

DO PROFESSORS HAVE CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY?

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Abstract

Beyond the success in product branding, marketers can now successfully brand services, people, places, organizations, or ideas (Kotler & Keller, 2006). In recent years, branding of people has not only gained scientific interest but also legitimacy. Human brands refer “to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (Thomson, 2006). However, human brands research has been limited to the context of celebrities such as sports, music and film personalities and politicians. But human branding need not be limited just to celebrities. Just as celebrities can be branded so too can certain professionals such as professors (Jillapalli & Wilcox, 2010), physicians, realtors, journalists, engineers, and scientists be branded and managed as brands. *Customer-based brand equity* is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand (Keller, 1993). *Customer-based brand equity* occurs when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2001). Thus, brand equity lies in the mind of consumers and is the essence of what consumers have learned, felt, seen and heard about the brand over time (Keller, 2001). To date there have been no studies on how the transference of branding process and customer-based brand equity strategies can be applied to the branding of certain professors.

Professor branding is grounded in the Keller’s brand resonance model (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2001) to explicate the transference of the branding process to certain professor brands. According to Keller (2001), the CBBE model consists of four steps, where each of the steps in the “branding ladder” is contingent on the achievement of the previous step. The four steps are (1) brand identity, (2) brand meaning, (3) brand responses, and (4) brand relationships. Accordingly, to create strong brands, Keller (2001) operationalizes a set of six “brand building blocks” that make up the brand pyramid and are in sync with brand identity, brand meaning, brand responses, and brand relationships. The six “brand-building blocks” are salience, performance, imaging, judgments, feelings, and resonance. In the context of strong professor brands, salience relates to the professor brand awareness and how easily students can recall and recognize the professor. Performance refers to the way the professor brand meets the functional needs of the students and satisfies the utilitarian, aesthetic, and economic needs of the students. Brand imagery deals with the extrinsic properties of the professor brand while

brand judgments are the personal opinions of the students and are based on the professor brand performance and imagery associations. Student feelings are the emotional reactions of the students engendered by the marketing or the promotions of professor brand. Finally, brand resonance focuses on the nature and depth of the professional relationships students have with the professor brand. To this end, we intend to empirically test students' feelings and attachments evoked by the professor brands and the relationships (brand resonance) between students and certain professor brands. According to the *Customer-based brand equity* model, if certain professors are to be considered as strong human brands, those professors must demonstrate customer-based brand equity in the minds of consumers (students). That is, students' judgments and feelings of the brand must evoke positive reactions and the nature of the relationship between the students and the professor brand must be intense, active and loyal.

The focus of this study is the professor brand equity in the minds of students. The model conceptualizes and hypothesizes that certain professor's reputation, competence, and service quality facilitates a student's attachment to the professor brand. Also, the model hypothesizes that a student's attachments to the professor influences the quality of the relationship as observed in the trust, commitment, and satisfaction within the relationship. Furthermore, the model hypothesizes that the depth of the relationship quality factors determines the student-based brand equity.

To the extent that the research propositions presented in this paper are empirically supported, the implications to both academia, and brand practitioners are meaningful. This research contributes to the body of brand literature by providing a theoretical framework for professor brand equity. The current brand literature has focused primarily on celebrity brand equity and no research to date has provided an understanding of student-based professor brand equity. Furthermore, this study provides an understanding how the transference of the branding strategies can be applied to certain professor brands. This research indicates that students advocate strong professor brands because of the strong positive associations these students have to certain professor brands.

This research has implications to professors by providing an understanding that professors can become strong brands if they cultivate and harness their reputation, competence and service quality. Additionally, a professor who is steward of their reputation, competence and service quality engenders positive attachments which directly influence the trusting, committed, and

satisfying relationships between the student and the professor brand. The sum of these deeper relationships between students and professors enhance student-based professor brand equity.

Most professors endeavor to create positive and favorable associations in the minds of their students. These actions will likely result in a student's belief that the professor brand is relevant to their student experience.

References available upon request