

Internal branding as a learning process: how employees adapt their behaviour after a brand change in service organisations

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Abstract

In service marketing, the behaviour of personnel is a crucial element in the brand building process. When a brand changes, employees have to adapt their behaviour in order to deliver the new promises of the brand to the customer. This paper examines the learning process that leads to that new behaviour. Drawing on a competence based definition of internal branding, we find the three traditional elements of the internal branding process, (i.e. the cognitive, affective and conative elements), although in a reversed order. Facilitating and prohibiting factors are identified. Suggestions for further research and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords

Internal branding process, service marketing, informal learning, service organisations

Introduction

The success of a service brand is closely linked with the behaviour of the employees. Employees are seen as a crucial element in the brand management, since they represent the brand in the interaction with the customer (Ahmed and Rafiq 2003). In the context of services, customers often make no distinction between the person delivering the service and the organisation. Poor staff performance often results in gaps between customer expectations and the brand promise (Parasuraman 1985, 1988).

Therefore, employees have to be enabled to deliver the brand image (Keller 2003, Wallace and de Chernatony 2005). They have to know the brand values, need to believe them and act in consistence with the values. This process of enabling is known as the internal branding process. Training is considered to significantly impact the delivery of the brand values (Lings, Gudergan and Beatson 2007, Jeanquart Miles and Mangold 2004, Lovelock Vandermerwe and Lewis 1999).

The purpose of this research is to explore what kind of training will enhance brand-building behaviour. First, we will discuss the role of the staff in the brand building process. Then we will argue for a competence-based definition of training and development, followed by a discussion of the role of competence in the internal branding process. We then report the methodology and the results of an empirical investigation, followed by suggestions for further research and a discussion of the managerial implications.

The role of the staff in the brand building process

A brand can be defined as a cluster of clearly defined values (de Chernatony 2001, Aaker 2000, de Chernatony and Segal 2001). It represents what an organisation wants to stand for and what it promises to its customers.

To evaluate a brand, one can analyse the degree of matching between the expectations of the customer (i.e. the promises that are made) and the perceived delivery (i.e. the effectiveness of making the promises true). For some brands, delivering the promises of the brand is (partly) determined by the interaction of the employees with the customer (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn 2001). These brands are linked with the performance of the staff of an organization. Organisations have to ensure that their employees deliver the promises made by the brand. Not succeeding in delivering these promises can negatively influence the credibility of the brand and the organisation.

The process of “*aligning an organisation around a brand*” (Tosti and Stotz 2001:30) is known as the internal branding process and can be aimed to both existing and prospective staff. In this study, we will focus on the internal branding process to existing staff.

The literature argues for special consideration for the internal branding process of services (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2001), which has traditionally relied on close, personal contact between customers and employees. Employees are representing the brand in the interaction with the customer (Ahmed and Rafiq 2003), who often makes no distinction between the person delivering the service and the organisation. Poor staff performance can result in a gap between customer expectations and the brand promise (Parasuraman 1985, 1988).

The most immediate evidence of service for the customer occurs in the service encounter or the ‘moment of truth’ when the customer interacts with the organisation (Lovelock 2004). Employee behaviour at the ‘moment of truth’ (Kasper et al, 2006) provides lasting impressions of the brand, and impacts on customer loyalty (Heskett et al 1994). Because the service can only be delivered by the employees of the organization, the task of getting employees to reflect the organization’s brand image and deliver on its promises is crucial for service organisations (Jeanquart Miles and Mangold, 2004).

The employee is the external face of the organization (Chebat et al. 2002), and his performance will affect customer interpretation of the service brand (Parasuraman et al. 1985, Parasuraman et al. 1988, Berry 2000, Hartline, Maxham, & McKee 2000; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005b). With product brands, consumers base their perception of the brand predominantly on the product's tangible features. Adversely, for service organisations, the perception of the brand depends highly on the behaviour of the staff. (Morhart, Herzog and Tomczak, 2007).

Since we recognize the significance of employees in the service encounter as a key determinant of brand performance, we will question whether and how employees can be enabled to behave in alignment with the brand values. We therefore discuss the role of training in the internal branding process.

The role of training in the internal branding process

The marketing literature acknowledges the role of training in the internal branding process. Training is considered to significantly impact the delivery of the brand values (Lings,

Gudergan and Beatson 2007, Jeanquart Miles and Mangold 2004, Lovelock Vandermerwe and Lewis 1999). It has been argued that training has to enable employees to deliver the brand image (Keller 2003, Wallace and de Chernatony 2005) by motivating the staff to give rise to a brand-supporting behaviour (de Chernatony 2001).

On the other hand, many researchers and practitioners have argued that traditional training and development is inappropriate and inefficient. Studies show that only 2% of the trainees felt that the training “had broken new ground” (Parsloe and Wray, 2000). Only a minority of the trainees is able to transfer the knowledge from the training room to the job reality.

Moreover, research shows that only 10 to 20% of what employees learn comes from a structured or a formalised training (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). The largest part of what employees learn occurs in the work situation.

Therefore the concept of training should be broadened to a learning concept, which recognises that working and learning are closely linked (Field 1995). Marsick and Volpe (1999) argue that formal training is just one aspect of the learning process and emphasize the role of informal learning. Informal learning can be defined as “*learning that is predominantly unstructured, experiential and noninstitutional*” (Marsick en Volpe 1999: 4). “*It happens outside formally structured, institutionally sponsored classroom-based activities, taking place under non-routine conditions or in routine conditions* (1990: 7).

The outcome of that learning process can be defined as competence. Competence is defined as groups or basic structures of coherent (1) knowledge, (2) attitudes and (3) skills of a person which are necessary to perform effectively, now and in the future (Baert e.a., 2000: 21). In the next session, we will argue that being able to behave in alignment with the brand values can be considered as a specific competence and as an output of a learning process. As a consequence, we will define the outcome of the internal branding process as the brand competence.

Brand competence as an outcome of the internal branding process

The marketing literature mentions three components of internal branding, i.e. a cognitive, an affective and a conative component. Traditionally, in a cognitivistic approach the process starts with acquiring knowledge about the brand (Burmann and Zeplin 2004) by understanding and internalising the brand’s values (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005b, Ind 2003, de Chernatony 2001). Before interacting with the customers employees must internalise the brand image (Jeanquart Miles and Mangold 2004) and develop shared brand beliefs

(Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005b). Thomson et al (1999) refer to intellectual buy-in as to the extent to which employees are aware and aligned with the brand, the business goals and strategies and to which they understand how they can positively affect them.

After knowing and internalising the brand values, organisations have to achieve emotional buy-in (Thomson et al 1999), i.e. employees have to be committed (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005b) and to connect emotionally with the brand (Mitchell 2002). The ultimate goal of the internal branding process is the conative element, whereby employees demonstrate brand consistent behaviour (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005b).

We can conclude that for a functional internal branding process employees have to know the brand values, need to believe them and act in consistence with the values. Increased commitment to delivering the brand promise (Heskett 1987) and a greater likelihood of higher brand performance (Kotter and Heskett, 1992) are seen as positive outcomes of employees' understanding of brand values. Also the definition of employee branding (Jeanquart Miles and Mangold 2004) comprises the three components (1) employees internalising the desired brand image and (2) being motivated (3) to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents.

Thanks to the analogy with the definition of competence, we will define the internal branding process as the process that enables the employees (1) to know the values of the brand, (2) to develop a positive attitude towards the values and (3) to develop the skills to deliver on the values of the brand. The output of that process will be defined as the brand competence.

Figure 1 below clarifies the analogy between competence and internal branding.

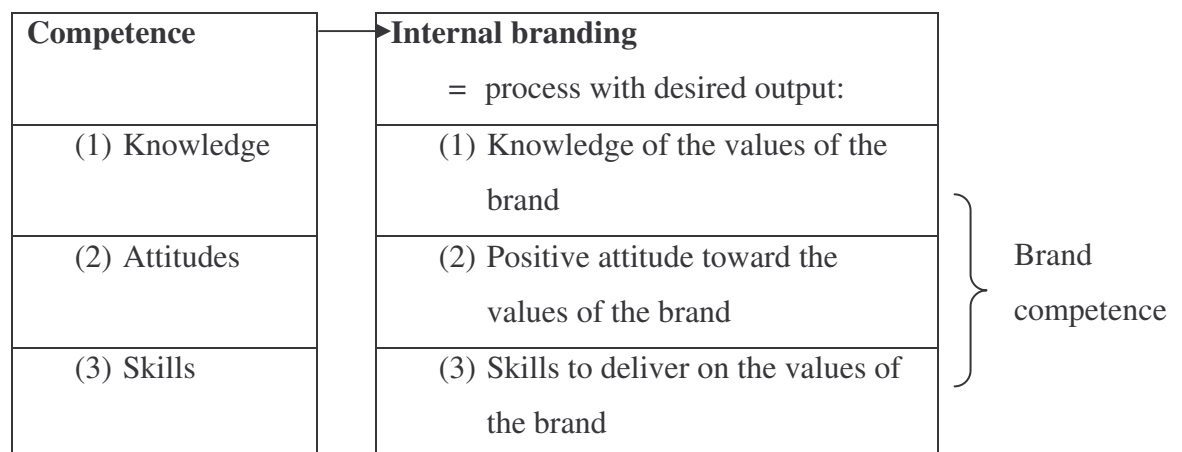


Figure 1: Analogy between competence and internal branding

Research question

This theory of learning can be applied to traditional programs of training and development. In this study, we will question whether - and in what direction- the broadened definition of learning will influence the process of developing the brand competence. This leads us to the central research question:

How can the different components of internal branding in the service-marketing be learned in an effective and efficient way in an organisation, so that the members of that organisation are able to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of that organisation? This question will be refined in three sub questions:

1. How can we map the internal branding process?
2. Which factors will facilitate acquiring the brand competence?
3. Which factors will prohibit acquiring the brand competence?

Methodology of the study

Due to the broad definition of the central research question, our study is exploratory and is aiming at developing hypotheses. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1994) was chosen as the methodological anchor of this study. Central to the grounded theory methodology is the convergence to a model through the interplay between data collection and data analysis. Starting data analysis from the beginning brought flexibility in the study and gave the researchers the advantage of the uniqueness of specific cases and the emergence of new ideas during the fieldwork to improve the emergent propositions and theory (Eisenhardt 1989). Following Eisenhardt (1989), the study began with no specific theory under consideration, neither with well determined hypotheses. As a guiding instrument, the researchers identified sensitizing concepts (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1994), i.e. a limited set of basic constructs. Possible relationships between the adopted constructs emerged during the study and no construct has a guaranteed place in the final version of the results (Eisenhardt 1989).

Data were collected by case studies. Yin (1989) recommends the methodology of case study in research with central how- and why-questions, with the researcher having little control over events. He states that the case study is recommendable when we want to broadly research the topics within a rich context with multiple contextual variables (Yin, 1993). Moreover, the method of the case study provides a holistic picture of the situation, since it gives a

description of people and organisations in their natural and contextual surrounding in change (Vallaster, 2004).

In order to control the context variables, we searched for cases in one particular sector: the sector of the adult education. The criteria for selecting this sector were the following:

- within the service sector, due to the crucial role of the staff in the process of satisfying the consumer;
- a sector with a meaningful output for the consumer. We took as an assumption that organisations will only invest in processes of internal branding, when the improvement of these processes has an influence on the satisfaction of the customer. Consumers will only be influenced by a brand image, if the underlying service is important in the personal life of the consumer.
- the management of the selected organisations must have a clear vision on the values of the brand. This vision does not have to be formalised in a written brand policy.

Both organisations consist of several branches and are situated in a competitive environment (i.e. each branch has at least one direct competitor in his region). The organisations have chosen a corporate brand strategy.

Because of the topical relevance, we choose two cases that caused a drastic change in their positioning of the brand toward the customer. One organisation (in the following referred to as case Minus) had a merger and a new brand name six years ago; the other organisation (in the following referred to as case Plus) had installed a new management with a fundamental change of vision, also six years ago. The retrospective view gave the researchers the opportunity to map the process of internal branding. To control the socio-cultural context, we choose two cases located in Flanders, Belgium.

Cross-analyzing the two cases resulted in the literal replication of the findings, with the analysis of the second case confirming the outcome of the first. The analysis also revealed contrasting results, which is called theoretical replication. Both literal and theoretical replication increased the internal validity of a study (Yin 1993).

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews, using a topic list, based on the sensitizing concepts, to provide consistency across the interviews. The interviews were done using the technique of storytelling. The interviewees were asked to tell a story: what happened just before and after the change? What were the global feelings about the change, of the interviewee and of the other employees? The time-perspective of the interviews was not predefined. Interviewees themselves choose the starting point of the changing process.

The researchers also used the technique of probing. A probe is a neutral verbal or non-verbal way of encouraging the interviewee to answer, or to clarify or extend an answer (Powney and Watts 1987:138).

Each interview took between 1.5 hours and 2 hours. We selected 12 respondents per case, starting with key informants (Marshall & Rossman 1989, Yin 1989) within the organisation. The criteria for selecting the following respondents were seniority (in service before or after the change) and function (management, middle-management and other). Due to the specific role of a teacher, i.e. an autonomous professional with a lot of self-government in the classroom, we selected not only teachers, but also non-teaching employees, like administrative and cleaning personnel.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in interim reports. As the prime analytical technique, we used Inferential Pattern Coding (IPC) (Miles & Huberman 1994) that follows a process of literal and theoretical replication. The aims of IPC were:

1. reducing large amounts of data into smaller numbers of analytic units or incidents;
2. helping elaborating maps for understanding incidents and the (causal) interactions between abstracted events;
3. enabling cross-case analysis by identifying common themes.

We followed three analytical steps of IPC (Miles & Huberman 1994: 90-237): (1) pattern coding, (2) drawing of within-case sequential incident networks, and (3) drawing of a causal network across the cases.

In qualitative research, triangulation is proposed as “a near-talismanic method of confirming findings” (Miles and Huberman 1994:266). Triangulation is a term taken over from the world of navigation, where several angles are used to define the position of a vehicle. (Mason 1993). By analogy with these navigators, qualitative researchers use several methods and several sources to reach rich and valid conclusions. The use of several methods and sources reflects

the striving towards an in-depth insight in the examined matter (Denzin & Lincoln 2003). In order to triangulate the data, semi-structured interviews were combined with document analysis and the data of one interview were double checked in the following interviews. This method guaranteed that the data obtained from different data collection techniques replied each other, which raises the validity of the conclusions.

Results of the study

Our empirical data showed two opposite cases. The members of one organisation had developed a strong brand competence, while in the other organisation we found a rather weakly developed brand competence. The differences in brand competence are described below.

Brand competence in the organisations

During the interviews and by analyzing them, it became clear that the two organisations we had chosen were opposite cases.

In case Minus, the overall feeling concerning the merger and the new name was negative, with a strong nostalgia to the past. With exception of the management, every interviewee showed those negative feelings.

The reaction [on the merger] was rather negative. I think that the majority of the personnel isn't very happy here. (Middle manager, in service before the change)

They say that it was better before the merger and the change of the name. I think it was better in all areas, but I haven't experienced that myself. Most of all, there was a much better atmosphere. (Administrative employee, in service after the change)

On the contrary, in case Plus, the employees were committed to help realising the new vision of the new management. No one referred to the old situation.

It was nice to have the organisation changed. [All the changes] came smoothly to an end. (Administrative employee, in service before the change)

I've never heard stories about the past. I think that everybody is glad that the organisation is evolved in this way. (Teacher, in service after the change)

The internal branding process

The stories told by the interviewees led us to map the internal branding process in an adult education context. This process appeared to consist of the traditional three steps (cognitive, affective and conative), although in a reverse order (cfr. figure 2). The internal branding process was starting with the conative element, followed by affective commitment and ending with the cognitive component.

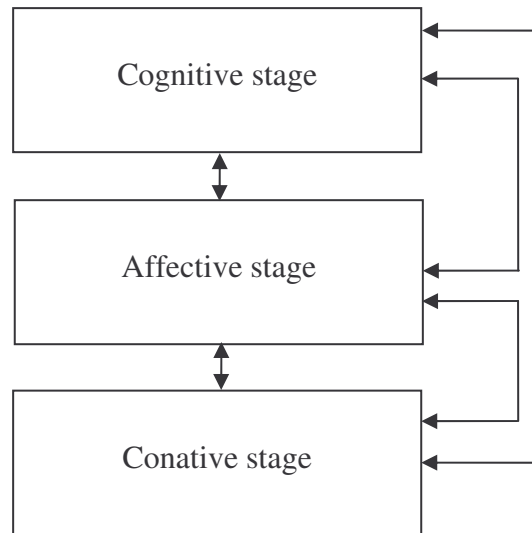


Figure 2: Three steps of the internal branding process

The three steps are described in the section below.

The conative component

Both in case Minus as in case Plus, the employees mentioned a minor/no difference in the beginning of the internal branding change. Literally everybody states that the day after, they were doing their job like they were used to. In this stage, almost all consideration goes to that conative element. Little questions concerning the affective or cognitive element arise.

In fact, in my daily job, there were no direct changes. The first year after the merger, we didn't feel any change. (Middle manager, in service before the change, case Minus)

In the beginning, everything remained the same. It has been a growing process.
(Administrative employee, in service before the change, case Plus)

These empirical statements lead us to the formulation of proposition 1:

P1 The first stage of the internal branding process is the conative element, i.e. employees keep doing their job as they were used to.

Employees are concentrating on doing their job. At this stage, they don't feel any change and as a consequence they are acting consistent to the personal interpretation of their own role. The basis for the role interpretation is different for the experienced staff and newcomers. For employees who have experienced the change, that interpretation is based on their role in the former organisation.

[Knowing the new vision] is not necessary to do this job. (Teacher, in service before the change, case Plus)

I was working in adult education for ten years, so I knew what to do, also after the merger. (Teacher, in service after the change, case Minus)

Also for new employees, recruited after the change, the conative element of the process seems to be the first. Their interpretation of their role can have different bases, e.g. experience in other organisations, knowledge achieved during their studies, personality.

For me, the benchmark was the didactics course that I followed. Without that course, I wouldn't have known how to start. (Teacher, in service after the change, case Plus)

I started without any knowledge about the organisation. I've learned it on the job. (Administrative employee, in service after the change, case Minus)

These empirical statements lead us to the formulation of proposition 1a:

P1a: The conative stage of the internal branding process starts with the employee behaving in consistence with his personal interpretation of his role.

With the process being evolved, the employees will (or will not) adapt their interpretation of their role. Step by step this adaptation will (or will not) align their behaviour with the values of the new brand or vision.

For me [the old brand name] stood for an organisation where everybody of any age could come and learn or refresh his knowledge. That is still my brand image, also for the new brand. (Administrative employee, in service before the change, case Minus)

I think that [knowledge of how to behave] grows. It evolves systematically, year by year. (Teacher, in service before the change, case Plus)

Also new employees, recruited after the brand change, will adapt their behaviour.

After a while, you notice the way of working of your colleagues and by looking at them, you amend your behaving. (Teacher, in service after the change, case Plus)

When I did the reception of the students, my colleague heard what I said to them. Afterwards, she told me what I did wrong. (Administrative employee, in service after the change, case Minus)

These empirical statements lead us to the formulation of proposition 1b:

P1b: The conative stage of the internal branding process evolves with the employee behaving in consistence with an organisational interpretation of his role.

The affective component

When employees have adapted their personal role interpretation into an organisational one, they get (or get not) affected with the new brand or vision. This affective commitment is important in the internal branding process, since an employee who feels affection towards his employer is likely to identify with the organisation and shows behaviour aligned with the organisational strategies and objectives (Piercy and Morgan 1990).

In case Plus, we found a strong affective connection with the new vision and management.

Everything became much more professional. (Teacher, in service before the change)

On the contrary, in case Minus, we found a weak affective connection to the new merged organisation and the new brand. With exception of the management, who mainly constructed the merger and the new brand, no one showed a positive attitude toward the change.

I'm not proud on this organisation. I'm glad that I have a job, that's all. (Administrative employee, in service after the change, case Minus)

The commitment of the majority of the personnel is very low, I think. (Middle Manager, in service before the change, case Minus)

Illustrative of the weak affective connection with the new organisation are the numerous references to the organisational situation of the past. Every interviewee referred to the past and mentioned that the organisation was performing better before the change than after the change. The working atmosphere was reported to be better in the past by every interviewee, even by those recruited only after the change.

Assuming that the affective connection to the new brand is the following step in the internal branding process, leads us to proposition 2.

P2: The second stage of the internal branding process is the affective element, i.e. employees getting committed to show behaviour aligned with the new brand/vision.

The cognitive component

Exact knowledge of the brand values and/or the vision of the organisation is very scarce, both in case Plus as in case Minus. In case Minus, the majority of the staff, with exception of the management, did not overpass the affective component and as a consequence, does not consider the cognitive element.

Although in case Plus employees know how to behave in alignment with the vision, they cannot put the vision behind the organisation into words.

I know our organisation has a written vision that I've read once. But I don't remember anymore what it was about. (Teacher, in service after the change, case Plus)

I cannot reproduce the vision text literally, but I don't think it's necessary. We know the future direction of this organisation and that's enough. (Teacher, in service before the change, case Plus)

This absence of the possibility of clarifying existing knowledge is an indication that knowledge must be defined more widely than the visible explicit knowledge. According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), we therefore make a distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is formal and systematic and can be expressed in words and numbers, in the form of hard data, scientific formulas and/or normalised procedures. It concerns in other words encoded knowledge which can be transmitted to others by means of a formal, systematic language. In the two observed cases, we only found the top management

having explicit knowledge about the brand or the vision. No other member of the staff, neither in case Plus as in case Minus, could make that kind of knowledge explicit.

Tacit knowledge concerns the subjective insights, feelings, conceptions and mental models (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). This form of knowledge is extremely personal and context-specific, hardly to formalise and, as a consequence, difficult to transfer or to spread. In case Minus, we found no indication of employees having tacit knowledge about the new brand. All implicit references which came up concerned the old brand and the old organisation.

In case Plus, all employees referred to elements of the new vision, without explicit mentioning the existing values of the brand or the new vision of the organisation. They mentioned new roles and adapted behaviour towards the students. All the changes in their daily job they referred to were aligned with the new vision and were supporting the new brand values.

This empirical data leads us to formulate the following propositions:

P3: The third stage of the internal branding process is the cognitive element. This element has to be split into tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge.

This process of internal branding does not enrol automatically and autonomously. Our empirical data enabled us to identify some facilitating and prohibiting factors of the process. These factors are described in the section below.

Facilitating and prohibiting factors of the process.

Each step in the process can be facilitated or prohibited. We will first describe the facilitating and prohibiting factors of the conative component, followed by those of the affective component. The section will end with the factors facilitating and prohibiting the explicit knowledge of the brand.

The conative component

As described above, at the start of the internal branding process employees are not changing their behaviour. With the process being evolved, the employees will (or will not) adapt their

interpretation of their role. Step by step this adaptation will (or will not) align their behaviour with the values of the new brand or vision.

Major facilitating factor in this adaptation and re-interpretation process is the community of practice. “Community of practice” is defined as a group of individuals participating in common activities, and experiencing or continuously creating their shared identity through engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities (Lave and Wenger 1991). It refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations. Communities of practice arise by similar work tasks, where employees develop mutually personal and emotional links. The creation of these communities depends on the degree to which employees see a common meaning in the work and personal relations. As a consequence, an organisation consists of several communities of practice and employees can be part of different communities of practice within the organisation. Illeris (2004) mentions the communities of practice as a facilitating concept for employees to find role models and to learn new roles .

Both in case Minus as in case Plus, sharing ideas and finding solutions together with colleagues seems to be a driving factor for the renewed interpretation of the own role. The individual can thus be seen as an active participant in the practices of the work community, and in the construction of his/her perception of his personal contribution to the new brand or vision through these communities.

I attended the lessons of my colleague, to see how things were done in the organisation. (Teacher, in service before the change, case Plus)

After the merger, it was good that we had an open-space office. You hear a lot of your colleagues and you can see how they are doing their job now. (Middle manager, in service before the change, case Minus)

In the transition from a personal interpretation to a sub-organisational interpretation of the employee’s role we found the practical cultural artifacts as a second facilitating factor. Schein (1984:3) defines the cultural artifacts as the constructed environment of the organisation. It concerns the visible but often not decipherable elements, such as architecture, technology, dress code and visible or audible behaviour patterns.

[The new vision can be seen] in the new lay-out of our documents: everything is designed very professionally by a specialist. (Teacher, in service before the change, case Plus)

Before the change, we always shook hands. That was the habit here. Nowadays, that has become diluted. (Cleaning personnel, in service before the change, case Minus)

This leads us to the following proposition:

P4 The transition from a personal interpretation of one's role to a sub-organisational one is facilitated by the opportunities to be part of one or more communities of practice and by cultural artifacts.

This transition to an organisational interpretation of the employee's role is a key element in the internal branding process, particularly in the service marketing. Because of the simultaneous process of production and consumption, referred to as the servuction process, (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987), the behaviour of the employee directly interacts with the customer and the environment (cfr. figure 3). These "moments of truth" largely affect the customer's perception of the service brand. With the brand changing, the behaviour of the employee has to be adapted to come in line with the new brand values or the renewed vision. Sticking to their old interpretation of their role, employees could damage the brand building process.

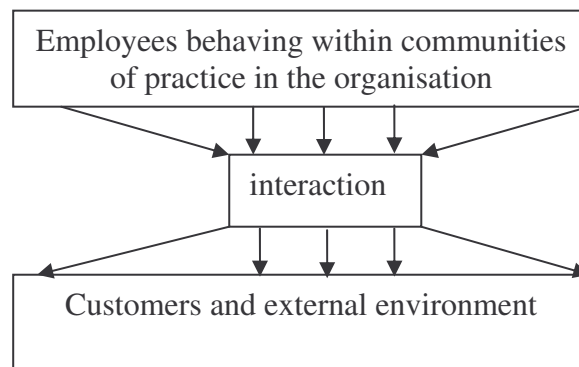


Fig. 3: The influence of the employees' behaviour on the customer

The affective component

During the interviews, the conditions of work came up as a facilitating factor of a positive attitude towards the vision.

Before the merger, we had old computers, not enough beamers and a network that was not functioning. The new direction has invested a lot of time and money in that infrastructure. (Teacher, in service before the change, case Plus)

Also the psychological contract was found as a facilitating factor. The psychological contract refers to the subjective beliefs of the employee regarding an exchange agreement between this employee and the employing organisation and its agents (Rousseau, 1995). The contract is promise-based, relatively stable and durable and it is seen by the employee as a mutual agreement (Rousseau, 2001).

It is just afterwards, at one of the speeches at New Year that I have really realised that this is a good organisation to work for. (Teacher, in service after the change, case Plus)

In analogy with case Plus, conditions of work and the psychological contract were found as the factors influencing the affective component, albeit in this case in negative sense. Every employee mentioned the change of working hours, the decrease of the number of days of vacation and the abrogation of the possibility to work and get paid extra hours in a week as factors that negatively influenced their commitment to the organisation.

Vision? Vision? I don't want to know about the vision before they take care of our employment contracts. (Teacher, in service before the change, case Minus)

That leads us to the formulation of following propositions:

P5a: Conditions of work that are positively evaluated by the employees are facilitating the affective commitment to the brand/vision.

P5b: Conditions of work that are negatively evaluated by the employees are prohibiting the affective commitment to the brand/vision.

P5c: The psychological contract that is evaluated by the employees as effectively executed is facilitating the affective commitment to the brand/vision.

P5d: The psychological contract that is evaluated by the employees as not effectively executed is prohibiting the affective commitment to the brand/vision.

The cognitive component

The interviews indicate that involvement in the decision making process of the brand vision and the hierarchical level and/or function that are related to the latter are the factors that facilitate the creation of explicit knowledge. Only members of the management and some members of the middle-management, i.e. those who have worked with the vision text in their daily job, have explicit knowledge of the new vision.

I know the vision text very well, because I have reworked it in the cultural policy of the organisation. (Middle manager, in service before the change, case Plus)

P6: The development of explicit knowledge about the brand/vision is influenced by the involvement in the decision making process and the hierarchical level and/or function that are related to the latter.

An internal branding model

The different steps of the internal branding process, together with their facilitating and prohibiting factors, can be summarised as in figure 4.

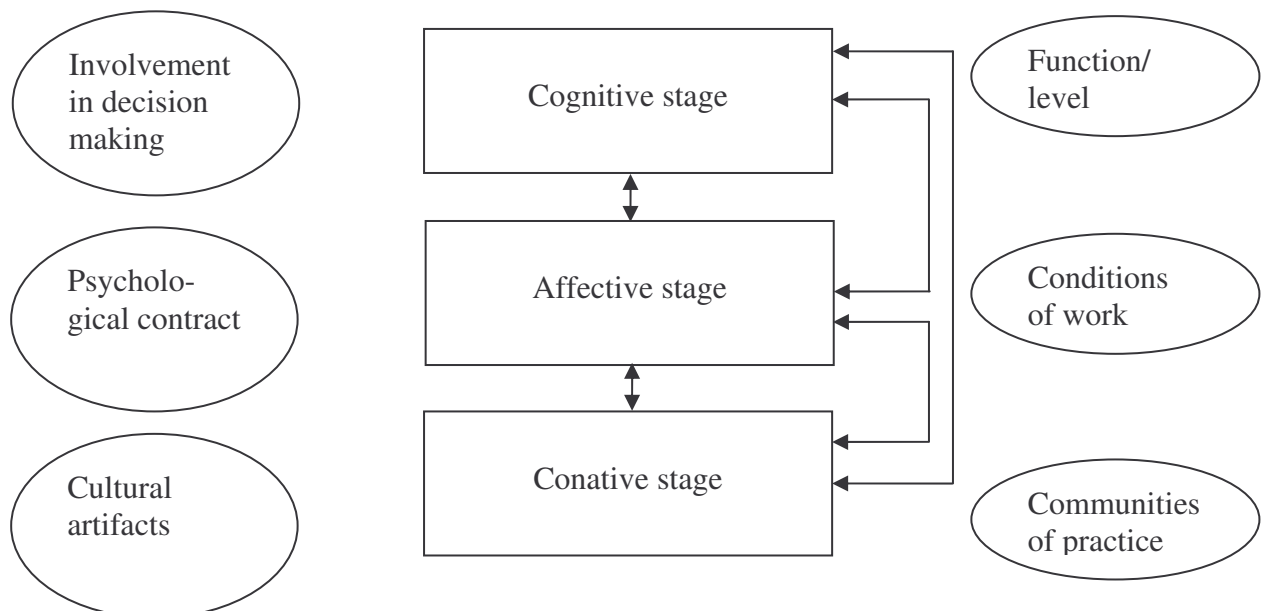


Figure 4: An internal branding model

Discussion

Our study contributes to research on the mapping of the internal branding process in the service marketing. By approaching internal branding as a competence, we also contribute to a deeper insight in the way people learn on the workplace and in the factors that facilitate and prohibit those workplace learning processes.

Traditionally, internal branding is conceptualised as a process starting with the cognitive element, moving on to the affective component to end with an appropriate behaviour in alignment with the internalised brand values. Marketing literature has considered training as a means to develop these elements, but there is little research concerning the other elements of workplace learning.

Our results in this specific case of adult education centres in Flanders illustrate an alternative conceptual model of brand competence, starting with the conative element, with the employee who behaves in accordance to his interpretation of his role, without questioning the new brand values and/or the influence of the change on his client-related behaviour. Being part of a community of practice and having access to cultural artifacts seem to be elements facilitating the transfer from a personal interpretation of one's role to an organisational one.

While doing his/her job and servicing the customer, the employee gradually gets committed to the new vision or brand and step by step adapts his/her client-related behaviour. This affective component is said to be influenced by the psychological contract between employer and employee and by the conditions of work.

Only when employees are affectively involved in the process, they seem to be willing and able to gather knowledge on the new vision or brand. A distinction has to be made between the top management and the rest of the staff. Only the top management, who was involved in the decision making process of the new brand, is able to explicit the vision of that new brand. Employees that were not involved in that process, only demonstrate tacit knowledge on the brand. That shortage on explicit knowledge can cause problems of transfer of knowledge to other employees or newcomers.

These findings have also managerial implications. When managers are willing to align the behaviour of the employees with the new brand values, they should be aware that they have to change the brand competence of the employees and, therefore, induce a learning process.

This study highlights some facilitating and prohibiting factors to manage the (informal) learning process at the workplace.

Typical for the brand competence as found in the empirical data, is the fact that the process begins with “doing something”. If management does not provide a positive learning climate or a stimulus to learn on the workplace, employees will behave in accordance to their own interpretation of their role. It is not unthinkable that without managerial intervention, that behaviour will not align with the new brand values or the renewed vision.

Particularly in the service marketing, this behaviour can damage the brand building process, because of the crucial role of the employee in this process. Delivering a service is a moment of truth, whereby the employee’s performance affects customer interpretation of the service brand. The influence of the employee on the brand building process is consequently too large to leave it unmanaged.

The present study is limited to two cases in one particular sector. The explorative character of the research has led us to propositions and to assumptions of the relevant variables and their relations. In turn, these limitations provide an opportunity for further research. Future research can examine data collected in additional cases in the same context to test the validity of the propositions and to translate them into hypotheses. Later research can then test the hypotheses to validate the proposed conceptual model of internal branding as a competence.

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