



The Key Success of Company Branding Through Employees

กุญแจสู่ความสำเร็จในการสร้างแบรนด์บริษัท ผ่านพนักงาน

Dr. Tanya Supornpraditchai

Lecturer in Department of Master of
Business Administration (MBA)

Panyapiwat Institute of Management

E-mail: tanyasup@pim.ac.th

Abstract

Research of company branding strategy has captured more and more attention from many scholars. In practice, there are growing numbers of organizations moving their brand strategies from individual product branding to company branding in order to provide an umbrella of trust for all product and service categories of the company and to assist the company to achieve extension of its dissimilar products or services in the future. It has been argued that company branding strategy is a major marketing tool that companies use in order to gain a competitive advantage over their competitors. The focus of company branding has been on creating customer commitment to a brand by attracting new customers and retaining existing customers which will lead to increase of sales. The literature review shows that company branding strategy in both academic research and practice has directed more focus on customers than other stakeholders, for example, employee. Recently the concept of company branding strategy has been expanded into the employee context. Similar to customer, company brand has a personality as seen by its employees. In fact, an employee develops a closer relationship with a company brand he works for. This article examines the importance of company branding strategy through company employees.

Keywords: Key Success, Company Branding, Employees

บทคัดย่อ

ปัจจุบันนักวิชาการให้ความสนใจงานวิจัยเกี่ยวกับการสร้างแบรนด์บริษัทเพิ่มมากขึ้น โดยหลายบริษัทได้เปลี่ยนกลยุทธ์การสร้างแบรนด์จากการมุ่งเน้นสร้างแบรนด์ของสินค้าตัวใดตัวหนึ่งมาเป็นการสร้างแบรนด์บริษัท โดยมีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อให้ลูกค้าเกิดความมั่นใจในสินค้าและบริการทุกชนิดของบริษัทมากกว่าที่จะเน้นการสร้างความมั่นใจในสินค้าหรือบริการตัวใดตัวหนึ่ง นอกจากนี้การสร้างแบรนด์บริษัทยังช่วยเพิ่มโอกาสการขายสินค้าหรือบริการใหม่ๆของบริษัทที่กำลังจะออกสู่ตลาดในอนาคต นักวิจัยและนักวิชาการสรุปว่ากลยุทธ์การสร้างแบรนด์บริษัทนั้นเป็นกลยุทธ์หลักทางการตลาดที่สามารถทำให้บริษัทนั้นๆ มีศักยภาพในการแข่งขันที่เหนือกว่าบริษัทคู่แข่ง ในอดีตการสร้างแบรนด์บริษัทนั้นจะมุ่งเน้นไปที่ลูกค้าเป็นสำคัญ โดยมีจุดประสงค์เพื่อให้ลูกค้าไว้วางใจในแบรนด์โดยดึงดูดลูกค้าใหม่ๆ และรักษาลูกค้าเก่าซึ่งส่งผลให้ยอดขายของบริษัทเพิ่มขึ้นได้จากการทบทวนวรรณกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องทำให้ทราบว่ากลยุทธ์การสร้างแบรนด์บริษัทนั้นมุ่งเน้นไปที่ลูกค้าเป็นหลักโดยลึมนึกถึงกลุ่มที่มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียที่มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องเช่น พนักงานของบริษัทเอง อย่างไรก็ตามปัจจุบันนี้กลยุทธ์การสร้างแบรนด์บริษัทได้รับการขยายไปสู่ระดับพนักงานของบริษัทแล้ว ซึ่งในความเป็นจริง แบรนด์ของบริษัทมีอิทธิพลต่อพนักงานของบริษัทเองเช่นเดียวกับที่มีอิทธิพลต่อลูกค้าของบริษัท ที่สำคัญพนักงานของบริษัทมีความเกี่ยวพันกับแบรนด์บริษัทโดยตรงและสัมผัสมากกว่าลูกค้าเสียอีก บทความวิชาการนี้จึงได้ให้ความสำคัญต่อกลยุทธ์การสร้างแบรนด์บริษัทโดยมุ่งเน้นไปที่พนักงานของบริษัทเป็นหลัก

คำสำคัญ: ความสำเร็จ การสร้างแบรนด์บริษัท พนักงาน

Introduction

It is the first important thing to examine some fundamental concepts of the branding strategy. Roa et al. (2004) indicate three different types of branding strategies; (1) company branding, (2) house of brands, and (3) mixed branding. Company branding strategy is dominant where the company brand name is used across all company products and services in order to get the benefits of an economies of scale in marketing, for example, Hewlett-Packard, McDonald's, FedEx (Roa et al., 2004), Mars and Nestle (Davies & Chun, 2002). The house of branding strategy does not use the company name but uses individual brand names to

promote products and services in order to differentiate positioned brands, for example, Unilever and Procter and Gamble (Davies & Chun, 2002). Finally, mixed branding strategy is used in companies such as Hilton, British Airway (Davies & Chun, 2002) to create separate product classes for various brands, for example, Pepsi uses the company brand name for certain products and its product brand name for other products in their portfolio (Roa et al., 2004)

Nowadays, in the marketplace where products are similar and product life cycles are getting shorter, for example, pharmaceutical and technology industries, company branding

can provide a sustainable competitive advantage by differentiating the company, its products and services from its competitors. Company brand is an integrated and cost saving approach to branding strategy. The cost of introducing a brand into a consumer market is a considerable investment as there is no guarantee of success. As marketing costs rise, establishing a company brand may be more efficient than employing product branding strategy.

Companies can find ways to strengthen their company brand to offer and provide differentiating products and experiences for their customers. de Chernatony (1999) asserts that where a company branding builds customers' respect and trust with one of the company's offerings, it is more likely that consumers will accept the company's promises for an additional subsequent offering. Newman (2001) estimates that 26 percent of cost can be saved by using a company brand for a new product/service launch and the successful rate can be increased by 20 percent. Company branding has four major advantages; (1) economies of scale in marketing, (2) total lower costs of advertising, (3) lower costs of creating brand equity, and (4) lower costs of new product introductions (Roa et al., 2004).

The company brand is different from the product brand in the diversity of audiences. It requires multi-stakeholders to be involved. Hatch and Schultz (2003) and Schultz and de Chernatony (2002) insist that the company brand is formed and held by all of its stakeholders including employees, customer,

investors, suppliers, partners, regulators, special interests, and local communities. However, there are a limited number of qualified marketers to manage the marketing of the company brand across all the communications disciplines, which are advertising, public relations, promotion, philanthropy, and internal communications (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004).

Company branding through both internal and external perceptions intends to add value through identification of the products or services of the company and differentiates those products or services from its competitors. However, companies often forget the importance of the internal customers and their employees. They pay much more attention to the external customers. Stuart (2003) asserts that employees are the most important group of stakeholders in all organizations but they are often overlooked.

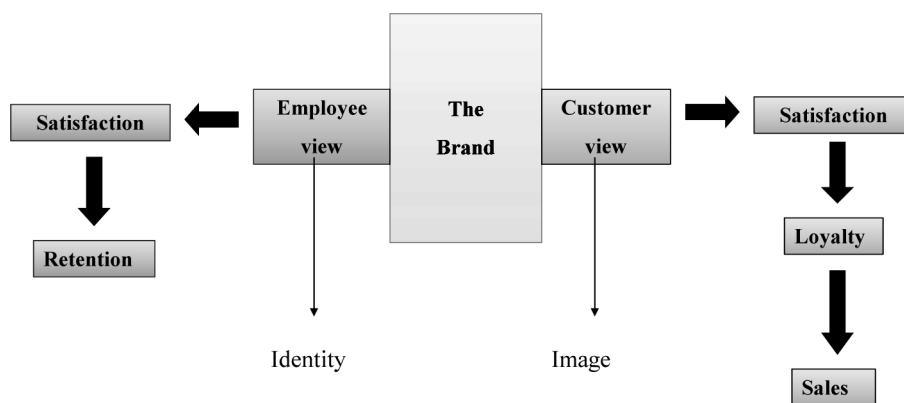
Literature review shows that there are gaps between the internal and external perceptions of a company brand. Gaps were identified between the perception of the employee and the perception of the customer of a company identity (Davies & Chun, 2002). de Chernatony (1999) insists that in order to strengthen a company brand, the company has to narrow the gap between internal and external perceptions.

How to Build a Successful Company Brand? Internal customer (the key success for company branding strategy)

Employees are one of the stakeholder groups who are influenced by the company image (Abratt, 1989) and have an impact on

company identity (Ind, 1997; Stuart, 2002). Company marketers need to internalize the message with the employees. There needs to be a greater attention to the development of clearing brand messages with the employees. The brand positioning must be cleared and communicated to employees in order to inspire and assist them to understand their role in relation to the brand. In fact, employees are an important information source and reference for the customer about the company. Therefore, employee actions and attitudes need to be in harmony with the way that senior management wishes the company to be perceived (Kennedy, 1977).

The perception of employee and customer also affect their attitude and behavior toward the company. Davies et al. (2003) provide the Company Reputation Chain model showing that there are the links in the reputation chain between internal and external perception, as shown in Figure 1. The company brand image, from the customer's point of view and the company brand identity, from employee's point of view need to be harmonized. They also assert that there are positive links between company image and company sale performance. Therefore, customer-contact employees have dramatic role to communicate the company brand to the customers.



Source: Davies et al. (2003)

Figure 1: The Company Reputation Chain

Employee: brand ambassadors

In addition, employees' attitude and behavior need to be aligned with the company brand value because they affect other stakeholder's perception of the company brand. There is growing interest in brand

attitudes of employees because they are the key to build relationships with all the company's stakeholders. They assist the company in expressing the meaning of the brand (Balmer, 1995; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Wilson, 2001). In developing

company branding, attention should be given to employees who provide the service to the external customers. Especially in service businesses, customer-contact personnel are as important as the companies' products (de Chernatony, Drury & Segal-Horn, 2003). They are more involved in the development of the company brand than a product brand (de Chernatony, 1999; McDonald et al., 2001).

Furthermore, external brand communications also affect internal perceptions. Hatch and Schultz (2001) point out that the company employees are also external group members who consume company products/services. They can compare the communications within and outside the company. Their perceptions of the company can influence the organizational identity when they make the contact to the customer (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

Company branding strategy aims to have all members of the company behave in a manner conforming to the desired brand identity. Therefore, a company needs to clearly communicate the purpose of its brand to employees in order to inspire them and help them perceive the intended meaning of its brand and their roles relate to it. Company branding relies heavily on a company's members holding congruent perceptions about the nature of the company (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). The role of employees is changed; they are now the brand's *ambassadors* (Hemsley, 1998).

There is evidence that the more employees identify with a company, the more likely they are to show a supportive attitude toward it

(Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and the more they focus on tasks that benefit the company rather than self-interested objectives (Bell & Menguc, 2002). By focusing on company branding from employee's perspective, companies can draw greater attention to their human capital. It is essentially a matter of ensuring that there is alignment between how employees feel about the company brand and the company brand as designed by management. de Chernatony et al. (2003) argue that a service brand can die because of its staffs, not because of its customers.

In line with Davies et al. (2003), employees play a crucial role in the brand building process. They are the interface between internal and external brand, and can have a significant impact on the perception of customers toward both the brand and the company (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). All employees represent the company identity and influence external stakeholder perceptions about the company (King, 1991).

The outstanding example of the successful company branding concept is *Starbucks*. The company puts more effort in employees than customers. It pays attention in employee's training, employee's benefit, employee attitude and behavior, to communicate the brand from inside-out (Burmahn & Zeplin, 2005). Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, said that "we are not in the coffee business serving people...; we are in the people business serving coffee" (Bedbury & Fenichell, 2002: 50). This suggests that Starbucks focuses on four main components, which are employees' training, employees'

benefits, employees' attitudes and behavior in order to motivate them to deliver the appropriate service to the customers. Using this perspective, internal company branding becomes important, in other words, employees will need to be addressed first and the end-user (for example, customer) will be satisfied at last. Jawahar and McLaughlin (2001) point out that employee is likely to be the most important in the "growth stage" and "mature stage" of the company brand lifecycle and less important in the "declining stage". On the other hand, Stuart (2003) argues that employees are important at all stages of the company brand lifecycle, for the reason that the employees represent the company identity that affects external stakeholder perceptions. Employees are a sustainable source of competitive advantage; making them a critical resource at all stages of the company brand lifecycle. In fact, weakened employee identification will damage organizational identity. Therefore, companies should ensure that they convey company brand identity to their employees and focus on achieving effective internal communication between the organization and their employees in order to interact with customers.

The literature review in both the marketing and HR fields demonstrates that the employee's perception of her/his company brand has an impact on her/his attitude and behavior toward the company (Balmer, 1995; de Chernatony, 1999; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Martinet al., 2005). The increased attention being focused on employees by scholars in the marketing

field has occurred because they are recognized as the key success for the company brand (Griffin, 2002; Olins, 2000).

When a company conveys expectations of what it will deliver in terms of products and services as a brand through promises (for example, through advertising) to the customers, the company's employees' behavior needs to be aligned with those expectations in their contact with the customers. Company's employees are the people who deliver the meaning of the brand to customers (Balmer, 1995; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Wilson, 2001), therefore, their attitudes and behaviors need to be in harmony with the company brand (Balmer, 1995; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Wilson, 2001) and the way that the company expects to be perceived (Kennedy, 1977).

Employee: as product

The core concept of company branding strategy in applying to company's employee is the idea of turning business from inside-out and linking company's current employee behavior to the company brand. The benefit outcomes of the company branding strategy in applying to company's current employee from marketing perspective focus on employee attitudes and behaviors when they provide the service to the customer (de Chernatony, 1999; de Chernatony et al., 2003; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). In marketing research, scholars assert that there are positive links between the communication of a company brand to its employees

and their behaviors in the way that support the company brand and deliver it to customers, as shown in Figure 2 (Davies et al., 2003).



Note: Developed from Davies et al. (2003)

Figure 2: Benefit Outcomes of Company Branding Strategy from Marketing Perspective

In fact, employees not only significantly influence the company brand, but are also influenced by it (Dortok, 2006). Although the main objective of most advertising is not to communicate with a company's employees but to its customers, a company's advertising can affect its employees (Acito & Ford, 1980). Studies have shown that company branding activity such as advertising has an impact on the company's employees (Acito & Ford, 1980; Bird, 1989; Bowers et al., 1990; Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1998). In addition, organizational scholars emphasize the importance of using internal communications to inform and create an understanding of the company brand, and to build ownership among employees (Gilly &

Wolfinbarger, 1998).

In addition, a company's advertising claims influence its employees' positive or negative attitudes toward the company. Take the case of Eastern Airlines: various forms of advertising that promote specific attributes of the company service indicate to its customers what they can expect from its employees and also influence its employees to support the company goals and imply to them how they are expected to behave (Acito & Ford, 1980). On the other hand, a company's advertising may be a source of pride or humiliation to its employees. As suggested by Acito and Ford (1980), in a company that uses low-quality materials and inferior standards in production methods but over-claims about its product quality in its advertising, employees might react by expressing cynical opinions about that advertising and the company.

How to Measure Employees' perception toward a Company Brand?

For the past decade, brand equity has become one of the key measurements in the evaluation of the value of brand. Recently, academics have paid increased attention to the impact of the company brand on its current employees (Han, 2005; Supornpraditchai et al., 2006, 2007) in which aimed at measuring the current employees' perception toward their current company brand and its effects. Han (2005) conducted longitudinal research in a food service company, studying the conceptual framework of company branding from

the employee perspective. Supornpraditchai et al. (2007) measure the degree of individual employees' perception of company brand and provide insight into employee attitudes and behavior that are influenced by brand strategies, using a fundamental brand equity theory. Han (2005) and Supornpraditchai (2007) point out that understanding of individual employees' perception toward their company brand can contribute to enhancing the company's competitive advantage. In particular, if a company understands what its employees believe in terms of their responsibilities towards their company brand, then company marketing activities could be able to direct the situation in a more efficient way to its customer. From an organizational perspective, relevant and accurate research on individual employees' perception of company brand is imperative for seeking to effectively manage a company brand (Supornpraditchai et al. 2006).

The consequences of a company's succeeding in creating brand equity in the perception of its employees can be significant. For example, if a company understands the employees' perceptions toward the company brand and the way in which the company brand is positioned relative to competitors in the mind of employees, opportunities for improved marketing strategies can be created. Furthermore, communication strategies can be more effective and the company might succeed in discovering a positive development in the positioning of the company brand in its employees' minds.

Company Branding for Competitive Advantage

Supornpraditchai et al. (2006, 2007) argue that company branding strategy is an important tool to influence employees to behave in the appropriate way that supports the company and its success. Company branding strategy influences behaviours among a company's employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). In relation to establishing the company brand, marketing scholars focus on the company brand marketing's impact on the company's employees who deliver the brand to the customers (Balmer, 1995; Chebat et al., 2002; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Wilson, 2001). On the other hand, HR scholars focus on employee retention (or employees' willingness to stay with company) (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Davies et al., 2003) as an outcome of company branding strategy that will improve company productivity (Lawler & Hackman, 1971).

Companies face the problem of high rates of employee turnover. According to Ambler and Barrow (1996), Barrow and Mosley (2005) and Martin et al. (2005), there is consistent evidence showing that company branding provides economic benefits for the company. Lawler and Hackman (1971) suggest that when employees leave a company, a number of other costs increase, such as the expenses of recruitment, selection, payroll accounting, having inexperienced workers on the job and supervision. These accumulated expenses are significant costs for a company.

In addition, the costs of recruiting the best people and training them can only be recovered if they stay long enough to make a return

on that investment (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Ambler and Barrow (1996), Han (2005) and Supornpraditchai et al. (2007) assert that the company branding strategy may be used to signal the company's quality and job security to its employees. As employees commit to the company brand, they may be willing to stay with it.

It is argued that a company's branding strategy aimed at company's employees should be the focal point of any new company branding journey (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; King & Grace, 2005). In HR research, scholars show that there are the positive links between employees' perception of the company brand to their satisfaction and retention, as shown in Figure 3 (King & Grace, 2005). The benefit outcomes of company branding in applying to company's employee, from HR perspective focus on employee's intention to stay longer with the company (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).



Note: Developed from King and Grace, (2005)

Figure 3: Benefit Outcomes of Company Branding Strategy from HR Perspective

Conclusion

In summary, this article suggests that companies should regard their employees as internal customers. Similar to customer, a company's brand has a personality as seen by its employees. Employees develop closer relationships with their company brand they work for. The focus of company branding strategy has been on creating customer commitment to that company's brand. This article confirms that company branding strategy can also be used to create employee commitment to a company and to retain existing employee with a company in which can lead to increasing of company brand success and its productivity. Especially, a company should help its frontline staffs understand their roles and values for the company. Engaging employees' behavior with the brand can enhance company brand success.

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Tanya Supornpraditchai received her Ph.D. in Marketing from the School of Marketing at University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) after obtaining a Post Graduate Diploma in Commerce (major in marketing) from University of Sydney and Bachelor of Pharmacy from Rangsit University. She joined the Department of Master of Business Administration at the PIM in 2010. She enjoys working across a wide spectrum of marketing management, retail business and HRM. Her interests include corporate branding, brand equity, internal branding, organization and customer behavior, and retail business management.