Brand 'Infrastructure' in Non Profit Organizations; challenges to successful brand building?

Abstract

The particular purpose of this paper was to examine and explore the factors necessary within non profit organizations for successful branding, and challenges in their implementation. The approach was an appropriate inductive qualitative one, conducted through depth interviews with opinion formers.

Whilst there has been some research into the variables necessary to successfully build brands, only limited work considers anything other than commercial branding contexts. The originality is that through this work both theory and practice of branding in non profit organizations will be better informed so that structures to support branding can be better managed. Factors considered important to branding were identified, particularly leadership, employees understanding and clear vision. It was interesting that respondents generally agreed that limited marketing budgets were not necessarily a major problem. The research also identifies variables that contribute to a conceptual model of non profit brand management, experiential and emotional branding in particular being notable as offering possible platforms for differentiation.

The work is exploratory in nature and therefore whilst it informs understanding of brand management in a non profit context also forms a basis for wider empirical testing.

Keywords

non profit organizations, non profit branding, public sector branding, non profit brands, university brands.

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Introduction

There is an acceptance that organizations need to develop strong brands as part of their strategy (Keller 2001; Kay 2006) and an organization's success depends heavily on its brand's success. Ten years ago little scholarly research had been devoted to branding in the non profit sector (Hankinson 2001) but more recently interest in this field as part of marketing has grown rapidly (Bennett, Kerrigan and O'Reilly 2010).

If brands are key to all organizations, then brand management is important to implement branding in both non profit and commercial sectors (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Sargeant 2009). Traditional brand management draws upon the resource based view (RBV) of organizations (Mahoney and Pandian 1992) and elements of the marketing concept (Bridson and Evans 2004; Aaker 1996; Keller 2001) and the degree and manner in which brand management is implemented relates to brand orientation (Bridson and Evans 2004). There are two broad ways of viewing brand orientation; the philosophical foundation and the behavioral foundation. The philosophical foundation sees brand orientation as embedded in the organization's values and beliefs, whilst the behavioral foundation understands it in terms of implemented behaviors and activities (Bridson and Evans 2004). The research in this paper explores the factors necessary to, and challenges inherent within, implementing brands in non profit organizations (NPOs) and therefore has its conceptual framework rooted in these foundations of brand orientation, in particular exploring "implemented behaviors and activities" in the NPO context. Ewing and Napoli (2005) support this focus on implemented activities when they define non profit brand orientation as "reflecting an organization's focus on the internal and external activities necessary to build and sustain strong brands".

Internal factors that allow brands to be constructed, communicated and managed logically include such variables as vision, support, leadership, available budgets and experience (Bridson and Evans 2004; Napoli 2006). In this paper these factors are termed the 'brand infrastructure', although this is far from a definitive list and the research encouraged additions to these.

However, existing frameworks developed with commercial organizations in mind to explore branding activities do not wholly fit the particular context and challenges of NPOs (Chapleo 2010; O'Cass and Voola 2011) as non profit brands need to address a variety of additional organizational objectives (Stride and Lee 2007).

This paper therefore adds to knowledge by examining branding in non profit organizations and the variables that comprise the brand infrastructure, as well the challenges to their implementation. It is intended that through this work theory and practice of branding in NPOs will be informed so that structures to support branding can be better managed and a platform for further empirical work can be built.

Brand success factors

A branding strategy and basic principles must be defined in order to create a strategic direction for the use of brands and the 'firm-based characteristics' that support branding are an important part of this (Douglas, Craig and Nijssen 2001).

Key authors discuss the elements that underpin successful brands such as Keller (2001) who offers six steps: performance, imagery, salience, judgments, feeling and resonance. Krake's (2005) paper presents guidelines for the creation of a strong brand that explore internal factors important to brand success to a greater extent, however. He suggests that an organization should focus on a small number of brands in order to create clear brand associations. Secondly, there must be an integrated mix of brand elements that fully support both brand awareness and brand image. Thirdly, an organization should be logical in its policy and consistent in its communications. Fourthly, there should be a clear link between the character of the company and the brand and finally, there should be a passion for the brand within the company.

It may be argued, therefore, that for a successful brand to be built and managed, a number of factors or variables need be in place within a brand orientated organization (Ewing and Napoli 2005).These internal factors are, for the purpose of this research, referred to as the 'brand infrastructure' and it is these that this paper explores.

Brand infrastructure; internal success factors

Harris and de Chernatony (2001) suggest that a sustainable competitive advantage through brands can better be achieved in terms of unique emotional elements than functional characteristics and Aaker (1996) supports this to some extent when he talks of the importance of the emotional aspects of a brand. These emotional values are not just communicated by advertising but also through employees' interactions with different stakeholders (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Employees have to communicate the brand's promise across all contact

points, whereas such behavior can become a competitive advantage if they deeply believe in the brand's values (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005). In the service sector, employees, information technology and operations as well as service culture also have an influence in service branding (Kimpakorn and Tocquer 2009). Everybody in a firm can be seen as a service provider and should be encouraged to live a company's values and attitudes (Ghose 2009). Brumann and Zeplin (2004) argue that the strength of a brand depends on the consistency of the customers' brand experiences along all customer-brand touch-points determined by the brand's identity. Consequently, the brand's identity must be consistent with employee's values and behavior (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Internal brand building is therefore crucial in developing a successful service brand (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005) and the importance of the 'brand infrastructure' is evident.

The work of Morgan (2012), Napoli (2006) and O'Cass and Voola (2011) is also helpful in exploring current understanding of internal capabilities supporting branding and a number of factors are evident in extant literature, several of which are particularly worthy of discussion:

Organizational culture

The culture of an organization is important and must be comprehended by all employees, since it offers the frame for staff interactions and external representation of the company (Balmer and Greyser 2006). Moreover the cultural context has an influence in knowledge creation and how staff implement brand values through social processes (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005). A company faces a challenge to introduce and realise its culture in a multinational environment, since other cultures interpret brand messages differently (Kay 2006).

Effective internal communication

Effective communication is important on both a team and organizational level (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). In order that all employees understand and live a brand's values and

identity, good internal communication is very important to achieve a consistent understanding and to reduce confusion about brand positioning (Aurand, Gorchels and Bishop 2005). Vallaster and de Chernatony (2005) differentiate verbal and non verbal communication. Verbal communication channels include internet platforms, e-mail, face-to-face, meetings and written memos and the same messages and values have to be communicated not just to customers and business partners but also internally (Shocker, Srivastana and Ruekert 1994). Non verbal communication includes showing commitment, living brand values, and trusting and enabling staff (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005).

Finally, Asif and Sargeant (2000) identify six key outcomes of effective internal communication. These are shared vision, job/personal satisfaction, development of a service focus, empowerment, commitment and loyalty.

Leadership

It seems self evident that leadership is important in internal communication. A leader's task is to take on the brand's promises and translate them into action (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005). Leaders support internal brand building and the relation of resources for brand-related information, knowledge and networking (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2006) and influence internal brand management with clear responsibilities (Burmann and Zeplin 2004). Likewise, employees striving for a high level of leader-employee exchange achieve higher levels of performance in return for higher rewards from their leaders (Henry 1994). Consequently, leadership can motivate employees (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005).

Additionally, a leadership task is to generate shared understanding of brand values (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005).

Human resources

In addition to marketers who define a brand and its promises and values, and leaders who have to communicate and translate these promises and interact with employees, human

resources (HR) departments are also pivotal. HR is important since they may recruit people who buy the brand promise themselves in the first place (Aurand et al 2005). Furthermore, training is important to ensure that all staff comprehend, live and communicate the brand promise (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Additionally, the role of both HR and leaders is to motivate staff (Aurand et al 2005).

It is evident from the literature that to communicate a successful brand outside the organisation requires a number of variables to be managed internally and the relationship between external brand and internal 'brand support and structures' is critical. This is evidenced through elements of brand orientation; particularly behaviors and activities necessary to build and sustain strong brands (Bridson and Evans 2004; Ewing and Napoli 2005). Extant literature discusses these in varying degrees but little work explores specifics in the context of a non profit organization, a sector where branding has rapidly advanced.

Relevance of non profit branding

Branding is important to non profit organizations as there is a clear link to competitive advantage (Aaker 1996 ; Keller 2001) and effective use of resources (O'Cass and Voola, 2011).

NPOs have much to gain by adopting some practices of commercial branding (Ewing and Napoli 2005) but a number of key differences make branding challenging ; NPOs generally have a larger number of customer groups and need an openly recognizable and consistent position to beneficiaries, supporters, stakeholders and regulators (Bruce 1998). These groups often have disparate communications needs (Stride and Lee 2007).

Philosophy is an important element of marketing activity in NPOs (Bruce 1998) that should run through all brand communications. It is not that for profit organizations do not have philosophies and values, but rather it is the non negotiability of these values in NPOs that marks them as distinct (Stride and Lee 2007). Therefore in terms of branding values are key

and an NPO's values should be cherished, although these can make it difficult to develop a single coherent philosophical position across the entire organisation (Stride and Lee 2007). Branding has a role to play in managing these particular challenges and improving NPO performance (O'Cass and Voola 2011). However, whilst at a superficial level the branding concept in now well advanced in NPOs (Stride and Lee 2007), existing branding frameworks arguably do not allow for the specifics of the NPO context and associated brand management execution may be lacking or difficult. It is in exploring the factors underpinning successful NPO branding and challenges in their implementation that the essence of this paper's contribution lays.

Methodology

The principal focus of this work was to 'seek a deeper understanding of factors' (Chisnall 2001) important to support branding of UK non profit organizations. The broad approach was therefore a phenomenon driven inductive one that sought to understand a particular area through exploring the interpretation of that 'world' by its participants (Bryman and Bell 2003). The sample size was appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study (Christy and Wood 1999; de Chernatony et al 1998) as it offers generalizations that put flesh on the bones of general constructs (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Twenty interviews were conducted among Heads of Marketing for UK non profit organizations comprising charities, universities and miscellaneous public sector organizations, over a four month period in 2010 -11 (comprising eight charities, seven universities and five local government/ political organizations). These were selected by a random sampling technique. In the future research will examine each sub group (e.g. charities, education) separately as it is expected that findings will not be homogenous, but the intention in this early exploratory work was to examine non profit organizations in general. Senior marketing and external relations personnel were selected as they represented experts with a breadth of experience who can draw on their specialist knowledge to define the fundamental characteristics of relevant matters (Tremblay 1982; de Chernatony and Segal Horn 2003).

Semi-structured interviews were employed and average duration of each interview was seventeen minutes. The broad issues discussed related to identifying factors that were considered necessary for successful NPO branding and their relative importance, challenges to NPO branding, and current issues, although within each of these headings points were explored and discussed (sometimes at length) in line with the strengths of exploratory work.

Interviews were recorded (Goodman 1999) and transcribed. The analysis was informed by Miles and Huberman (1994) using coding that identifies any commonalities in responses, and the particular qualitative approach of Schilling (2006) in structuring the content analysis by attaching each statement or phrase to one of the defined dimensions. After initial content analysis, the results were checked by an independent research assistant as providing an accurate summary. Conclusions were then discussed and drawn from viewing the findings in the context of research objectives (Flick 2006).

The anonymity requested by some participants made the attribution of direct quotes challenging. Nevertheless, a number of pertinent quotes were assigned by organization category in an attempt to partly address this issue.

Findings

The elements of non profit organization brand 'infrastructure'.

Respondents' views on internal factors necessary to support branding capabilities in NPOs were explored. Broadly the results supported factors suggested by Napoli (2006), O'Cass and Voola (2011) and Morgan (2012) but content analysis suggested the particular importance of several specific factors:

Firstly, the support of senior management; without this, it was argued, branding can too easily become "all about the logo" (university marketer) and there is the danger of "branding in a vacuum" (charity marketer).

Secondly, understanding of branding and valuing branding was also thought important. It was argued that there may be "confusion about what the brand is among most people" (charity marketer) and most respondents mentioned some form of brand training or education to try and build what was termed 'buy in'. It was conceded that this was sometimes easier said than done but nevertheless a consensus that it was necessary was evident. There were positive examples such as that from a university marketer who talked of continually feeding out snippets of information and presenting aspects of the brand to staff and that when the actual branding program was launched it was consequently no problem to engender a reasonable level of support. It was suggested that this idea of brand 'buy in' was also important among other stakeholder groups and effort should be made to inform and educate them. It appears that the importance of brand 'buy in' is similar to that required in most service brands whether for profit or non profit.

An appropriate marketing structure in the organization was the third factor; this may be seemingly obvious, but it was argued, something that non profit organizations may struggle to implement. Finally, good internal communications and a clear vision or mission were also specifically mentioned.

These points largely support the existing literature on factors necessary for brand building (Harris and de Chernatony 2001) but it was the subtle differences suggested that embrace the benefits of exploratory work. The internal communications point is particularly worth expanding as it was suggested that, for branding in the fullest sense to take place for NPOs, effective internal communications is critical. This most frequently seems to take the form of intranet, staff briefings, consultations and consistent messages, which are perhaps the more obvious elements. A supportive and consistent organizational culture was considered to sometimes be particularly elusive in NPOs but respondents reinforced its importance to branding.

The relative importance of brand infrastructure variables to NPO brands.

A number of internal factors important to branding in organizations of all types were identified from literature (Napoli 2006; Keller 2001; Krake 2005; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Chapleo 2010) prior to the research. These are included in Table 1.

The list of factors was offered to respondents, who were asked to rate these in terms of importance to brand management in an NPO on a four point scale, the intention with such a small sample not being to offer any empirical measurement but to begin to highlight the elements considered more important. An important point is that these factors were purposefully quite broad, including a degree of synthesis of elements suggested in the above literature. This was to utilize the exploratory approach and give respondents the opportunity to add to and expand upon their answers.

The factors (or variables) were, in descending order of perceived importance: support of leadership; clear mission and vision; employee buy in; effective internal verbal communications; organizational culture; management capabilities in marketing; capabilities in marketing communications; effective internal branding communications; information technology systems; marketing budgets; research capabilities.

A number of points were apparent; some of these reinforce previous for profit branding literature (but in the NPO context) but other elements suggest insights that inform future empirical testing. Leadership and a corresponding clear mission / vision were considered the most important factors, and this corresponds with the literature. However, arguably a more interesting point was the low importance placed by respondents on budgets; this might initially seem surprising as traditionally consumer brands have utilised sizeable marketing budgets. Whilst NPO marketers have long had to work with limited budgets (in comparison to many commercial counterparts) they considered that they had learned to embrace this and employ branding in its 'fullest sense' (NB Not simply visual identity).

This, it was argued, had led NPO marketers to be creative and approach branding activity through a number of routes. Specifically suggested were branding through 'experience', 'reputation management',' internal cultural branding' and 'press and publicity'. Whilst these techniques are not necessarily new or innovative (Schmitt 1999) their identification as particularly applicable to NPOs may be. Substantial spend on marketing communications was not deemed as critical as it might be argued to be in commercial organizations, although this is something of an over simplification, as further questioning suggested that the phrase 're-evaluation of marketing communications' (charity marketer) might be a more appropriate summary.

There was a suggested wish among respondents to fully embrace e-marketing through current channels such as Facebook and Twitter, web search optimization and virtual marketing in general. This appeared to be closely tied in with the wish to integrate the emotional side of branding though online communities with the whole brand experience. Marketing communications such as print were still felt to be an important part of brand building, but the view that it was necessary and desirable to decrease reliance on these to utilize online

marketing was clear. There was also talk of perceived cost effectiveness of new media marketing communications although clearly this is a rather simplistic view.

Harris and de Chernatony's (2001) argument that sustainable competitive advantage can best be achieved through emotional elements of branding resonates with the idea of experiential branding in NPOs that seemed to crop up quite frequently in interviews; indeed some UK NPOs such as universities had a specific 'head of experience' job role but the challenge that many respondents talked of was actually translating this to clear programmes of action that they could roll out to the whole organization.

This in itself may not be a departure from the conceptual framework based on commercial organizations but it was suggested by many that NPOs were well placed to have strong experiential brands due to their emotional resonance (particularly evident in charities and education). There are existing conceptual frameworks that may offer a basis to explore this specific element to a greater extent in the NPO context; Keller's (2005) 'judgments' element of his Customer Based Brand Equity model, which includes emotional reactions and feelings, is one such model, but of particular relevance is Schmitt's (1999) suggestion of experiential brands that engage with feelings and emotions as well as appealing to the intellectual aspects of lifestyle and desire for self improvement.

In the context of this question some other more predictable factors were offered, including the importance of medium / longer term "consistency of approach" and "continuing support and real understanding" from management (university marketer) and these correspond to a reasonable extent with the extant literature. It seems, therefore, that factors that support successful branding in NPOs are (with some exceptions) similar to those in commercial organizations, but it is in their implementation that challenges are apparent.

The greatest challenges to successful brand management in NPOs

Exploratory work allows related topics to be examined as they evolve and this was the case here where respondents seemed keen to elaborate and some went into considerable depth.

A key challenge that may be particularly applicable to NPOs was creating real understanding of branding within the organizations, and it was argued that the leadership element already identified as important was key in this respect.

As mentioned before, whilst the concept of the 'brand experience' may offer possibilities for brand differentiation in NPOs it was felt that this was not fully understood and valued. It may be argued that thinking about holistic experiences rather than a product-benefit focus (Schmitt 1999) has resonance with many NPO service offerings and that this approach allows both the emotional and rational drivers of consumption to be recognized.

Also particular to the university sector was doubt among some marketers that a clear brand that summarizes what the university does in one statement could ever really be achieved. As one university marketer argued "creating our brand is more challenging than for a can of coke because our product is inherently complex and we are offering multiple things for multiple audiences". This is arguably true for most NPOs and respondents again talked of the need to brand the experience and the need to find the effective channels and tools to communicate this. The evolving marketing communication tools mix in NPOs is seemingly a vein for further investigation.

Suggested for public sector organizations in general was the perceived "cynicism of staff that impedes community and cohesion when trying to build a brand" (public sector marketer); whether this is more pronounced than in for profit organizations is open to debate, but this was termed the 'cultural issue challenge' of branding by one public sector marketer.

It was also felt, particularly in the charity sector, that the sector has staff with strong internal motivations but that the external brands don't always fully communicate this. There was felt to be a great potential for brands in the charity sector in particular as donors often had 'their'

charity that they identified with or that "engaged with their lives" (charity marketer). The challenge was argued to be tapping into and communicating this. Charities in particular felt that they were already competent at doing this, but that was not necessarily reflected across the NPO sector overall. The need to communicate 'emotional resonance' was a phrase that encapsulated the views of many, referring to the need to actually communicate values that have relevance and emotional connection to the intended stakeholders' lives. The evolving paradigm of online marketing communications for NPOs was thought to offer opportunities to do this, something which currently receives limited discussion in the literature.

Finally the budgeting systems were also identified as a challenge by a few respondents, with talk of 'locked down systems' where parts of the organizations had their own discrete budgets that led to inflexibility. Whilst this is clearly not unique to universities and public sector organizations, it was respondents from these sectors that expressed concern about this point. In fact it may be argued that for profit organisations also face many of the challenges discussed here, but respondents did suggest that a number of these (such as cultural acceptance and 'buy in') were particularly pronounced for NPOs.

The changing pace of the external environment was argued to be a challenge by most respondents, with organizations increasingly having to adapt and react to market conditions at a faster pace than they have culturally been equipped to do. On a positive note, however, it was felt by some that this changing environment was forcing a cultural change internally which led to more competitive branding strategies in non profit organizations.

Conclusions

A number of conclusions may be drawn from this research that are worthy of discussion.

Many findings reflect the existing branding literature (such as leadership being considered a key element of the brand infrastructure) but there are areas where this is not wholly the case, however. It is through highlighting particular insights that exploratory research adds value,

and two such areas were evident. These were that a consensus that limited budgets, whilst a challenge, were not critical, and that experiential brands may offer a basis for differentiation. The challenges and opportunities of experiential branding and how to fully implement this as part of an integrated communications strategy are, it was felt, yet to be fully defined but Schmitt (1999) offers a strategic framework for managing experiences that may offer a conceptual framework worthy of exploration in the NPO context.

The feeling that NPOs were largely practicing effective marketing on limited budgets is also noteworthy as the obvious next step is to examine and assess this claim. It seemed that NPO marketers have embraced branding in its broadest sense and have found creative alternative branding approaches. Some examples of these were outlined in the findings but clearly this is something that would benefit from deeper investigation to inform both theory and best practice.

It is suggested that whilst the factors necessary for successful NPO brands are broadly similar to commercial organizations, it is in challenges in their execution and management that insights are apparent; often connected to organizational culture and corresponding elements of brand orientation.

In particular , respondents considered that understanding of branding by management and employees in general was still a significant challenge and it was suggested that real understanding demonstrated through ongoing actions that supported brand building rather than superficial 'lip service' was sometimes lacking.

Overall, whilst findings do often support the existing literature, it is argued that they build upon it and actually that whilst factors necessary for branding only differ to a degree (experiential branding and low cost effective marketing communications being two such areas), it is in the challenges in implementation that a specific conceptual framework for NPO branding could add real value. Whilst there was a clear perception of the importance of

branding and what needed to be done among respondents, the challenges were very evident and a degree of concern about the support to get the job done could be discerned.

Implications and Agenda for Future Research

Clearly this research is of an exploratory nature, and therefore offers a number of areas worthy of further exploration, both in terms of practical approaches and academic research.

The suggestion that marketing budgets, whilst important, are not critical to successfully branding NPOs is interesting and strongly infers that there are alterative ways to build brand. NPO brand guardians need to understand branding in its fullest interpretation and to design and execute strategies that employ all elements of branding. Some of these factors are suggested in the findings and clearly this is already happening to some degree but it seems that there is an opportunity for best practice to be shared and for researchers to formalize this knowledge and further research in this area is appropriate.

In terms of specifics, cultural issues as part of internal branding were identified as challenging for NPOs and how a consistent brand culture could practically be achieved could perhaps forms a case study in its own right?

More broadly, this paper suggests a need for innovative new strategies that embrace experiential and internal branding, and utilize online and social media marketing (as well as traditional marketing communication) to effectively communicate these and build brands. This is not an easy matter but the call to the challenge is evident in this work.

Overall what is called for is a conceptual framework that embraces experiential and internal branding to effectively build and manage NPO brands, in the context of sector specific challenges to execution. There is extant literature that may inform this process; perhaps what Schmitt (1999) terms as a 'spirit that pervades the entire organization'. This is something that it seems many NPOs should be well placed to engender and it will be interesting to see the degree to which this develops though practice and literature in the future.

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TABLE 1

NPO Board internal Factors suggested as necessary for branding

Support of leadership
Clear mission and vision
Employee 'buy in'
Effective internal communications
Supportive organizational culture
Marketing capability of managers
Marketing capability of managers
Marketing Communications capabilities
Internal branding programs and communications
Information Technology Systems
Appropriate budgets
Marketing Research capabilities