

Employees are part of the brand, too!

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The importance of having a strong brand has been recognised by researchers and practitioners for many years. Typically, a brand should communicate a distinct set of characteristics. This should be done in a similar way each time the consumer encounters it. When it works as intended, the result is that consumers end up associating Ryanair with cheap flights and Wrangler with rugged clothing, for example. In the past, consistent communication stressing what a brand stands for has previously been the mainstay of marketing departments or advertising agencies – until now.

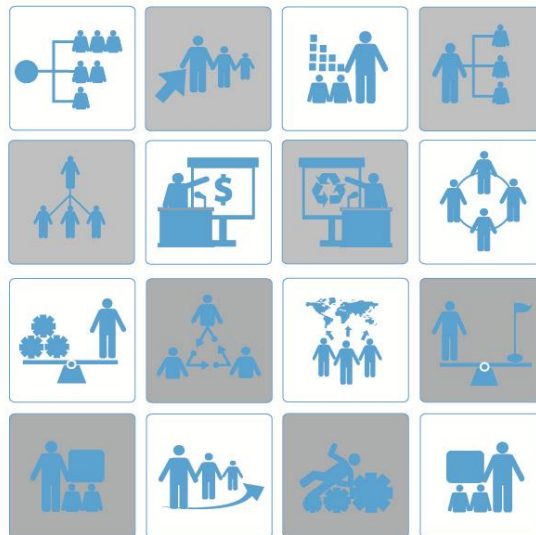
Human beings are very perceptive to the behaviour of others, so it stands to reason that employee behaviour has a strong impact on a customer's impression of the company they are dealing with. Face-to-face interaction with an employee of a company is an important source of information for the customer when judging the brand. Some firms already recognise the potential of this in their brand building efforts by encouraging their staff to "live the brand".

Southwest Airlines, a company which wants its brand to be known as fun, encourages its staff to do fun things – like singing onboard safety instructions or organising impromptu competitions like "the-passenger-with-the-biggest-hole-in-the-sock-wins-a-free-airline-ticket" aboard the aircraft.

Firms have started to recognise the increasing importance of the role played by employees in communicating their brands, but it remains an area that has been studied very little. A team of researchers from the United States has now attempted to analyse

the extent to which proactively aligned staff behaviour with the brand can influence consumer brand evaluation.

Consumers are inherently very lazy and don't want to engage in advanced problem solving when faced with brand information. From the results of the research, it was possible to test the concept that high levels of alignment between employees and their company's brand



allowed customers to process the brand in a more effortless way, leading to a more positive evaluation of the brand.

In a series of experiments, the researchers exposed participants to brand information both through employee behaviour and impersonal channels such as printed ads and packaging. The experiments were designed so that participants encountered all incarnations of the different scenarios with either aligned or non-aligned brand information from the two sources.

The results were clear: when employee behaviour was aligned with impersonal information such as printed ads and packaging, customers reacted with a higher level of overall brand evaluation and higher perceptions of brand equity.

Employees who encounter customers should therefore behave in alignment with what their company's brand is communicating through other sources – but within reason. The research also demonstrated that care should be taken not

to force employees to behave in a way which might appear inauthentic, as this was not received well by the customer.

The results of this research demonstrate the importance of the behaviour of employees when dealing face-to-face with customers. Whilst not as simple as tinkering with the content of printed ads and packaging or other sources of impersonal information, aligning employee behaviour with the brand should form part of an organisation's integrated brand building activity.

The way in which employees liaise with their customers should be a brand issue and these messages need to be carefully communicated internally to help employees understand what the brand is supposed to stand for. What has historically been deemed a marketing issue, has all of a sudden gained a deeper meaning, as the importance of authentic behaviour by employees and the human aspect of the brand, demands the future attention of Human Resources departments across the globe.

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The full reference for this study:

Sirianni NJ, Bitner MJ, Brown SW & Mandel N (2013), "Branded service encounters: Strategically aligning employee behaviour with the brand positioning", *Journal of Marketing*, 77 (November), 108-123.