy</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
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| **Brand Advocates**     | - Share knowledge of brand internally and externally  
                          - Participate in driving direction of brand | - Feel empowered  
                          - Excited to shape future of brand  
                          - Believe in differentiation of brand | - Active word-of-mouth marketing  
                          - Live brand at work and in community  
                          - Model behavior for others |
| **Brand Believers**     | - Understand brand relevance to specific job  
                          - Understand customer needs | - Passionate about brand  
                          - Believe in brand  
                          - Believe that the customer is always right | - Engage in word-of-mouth marketing  
                          - Try to live the brand but feel constrained |
| **Brand Learner**       | - Participate in training  
                          - Know brand message, values, and stories | - Happy when things are going well in the organization | - Meet basic customer needs  
                          - Live job to the letter of law description |
| **Brand Resisters**     | - Lack of understanding of brand  
                          - Misconceptions of brand | - Indifference  
                          - Apathy  
                          - Unhappy at job | - Inconsistent behavior  
                          - Put self-interest first |

Source: Commander et al. (2007)

### 3. Methodology

For the purpose of the study, three to five star hotels in Perlis, Kedah and Penang states were approached and a number of 295 questionnaires were distributed to identified employees. 295 employees were approached randomly with the help of hotels’ representatives. Only 218 were returned, thus response rate is 73.9%. However, only 199 questionnaires were usable and proceeded for data analysis. Hotel industry was selected because the industry is highly labor intensive and highly competitive thus demand employees to represent the brand accordingly. Hence, hotel industry is considered as the best platform for researchers to test the research model. Both frontline as well as backstage employees were included in this study because in advance service economy, both are equally important for the brand success (Burmann et al., 2008). The measures of brand knowledge were adopted from the scale of Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2009) with 9 items. Questions mainly in 6-point Likert Scale.

### 4. The Findings and Discussion

#### 4.1 Respondents’ Profile

Generally, the respondents were from three (40.7%), four (47.7%) and five star hotel (11.6%). Almost 60% are frontliners and 40% are backstage employees. Majority of the respondents are permanent workers, working at least 1 to 3 years to particular brand/organization with moderate academic attainment (at least secondary school), and earned between RM501 to RM1000 monthly. The distribution of gender is equally distributed between male and female. Majority of the respondents also aged between 21 to 30 years old (almost 50%).
4.2 Employees’ brand knowledge: The evidence

In general, based on the mean score, most of the respondents’ answer is skewed towards the agreement continuum of the statement given. This indicates a positive or favorable attitude towards the brand among the hotels’ employees.

In detail, when respondents were asked about their understanding of brand meaning, about 18.6% of the respondents were not understood the brand meaning clearly, 24.6% quite understood, and almost 57% of them understood the brand meaning. About 45% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that their organization’s brand is excellent in the service it provided. Almost 50% either agreed or disagreed towards knowledge of their organization’s excellence in providing the services and only 5% of them didn’t know. Respondents then asked on their knowledge of organization’s target customer. Almost 55% of respondents knew their target customer, 42.2% neither agreed nor disagreed and 2.5% didn’t know of their target customers.

Respondents also were asked about their knowledge of organization’s goals and policies. Majority of them i.e. 56.2% said they understood, 40.7% moderately understood and only 3% didn’t understand. Interestingly, 51.8% of the respondents either strongly agreed and agreed that they had understood customers’ expectation, about 44% moderately understood and only 4% didn’t understand. When respondents were asked about the importance of their work in overall brand success, surprisingly, 70.4% of the respondents were towards the agreement of the statement, while 28.1% either agreed or disagreed and only 1.5% disagreed.

Further, with regards to the statement that their understanding of how their behavior influences the organization’s success, about 65% of them agreed, 33.1% moderately agreed and only 2% disagreed. In detail, when respondents were asked on how their own work contributed to overall brand success, 60.8% agreed, 37.7% moderately agreed and 1.5% disagreed. Finally, respondents also were asked on their understanding of their role in delivering the brand promise. It is recorded, 27.1% clearly understand, 35.7% understand, 34.2% moderately understand and 3.0% didn’t understand their role in delivering the brand promise.

Based on the findings, it is clearly show that, Malaysian hotels’ employees had adequate brand knowledge whereby majority of the score ranging from 40-60%. Hence, this is contradicted with the finding by BCKB (2002). Based on Commander et al. (2007), Malaysian hotel’s employees in this survey could be grouped as brand believers. According to Commander et al. (2007), employees in this group have a good knowledge of the brand and customers. Most of them understand how their job could contribute to overall brand success and understand customers’ need and expectation. This is supported in this study whereby almost 70% of the respondents clearly understand how they could contribute to the overall brand success. In addition, almost 52% of the respondents understand customers’ expectation. Interestingly, the findings contributed to extend the boundary of knowledge that Malaysian employees had adequate knowledge of the organization’s brand whereby previous study failed to confirm such employees’ brand knowledge (see Kimpakorn&Tocquer, 2009). Hence, these employees believed to behave in-consistent with the brand values.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

Do your employees know? Hence, based on the findings, it is clearly shows that Malaysian employees especially in hotel industry had adequate brand knowledge to fulfill the customers’ need and want. This study had extended the literatures in brand management specifically internal
branding that employees’ awareness towards the organization’s brand and their contribution to the overall brand success had increased. As such, internal branding initiative that prioritized the performance of the employees as a brand deliverer in Malaysia is on the right track and could be a best platform for sustainable competitive advantage for many organizations. As this study manage to profile Malaysian employees as a ‘brand believers’, it much easier for marketers to fulfill the brand promise. As indicated by Commander et al. (2007), this group of employees i.e. brand believers manage to display appropriate brand-behavior but limited due to several constraints. Hence, management should seek formula to transform those employees to become brand advocates.

Despite the interesting findings, this study only attempt to profile and to examine the level of employees understanding towards the organization’s brand. Hence, future research should be directed to identify determinant of employees’ brand knowledge and the consequences. Future research should examine the effect of brand knowledge on employees’ behavior towards the brand mainly to confirm Commander et al.’s (2007) suggestion.

References


Management, 37 (1), 9-20.