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THE NARRATED BRAND

An Exploration into how Employee Narratives Construct the Brand of a Large Service Organisation

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Abstract

This research grew out of a response to Gummesson’s (1998) view that we need to challenge traditional views of marketing. Views linked to relational marketing, service-dominant logic, and experiential marketing represent some of the main paradigm shifts in marketing which challenge the traditional transactional view. Within these theoretical shifts the term ‘brand’, already ubiquitous due to its long history (Stern 2006), has been recast and enlarged. The importance of service branding had already been established by Berry (2000). Then within a service-dominant logic framing (Vargo and Lusch 2004a; 2004b; 2008), the brand was given a central relational, co-creational role (Brodie, Glynn and Little 2006). In an experience economy the brand is enlarged even more to include the whole consumption experience (Haathi 2003). The brand is also posited as a socially constructed text (Hatch and Rubin 2006).

In this study I have focused on the experience of employees in constructing the brand of a large service organisation which has a strong brand and relies on employee ‘buy in’ to fulfill its brand promises to its customer base. I used a narrative approach in designing the study, and then generating and analysing data (both verbal and visual). This method, combined with a three-phase focus group and individual interview design, created a rich picture of one particular organisational context. My aim was to explore how employees constructed the brand by revealing a complex picture of the brand experience of the participants who took part.

The main findings reveal a multi-faceted brand that is viewed from various perspectives. This construction is contradictory, paradoxical, and complex. I highlight theoretical touch points from the accepted canon which both inform and are informed by the views of my participants. In doing so I present a narrative construction of the brand which can be incorporated by these various branding frameworks but which is not fully explained by them either. The narrated brand reveals the brand ultimately as a mutable mirror from and through which the narrator constructs her/his brand identity.
Thus the narrated brand revealed in this work presents an unstable (Harding 2007), identity-based view of the employee’s brand experience which affirms the adoption of a narrative approach in such qualitative research.

This thesis, therefore, makes three main contributions: a theoretical one in that this study reveals a complex view of the employee perceived brand; a methodological one in that the use of narrative analysis is enlarged within the marketing discipline, and, in particular, in relation to the brand as it pertains to the employee; and a managerial one in that unveiling the complexity of the employee’s construction of the brand may help organisations better understand how current models and systems (which may be either simple or complicated) map onto the complex brand realities experienced by employees. Finally, this study, though limited to a qualitative, single embedded case study, provides a rich way ahead for further research into the construction of the brand experience to be conducted and extended.
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