

'LIVING THE BRAND': A PHILOSOPHY-DRIVEN STRATEGY OF BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL BRANDS THROUGH PEOPLE

Kelly Tian and Miguel Zuniga, Department of Marketing, New Mexico State University, MSC 5280, PO Box 30001, Las Cruces, NM 88003-1498; ktian@nmsu.edu; mzuniga@nmsu.edu.

ABSTRACT

Brand identity has emerged as a key concept in dominant branding models following a philosophy that in order to stand out brands must be imbued with human qualities (Aaker, 1996; Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). While inquiries into the financial and cultural value of products' brand identities have flourished for over a decade (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006), investigations into processes of organizational branding and shaping organizational brand identity, are relatively new (Johannsson & Holm, 2006; Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006). Organizational brand identity is an articulation of who the for profit or not-for-profit organization is and what it stands for that distinguishes it from other organizations (Schultz & Hatch, 2006). The brand which traditionally targeted only customers has increasingly become an organizing frame used by organizations in dealings with their various stakeholders, inclusive of employees, shareholders, the financial community, donors, volunteers, suppliers, and regulatory bodies (Olins, 2000).

Organizational brands and their cultures and communities are of great consequence to organizational performance and survival (Balmer, 2006; Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005; Muzellec, 2005; Olins, 2000; Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Schultz & Hatch, 2006). Academic institutions are no different. They have evolved from nonprofit organizations that merely use marketing tools to brand organizations that seek to wield a brand identity and engage its constituents within brand communities. Brand engagement activities include investments of resources (time, energy, or emotion) beyond that expended during the acquisition and include participating in activities of the brand, taking interest in news about the brand and sharing about the brand with others inside and outside an imagined brand community.

Drawing from extant literature, we call attention to the "Living the Brand" perspective as a management philosophy of engaging and enthusing employees. Employees who embody and live the brand influence others' engagement with the brand.

At the heart of the living-the-brand philosophy is the employee's experience that s/he embodies the organizational brand identity. It is from this experience that other distinguishing aspects of living the brand emerge or revolve. Embodying the brand identity refers to an employee who incorporates her understanding of the brand identity into the self, as an understanding which is shaped by practices of mutual sharing with others about the brand, its values, its meanings, and brand-related consumption experiences. These others include various stakeholders who bring their own interpretations to bear on and integrate with those of the employee and those disseminated through media communications of the brand. The experience of embodying the brand is one of a sense of shared, overlapping identity with the brand. This overlap reflects that the employee is a vested member comprising the brand community through which the organizational brand identity is wielded (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002); and, that the employee engages the organizational brand identity to enhance and extend the self (Belk, 1988).

Distinguishing aspects of the living the brand philosophy as compared with traditional management ideology are as follows. First, rather than viewing themselves as representatives or agents of the organization, employees see themselves as member of the brand community. Second, employees may view customers as potential or fellow members of the brand culture or community (see McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). That is, there is a blurred organizational boundary such that employees no longer see themselves as inside the organization where other stakeholders reside outside of it. Finally, employees interactions with stakeholders are not scripted or experienced as impression management, but rather authentic. Subsequently we conceptualize 'Living the Brand' as a concept distinct from organizational citizenship and identify six constitutive living-the-brand practices.

References Available on Request