

A complex identity and brand structure: insights from the Swedish public sector

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overview

- ▶ This paper focuses on the exploration of branding in the public sector with particular attention on the complexity and interrelatedness of brands and identities.
- ▶ Based upon qualitative data from 20 interviews and 7 observations with managers and staff of a County Council in Sweden.
- ▶ Overall, this paper argues that to support emotional employee-brand relationships, it may not be sufficient to pursue a centralised, organisational-wide internal brand management.
- ▶ Rather, the various brands need to be integrated and the professional identity of the employees need consideration.

Context

- ▶ The need to understand branding in a public context has been emphasized in several recent studies that highlight the distinct nature of public sector branding (e.g. Leijerholt et al., 2019; Sataøen and Wæraas, 2015; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009).
- ▶ Brands historically viewed as a transactional process, predominantly involving profit and a consumer focus, but the concept has evolved. A more contemporary approach to branding is presented by Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester (2018, p. 256) who define the brand as :

an evolving mental collection of actual (offer related) and emotional (human-like) characteristics and associations which convey benefits of an offer identified through a symbol, or a collection of symbols, and differentiates this offer from the rest of the marketplace.

- ▶ At the core of the brand is, therefore is the organisational identity that serves as a foundation (He and Balmer, 2007).
- ▶ However, consistency has been identified as a challenge for public sector organizations.
- ▶ This work builds on a previous paper by Leijerholt, Chapleo and O'Sullivan (2019), who identifies a complex brand relationship between the organizational and departmental brands in a public sector organisation.

Purpose of our paper

- ▶ Overall, to explore the variety of brands and identities that may exist within a public sector organization and how these brands and identities interact. Three objectives guide this article:
 1. To provide insights into the complexity of brand and identity structures influencing emotional employee-brand relationships in the public sector.
 2. The emotional hierarchical structure between brands and identities among public sector employees.
 3. To explore underlying influences in the employee relationships with brands and identities.
- ▶ The paper takes an employee and middle manager perspective.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Brand management and identity

- ▶ To ensure an effective brand, organizations need to understand how to manage the brand (Aaker, 1996). Brand management is widely considered to be a key strategic issue for an organization (Rindell and Strandvik, 2010).
- ▶ It has been proposed that for a brand identity to be trustworthy, it should focus on the core competencies of the organization (Jan Alsem Karel and Kostelijk, 2008).
- ▶ In the public sector, branding has historically been criticised for often being about slogans and strap-lines rather than the development of brand strategies (Whisman, 2009).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- ▶ Public sector employees may be more inclined to develop an emotional connection to the part of the brand identity that connects to the sector role and services provided by the organisations (Leijerholt et al., 2019).
- ▶ The complexity of brand management, not least in the public sector, can therefore be assumed, as successful brand management demands buy-in of the brand identity among both internal and external stakeholders.
- ▶ **Internal brand management** Liu, et al. (2015, p. 319) position internal brand management as “an organisation’s attempts to persuade its staff to buy-in to the organisation’s brand value and transform it into a reality.”
- ▶ Employee actions and behaviours should reinforce the brand identity (Aurand et al., 2005)

continued...

- ▶ An organisation achieves its greatest advantage when employee actions and brand identity reinforce one another (Aurand et al., 2005) and employees feel they identify with the organisation and thus become brand champions who embrace the brand (Ind 2001).
- ▶ In the non-profit context, the notion of *brand democracy* has been introduced, which can aid the integration of the brand internally.

Methodology

- ▶ This paper reports on a case study of four departments within the healthcare organization of a Swedish county council.
- ▶ The qualitative case study entailed semi-structured interviews and observations of staff meetings: 20 interviews and 7 observations were conducted. The interview respondents included six managers, 13 employees, and the County Council Head of Communication. The average length of an interview was 1 hour and 13 minutes,
- ▶ The observations were conducted at weekly and monthly staff meetings, as well as departmental planning days. Field notes were taken during the observations.
- ▶ The data analysis followed the guidelines of Charmaz (2006). Thus, the data was coded in two steps, starting with a line-by-line coding before developing and categorizing the data into higher abstraction levels. From this process a number of core themes emerged.

Findings

- ▶ Empirical findings show a complex situation exists in regard to identity and branding structures in the organisation.
- ▶ From an organisational perspective there is one main brand that is promoted, that of the organisational brand, yet departmental initiatives are also allowed, and even encouraged.
- ▶ However, from an employee perspective there seem to exist a number of different brands that employees may relate to; an organizational brand, department brands, and health care provider brands (i.e. the specific hospital/health center).

- ▶ Employee relationships with the multiple brands - Interviews reveal that the case organization is often perceived as rather fragmented and complex.
- ▶ While some employees seem to relate quite easily with both the organizational and departmental brand, others express a closer connection to the departmental level.
- ▶ While the organization may be involved in communicating the brand throughout the organization, experiences on local level seem to take precedent over any communicated messages; employees see the brand as they experience the brand.
- ▶ Because of the fragmented organization, it may be important for the organization to link into the departmental relationship among employees as a means to supporting a strong brand for the organization.

- ▶ The empirical findings also suggest that in addition to the organizational and departmental brands some employees also seem to relate to a third brand, that of the hospital/health care provider where they work. This brand seems to have a special connection for some respondents.
- ▶ Thus, findings present a rather complex relationship within the organization where several brands are perceived to exist.
- ▶ While the departmental brand often has a stronger emotional connection for the employees, the other brands also do seem to be relevant for employees. Interestingly, these various brands do not seem to compete. Rather, they seem to have a natural interrelatedness.
- ▶ However, within this situation there also seem to be an additional factor coming into play for an emotional employee-brand relationship; the professional identity. This identity seems to play a key role for some employees.

Discussion & Conclusions

- ▶ It is evident that the organisation in this study is aiming to build and present a single, consistent organisational brand.
- ▶ That said, the complexity of the organisational brand and identity structures is noticeable as employees tend to relate to various brands and identities.
- ▶ Thus, this study confirms the existence of multiple identities (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). Within this case organisation, there are three distinct brands : the organisational brand, the departmental brand, and the hospital or service provider brand.
- ▶ In addition, employees seem to identify with two organisational levels, the department and the organisation. An additional identity that comes into play is that of the professional identity (e.g. doctors, nurses).

- ▶ From the findings in this study, it is clear that a top-down development of the brand cannot be imposed.
- ▶ Consulting and engaging the employees in the brand implementation process is advised (Dholakia and Acciardo, 2014).
- ▶ As literature highlights, when employee behaviour and the brand identity are reinforcing each other, organisations usually achieve a significant advantage (Aurand et al., 2005).
- ▶ It can therefore be argued that the notion of brand democracy should be incorporated in the organisation, with a greater employee participation in brand management (Laidler-Kylander and Stone, 2012).
- ▶ However, the evidence from this study suggest that such brand democracy may need to originate from the innate values and role of the sector.

- ▶ Findings in this study align with suggestions that for an identity to be trustworthy, it is imperative that the identity captures and **highlights the core competencies** of the organisation
- ▶ Employee brand-relationships and **identities seem directly related to a sense of pride**. This can also be noticed among employees with a strong professional identity, as this identity seems to take the ‘upper hand’ for them.
- ▶ **Professional identity seems to affect how employees relate** to the various brands; those brands who aligns well with the professional identity are the ones that gain an emotional relationship.
- ▶ This paper shows that to support emotional employee-brand relationships, it may **not be sufficient to pursue a centralised, organisational-wide internal brand management**.
- ▶ Rather, the **various brands need to be integrated** and the professional identity of the employees need consideration; the role of the organisation in society and the pride and accomplishment of employees are often dominant factors.
- ▶ Therefore, to ensure a suitable level of consistency within these organisations, the **alignment may need to start at the core values that exist in the professional identities of employees and the innate values** of the sector.

Limitations

- ▶ The sample is therefore, whilst appropriate for this type of study, small and also culturally specific in that it is only from the Swedish public sector.

Thank you !

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