

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, IT & MANAGEMENT

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DETERMINANTS OF INTERNAL BRANDING FOR CUSTOMER-ORIENTATION

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ABSTRACT

In the world of changing market dynamics, there is a significant need to study the strategies that can build and sustain an organization. Brand of an organization is no more a differentiating tool but a powerful tool to connect the organization with customers. Customer-orientation is a new set of marketing activities that connects the organization and the customers. Internal branding is the set of organizational activities that build and promote the brand values and organizational values among employees who are the internal stakeholders and who deliver the brand promise to customers. Employees are the human face of an organization that connects it to customers. To be customer-oriented hence demands internal branding activities. The purpose of this study is to identify the major internal branding activities that help the firm to build and implement customer oriented strategies. The conceptual model depicted in this study recognizes the factors that determine the role of internal branding in building a customer-oriented firm. These determinants are identified from the previous works on this area and from companies and brands where the onus of their success is due to internal branding practices. Considerable amount of literature in the field of internal branding and customer-orientation has revealed the research gap that customer-orientation influenced by internal branding determinants has not been studied. Hence this study brings out certain findings that can help the marketing practitioners to underpin the contribution of internal branding practices in order to focus on customer-orientation and towards transforming an organization to be customer-centric.

KEYWORDS

Brand management, customer-orientation, internal branding.

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and highly competitive business environment, organizations continuously struggle to expand their market opportunities. From its traditional goods-centered perspective marketing is still in its early stages of transition to service-centered perspective. This paradigm shift requires most firms to pursue a strategy of value addition that integrate products with services offering a complete bundle of benefits (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Today brand is no more just a tool for identification and differentiation rather a promise of value addition that connects customers to the firm. A promise to meet customer expectations enable the organization to position its product or service. The articulated promise gets its true meaning only when the consumer experience the perceived value being delivered in the same way the company has promised. Therefore a brand represents the promise of an organization to its customers. From being a marketing tool in the previous century, brand has undergone a progressive evolution to a position where the firm's vision and strategies became instruments of the brand (Berthon et al, 1999). This decade fostered a major shift of power to the consumer which integrates both creators' intention and consumers' expectation wherein brand shifted to be an interpretation of consumer experience. This shift in the marketing philosophy of brand building efforts entails customer-orientation for sustainable competitive advantage of a company (Donovan, Brown and John, 2004). It is not companies who build the brand rather brands are build by customers. Brand is no more a tool for differentiation rather an utmost strategically significant concept of an organization in framing the vision, mission, and core values and for delivering the tangible and intangible attributes of an organization's promise. Hence the branding process has evolved as a predominant marketing function in today's competitive environment since this concept is more focused on customer experience. To develop marketing capabilities for a customer-focused firm has been a significant research topic of Marketing Science Institute for the year 2010-2012 for two major reasons (msi.org). The collaborative efforts of firms and customers to create value can be a major reason in identifying customer as an important source of competence. Second, a firm's marketing capabilities can use effective strategies for a firm's transition from a brand or product orientation to a customer-focused organization.

To be customer-oriented means focusing on value addition of both tangible and intangible attributes for the benefit of customers. Many studies have emphasized the significance of the tangible attributes of a brand on customer satisfaction. Since marketing practitioners recognized that tangible attributes alone and its derivatives are eventually of less help to provide a competitive edge for the firm, the insight behind intangible attributes and inimitable strategies to win the business has been gaining attention. This realization signifies the interactive and interconnecting customer engagements as a major customer retention method. The need to share a common goal of customer satisfaction also identified the need to share a common meaning on the firm's value proposition. While Keller and Lehmann (2006) reviewed brand relationships, brand experience and the influence of corporate image and reputation no attention has been paid to the role of brand from a service centric perspective of the employees who translate the brand promise to customers. This implies that all the employees are the service-providers and thus service ought to be the core function of value creation through customer service (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). However the patterns of customer engagements in the value creation process has raised the awareness of the crucial role that employees play in the value creation process of the brand that culminates in an inimitable competitive edge to the firm. Driven by the research findings from the Forum for People Performance Management and Measurement, and recent articles in the *Harvard Business Review*, firms are finding the significant role of employees in building their brands.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first category of literature review intends to create a foundation for the study by imploring the conceptual meaning of brand and brand management. Studies of David Aaker (1991) explain brand equity as a primary source of competitive advantage and future earnings. Keller (1999, 2008) focused his works on the strategic brand management with the customer based brand equity and highlights the development and maintenance of competitive brand identity. In its traditional definition a brand is understood as a name, symbol, design or any other feature designed to distinguish the goods or service of one producer from that of another (American Marketing Association, 1995). The second category of review includes cases of certain companies who practice internal branding, citing the role of internal stakeholders who are none other than their employees in building and sustaining competitive advantage using internal branding measures. The third part of the review pertains to the studies focused on customer-orientation and how internal branding initiatives contribute to frame customer-oriented strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON INTERNAL BRANDING

Internal branding comprises of all activities of a company to ensure the intellectual and emotional commitment to the brand (Thomson et al 1999, Thomson and Hecker 2000). Internal branding encourages living the brand, speaking with one voice (Ind N.2001, 2003; Ind.N and C. Watt 2005), and two way communication process which is more of an iterative process (Totsi and Stotz,2001). Mahnert and Torres (2007) places the three core principles of internal branding constructs though he finds it lacking focus and definition: (i) committed employees reflect and deliver desired brand values, (ii) effective communication results in brand promise realized internally and externally, (iii) internal branding needs to permeate to all level of organization to align the behavior and attitude of management and staff. The organizational activities that ensure intellectual and emotional commitment to the brand are one of the earlier definitions of internal branding.

While the institutionalized feedback loops that identifies and remove inhibitors of the process is internal branding (Vallester and de Chernatony, 2006) creating powerful brands and competitive advantage through people in the organization is also recognized as internal branding (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). Branding is described as an organization's ability to align its every action and message with its core values and to keep the organization's promise to its customers and the sum total of all customer experiences (King and Grace, 2009). Scandinavian brand strategist Nicholas Ind (2004) defines internal branding in terms of story telling as the way of building brand communities for sharing and preserving their heritage and building their culture. The evolving paradigm in marketing philosophy describes branding process as delivery of a promise facilitated through internal customers who are the employees (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). Being at the interface of the internal and the external world of the brand, employees at the point of contact with customers exert a certain degree of influence on customers' perceptions about the brand and the organization (Balmer and Wilkinson, 1991). To attain and maintain the desired corporate image and corporate reputation, employees who are responsible for fulfilling the brand promise are required to deliver the service in a consistent manner (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003). Successful internal branding ensures commitment and loyalty of employees to the brand that enables them to transform espoused brand promises into brand reality for customers and other stakeholders (Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Pappasolomou and Vrontis, 2006). The research results of a valid conceptualization process of employee branding process defines it to be a process by which organizations can ensure the desired brand image in the light of organizational values is reflected to their customers through their employees (Miles and Mangold, 2004). Another study by the same authors showed empirical evidence of how employees' knowledge of the desired brand image has a significant contribution to the employee brand (Miles and Mangold, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW ON CUSTOMER ORIENTATION

From the previous studies on customer-orientation, it is the set of beliefs that put the customers' interest first while not excluding other stake-holders' interests to attain a long-term profitable enterprise. Organizations should focus on the interaction with customers and then look inward to explore how that customer knowledge can be used to build organization-wide responses. Jaworski and Kohli (1996) referred this as market orientation while Narver and Slater (1990) identified customer-orientation, competitor-orientation and inter-functional coordination as the three elements constituting market-orientation. Empirical researches for measuring customer orientation of a variety of types of salespeople studied customer-orientation in terms of the satisfaction of customer needs at the level of the employee-customer interaction. Several studies found employees who exhibit a high degree of customer orientation engage in behaviors that increase the satisfaction of their customers. In addition, customer-oriented behaviors lead to the development of long-term relationships that are mutually beneficial to both the parties (Kohli and Jaworski, 1996).

Although limited research has investigated customer-orientation and its antecedents, some research focusing on the inter-functional coordination of work processes and inducing cultural transformation has been done (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990). Both marketing and management researchers are centered on the three pillars of customer orientation theory: senior leadership, inter functional coordination and market intelligence. The catalytic role of senior leaders in the transformation to a customer-orientation has been explored (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993) and its implementation has also been empirically reinforced (Kennedy *et al.*, 2003). Using customer orientation as an indicator of performance, relationship between organizational socialization outcomes and performance has been studied (Kelley, 1999). His conceptual framework suggests that customer orientation is affected by the organizational climate, motivational effort and organizational commitment of service employees. In short, the set of activities that focuses on acquiring and retaining customer-oriented employees' gains strategic significance of a firm's decision-making. The vision and mission statements that envisage the brand promise should be understood and shared by the workforce in a consistent manner (de Chernatony & Seigal Horn, 2003).

The true meaning of vision and value statements of a firm is epitomized to customers only when the employees transcend it in alignment with the firm's strategies on customer orientation. This approach is possible to be experienced and reflected by customers through the internalized expressions of the brands' employees. Procter & Gamble CEO Richard Deupree expressed this idea eloquently: "If you leave us our money, our buildings and our brands, but take away our people, our company will fail. But if you take away our money, our buildings and our brands, but leave us all our people, we can rebuild the whole thing in a decade." (Cited in Macrae, *Journal of Marketing*, 2003)

INTERNAL BRANDING PRACTICES OF SUCCESSFUL COMPANIES AND BRANDS

- NIKE:** - Nike's 'Just Tell It' Campaign deems the best way to create a prosperous future is to make sure all of its employees understand the company's past. That's why many veteran executives at Nike spend time telling corporate campfire stories. When Nike's leaders tell the story of how the cofounder and CEO Phil Knight's coach Bill Bowerman after deciding that his team needed better running shoes, went out to his workshop and poured rubber into the family waffle iron, they're not just talking about how Nike's famous "waffle sole" was born. In the late 1970s when this innovative program started, it was an hour-long lesson given to new employees wherein they hear such tales; they understand Nike's commitment to helping athletes through this corporate-storytelling program. Now this orientation lasts two days, and the story of Nike's heritage is the first item on the agenda. Each "Ekin" ("Nike" reverse-spelled, are tech reps known for their Swoosh ankle tattoos) undergoes a nine-day Rookie Camp at Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon. "We're connecting what we're doing today back to Nike's heritage," says Dennis Reeder, Ekin training manager. It envisions a day when the orientation process will last a week and take place at "Nike University."
- UPS:** - The vans and uniforms of UPS, which are deliberately styled after the military to express discipline and punctuality is another example of employees on the consumer touch point enlivening the brand's value. Southwest Airlines follows a rigorous assessment of a candidate's personalities during interviews, from pilots to mechanics, on a scale of one to five on seven traits corresponding to the brand's core values (Mitchell, C, 2001).
- HCL:** - The organizational transformation HCL Technologies Ltd details the imperative role of employees in building and sustaining a company's success. The CEO Vineet Nayar in his book "Employees First Customers Second" (2010) describes the concept EFCS as a constantly evolving "thinking journey" with new ideas and initiatives taking shape along the way. He elaborates how HCL embodied the true meaning of this with absolute and complete employee participation. In the discussion he explains the employees' role in turning the organization pyramid upside down which is an eye-opener to the identity crisis of employee branding in Indian corporate houses.
- SAAB MOTORS:** - In early 1990s while in search of an effective turnaround strategy did an assessment of the brand's strength and weaknesses to find that the brand was not well understood inside the organization (nor outside too). The Brand Consultancy group, TBC who suggested repositioning the brand essence under 'unconventional' adopted dynamic unconventional training methods like a videotape called 'Pillars of the Brand' and the SAAB Way Training which was encouraging voluntary participation of every employee from the one who answers the telephone to the one involved in designing and distributing it (Bergstrom, A, Blumenthal, D and Crothers, S, 2002).
- VOLKSWAGEN:** - The success of the Volkswagen Group (UK) retailer channel is being monitored closely by Volkswagen Germany using Connect vision internally for some time to manage and distribute content for its 'News Forum' service to over 400 employees working in Volkswagen Passenger Cars, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, Seat and Skoda at its Blakelands headquarters in Milton Keynes. The ease with which the internal communications team in each business is able to draw on a wide variety of imagery and multimedia formats means that retailers are able to customize part of the screen for news announcements and special offers. The branded Service Screen content being managed from Volkswagen head office in Milton Keynes, its layout is split into three areas to show car video images, Volkswagen news and special promotional offers as text at the bottom of the screen. Using Connect vision software to add, schedule and distribute content to all screens in the network and to reduce IT security and network capacity issues at each Retailer, the LCD screens are supplied with a dedicated PC providing the initial on screen content which is updated on-line by Volkswagen's marketing team.
- VOLVO:** - The idea behind Volvo's hybrid car, Cross Country has been developed out of the creative tension in its contradicting core values safety and excitement itself. To express the true meaning of these values in their brand pyramid, the new design was driven out of customer-focused needs identified by the employees. It was meant to expand Volvo's appeal more emotionally engaging rather than functionally. To identify the key success factors the law internally was to gain inspiration from the concept development team development team who focus on customer perceptions and lifestyles.
- In his book 'Living the Brand' Nicholas Ind describes the success of Quicksilver and Patagonia through the internal branding techniques of customer and employee engaging strategies. The intuitive and courageous innovation of the sportswear brand Quicksilver is the result of close connection of its long tenure employees with the sports they serve. This implies the freedom of co-creativity through listening, sharing knowledge and experimentation. In the practitioners'

arena a few companies who implement internal branding like Mayo Clinic and Millers Breweries extrapolate the strategic significance of internal branding which has been less studied by theorists.

NEED OF THE STUDY

Branding in itself is a vast concept and its literature has been mostly focused on the external communication of the brand (de Chernatony 2001, 2003). Substantial research on branding suggests that delivery of the promise of a brand is facilitated through the employees who espouse the meaning of brand message and thereby transmit highly reliable brand values to the customers (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). Most of the work in the academic domain of internal branding has been confined to service oriented or B2B industries. Hence, many a time it is conceived to be less prevalent in the product based or B2C business. Moreover, who owns the planning and implementing of effective internal branding is the practitioners’ dilemma. Due to its overlapping existence, a lack of common philosophy for internal branding within and between disciplines of marketing and human resource management seems to hinder its acknowledgement. Timothy, Linda and Terrence (2005) examine the successful promotion of the internal branding doctrine may be as dependent on HR initiatives as on those developed in the marketing department. In spite of well-documented internal branding initiatives, there appears to be room for improvement among HR departments in terms of successfully delivering the corporate branding message. HR professionals who are in charge of internal communications typically lacks the marketing skills needed to apply many of the principles of consumer advertising to internal communications that enable employees to “live” the vision of the brand in their day-to-day activities. Before the brand’s promise is sold to its customers, companies need to sell it to their employees on what need to be done for effectively transmitting the brand values with customer orientation and why it should be done. Hence the employee engagements in designing the internal branding strategies become inevitable. How to achieve such competitive advantage is studied with respect to internal communication guided by managers who walk the talk that can get easily emulated as the brand’s values by each employee. In his book “Employees First Customers Second”, Vineet Nayar, the CEO of HCL has written how his company focused on its value creators- the frontline employees to achieve remarkable growth. His famous EFCS could help the customer see the organizational values when committed employees uphold it even before the senior leaders have seen it. In the process of transforming an organization to customer-orientation the relevance of internal branding measures gains higher significance since employees are the catalysts of the process. Though many companies say ‘customers come first’, the disclaimer in it is ‘after employees’.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study makes an attempt to investigate the factors that precede the internal branding initiatives and pave the way to frame customer-oriented strategies of an organization. In its effort to envisage a conceptual model of internal branding, this study also looks at how the internal branding practices have helped a few organizations to be successful in their formulation and implementation of customer oriented strategies.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

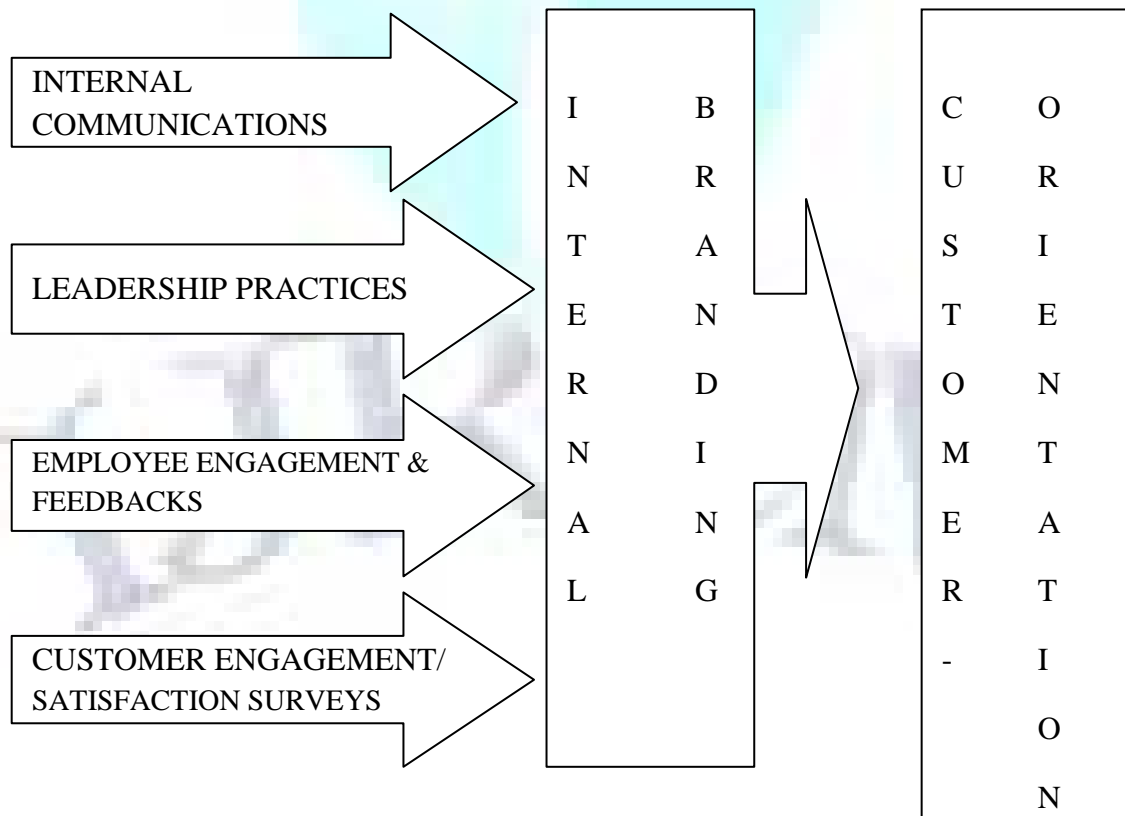
The major purpose of this study is to explore the role of internal branding in the making of customer-oriented firms. The specific objectives are as follows.

1. To explore the internal branding practices adopted towards customer-orientation of a firm
2. To identify the various internal branding factors affecting the customer-orientation
3. To elicit the antecedent factors of internal branding that drives customer- orientation

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The relevant articles on internal branding has been conceptualized to build a theoretical model in order to address the factors determining internal branding that eventually leads to customer orientation. This study also covers the case of five brands and a few companies for whom the onus of success lies in internal branding.

FIGURE 1: MODEL OF DETERMINANTS OF INTERNAL BRANDING



FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The formal and informal message systems of internal and external communication align the desired brand image with the organizational values (Kelley, 1999). The organizational commitment of employees is related to their customer-orientation. Based on the research gaps identified in the literature review of internal

branding and customer orientation a conceptual framework has been derived at. Those factors that are considered necessary for employees to successfully deliver their organization's brand promise are categorized as the determinants of internal branding. Since customer-orientation is initiated by senior managers and implemented by employees of all levels this model attempts to explore the effect of the factors that determine internal branding on the customer-orientation. As suggested in the literature, internal branding gets implemented by means of formal and informal meetings, trainings etc. Senior Managers being the change agents are primarily responsible for customer-orientation (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). The treatment employees receive from their manager get precisely reflected to customers by the behavior observed in front-line employees. Therefore a high correlation between employee and customer responses to the brand image has been reinforced (Tosti and Stotz, 2001). Hence the top-level leaders approach reflects upon the customer-oriented initiatives by means of the right alignment of external branding with internal branding is a major determinant of internal branding. Using employee response to build a sense of ownership and belongingness has helped HCL Technologies. The case of Nike is an example of how internal communication such as training can be used as an effective tool to internalize the brand's mission using informal story telling style. The non- preaching style of training and similar forms of information dissemination encourages employees to espouse the brand values and thereby deliver the brand promise with honor. Such an exercise activates the alignment of the external brand with the internal brand because the employee who enlivens the brand promise delivers the expectation the company has offered (Ind, 2003). An engaged customer is generated only by an engaged employee. A customer-centric decision that helps in revenue generation is the outcome of a rippling effect initiated through the employee engagements enforced through appropriate internal communication tools. On the basis of the cases that are mentioned in the literature it is obvious that organizations adopting internal branding determinants culminate in customer- oriented approach in their strategy formulation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Traditionally organizations spend heavily on external branding. Brands are indisputably a major asset of an organization. Since brand is defined as an organization's promise, those who carry out and deliver that promise are the first and the most important audience; they give life to customer experience (Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2009). It is the employees who ultimately foster customer experience. Hence a major focus is essential on framing internal branding determinants that can help the firm to facilitate the implementation of customer-oriented strategies. But most of the investment is focused on external branding by not paying attention to align it with internal branding efforts. When there is a lack of alignment of organizational values with employees' values, customers can easily sense how sincere the employees are to the brand promise. Such challenges can intimidate the implementation of customer-oriented strategies. Thus the success of customer-centric approach is highly related to the internal branding efforts that strengthen the organizational workforce. Using the right mix of formal and informal internal communication forms, emulative leadership practices of senior managers, employee engaging activities that connect them primarily to the company and then to its customers, appropriate rewards and recognitions based on performance reviews encompassing brand behaviors, 360 degree feedback and customer surveys and feedbacks are the suggested internal branding techniques that strengthen the customer-orientation process. However a quick and direct result out of internal branding determinants is difficult to be measured.

Marketers must work very closely with HR, leadership and skilled strategist to build integrated internal branding programs that leverage customer-orientation. As the framework identifies internal branding implies the strategic significance of branding in the cross-functional coordination. Hence the CEO is the ultimate CMO to facilitate adequate internal branding measures for the appropriate implementation of customer-oriented strategies. As anticipated by Tosti and Stotz (2001) branding may be the most practical answer to competition since it is powerful enough to recognize the external promise to customers and to align the internal stakeholders to the organization. The recognition of internal branding in turn is leading to the creation of new budgets and efforts devoted to align employee behaviors with consumer needs. The responsibility lies with human resources in some firms; whereas it is part of corporate communications in others which might report to marketing. This major shift towards internal audiences will surely attract a wide variety of performance improvement consultants and branding companies that want to play at the strategic level, in turn creating lots of opportunities to engage, enable, and empower people. To maximize the return on investment on its brand promise, some of that investment of a firm must go into creating an internal manifestation of the brand promise.

LIMITATION & CONCLUSION

This study is conceptual in nature and hence there is a lack of primary data collection for empirically analyzing the model. Since most of the literature shows in-depth interviews and focus group study it is observed that qualitative research is prevailing in this domain.

SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The effective ways to deploy the resources and manage employees to sustain their focus on customers when they are operating in competitive and rapidly changing environments need to be researched so as to improve the firms' competency for customer-orientation, especially for delighted consumer experiences. The scope of further research lies in the measurement of the impact of internal branding techniques on the organization's customer-centric measures. Though balanced score card, employee surveys and 360degree feedback programs are the prevailing measuring tools none of these are specific to measure the effectiveness of internal branding initiatives (Mac Laverty et al., 2007). Unless a specific measuring tool is adopted, the unsung heroism of internal branding may persist to exist. Further studies can explore internal branding factors that are highly specific to implement customer-oriented approach in an organization. To replace the expensive media advertisements, customer-orientation can be easily attained from internal branding factors. The conceptual model designed in this study can be further adopted for empirical studies in internal branding.

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