Employer and Customer Branding:

An Essential Linkage Leveraged Through Social Media

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Abstract

Human resources and marketing are in periods of need to unite their strategies as technology evolves and becomes further embedded in society. These advances have increased the need for better alignment between the employer and consumer brands of organizations. The authors propose a model to increase brand alignment between an organization's human resources and marketing functions. Social media is highlighted as a medium through which human resources and marketing messages may be aligned most effectively. This paper uses a case study approach to explore the issue of brand alignment, referencing the experiences of three operationally distinct organizations. Case studies from two technology firms and a global consumer brand are used to delineate the specificities of the model. Recommendations for using social media as a tool to engage customers and employees are explored. An agenda for best practices for effective brand alignment between human resources and marketing is offered.

Keywords: social media, branding, employer branding, employee experience, human resources, marketing

The fields of human resources and marketing are experiencing changes to their operations due to continuous technological advancement. Human resources (HR) is transitioning away from being a solely transactional department. Many organizations have made investments in new HR technology to reduce the transactional aspect of HR with the hope that they can be of more strategic help to their businesses and drive engagement amongst personnel. In contrast, gatekeeper technologies are increasingly being adopted by surfers of the worldwide web, there are fewer opportunities for marketing teams to reach consumers at a broadcast level because audiences can skip advertisements or view content on ad-free platforms. This has led marketing departments to move from broadcasting to a wide audience to a more individualized, targeted approach. Companies are now using social media to engage directly with customers and build a more personalized relationship with their brand (Rohm, Kaltcheva, & Milne, 2013). Employees are also consumers in our evolving economy and thus have developed an expectation for employers to treat them as unique individuals and not just another name on a long email distribution list. Therefore, a shift from a broadcast strategy to an individualized approach is needed in HR as well (Love &Singh, 2011).

Broadcasted announcements, policies, and interventions from HR should take less precedent while a partnership with line managers to provide an engaging, individualized experience should begin to become the best practice in modern HR. While most HR professionals agree that business objectives should drive strategy, rarely do HR professionals reflect on the ways in which their strategies affect business outcomes. Organizational goals filter down to departments; however, few companies integrate these goals bottom-up across the organization to achieve integrated talent management. HR puts out a general message of what the organizational goals are and some employees' *buy-in*, while others do not perceive a link to their own work experiences and responsibilities (Chimhanzi, & Morgan, 2005).

Transitioning to a bottom-up approach allows managers to provide an individualized experience for employees. Employees can work with managers to understand how their specific objectives impact the greater business, increasing the likelihood that employees will *buy* the HR strategy and goals being sold. We propose that organizations consider how an integrated two-way business strategy between HR and Marketing can drive effectiveness.

Marketing departments have been using the customer experience to entice and engage customers at every level. As the

social marketing trend continues to grow customer experience is

becoming more individualized. Each customer receives the brand

message through individual interactions with the brand itself

(Veríssimo & Menezes, 2015). The challenge for marketers in this new

landscape is to satisfy the need for individualized attention, while

keeping the brand message and customer experience consistent. This

is a valuable lesson for HR; if customer experiences are what the

company brand is selling, then it is the responsibility of employees to

deliver on that brand promise (Sehgal & Malati, 2013). According to

Anselmsson, Bondesson, and Melin (2016), HR should take the same

approach and message at an employee level that is consistent with the

overall strategy and aligned with what message marketing is sending

to customers. An organization's employee brand and customer brand

should be two sides of the same coin. Consider that prospective

employees' first impression of an organization is likely the consumer

brand and not the employment brand. If these two are incompatible,

organizations risk attracting candidates with a poor person-

organization fit (Kristof, 1996).

Early in a brand's existence, there is the advantage of one-way

communication. Once the product or service is released, strangers hold

more influence than marketers (i.e. reviews on Yelp, word of mouth). A

marketers' best opportunity to influence is through customer

communication and relationships (Shao, Jones, & Grace, 2015). This concept extends to HR practices. Early on in the employee life-cycle, HR can broadcast an employer brand and business strategy in a group setting during recruitment and onboarding (Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010). However, once the *honeymoon* phase of the employee life-cycle ends, co-workers and managers have more of an influence on employees' experiences.

Social media will be a critical aspect of business strategies going forward as it is the platform for brands to interact with customers as well as their own employees. Edgar Schein wrote "culture determines and limits strategy" (Hassan, 2016; Schein, 2010). Culture should thus be ingrained in the business strategy. When an organization builds a culture that is consistent with its brand message, the customer's experience is consistent (Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann, & Herrmann, 2007). HR and Marketing can partner to ensure impactful customer and worker experiences.

This brand alignment approach is a further extension of shared activities between HR and other organizational departments. For example, the relationship between HR and pay for performance is a scenario where interdepartmental cooperation leads to better outcomes. Aligning HR strategy with pay strategy yields powerful

results (Kerr, 1997). Organizations often align brands with a rewards strategy to better reflect cultural values and incentivize organizational goals (Giannakis & Harker, 2014). When searching for business to business partnerships, organizations often try to align their brands to a potential partner, even though most organizations neglect to align their brands internally.

Industrial Organizational (I-O) Psychologists and a strategically-focused HR department could be the major proponents of creating proper alignment. I-O psychologists attempt to link employee data (i.e. employee engagement) with customer experience and business results (i.e. feedback and sales revenue). This type of linkage analysis is already heavily used within industries such as hospitality and retail but has yet to be adopted in others. Research has shown the effect of the linkage between employee brand service identity on brand performance (Coleman, de Chernatony, & George, 2015). Internally, many organizations use this type of data to make decisions about HR initiatives, but rarely has this linkage analysis been used to coordinate changes to employee and customer experiences. The missing ingredient appears to be a lack of a clear link through which the shared experiences of customers and employees can be designed and administered by the organization. Employees are accustomed to data mining; they see consumer brands change in response to feedback and

individualize their experience using data. If an employee can be offered suggested products to purchase based on an algorithm, why can't their HR department leverage the vast employment data they have to tailor their employee experience?

Prior models of the relationships between human resources employer branding and market branding identity viewed the process through the psychological contract (Martin, Beaumont, Doig, & Pate, 2005). Rousseau (1995) posited the psychological contract to be an implicit understanding between two parties that's based on a perceived relationship and a sense of obligation to perform certain behaviors. In relation to the current research, understanding the value of a psychological contract may be essential when considering the impact violations to the psychological contract may have on an organization. For example, a breach or violation by management is apt to hinder employees' motivation and performance as a result of missed expectations of their personnel. While the psychological contract is an effective methodology to foster a positive culture, it remains a limited approach in a modern context. While Martin et al (2005)'s model is an important contribution to the research literature, this model was developed prior to the advent and domination of social media in the world of marketing. The authors of the present theoretical paper feel that prior models are limited and propose a more comprehensive

theoretical model that includes the mechanism of social media as an all-encompassing communication tool while still using a case study approach to develop the model.

We propose that the medium through which marketing and HR can most effectively collaborate on communicating a shared brand identity and customer experience is social media. Social media can connect the two experiences since it is a form of communication that can reach across the management-employee-customer divide (Whiting & Deshpande, 2016). Social media companies such as Facebook are starting to realize the power of the medium by offering their own in-house social media services. We propose a cyclical model (Figure 1) that offers a clear method by which organizations can leverage social media to facilitate a partnership between HR and marketing. A focus on both customer and employee experiences with special attention to feedback processes can be a way for marketing and HR to collaborate where both functional areas can benefit themselves and the business.

Figure 1

Model of Communications
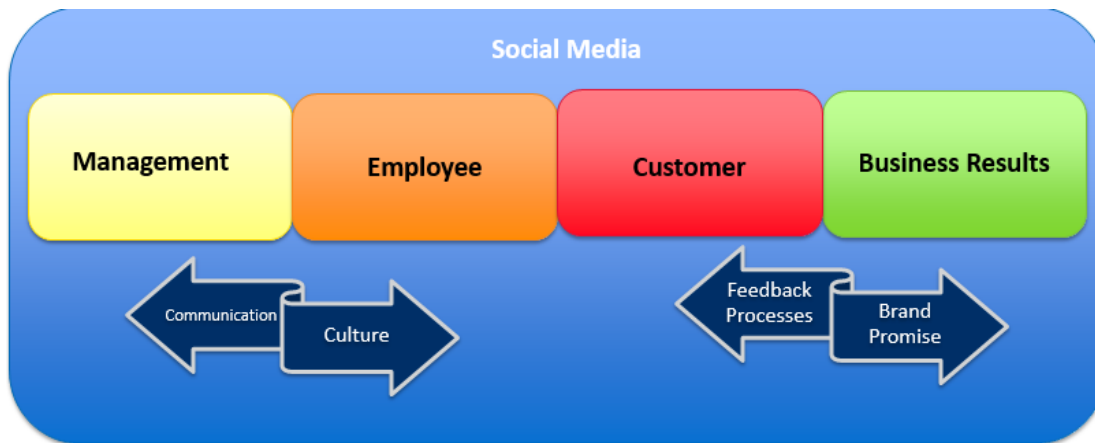
Our proposed model of communications aims to be an all-encompassing framework. Detailed in figure 1, a cyclical relationship is displayed, where management communicates directly to employees, employees interact directly with customers, customers yield business results, and the returns filter back into the organization, which sets new precedents for management. Along this process, multiple reciprocal interactions also take place. Responsible for their subordinates, management imposes a culture reflective of the organizational climate and values by which the business operates. The standards set are further embodied through employee interactions with customers. As the face of the organization, personnel are responsible for delivering on brand promises and ensuring effective business transactions on behalf of the company. While culture and

brand promise move clockwise through the model, there are also interactions which tread counter-clockwise and filter back to levels of the organization. Customers offer feedback, be it positive or negative, to their transactions with the business. Additionally, employees are also apt to communicate their engagements with their managers.

Throughout these various interactions, a key factor to consider is the prominence of social media. The technological platform is all-encompassing and serves as a new medium through which the factors can be shared. It is not uncommon to view organizations directly interacting with the public through social media forums; more often than not, companies are apt to respond to feedback and complaints. Often, it has also provided a voice for customers to directly engage with peers and the organization to share their experience.

The model shows that communication between management and employees is a two-way street. Dynamics between employees and customers exist as well. What changes the nature of these communication patterns is social media. Social media can affect business results and serve as a feedback process from customers as well as employees (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). As currently constituted social media affects each segment of the model and allows for unbound communication. Social media, unlike other mediums, does not follow the strict patterns of traditional communication. Customers

can even provide innovative ideas to organizations through crowd sourcing (Yates & Paquette, 2011). Thus, this platform becomes a disruptive factor in the relationship between customers, employees, and management (Schulze, Schöler, & Skiera, 2015). Consider the impact Yelp reviews can have on the consumer brand and the influence Glassdoor has on the employer brand. The appropriate means of response is individualized and through the social media platform. An organization cannot broadcast a culture of customer service excellence while consumers post negative reviews and employees complain on Glassdoor. Additionally, an organization cannot portray a people-focused consumer brand while exposing employees to subpar pay or labor standards. The two-way nature of brand communication and the expectation of individualization make social media an obvious conduit between employees, HR, consumers, and marketers. We examine three case studies to illustrate how organizations are using social media and communications to achieve organizational outcomes.

Following in the work of previous theoretical models (Martin et al, 2005; Mosley, 2007; Figurska & Matsuka, 2013; Yates & Paquette, 2011), the authors developed a model of human resources and marketing brand alignment. The authors reviewed three case studies and developed a model based on the experiences of working on

applied consulting projects with three organizations. Due to non-disclosure agreements the case studies described below are masked.

Case Studies

A Tech Firm

Our first case study examines a large technology company. They implement a very similar strategy from both a marketing perspective and an employer brand perspective. Their brand strategy focuses on creating and providing the best product in the market. They focus on creating a personalized experience that makes connections with consumers. Their go to market strategy is both aggressive and disruptive. They have already been successful in changing the trajectory of their entire industry and are responsible for putting some former industry leaders out of business.

Their culture and people strategy follow a similar approach, focusing on building an environment of only top performers. They pay employees at the 90th percentile with the expectation that by removing compensation as a distractor, they can hire and retain the best and the brightest. This strategy has been a huge success for them and is a key tactic for multiple reasons. First, as with any technology company, they cannot afford for their software to fail. This is a 24/7 operation and for them to remain disrupters, they need to continue to provide the anytime, anywhere service they provide. Second, by hiring

the best and taking pay off the table, they have fostered an environment that inspires creativity and continues to keep them on the cutting edge. Third, their social media strategy reflects the connection between customers and employees. The company's external branding is reflected in their treatment of employees. With this type of alignment, the experience of customers matches the experience of employees and a consistency of service is achieved. As figure 1 displays social media has the potential to promote each major group (management, employees, the customer, and business results) and the organizational outcomes. Through this medium, marketing and HR promote the culture of the workplace and are also capable of responding to feedback. The brand image is not only maintained but expanded in its reach to a larger audience, drawing in further business.

Gig Economy

Our second case study is a tech start-up operating in the gig economy. This company faces a unique challenge due to their use of independent contractors. While the company can attempt to create a brand image *on paper,* they have limited control over the behaviors of their contractors. This presents a unique challenge in the modern age where individual interactions can have a major impact on a brand image. Despite their challenges, their brand message is about bringing people together. This organization takes a global unity perspective,

seeking to be perceived as worldly and progressive. In addition to these challenges, this company has also taken more than a shallow dip into the political conversation regarding acceptance and equality. Central to their brand image is the idea of inclusion and diversity. Unfortunately, even with their admirable stewardship of equality, they have recently come under fire for the discriminatory actions taken by some of the independent contractors that operate under their brand. This is the ultimate misalignment between management and employees where a clear signal from the organization is ignored.

This second case study is an excellent example of the importance of brand and customer image alignment. Marketing built this image of global stewardship, just to see it fall flat when human resources was unable to prevent discriminatory behaviors by these contractors. Had this startup's marketing and human resources teams coordinated further on what their brand strategy was going to be, maybe human resources could've had a recruitment strategy that targeted more prospects that are also progressively minded and a selection system that selected out people who were likely to discriminate against others. Had marketing discussed their brand strategy with human resources, someone could have highlighted the low control the organization has over the actions of its contractors, and thus suggested a different brand image and marketing strategy.

The lack of control consequently resulted in social media backlash. Social media has widely broadcasted the bigotry of the organization's personnel to other full-time employees and potential customers, consequently also hurting their business results. This example illustrates the disruptive nature of social media communications and highlights the importance of brand management via social media. Negative information that does not align with the brand of the company can affect long-term financial results. Another way in which this startup fell short is the lack of an individualized approach to HR. Perhaps if there was a more direct and individualized relationship between the organization and the contractors, their brand message would have been adopted by the contractors. Instead, they relied on a broadcast strategy that was clearly missed by a few of their contractors. A brand alignment between employee and customer experiences could stem the tide of these types of outcomes.

Global Consumer Brand

Our final case study examines a global consumer brand that focuses on women. This organization is a manufacturer of consumer products. Their brand strategy has been empowering women and helping them feel beautiful by raising their self-esteem. For the better part of a decade, they have implemented marketing campaigns focused on women's individual beauty. The strategy behind this type of

marketing campaign is brand awareness and advocacy. The goal is not to direct buyers to purchase products based on the merits of the product itself, but to drive awareness of the values the organization embodies compared to its competitors within a flooded market.

This strategy of empowerment and individualism for women needs to mesh with the organization's human resources strategy. A quick review of their careers webpage indicated that more than 75% of the people depicted were women. While this is a good sign, there needs to be an internal culture that matches their brand culture as well. The website is an external promise to employees about the value placed on women in the organization. A senior marketing executive once said, "there is no customer brand and employment brand, there is just the brand." When you consider the model, employee brand only goes as far as the customer brand and vice versa. If managers treat employees like replaceable cogs in a huge business, the employee culture and engagement will be negatively impacted. Management should be receptive to the feedback of both personnel and customers; communicating the current climate is an ongoing process that an organization must remain on top of if they wish to address issues and promote the brand in an effective way.

Conclusions

Now, more than ever, marketing and human resources departments need to consider the optimal methods to achieving brand alignment to deliver a consistent and reputable image of their organization's values. Disruptive technology is changing the way organizations interact and represent themselves both internally and externally. Embracing the medium of social media, companies have the potential to enrich the way they present their business and can reach a broader audience. Displayed in figure 1, the new diagram displays the various interactions often engaged in, and how they may permeate onto this new platform.

The three case studies illustrate the broad effect of brand alignment through social media. Social media can connect your employees to your customers through a clear brand image, but it can also be used to promote negative ideas about your brand in an uncontrolled fashion. Ideally, social media is a way to communicate the promise of your brand to a wide audience. Organizations focusing on aligning their internal and external brand can achieve greater outcomes in the modern business world.

Human resources and marketing professionals should agree on the company brand and strive to implement their values. This brand agreement is an expression of company strategy. Once agreed upon,

the teams should focus on the development of experiences for both their personnel as well as their clientele. Through identifying the touch points between employees and customers, merging conceptual alignment with realistic interactions may maximize the delivery of the brand promise to both employees and customers.

HR and marketing should agree on a communication strategy and complement each other's work. For instance, if an employee has lived up to the standard set forward by HR, then they should be recognized via social media. Another implementation can manifest itself when a customer has had a particularly good experience with the organization and uses social media to communicate their appreciation, which may lead to greater awareness and more potential customers.

Limitations

The most prominent limitation in the present research is the limited information provided regarding the case studies. While the present cases support the ideas presented in the model experimental or correlational data is needed to test the proposed framework.

Another challenge to the researchers was theorizing a model that addresses the multidirectional relationships across management, employees, customers, and business results. Further development may be needed to consider the practical methods by which the joint marketing/HR initiative can be actualized within organizations.

Despite these limitations, we have introduced a new model to approach modern business operations. The information age is continually evolving, and it will be a necessity in the twenty-first century for companies to adapt accordingly with new tactics to properly promote their brand but to also be receptive to feedback of various sorts.

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