Motivational drivers that fuel employees to champion the hospitality brand

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ABSTRACT

Many hospitality organizations have recognized the significance of having strong brands in the marketplace. Given that customers' brand experiences are greatly affected by frontline service employees, it is crucial that service employees are capable and motivated to transform brand promises into brand realities. This study seeks to build on the emerging Internal Brand Management (IBM) research, by examining employees' internal drive to go above and beyond their formal job requirement to benefit the brand. Based on motivation theories and the empirical data from 202 hotel employees, we examined the impact of employees' pro-brand motivation (an internal motivation that is engendered from extrinsic stimuli) and their intrinsic motivation to work on their brand performance. In particular, we identified two significant motivational drivers for employees' pro-brand motivation namely, employee perceived brand meaningfulness and employee perceived brand value fit. Based on the synergy between employee pro-brand motivation and intrinsic motivation to work, we further proposed an Employee Brand Motivation Matrix reflecting four types of employee motivation that underpins the rationale for employee brand performance. Organizations can use this matrix as a diagnostic tool to segment their workforce, gaining a true appreciation for the extent to which their workforce is willing and able to champion the brand.

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1. Introduction

Strong brands are crucial for organizations to achieve a competitive advantage in the marketplace. In the hospitality industry, given the unique characteristics of service products, brands facilitate customers' decision-making (Brodie et al., 2009; Grace and O'Cass, 2005), enhance unique appeals of service products (O'Neill and Mattila, 2010), and aid business performance (O'Neill and Carlbäck, 2011). This is because, compared to tangible goods where evaluations of product quality can be determined prior to purchase, the highly intangible and heterogeneous nature of the hospitality product makes inferring service quality prior to consumption very difficult (Berry, 2000; Xie and Heung, 2012). With unique values and favorable appeals embedded in brands, customers are able to "tangiblize" and understand services, as well as increase their trust in the service products (Berry, 2000; Brodie et al., 2009; Grace and O'Cass, 2005). In addition, for experiential hospitality products, such as hotel stays, unique brand values can accentuate guests'

experiences as well as help hotel companies to avoid becoming an indistinguishable service offering from its competitors (Gilmore and Pine, 2002; Mcintosh and Siggs, 2005; O'Neill and Mattila, 2010). From a performance perspective, O'Neill and Carlbäck (2011) demonstrate that branded hotels have higher occupancy rates than independent hotels across different economic cycles. Especially during economic recession, branded hotels are able to obtain relatively more profit and have lowered profit variability (i.e., risk) than that of independent hotels, demonstrating the importance of strong brands for service products.

However, building a strong hospitality brand requires more than external branding efforts that communicate a favorable brand image to customers. The actual brand performance delivered by employees during service encounters can significantly influence customers' perception and assessment of the service brand (Bitner et al., 1994; Grace and O'Cass, 2005; Hartline et al., 2000). When employees deliver services that are consistent with customers' prior expectations, it is anticipated that customers will maintain and carry on their prior positive attitude toward the brand (Bitner et al., 1994; Henkel et al., 2007; Solomon et al., 1985), and subsequently, the credibility and strength of the brand can be enhanced (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Thus, the benefits of having a unique service brand to achieve a competitive advantage can only be

realized to the extent that employees are knowledgeable and capable of demonstrating those brand values in their thoughts and actions during service encounters (Berry, 2000; Berry and Lampo, 2004).

In order to build and sustain the consistency between customer brand expectations and employee brand performance, both academics and practitioners have emphasized the significant role employees play in converting brand promises into brand realities (e.g., King and Grace, 2008; Morhart et al., 2009; Mangold and Miles, 2007). Many organizations have adopted Internal Brand Management (IBM) initiatives as an effective tool to build strong brands from the inside out (Burmann et al., 2009). Many researchers argue that organizational effort regarding IBM such as brand training, internal communication, and leadership are the direct antecedents of the desired employee brand performance (e.g., Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Burmann et al., 2009). While a significant amount of the IBM literature has taken an organizational perspective, emphasizing the role of IBM in engendering employee's brand performance, the employee perspective in developing such brand performance, as informed by IBM initiatives, has not been sufficiently addressed. More recently though, researchers have started to explore the central link between organizational effort and the coveted employee brand performance (e.g., Chang et al., 2012; Xiong et al., 2013).

Since its original conceptualization, IBM researchers have argued that in order to achieve internal branding success, employees need to exhibit brand commitment and citizenship behaviors toward the brand (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Such an attitude and behavior requires the development of employees' altruistic spirit toward the brand (Podsakoff et al., 2000). Following this thinking, Chang et al. (2012) proposed employee brand psychological ownership as the psychological experiences that promote such employees' altruistic motivations in IBM. Similarly, Xiong et al. (2013) examined employee brand understanding as eliciting volitional effort and active involvement in building the brand based on Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, 1976). This theory suggests that through varying job designs (e.g., skill variety, task identity, etc.), employees will perceive different levels of psychological states, resulting in different levels of personal and work outcomes such as strong employee work motivation and job satisfaction. Such investigations are significant given that organizations' formal compensation systems are generally aimed to promote employees' performance as prescribed in their formal job responsibilities. With respect to the coveted extra-role brand performance, because of its tacit nature, it is difficult to standardize and document in procedures, and is, therefore normally not recognized or remunerated by organizations (King and Grace, 2009; King et al., 2012). Thus, organizations have to rely on employees developing additional, inwardly driven motivation, or compelling reasons, to justify their volitional effort to deliver the brand promise to customers consistently (Xiong et al., 2013). From this perspective, the research question that informs this study is as follows

Research Question: What are the drivers of employee brand motivation that elicit employee brand performance?

In answering this research question, this study seeks to build on the emerging IBM research by examining the employee's internal motivational drivers to deliver brand aligned performance. Understanding how employees develop the motivation to go above and beyond their formal roles to benefit the brand is considered a prerequisite for the justification of IBM investment and subsequent identification of effective IBM initiatives. It is from this perspective that the significant practical implication of this study is illuminated. Specifically, the results of this study provide insight with respect to what motivates employees to enhance customer-brand outcomes as well as advance the organization's mission. Through the articulation of brand meaningfulness and brand value fit as the underlying

motivational drivers that explain employee motives to champion the brand, hospitality organizations are afforded a means through which they can assess the effectiveness of their IBM initiatives. These constructs provide a measurable indication of employee willingness to advance the brand. In doing so, hospitality organizations are offered a real time assessment of the effectiveness of their significant investment of organizational resources required for IBM, including recruitment, as well as implementing and enhancing brand training and communication.

This study is believed to be the first study to specifically look at employees' brand motivations to understand employee brand performance. The main research question is to understand employees' motivational drivers to elicit brand performance from their perspective. Drawing upon motivation theories including Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) (Ryan, 1995; Ryan and Deci, 2000), we propose two main motivational drivers namely, employee perceived brand meaningfulness and employee perceived brand value fit, to predict employees' strong internal motivation to deliver brand aligned performance. Specifically, Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000) suggests that individuals' motivations can come from both intrinsic factors such as curiosity and values, and extrinsic factors such as pressure and rewards. Although it is commonly held that motivation resulting from intrinsic factors is stronger than that from extrinsic factors, SDT argues that individuals are able to develop strong internal motivation from extrinsic factors just as they would if the motivators were intrinsic. This development mechanism (i.e., a self-determination continuum) is discussed extensively in Organismic Integration Theory, which is a sub-theory of SDT. Based on SDT and OIT, we further examined the impact of these motivational drivers (i.e., employee perceived brand meaningfulness and employee perceived brand value fit) on an employee's pro-brand motivation, and subsequent brand performance, with consideration also being given to the moderating impact that an employee's intrinsic motivation to work (an inherent motivation) has on this relationship. Through a sample of 202 US based hotel employees, we find that the two identified motivational drivers have a significant impact in engendering the self-determined pro-brand motivation. In addition, the coveted employee brand performance was shown to be significantly impacted by pro-brand motivation and this significant relationship was moderated by employees' intrinsic motivation to work.

2. Literature review

The role of employees in achieving service excellence and brand success has been well-recognized in literature (e.g., Berry, 2000; Berry and Lampo, 2004; de Chernatony and Riley, 1998). However, the task of getting employees to act as "brand champions" is still a challenge for many service firms (Morhart et al., 2009). Delivering the brand promise is different from simply delivering good service. Compared to service quality, which is more about providing the functional utility within employees' formalized job responsibilities, brand aligned service goes beyond service quality, requiring employees' discretionary effort and extra-role behavior to deliver a consistent and unique brand experience that differentiates the service from other providers (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005). Therefore, encouraging employees to go above and beyond their roles to deliver brand performance requires consideration of motivational drivers that inform their attitudes and subsequent behaviors.

2.1. Motivation to be a brand champion

Motivation is an important topic that explains people's behaviors. In general, motivation can be defined as "the psychological