Exploring the relationship between corporate, internal and employer branding – An Empirical Study

Introduction

Employees are considered the most important factor to the overall success of corporate brand management, as King (1991) advocates that employees are the interface between the organisation and customers. The importance of 'employer branding' has been highlighted (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Edwards, 2005); however the interrelationships between the corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding have not been fully explored in the corporate branding literature. This study investigates how these three concepts are linked in practice and examines how internal and employer branding could work together to reinforce the corporate brand in the U.K. Higher Education sector, specifically a School within a UK university.

The corporate branding concept places an emphasis on employees' attitudes and behaviours. This has given rise to internal branding and employer branding, which argue for a closer alignment between the employees' values and the corporate brand's. However, few studies have attempted to provide a platform by which the two concepts can be synergised to achieve a strong, consistent corporate brand. In previous work, the authors have attempted to address this gap through the development of a new conceptual framework based on existing literature which argues for closer conceptual alignment between corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding. This paper has developed this conceptual framework by providing empirical evidence based on qualitative research. The research was set out to explore, using a case study, the extent to which this conceptual framework can be applied to an organisation. The paper will discuss the preliminary findings of 15 in-depth interviews with employees and managers of a University faculty. It provides insights into how corporate branding, employer branding and internal branding can be aligned and applied into the not-for-profit business setting.

Research Context

Corporate identity reflects the values that are central to a corporate brand. Therefore, corporate identity forms the foundation of a corporate brand (Balmer, 2001). The aim of corporate branding is to deliver values which attract key stakeholders to the

organisation so that they can develop a sense of belonging to the organisation (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). However, the interrelationships between corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding have not been explored sufficiently in the existing literature (Foster et al., 2010).

Existing corporate branding literature tends to focus on the internal audience. Authors have emphasised the importance of employee involvement (de Chernatony and Harris, 2001) to ensure the consistent delivery of brand values to stakeholders. Employees are considered the ambassadors for their organisation. Internal branding has been used as a means of aligning the values of employees and the corporate brand (Reichheld and Rogers, 2005). By delivering the consistent corporate brand messages to all stakeholders, internal branding enables organisations to differentiate themselves and achieve competitive advantage (de Chernatony and Harris, 2001). However, internal branding has its focal point on existing employees; it has not sufficiently explored the recruitment of the '*right*' people in the first place.

The external perception of the corporate brand has tended to focus on customers' opinions. Therefore, research on the internal branding perspective has not adequately explored the opinions of the prospective employees who play an important role in corporate brand management, as Ind (1998) states that the recruitment of the '*right*' people could contribute to the corporate brand development. Employer branding can play a role in this and has been defined as a process of '*promoting, both within and outside the firm, a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer*' (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004, p.120). Employer value propositions about the employment experience have been discussed in the literature; however, studies on how internal branding could impact on staff recruitment are still scant. Hence, this study aims to address the gap in knowledge by exploring the relationship between internal branding, corporate branding and employer branding. The research questions of this study are as follow:

- How effectively are the School's brand values communicated internally?
- How effectively are the School's employer brand values communicated externally?

- To what extent are the internal brand values and external employer brand values of the School aligned to the School's and University's corporate brand?

Research Design

A qualitative research approach has been adopted for this study due to the exploratory nature of the topic and the apparent complicated relationship between corporate, employer and internal branding. A case study approach was used with one University faculty in the U.K. being selected for this context. Fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with the existing staff within the School. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. The participants were selected according to the 5 key functions within the university; these were research, commercial, teaching, managerial and administrative. The themes explored in the interviews are related to corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding of the School and the University and the extent of how these concepts are aligned. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis.

Preliminary Findings

Internal branding

All the senior managers shared a similar view of the School's brand values. However, many employees were unfamiliar with all the core brand values of the faculty. They were unable to describe these values, and some expressed that the values were not communicated to them consistently or explicitly. In addition, it was found that different divisions and functions of the School had various priorities and agendas; and cultures, and these caused confusion amongst the existing employees in relation to the School's brand values. That said, 'employability' was one of the brand values identified by the existing staff. This value was communicated to staff through both internal and external sources (e.g. league tables, placement and career services and students) but not necessarily through communication by managers.

Existing literature (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007) emphasises the importance of communication in implementing internal branding. An effective communication strategy would ensure that there is a shared understanding between the management and employees. This would also lead to the right pattern of behaviour. Any communication breakdown would cause major problems in which staff could not

identify with the brand values of the School and hence fail to communicate these unique values to other stakeholders. However, the findings suggested that many staff, particularly academics, were resistant and cynical to internal 'branding' and marketing related communication and were more receptive to communication that relied less on the 'hard sell' and took account of the different working patterns of academics. So, for example, there was a heavy reliance on email as a way of communicating to staff which whilst creating a lot of email traffic was deemed the most appropriate way to reach staff who were out of the office due to activities like teaching, meeting clients and working from home.

The employer brand

Traditional means of conveying the employer brand, such as job adverts, were regarded as not effective in communicating the brand values of the School. Instead existing staff played a considerable role in attracting applicants (e.g. academics) to the School, such as when they presented at conferences. They therefore acted as the ambassadors of the employer brand. The accreditations and awards also made the School an attractive place to work. Furthermore, the physical attributes of the School, such as the location and building were seen as key methods for attracting staff new employees. The building therefore reflected the mission of the School and sent out a clear message to both the internal and external stakeholders.

Linking the internal brand values and external employer brand values of the School with the University's corporate brand

The corporate brand values appear to be understood amongst the senior management, however, it was found to be inconsistent amongst employees. This could be a result of the School undergoing recent changes in strategic direction, although participants reported that they were clear in terms of their job roles. Those people who were able to comment on how the School's brand linked to the University's brand, reported that this was because of their awareness of tangible elements, such as the programmes and types of research the School was involved in and reported in things like the website, prospectus etc. This suggests that the visual identity was seen to be important in communicating the message to the existing employees.

One shared value that was reported frequently, however, was that of 'employability' and the idea that students studying at the School and University were in a strong position to apply for work when they graduated. This could be regarded as a core value and one which participants tried to communicate whilst interacting with stakeholders, such as students. This seems to resonate with existing literature that values drive behaviour. In other words, when employees are clearly aware of their corporate brand values, they will be enabled to deliver on those values, which will lead to consistent delivery of corporate brand promise.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings of this study indicate that although there are theoretical links between corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding (Foster et al., 2010) the existence of this in practice is patchy. In some instances this reflects the nature of the industry the case organisation operates in. The nature of the sector reflects the different nature of the internal audience. As such, the style of communication and how the brand message is communicated needs to be adapted to suit the nature of the audience in terms of how receptive they are to internal branding communication and the nature of their job roles. Some of the brand values were communicated effectively as a result of reinforcement from a combination of internal and external sources and not necessarily through interactions with managers. Traditional recruitment sources were also less effective in communicating brand values to potential applicants yet the role of brand ambassadors is essential in delivering the School's USP to the external audiences. This research has suggested that there is a link between internal branding and employer branding as existing staff act as the brand ambassador; however, only the senior management have good understanding of corporate brand values and the internal branding process. Internal branding and its activities are important to those people who are recruited through the traditional means to ensure that they understand School's brand values and hence their likeliness to stay. This case study explored a specific context and the analysis is only based on a small sample, the findings could not be generalised outside the context studied. The nature of the topic has also proved to be difficult for some respondents as they had difficulties in articulating their thoughts and feelings on the 'branding' issues of the School.

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