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An Approach Towards Developing a Successful Service Brand

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ABSTRACT

Branding in services marketing is about the amalgamation and steadiness of functional and emotional values. Branding plays an extraordinary role in service companies because strong brands increase customers' trust of the imperceptible purchase. Strong brands enable customers to better envisage and comprehend intangible products. A powerful service brand is fundamentally a promise of satisfaction. Identifying and sustaining the values of a services brand is vitally important for brand success. This paper explores the issues of brand equity in services and also focuses on fundamental criteria for developing a service brand.

KEYWORDS : Brand, Consumer, Services, Values.

INTRODUCTION

A service is an activity which has some element of intangibility associated with it. It involves some interaction with customers or property in their possession, and does not result in a transfer of ownership. Services do not have a physical presence and they cannot be touched. This is because their distinguishing characteristic is that they are an act or a performance. A service is consumed at the point where it is produced. For example, watching a play movie at a theatre, learning computer at school or taking a holiday all involve the simultaneous production and consumption of the play, new technology and leisure and relaxation. Services provide an opportunity to add value, as each service is a unique experience.

Branding in services marketing is about the amalgamation and steadiness of functional and emotional values. Branding plays an extraordinary role in service companies because strong brands increase customers' trust of the imperceptible purchase. Strong brands enable customers to better envisage and comprehend intangible products. They reduce customers' perceived monetary, social, or safety risk in buying services, which are difficult to appraise prior to purchase. There are several definitions of the term brand. The common themes are that a brand is more than just a combination of a name, a design, a symbol or other features that differentiate a good or a service from others. It is a unique set of tangible and intangible added values that are perceived and valued by the customer.

Branding is crucial in services, given the inherent difficulty in differentiating products that lack physical differences and the intense competition within service markets. The main differences that influence branding policies in case of services are that services have a varying level of quality, the consumer has to become involved in the consumption of a service actively, and they are intangible and perishable. When a brand in general gives the consumer more confidence in his choice this is even more important for services. Their quality and other features are more difficult to judge. Due to their intangibility and complexity it is harder for the customer to distinguish between the offers from the broad range of service organization operating in the market. The intangibility of services makes buying them from a safe place an appealing proposition for customers. A powerful service brand is fundamentally a promise of satisfaction. It is a blend of what the company says the brand is what others say, and how the organization performs the service--all from the customer's point of view. Big brands always make an emotional connection with the proposed audience. They reach beyond the solely rational and purely economic level to sparkle feelings of closeness, affection, and trust. Brands that connect with customers' emotions are those that reflect customers' core values. In effect, the brand captures and communicates values customers hold dear. The organizations true value comes up in the customer's actual experience with the service.

In case of packaged food product the product is the primary brand. However, with services, the company is the primary brand. The locus of brand impact differs for services because they lack the tangibility that allows packaging, labeling, and displaying. It is not possible to package and display an entertainment or financial service in the same way as Britannia packages its biscuit and displays them. Even more significant is the source of customer value creation. Brand impact shifts from product to company as service plays a greater role in determining customer value. Barista Coffee customers buy the product brand. Customers patronizing a Café coffee day store, however, buy the company brand.

The service experience with Café coffee day creates an important perception of the brand.

Brand Equity According to the Type of Service

According to Aaker (1996), the value of brands, or their equity, is based on brand name awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations. These associations are largely aesthetic and experiential, and express a set of values that position the brand as unique and valuable. A holistic brand image integrates entities such as values, colors, name, symbols, words and slogans. Once an organization establishes a favorable brand image its main task is to ensure consistency. Although there are differing interpretations of brand, it is not the definition which distinguishes product branding from services branding, but the execution strategy. All products, whether goods or services, possess search, experience, and credence attributes. Search attributes, such as brand name and price, include product characteristics that consumers can determine and evaluate prior to purchase. Experience attributes, such as fun, emotion, or entertainment value, are those product characteristics that can be discerned and evaluated only after purchase or during consumption. Credence attributes include any product characteristics that consumers cannot determine or evaluate even after purchase or consumption. While most goods are high on search and experience attributes, most services are high on experience and credence attributes. Consequently, consumers are able to determine and evaluate most service characteristics only during or after consumption, if they can be discerned at all. Very few services are dominated by search attributes. Kotler (1991) identified four categories, varying from a 'pure' product to a 'pure' service. A pure tangible product includes a tangible offer, such as sugar, or tea. No services are bought with the product. Another is tangible product with accompanying services such as commissioning, training, maintenance. Here, the offer has built-in services to enhance its customer appeal, e.g. computers, machine tools. In case of minor goods or services, the offer is basically a service but has a product element, e.g. property surveyors, whose expert inspection is encapsulated in a report. Similarly, airlines offer in-flight meals, or entertainment. Last is pure service where one buys expertise. Here, the offer is a standalone service such as psycho analysis.

The importance of brand equity for services varies depending on whether the service is dominated by search, experience, or credence attributes. The presence of search attributes helps to make the service tangible, thereby making the purchase less risky for the consumer. The relative lack of search attributes in the vast majority of services makes the purchase task more intricate and perilous than for goods. One way to increase the tangible nature of a service (and increase the number of search attributes) is to use an extrinsic cue like a brand name. Thus, the use of brand names in services marketing can help to reduce consumers' purchase risk and optimize their cognitive processing abilities. Consumers rely heavily on extrinsic cues, such as brand names, in their

assessment of products prior to purchase .This dependence on extrinsic cues occurs because the expected costs of search to determine relative quality levels of competing brands exceed the expected gains from search. Hence, when intrinsic cues are difficult to discern, or the cost of the search is high, consumers will rely on external cues. When credence attributes dominate the service offering, consumers are even more likely to rely upon external cues, such as brand name, to aid in their buying task. This occurs because consumers cannot judge the performance of credence-dominant services even after consumption. As a result, it is expected that branding would be more important in services dominated by credence attributes than those dominated by search or experience attributes. For similar reasons, it is expected that consumers are more likely to rely on brand names for services that are high on experience attributes than those that are high on search attributes.

Major Criteria for Successful Service Branding

There are three key ingredients for successful services branding. The first requirement is integration of communication and service innovation and delivery strategies, and the integration and harmonization of communication strategies aimed at different stakeholder groups. The second requirement of successful services branding is investment in people which includes internal marketing and personalization of the brand, as well as investment in skills training. Together these practices also help to improve perceptions of service quality and satisfaction, as well as improved interpersonal relations with a variety of stakeholders, which are acknowledged aspects of successful service brands. The third requirement is to develop a respected corporate reputation. Reputation comes from providing outstanding service, being a good employer, and showing socially responsible behavior towards the community. All these activities are likely to improve positive word-of-mouth. Sponsorship and other forms of community relations are required for both branding and image/reputation management. This reinforces the conclusions that managers of best service firms consider customer perceptions to be central to the development of corporate reputation, and that corporate and service product branding strategies should contribute to over-arching reputation objectives. Many services branding issues require a company-wide approach like closing service quality gaps; a focus on internal and external stakeholders, including staff; and a need to monitor the whole service delivery process and the role of strong organizational values in motivating staff to deliver the services brand. Understanding the values, and recognizing their roles, reduces employee stress and increases commitment to delivering the service brand.

Brands convey information about the standard of services and in doing so seek to achieve two main goals. First, brand can reduce the uncertainty associated with the purchase of services, especially when there are no tangible elements on which to base purchase decision. The second goal is to reduce the amount of time people spend searching for a particular service, especially when they are unfamiliar with a particular market or category. When travelling, many visitors to a city will stay at hotels such as Taj, Oberoi or ITC Welcome group, because the brands say something about the standard of service that can be expected. Long-term relationship of trust between the services brand and the consumer informs and reinforces the corporate culture in which the brand and the service delivery are embedded. Services marketing should therefore be considered as a customer management process. This require not only proposing how an offering might be of value to customers but it also requires enabling and supporting them to create the value they require through their use of the services.

CONCLUSION

A successful services brand is value-dependent and service encounter-dependent, be cause services brands are relation-based both internally and externally. Strong brands increase customers' trust on services and help them to better understand and visualize what they are buying. Powerful brand in service companies use branding to define their reason for being and connect emotionally with customers, and internalize the brand for service providers so that they will build it for customers. This is the reality of creating value for customers primarily through service as the company becomes the brand.

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