

Employees Perspective on Internal Branding Mechanisms. Case Study of a Multinational Organization in Ghana

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Abstract

This study examines how employees are supported to acquire requisite knowledge and skills and build brand supportive behaviors for corporate success. The study was conducted in a manufacturing setup of a multinational organization in Ghana. Being an exploratory study, a qualitative approach was adopted, and primary data was collected from twenty respondents via face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was employed as it enabled diversity to be explored and targeted personnel to be contacted and interviewed. Manual coding was used in analyzing data collected. The study findings identified various mechanisms that an organization can employ to help employees build brand supportive behaviors, and to get employees empowered to deliver on the brand promise. The findings revealed that internal branding initiatives such as employees perceived knowledge and capability building activities, internal communication, leadership support, and the work environment, acted as critical mechanisms that contributed to employees' empowerment and display of brand supportive behaviors. The study further notes that effective management and implementation of internal branding activities contributes greatly to employees' empowerment, employees' internalization of corporate values, and consequently employees' delivery on the brand promise. The study results confirm the significance of internal branding initiatives to employees' development and organizational growth and recommends that internal branding initiatives be promoted for sustained success. The research approach adopted however limits generalizability of the findings to other organizations. This study contributes to the scanty empirical literature on internal branding in Africa, and more importantly to the limited literature on internal branding in Ghana.

Keywords: Internal Branding (IB), Human Resource (HR), Employees Empowerment, Corporate Success, Brand Supportive Behaviors.

Introduction

In a keenly contested market place, businesses continue with their strife to gain competitive advantage through stakeholder involvement, co-creation activities, and provision of unique products and services deemed vital for business sustenance and also relevant for satisfying customer requirements (King, 1991; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Merz et al., 2009). Researchers and practitioners the world over have suggested that branding initiatives be employed for the creation of distinctiveness and sustained organizational success. Scholars such as Aaker, 1991; Rooney, 1995; Madden et al. 2006; and Kapferer, 2012; for instance, argue that brands form part of organization's most valuable assets and a part of the major strategic management tools necessary for creating and maintaining sustained

competitive advantage. Similarly, King and Grace (2008), assert that employees form part of an organization's brand and that investing in them is the strategic weapon for exceptional service delivery. Miles and Mangold (2005) also acknowledge the important role employees play for corporate success and posit that employees form part of an organization's valuable assets as they possess valuable knowledge and skills which when tapped into and managed effectively enhances an organization's image and promotes corporate success. Furthermore, Foster et al, (2010) and Patla and Pandit (2012), state that enhancing employee productivity and service delivery is critical for corporate success.

The above opinions endorse the importance of internal branding (IB) as a strategic initiative for enhanced service quality, distinctive performance, enhanced customer experience,

corporate image, and reputation. Hence, the ability of the organization to differentiate its offering from that of competitors and to create distinctiveness in the marketplace for sustained success and competitive edge over rivals (De Chernatony and Dal'Olmo Riley, 1998; Thomson et al., 1999; Murphy, 1988; Jacobs, 2003).

A review of the academic literature on internal branding mechanisms however reveal that much more investigative studies have been conducted in the developed economies (UK, USA, Europe, and Asia) and secondly, such studies have mainly been in the service sector, with more than two or three studies exploring a particular industry within the service sector (example Hospitality, Banking, Insurance, Airlines, Tourism). In Europe for instance, studies such as Maxwell and Knox (2009) considered a non-profit sports organization, a specialist school, a film distribution, a television production, and a data analysis company; Wallstrom et al. (2008) investigated service firms; De Chernatony and Cottam (2006) examined financial services; and Burmann and Zeplin (2005) considered financial services, telecommunications, electronics, transport, and tourism sectors. Similarly in Asia, studies such as Punjaisri and Wilson (2011); King et al (2013); and Lee et al (2014) examined the hotel industry, while Patla and Pandit (2012), and Javannard and Nia (2011) considered the Banking industry, Ashraf et al. (2010) the telecommunication industry, Chong (2007) the Airline Industry, and Asha and Jyothi (2013) the telecommunications, Banking, IT, and Aviation sectors.

Thus, even though researcher interest has resulted in a plethora of investigative studies, very little empirical work has been done in Africa, and secondly that most studies have been conducted within the service sector leaving other sectors unexplored. Additionally, whereas some research works identify formal initiatives as crucial to success, others endorse both formal and informal initiatives. The scanty studies in Africa, and inconsistency noted in study results, calls for further studies to increase knowledgebase, and to clarify and validate existing research findings. Scholars such as King and Grace (2010), and Ashraf et al. (2011) have also requested that future empirical studies consider other sectors such as manufacturing settings to compare such findings with that of the service industry. Hence the contribution of this paper is threefold. Firstly,

the study which is conducted within an African context contributes to the limited empirical literature on Internal branding in Africa. Secondly, the study focuses on IB mechanisms conducted from an 'employee perspective' in a manufacturing sector where very little consideration has been given, and also in a developing country (Ghana) to add to the limited studies besides the service sector in Africa. Thirdly, study findings will provide more comprehensive understanding of IB initiatives necessary for corporate success to enrich the knowledge base and corroborate earlier empirical findings.

This section which is the introductory part of the paper provides the study background. Next is a review of literature which entails prominent theories that underpin internal branding efforts, an overview of previous studies on internal branding mechanisms, and gaps identified which form the basis for the study. This is followed with the methodology, study findings, discussion section, study limitations and managerial implications, after which a conclusion is offered.

Branding

Branding efforts have generally been noted as crucial to organizations differentiating themselves from others, to attract, effectively engage and retain employees, and gain competitive advantage (Aaker 1991, Kapferer 2012). Aaker (1991), assert that building brand equity is necessary for sustained competitive advantage. Similarly, Kotler and Keller (2009) emphasize the importance of establishing a strong brand for sustained competitive advantage. Contributing to this discussion, Kapferer (2012), emphasizes that brands are now being recognized as strategic assets and part of a company's capital and as such must be exploited to realize their full potential. Kapferer (2012) further indicates that brands have the power to influence and therefore the more a brand commands trust, respect, community engagement, interconnectedness, and is shared by a lot of people, the more powerful it becomes. Other scholarly works such as Lee et al (2015) also point out that brands are strategic assets and thus branding activities are necessary for creating an identity, distinctiveness in the marketplace, and value for an organization. The opinions expressed by the various scholars suggest that business survival, growth, and ability to build and sustain brand equity is underpinned

by branding efforts aimed at building the brands power.

Branding has evolved as a major component of marketing strategy with varied definitions offered by scholars as to what branding is. For instance, Rooney (1995:48) defines branding as “a technique to build a sustainable, differential advantage by playing on the nature of human beings”. Similarly, Brown, (1992 cited in De Chernatony and Dal’Olmo Riley 1998: 419) states that “a brand name is nothing more or less than the sum of all the mental connections people have around it”. Taken together, these definitions portray branding as perceptions created by firms to gain sustained competitive advantage to promote a certain image, prestige, or lifestyle, and as a strategic tool, used to attract and retain people. The varied definitions also confirm assertions made by scholars such as Backhaus (2016), Cascio (2014), and Kapferer (2012), that branding initiatives are increasingly being considered by business organizations as an effective and powerful tool essential for corporate success. Additionally, branding initiatives are being adopted as strategic initiatives and so are targeted at both internal and external customers and aimed at differentiating a firm’s brand from its rivals through the creation of desired images in people’s minds. Thus, with the understanding that branding efforts are clearly strategic initiatives, the application of branding initiatives have been noted to extend beyond the marketing function to other departments such as Human Resources for corporate success (Mitchell, 2003, Aurand et al, 2005).

Internal branding

Employees identification with an organization has been noted as critical for corporate success. More importantly, employees have been noted as strategic assets that can be exploited for the delivery of an organization’s brand promise (King and Grace, 2008). In line with this thinking, Internal branding mechanisms have been proposed as an approach worth adopting to promote an organization’s brand internally, and ultimately deliver desired goals. Ind (2003), an advocate of organizations differentiating their brands to deliver success, remarked that brands are about people, as such, brand success can be attained by empowering employees to live the brand values and by so doing get them to align their attitudes and behaviors’ with the overall

corporate goal. Scholars such as Michell (2002), Maxwell and Knox (2009), also assert that equipping employees with knowledge and capabilities gives employees a sense of direction and purpose, gets them engaged, motivated, emotionally connected, and additionally inspires them to deliver desired goals through the exhibition of brand supportive behaviors. Similarly, Balmer and Gray (2003) and Miles and Mangold (2004) suggests that employees must be motivated and empowered to build brand supportive behaviors which should be consistently aligned with the corporate brand promise. Additionally, scholars such as Harris and De Chernatony (2001); Balmer and Gray (2003); and Hulberg (2006), have emphasized that internally oriented initiatives are vital for corporate success which suggests that effective management of the relationship and experiences an organization has with its employees helps shape their perceptions, attitudes and behaviors which have been identified as vital for corporate success. Hence the need for organizations in the twenty first century to focus on internally oriented initiatives and more importantly on employees to support the organization’s brand to create distinctiveness for sustained competitiveness.

Whereas Bergstrom et al. (2002:135) indicates that IB refers to three things namely “communicating the brand effectively to the employees; convincing them of its relevance and worth; and successfully linking every job to delivery of brand essence”, Punjaisri and Wilson (2011:1523) describe IB as “the activities undertaken by an organization to ensure that the brand promise reflecting the espoused brand values that set customers’ expectations is enacted and delivered by employees”, while Miles and Mangold (2004: 68) define IB as “the process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents”. MacLavery et al. (2007:3) also define IB as “the set of strategic processes that align and empower employees to deliver the appropriate customer experience in a consistent fashion. These processes include, but are not limited to, internal communications, training support, leadership practices, reward and recognition programs, recruitment practices and sustainability factors”. A common feature inherent in their viewpoints is the important role of employees, and a

consideration of strategic measures to facilitate employee value internalization for the achievement of desired goals. It also suggests that internal branding activities are critical for corporate success and thus challenge organizations to pay attention to valuable assets such as its human capital for the creation of distinctive products and services for organizational success.

Theories Underpinning Internal Branding Initiatives

Several theories have been proposed to support Internal Branding Activities and to offer better understanding of the adoption of IB practices. Prominent amongst them is Social Identity Theory which highlights the effect of the individual's identification with the social group and the Resource-based view which emphasizes a firm's exploitation of its strategic assets to its best advantage. Social Identity Theory proposes that an individual's sense of self-worth depends on groups that he/she associates with or belongs to (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). The notion of self-worth being linked to membership of certain groups confirms the importance of the social environment and the individual's willingness to associate with and support group work. Punjaisri et al, (2009), indicate that internal branding activities enhances employees' sense of belonging as it fosters employee identification with an organization's brand, and motivates employees to exhibit brand-supportive behaviors that enhance group goals.

Similarly, the resource-based view advocates that firms are endowed with a unique bundle of resources, capabilities, and competencies which when strategically managed creates sustainable competitive advantage for the organization. Barney, (1991) argues that competitive advantage could be gained from organizational resources that are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable. Valuable resources Barney (1991) notes exploit opportunities and overcomes threats in a firm's environment, and non-substitutable and imitable resources he indicates are knowledge-based. Thus, the strategic use of a firm's human resources Barney (1991) notes, creates distinctiveness which is essential for corporate success. This suggests that effectively managing and consciously exploiting the skills and capabilities of an organization's workforce to its competitive advantage cannot be

underestimated. Penrose (1959, cited in Kor and Mahoney 2004), also argues that development of the capacities of the workforce create distinctiveness in work practices, products and services offered thus making an establishment more attractive to applicants and existing employees. Altogether, these theories suggest that a firm can develop and manage its strategic human assets to its advantage thus making more relevant internal branding strategies as necessary initiative to be adopted by organizations to create distinctiveness and corporate success.

Internal Branding Mechanisms: Overview of Previous Research

Empirical studies conducted from the employee perspective have identified numerous mechanisms for equipping employees to build brand-supportive behaviors, and to gain employees commitment and loyalty (Bowden, 2000; Begley and Boyd, 2000; Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005; LePla, 2013). Miles and Mangold's (2004) study for instance identified communication, employee recruitment programs, employee training and development programs, recognition and rewards schemes, work culture, leadership and co-worker support as mechanisms building brand supportive behaviors. Similarly, Asha and Jyothi's (2013) study in India which is similar to that of King and So's (2015) study in China, identified IB mechanisms such as; recognition and rewards; trainings and developmental initiatives; leaderships concern for employee growth; employee empowerment via employee participation in decision making; informal socialization with management and co-workers; and finally multidimensional communication by management, as contributing to employee development of brand-supportive behaviors. Their findings suggest a blend of both formal and informal socialization process as necessary initiatives for employee knowledge and skills acquisition, and for building brand-supportive behaviors.

Conversely, Punjaisri and Wilson's (2011) study in Thailand share some similarities with empirical studies such as Ching, (2007), Ashraf et al. (2013), Lee et al. (2014), and Yang et al. (2015). These studies, unlike the earlier studies discussed, highlight formal sources only as key mechanisms for building brand-supportive behaviors. Punjaisri et al's (2011) study identified internal communication, training

programs, the work environment, and personal variables as key mechanisms for IB initiatives. Lee et al's (2014) study in South Korea identified HR activities such as internal communication, training programs and reward schemes as initiatives vital for building employee brand supportive behaviors. Similarly, Yang et al's (2015), study in Taiwan identified formal initiatives such as brand training/ orientation programs, meetings, briefing sessions, and daily reporting amongst others as necessary initiatives for building employee commitment and brand supportive behaviors.

Taken together, one can conclude that although study findings suggest the need for brand-centered HR activities as necessary initiatives for building employee brand-supportive behaviors, study findings differ as to which programs are crucial for corporate success. While some studies suggest that brand-centered formal initiatives increase employee skills and knowledge base, other studies portray both formal programs and informal socialization processes such as leadership influence, co-worker support and conducive work environment, as crucial initiatives for employee building of brand-supportive behaviors. Besides the inconsistencies recorded in study findings, majority of these studies have been conducted in Europe, Asia, and USA, with very little studies conducted in Africa. Furthermore, focus of most IB studies have been on service organizations leaving other sectors unexplored. The afore-mentioned reasons provide justification for further investigation hence the need to conduct this study.

Research Aim and Design

This study conducted in Africa, specifically Ghana, and within a manufacturing set up, examines internal branding mechanisms from employees' perspective. A case study approach was adopted, and a multinational organization considered for the study. Based on recommendations made by Saunders et al (2007), and Bryman and Bell (2011), a qualitative approach was adopted to explore perceptions of the workforce on mechanisms employed to empower them to acquire brand supportive behaviors and deliver on the brand promise. The study employed purposive sampling and face-to-face semi-structured interviewing technique to collect data from 20 respondents in the selected multinational organization. The choice of

sampling approach was influenced by the study's aim of consciously engaging employees at all levels. Additionally, selecting respondents via purposive sampling was appropriate for the study as it enabled diversity to be explored and targeted personnel to be contacted and interviewed. Furthermore, due to the exploratory nature of the study, face-to-face semi-structured interviews was considered appropriate as it allowed for flexibility and a better understanding of opinions expressed, and to unearth new findings. The interviewing technique adopted also promoted dialoguing with informants to further probe and prompt when necessary to clarify issues. Also, the technique helped to delve deeper and to uncover unknown phenomenon (Walker and Myrick, 2006).

In analyzing data collected from respondents, the grounded theory approach was adopted. Bell and Bryman (2011), notes that the technique is by far the most prominent approach for analyzing qualitative data. The grounded theory approach involved coding, identification of themes, and textual explanation of feedback obtained from respondents. Research question posed was as follows; - In what ways do employees perceive the organization as empowering them to internalize its corporate values?

Findings

With the objective of understanding internal branding initiatives that promote corporate success, data assessment revealed four common themes as necessary mechanisms employed by the organization to empower employees internalize corporate values and to deliver on the brand promise. Themes identified which will be discussed next were knowledge and capability building activities, internal communication, leadership support, and the work environment.

Knowledge and Capability Building Activities

Respondents unanimously revealed that the organization provided different forms of training to enhance their knowledge base and equip them to perform their jobs. Respondents identified induction, refresher and on-the-job training, as IB initiatives consciously organized by human resource (HR) for employees, and all geared towards employees' understanding and inculcation of the corporate values. For instance, respondents mentioned that new recruits go

through induction training to learn what the company stands for and to align their values to that of the company. Subsequently specific training programs which are mandatory, on-line courses, and on-the-job training are organized to reinforce employee understanding and compliance with the corporate values. Some respondents also mentioned that the on-line courses were interesting as they tend to use real life situations (scenarios) to reinforce knowledge gained, after which employees are assessed so as to make information acquired more relevant and meaningful to employees' day to day work activities. Mentoring and coaching programs done by leadership and peers also helped employees align their attitudes and behaviors to that of the organization, and to encourage and reinforce expected values. This is evidenced by the following statements:

Respondents' views suggest that training programs are crucial to employees' display of brand supportive behaviors and this finding is consistent with studies such as Burmann and Zeplin (2005); and Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) as they established that training and developmental programs enhance employees' brand knowledge and skills, and helps build brand-supportive behaviors.

Internal Communication (Formal and Informal)

Majority of the respondents perceived internal communication championed by HR as contributing to employee brand knowledge and awareness, and their ability to perform assigned duties. For instance, respondents mentioned that management consistently reminded employees of the values and updated them on on-going activities through sources such as meetings, briefings, internal memos, manuals, and e-mails. Respondents also acknowledged that informal sources such as conversations and interactions with superiors and peers have also enhanced their brand knowledge and ability to align individual values to that of the organization which is evidenced by the following statements:

The opinions expressed suggest that internal communications both formal and informal sources reinforce brand messages, guide employees' actions, and assists in building brand supportive behaviors. This finding is consistent with studies such as Chong (2007); and King and Grace (2008) as they identified internal

communication to build employee brand awareness and brand supportive behaviors.

Leadership Support

Respondents acknowledged that Leadership plays a key role in employees' inculcation of the corporate values. For instance, respondents acknowledged that at forums such as employee meetings and briefing sessions, leadership interacts with them, reminds, encourages, and inspires them to live up to expected values. This is evidenced by the following statements:

The opinions expressed suggest that leadership support tends to strengthen work relationships as it directs, motivates, and inspires employees to remain committed and loyal to their jobs and achieve desired goals. This finding is consistent with studies such as Kaufmann et al., (2012); and Wallace et al., (2013) as they found that leadership's support motivates and inspires employees to act as ambassadors.

Work environment

Respondents perceived the work environment as influencing their inculcation of the corporate values. For instance, respondents acknowledged that work practices, work culture, employee interactions, and co-worker behaviors and attitudes influence what they do. Also, with the help of colleagues, new recruits adjust and are also able to fit into the system and perform assigned tasks. This is evidenced by the following statements:

Respondents' feedback suggests that besides the management systems and processes, policies and procedures, the informal socialization process reinforces brand messages received and influences employee brand - building behaviors and attitudes. This finding is consistent with studies such as Asha and Jyothi (2013); and King and Grace (2008) as they identified the work environment assisting employees perform assigned tasks.

Discussion

Whereas most of the existing studies on internal branding from the employee perspective have focused on the service sector and in the developed economies, this study has considered internal branding mechanisms from the employee perspective in a manufacturing setting in a developing economy. The research findings revealed that employees working with the

multinational organization under study in Ghana perceived their empowerment to internalize corporate values as emanating from internal communications, knowledge and capability building activities, leadership support, and the work environment. Employees also perceived their establishment as promoting brand – supportive behaviors due to HR’s consistent training and communication programs, which was deemed relevant for employee understanding of the corporate values, and leadership’s encouragement and reinforcement of the values for employee display of brand-supportive behaviors. Knowledge and capability building programs such as orientation training for new employees had a major influence on the initial socialization process and this was buttressed with subsequent training programs and on-the-job training to help build brand-supportive behaviors as they internalize and reinforce corporate values. Additionally, internal communication which included face-to face communication with employees during employee meeting and briefing sessions, as well as internal memos and email exchanges were noted as critical as it furnished employees with the requisite information and knowledge on the organization’s corporate values to enable them deliver on the brand promise. The findings are consistent with the views of scholars such as Yang et al, (2015), Lee et al (2014), Burman and Zeplin (2005), and Punjaisri et al (2008), who acknowledge that internal communication and training programs are internal branding mechanisms critical for corporate success and they help employees exhibit brand-supportive behaviors.

Leadership’s influence was also noted as significant as it impacted employee performance, which suggests that the informal socialization process is pivotal to IB success. The informal socialization process supported employee acceptance of the corporate values, helped establish the desired employer–employee relationship, and to build employee confidence to live and to deliver required goals. The study findings concur with the views of studies such as King and Grace (2012); Wallace et al. (2013); and Xiong et al. (2013) who assert that besides HR practices which equip employees with the requisite knowledge and skills, the work culture, and ‘care factor’ championed by leadership reinforces and motivates employees to live the brand. More importantly, the results also suggest

similarities in IB mechanisms identified in empirical literature on the services sectors discussed which implies that there are similarities in relation to IB mechanisms employed in the manufacturing industry studied in the developing economy and the services industries in the developed countries discussed in this study.

Limitations and Managerial Implication

Some limitations of study must be acknowledged. The study adopted a qualitative approach and employed purposive sampling (a non-probability sampling technique) to collect data from a sample size of 20 respondents. The study also focused on one organization (a manufacturing set up). The approach adopted, the sampling technique employed, and the unrepresentative nature of the sample size limits generalization of the study findings.

With regards to the managerial implications of the study, the paper seeks to draw management’s attention to the impact of internal branding initiatives. That is, its positive influence on employees, and additionally the important role of employees in the delivery of an organization’s brand promise. Hence, internal branding efforts must not be overlooked but rather promoted in business organizations that seek to attain corporate success and sustained competitive advantage.

Conclusion and Recommendation for Future Research

The study findings have demonstrated how internal branding mechanisms support employee empowerment, employee internalization of corporate values, employee exhibition of brand-supportive behaviors and consequently employee delivery on the brand promise. This imply that internal branding initiatives when effectively implemented would positively influence employees, get them more committed to the organization, help them identify and associate with the corporate brand, and consequently exhibit a sense of belonging for corporate success. The paper thus concludes that employees would exhibit brand-supportive behaviors if they are trained, coached, socialized, and empowered to do so. The study results also endorse the results of previous empirical findings which posit that internal branding initiatives when effectively deployed enable employees acquire brand-

supportive behaviors which is deemed critical for corporate success.

The paper further emphasizes the similarities in internal branding initiatives in the manufacturing set-up investigated in a developing economy and in-service industries in the developed countries which arguably suggests that internal branding initiatives identified can be applied in both manufacturing and services set-ups. But more importantly, the effective management and implementation of both formal and informal programs are critical for the realization of desired results. Drawing from the fact that much studies have not been undertaken in other sectors besides the service sector, the paper recommends that more investigative studies be conducted in other industries to test for similarities and differences in IB mechanism that promote success.

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