

Alignment and misalignment of frontline employees with brand: A customer perspective in service sector

Abstract

Services are intangible and frontline employees are their face. The frontline employees have an important role in building the confidence of consumers in service brands. The employees can be equipped to fulfil the implicit and explicit brand promises by internalizing brand image. In order to explore and investigate the dynamics of frontline employee Brand image alignment in service sector, this study adopted a mix method approach.

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the antecedents of frontline employee brand alignment. Data was collected by conducting observations and customer interviews. A total number of 8 observations and 92 customer interviews were conducted. Semi structured interviews were conducted by using Critical incident protocol technique. Based on these observations and interviews, our results indicate that frontline employee brand image alignment is perceived through their interaction quality which not only consist of their attitude, behaviour and expertise but also appearance of frontline employee.

Subsequently, two quantitative studies were conducted to develop and test the frontline employee brand alignment measurement. A total number of 567 responses were analysed for study 1 and 432 for study 2. A structural model was tested with outcome variables such as, brand evaluation and customer-based brand equity. Authentic employee behaviour and interaction duration were taken as boundary conditions. Authentic employee behavior positively moderates the relationship between FLE brand alignment and outcome variables. Whereas, interaction duration negatively moderates the relationship between FLE brand alignment and outcome variables.

Frontline employee brand alignment appears to be an important concept in service branding. From a managerial point of view the research tends to show that service branding is impacted by frontline employee brand alignment, especially the way they appear and behave. This study not only explains the concept of frontline employee brand alignment and develops its measurement but also proposes the determinants to measure the alignment. Furthermore, this study adds to the existing literature of interaction quality.

Keywords: *Frontline employee (FLE), Brand alignment, Interaction Quality, Appearance, Service branding*