

Relating to the Brand: Using Narrative Analysis to Explore the Internal Brand within a Large Organisation

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Abstract

That brands can be viewed in terms of relationships is a premise employed by Fournier (1998) in relation to product branding. We extend this premise to an internal service brand context. Our research provides insight into the way three employees of a large service organisation construct the employee-brand relationship through the stories they tell. In order to explore the brand as it is experienced within this organisation, we use an interpretive approach, whereby we frame the brand as a socially constructed text comprised of employee narratives. Such an approach acknowledges the materiality of language and the usefulness of narrative in providing the researcher with access to people's lived experiences, particularly within a complex organizational setting. The resulting employee narratives are divergent and reveal the complexity of the employee-brand relationship.

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Introduction

That brands can be viewed in terms of relationships is a premise employed by Fournier (1998) in relation to product branding. Fournier's (1998) study explores the consumer-brand relationship of three women in diverse life situations. We extend the consumer-brand relationship metaphor into the realm of service branding and from an internal perspective. The main purpose of this research is to increase our understanding of how employees construct the employee-brand interaction through the stories they tell.

Literature Review

The importance of branding within the context of service organisations is well documented. The brand represents a company's promise to its consumers (Berry, 2000; Krell, 2006). Experience with the service brand provides a strong basis upon which consumers attach meaning to the brand, and ultimately brand attitudes emerge through consumption behaviours (O'Cass & Grace, 2004b). Current research also explores a growing concern with issues around the brand consumption experience (Brodie, Glynn & Little, 2006; Keller & Lehmann, 2006) and emphasises a theoretical framework which calls for a deeper understanding of the ways consumers construct meaning in relation to service brands.

While most research around the consumer-brand experience has focused on the external consumer of the brand (e.g. Ambler, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Yao, 1997; Keller, 1993; O'Cass & Grace, 2004a; Schembri, 2009) internal branding has not received comparable scrutiny in the branding literature (Vallaster, 2004). Research focusing on internal marketing and branding issues includes exploration into the criteria for service brands to be successful (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003); the link between internal marketing, relationship marketing and service quality (Barnes, Fox & Morris, 2004); building an internal brand in a multicultural organisation (Vallaster, 2004); the relationship between organisational structures and individual brand supporting behaviour (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006); internal marketing programs (Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006); and, most recently, the elicitation of brand-building behaviour from frontline employees (Morhart, Herzog & Tomczak, 2009).

Despite there being an emphasis on the external consumer-brand relationship, there is clear recognition of the importance of the employee-brand relationship in service delivery (Buchanan-Oliver, Wong-Ming & Sherrard, 2000; Gapp & Merrilees, 2006; King & Grace, 2005; Prasad & Steffes, 2002). However, while the employee's role as enabler of brand promises has been and is increasingly acknowledged, Vallaster (2004) points to a gap in our empirical knowledge of how this occurs, and Vallaster & de Chernatony (2006) call for further research "to understand how corporate branding structures are (re)produced in group interactions" (778). Notwithstanding Bronn, Engell & Martinsen's (2005) research which explores organisational identity by first looking at the internal members of an organisation, there are gaps in the literature around the issue of brand experience *within* an organisation.

We adopted a narrative approach because narratives are powerful devices by which we can understand the human experience (individual and collective), given that people have a natural propensity to create meaning about their worlds through stories (Padgett & Allen, 1997). Within marketing, narrative has been used to contribute to an understanding of the consumer's perspective (Stern, Thompson & Arnould, 1998), to demonstrate how consumer-

brand relationships are created at the level of lived experiences told through brand-related stories (Fournier, 1998), and to explore the way consumers use narratives to understand the role of brands in their lives (Escalas, 2004).

Within the area of organisational studies, it is recognised that collective self-narratives are likely to be fractured, contested and multi-layered, given the pluralism and polyphony that characterise organisations (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). The organisation is framed by Hopkinson (2003) as a site of multiple communities each of which makes meaning. She traces the social structures, relations and identities within organisational worlds that the narratives construct. In addition, a study by Brown, Humphreys & Gurney (2005) analyses shared identity narratives at a UK-based tour operator. They regard organisations as discursive spaces constituted through language practices and propose that organisations may be characterised by multiple identity narratives which evolve, overlap and compete. Thus, “organisations are constructed through acts of languaging located in social processes of networking, negotiation and exchange” (Brown et al, 2005: 313).

Our primary research question is as follows: How do employees of a large service organisation construct the employee-brand relationship through the stories they tell?

Methodology

Our philosophical stance is a social constructionist-interpretive one (Crotty, 1998), and narrative analysis is positioned here as a sub-set within the wider frame of discourse analysis. We adopt the view that the researcher does not have direct access to another’s experience, but can only know ambiguous representations of it (Riessman, 1993). We also acknowledge that by abandoning any attempt to treat participants’ accounts as ‘true’ pictures of ‘reality’, we open ourselves up to understanding the culturally rich methods through which interviewees and interviewees generate “plausible accounts of the world” (Silverman, 2000: 823). Furthermore, we assume that brands are social texts which can be ‘read’ (Hatch & Rubin, 2006), and we employ Escalas’s (2004) suggestion that an important aspect of narrative is causality (relationships).

To explore the employee-brand relationship within a large organisation we collected data in three phases: Phase One, role-based groups; Phase Two, mixed role groups; Phase Three, individuals. The total number of participants was 53 producing 30 interviews. Of the 53 participants, 15 interviewees participated in both focus group and individual interviews. We designed the data generation process in this way in order to: explore the employee-brand relationship in depth, build trust and iterated knowledge with participants who took part in each phase; and increase the trustworthiness of our findings. Potential participants were selected on the basis of role, tenure, gender and ethnicity, and for convenience were employees from one region. Our aim was to speak to the diverse population that made up the large organisation within this region. Of the 15 participants (both focus and individual interviews) we have chosen three who are representative of the roles encountered (i.e. front-line, back-office support, a mixture of front-line support). They are representative of the divergent views of the employee-brand relationship that all narratives relayed.

Discussion

The following discussion outlines the narratives of the three employees selected. Participant A was a frontline employee, Participant B a manager, providing both frontline and support roles, and Participant C was in a support role. Their narratives were thematically analysed at

one of the most rudimentary levels of analysis: that of relationship. In addition, we further categorised these relationships to: type of relationship, level of attachment and brand strength.

Participant A views the brand, organization and self as being separate but interconnected: “*[the brand] leads into the organization which leads into me and I lead back into the brand*”. This description allows some separateness; the brand and organization can link into each other or he can link into either the organization or the brand, but there is also detachment. Participant A believes that having detachment means you can be fairer and have a more open-minded approach to everything (compared to those who are not as detached). He tells of others within the organisation who “*believe in it so much*” and warns that this can lead to a lack of insight (lack of detachment). In addition, Participant A likens the employee-brand relationship to a partnership: “*you never know what is going to happen; [it] could be like breaking up with a partner [...] the emotional disability afterwards*”. Thus, his need to be separate is also about protecting himself emotionally. Participant A describes the relationship between self, organization and brand as a circular one which suggests a degree of equality. However, he also represents the brand in a dominant position (as disseminator of power) compared to the organization and self: “*The organization would be fine on its own but it gets more power from the brand and I would be fine on my own but I get more power from the brand*”. This participant explains that he is loyal because the brand “*facilitates*” him as a person, and allows him to be “*known*” by others.

Participant B represents the brand as life giving and powerful, and an extension of her ‘self’. She represents the organisation as a house, the brand as the sun, and her ‘self’ as a person inside the house. The metaphor of the house links the participant’s life in the organization with her personal life outside the organisation, thereby conflating professional-personal boundaries. In addition, the brand is positioned outside both the organization and her life within the organization. For her the brand is vital for her life (without the sun life perishes) and the organization is constructed as protective. Furthermore, Participant B metaphysically extends the role of the brand to assume god-like dimensions, and talks of being “*indoctrinated by the brand*”, which has given her freedom to grow as a person, to make mistakes and to learn from those mistakes. However, she makes a distinction between the brand and the staff when mistakes are made: “*the brand does not represent human error*”. This conflicts with her previous assertions that the brand is an extension of her ‘self’. Yet the ability to be separate is congruent with Participant B’s description of the brand being constituent of her life but elevated and separate. Furthermore, Participant B depicts her relationship as a marriage, explaining that in any relationship “*you have a honeymoon period and then you have the really getting to know each other*”. Lastly, Participant A expresses her shock that others in the organisation do not seem to “*believe*” in the brand (the way she does).

Participant C characterises the brand as having a specific cultural environment and she perceives an increased threat to the brand coming from the organisation’s changing, multi-cultural work environment. She represents her role in the employee-brand relationship as being that of a protector or defender of the brand and notes that while the organisation hires people and puts processes in place, ultimately “*people make the brand*” through their behaviour. Consequently, this participant places importance on how she and others behave: “*you have to be careful; you have to protect the brand. You have got to look good, feel good*”. On one level, this view is pragmatic; i.e. Participant C protects the brand because “*It protects my job and I like my job*”. On another level her view reveals the extent to which the brand is part of her identity; i.e. the brand affects her relationship with others outside the organization, to the point where her role as defender of the brand extends into social settings: “*all of a sudden the brand becomes mine and that’s how people [outside] see it*”. Thus, her role as defender and protector moves beyond the organizational parameters.

In each of these employee narratives the brand is construed in different ways. In terms of type of relationship the brand is a potential partner/heartbreaker (A), marriage partner (B), and not part of her family (C). The brand is associated with religious belief in A and B (resisted in A and acclaimed as such in B), while the self is positioned as creator and defender of the brand in C. The brand is given a slightly stronger position in A's description of the way his relationship with the brand works. However, for B the brand constitutes the world both inside and outside professional and personal realms. In C's world, the brand does spill over into this participant's social world beyond the organization; however, rather than viewing the brand as powerful and life-giving, as Participant B does, Participant C privileges the self in the self-brand relationship.

The brand emerges from each of these stories as an entity which the participants relate to, or resist relating to, in a variety of ways, and confirms that relationships are linked to the consumer's lived experience of the brand (Fournier, 1998). We also show that the brand's role is multi-faceted: potential partner and heart-breaker, facilitator, life-giver, deity, marriage partner, something to be protected. We further establish that organizations may be characterised by multiple identity narratives (Brown et al, 2005), that organizations are sites of multiple communities that each make meaning (Hopkinson, 2003), and that the employee-brand relationship is contested and multi-layered, because of the pluralism and polyphony that characterise organisations (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

Our finding that the brand is related to in multiple ways has implications for how the brand is communicated to and received by employees. Management strategy will benefit by first exploring the organisational and corporate identities in terms of not only what that identity is hoped to be, but also in terms of how employees form their own versions of the brand, and in particular how they construct relationships with the brand as this underpins how they perceive the brand in relation to the self and organization. Understanding how employees form their own brand understandings necessarily has implications for internal branding processes, training programs and brand communication.

Conclusion

This discussion introduces a qualitative study, which explores the ways consumer brand-stories within an organization construct brand meaning and consumer identities. This analysis of the narrative constructions of three employees confirms that employees perceive the brand differently; representing and holding in tension competing narratives of the self, the organization and the brand. Our findings confirm the contested, paradoxical and complex nature of the employee-brand interaction. The use of narrative analysis and specifically the relationship metaphor provides a rich and complex picture of one organizational context.

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