

INTERNAL BRANDING AS A MANAGEMENT STRATEGY: A CASE OF ORGANIZED RETAIL SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to reveal use of internal branding in retail business and gain competitive advantage. Also paper examines the essential role that internal branding plays in doing successful business. A case-study approach is adopted using qualitative and quantitative methodologies from retail businesses, as well as reviews of earlier literature and research, give data for conducting analysis of internal branding in organized retail business. Authors find that internal branding is a new concept in retail business and internal branding helps in involvement of employees in making change, empower employees and build credibility with your employees and customers. Internal branding not only directly influences the performance of employees but their role in relation to the brand experience with customer in store. The research is relevant as it addresses issues of internal branding and its implications in retail business. Brand development is the business strategy and internal branding help to drive a business forward in complex environment. Study indicates that Marketers would learn how to effectively integrate and leverage internal branding and marketing to improve the short-term and long-term success of your organization. Research only related to retail sector. Implications on other sectors of businesses can be different. Extended research can be beneficial for strategy formulators.

KEYWORDS

Internal Branding, Retail, Retail Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

As the concept of large retail stores gains ground in India, the practice and concept of internal branding is likely to grow exponentially. In the western countries internal branding receives highest priority in commercial planning of a product and marketing activities. As seasons change, the branding techniques too change in a retail store. Traditional belief about branding and the biggest myth in the world of business continues to be that branding is for external purposes, for communicating to consumers and that it is the exclusive preserve of the marketing function. Then era came the belief that advertising, PR, database and direct marketing, interactive media must all create a consistent impression, and thus was born integrated branding, 360-degree branding, total branding and what have you. Not to mention PR agencies, direct marketing agencies and interactive agencies. But you may notice, that there aren't, as yet, organizations that specialize in what is called internal branding.

Retail industry is the sector that has grown in the last few years by leaps and bounds. There is a huge demand for internal branding and retail management work profiles now-a-days. Despite the growing interest in internal branding, there has been limited research conducted into the processes required to encourage brand-supporting behavior. Moreover, paradoxical to the need to understand employees, the existing insights have generally stemmed from research with management, brand practitioners' and even customers' perspectives. Therefore, this paper aims to unearth the role of internal branding and contribution of the employees who deliver brand values to the customer.

Being at the interface of the internal and the external world of the brand, customer facing employees exert a certain degree of influence on customers' and other stakeholders' perceptions about the brand and / or the organization, which determines the success of brand positioning. Their distinctive skills can create a company's competitive advantage that may be difficult to be matched. Such a differential advantage reduces the risk of being perceived as commodities. However, 'as much as the human factor is the company's most tenuous competitive feature, it can also be the most vulnerable one'. That is, they are as much a valuable asset as they are a challenge to a service organization.

The creation of a strong brand and the deliverance of perceived service quality are premised by employees' ability to deliver on customer expectations. Thus, adoption of internal-oriented initiatives, directed at employees improving service quality and bringing the brand to life, is advocated.

This paper, therefore, explores the effect of initiatives of internal branding in retail stores. Many leading retailers are leveraging their vast customer bases to build profitable relationships with customers by focusing branding marketing and customer service offering into a powerful, integrated brand offering. Retailers offering better customer service will build interactive relationship which helps to create customer loyalty. This initiative lies at the heart of sustainable competitive advantage in the modern retail industry.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF INTERNAL BRANDING

Internal Branding is the set of strategic processes that align and empower employees to deliver the appropriate customer experience in a consistent fashion. Internal branding refers to the activities employed by a company to ensure intellectual and emotional staff buy-in (Thomson et al., 1999) into not only the corporate culture, but also the specific brand personality invoked within this culture.

As the definition of brand changes, the process of branding and brand management moves forward as well. Along with external brand building, traditionally the main branding concern, many companies have made internal branding a top priority to counteract short-term perspective and lack of understanding and appreciation of brands within an organization (Keller 2008, 333). Getting employees to sell promises instead of products is especially important in high technology markets where product functionality and features are not enough to provide a source of differentiation anymore (Ward, Light & Goldstine 1999a). Drake et al. (2005, 181) state that engaging employees in implementing promise-based business model requires an incentive system to reward them for exceptional support of the brand strategy. Rewards and recognition serve as a good motivational tool as long as the fundamentals of the program are communicated before the program is launched (Drake et al. 2005, 181). The most effective on-brand rewards and recognition are adequate, sincere, and timely, and coincide with the execution of the internal branding program (Davis 2005, 239).

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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	INTANGIBLE VALUE ACCUMULATION IN CULTURAL AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES <i>DR. SHULIEN CHANG</i>	1
2.	STRATEGIES IN MANAGING BARRIERS TO CUSTOMER SATISFACTION <i>DR. ANTHONY .A. IJEWERE & EDITH .O.ODIA</i>	8
3.	A STUDY ON CONSUMER ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEPARTMENTAL STORES IN COIMBATORE CITY, TAMILNADU <i>DR. J. GOPU & T. GIRIJA</i>	15
4.	FACTORS DETERMINING CONSUMER PREFERENCES FOR BRAND EXTENSIONS <i>DR. NANJUNDARAJ PREM ANAND</i>	20
5.	ENFORCING THE INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL REPORTING STANDARDS WORLDWIDE <i>ENAHORO, JOHN & NDAYIZEYE GERVAIS</i>	27
6.	ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS ON AFRICAN MICROFINANCE INSTITUTION PERFORMANCE: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM EAST AFRICA <i>TILAHUN AEMIRO TEHULU</i>	32
7.	SOME HIDDEN TRUTHS ABOUT MANAGEMENT OF WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT <i>MUHAMMAD RIZWAN, SYED USMAN ALI GILLANI, DIL JAN KHAN, FAWAD SABOOR & MUHAMMAD USMAN</i>	37
8.	INVESTORS' PERCEPTION IN MUTUAL FUND INVESTMENTS (A STUDY IN SELECTED MUTUAL FUND ORGANIZATIONS IN VISAKHAPATNAM) <i>B. MURALI KRISHNA, K. RAKESH & P.V.S. SIVA KUMAR</i>	43
9.	GREEN FINANCIAL INITIATIVES – CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTUTURE OPPORTUNITIES <i>SWETA KUMARI, GAGANDEEP NAGRA, DR. R .GOPAL & DR. RENU VERMA</i>	48
10.	A STUDY ON EFFECT OF DEPRECIATION METHODS ON NET PROFIT OF BUSINESSES <i>DR. SURENDRA GOLE & ABHAY INGLE</i>	52
11.	STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE ORGANIZATIONS <i>AJIT KUMAR KAR</i>	54
12.	THE MARKETING PROBLEMS OF CARDAMOM GROWERS IN TAMIL NADU AND KERALA - A COMPARATIVE STUDY <i>P. SELVAMANI & DR. M. SYED ZAFAR</i>	60
13.	THE EMPIRICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRADING VOLUME, RETURNS AND VOLATILITY <i>DR. BAL KRISHAN & DR. REKHA GUPTA</i>	69
14.	IMPACT OF EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION AND UNION – MANAGEMENT RELATION ON ENHANCED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION- REGRESSION ANALYSIS [A STUDY OF ANDHRA PRADESH STATE ROAD TRANSPORT CORPORATION (A.P.S.R.T.C)] <i>A. R. VIJAYA CHANDRAN & DR. V. M. PRASAD</i>	74
15.	MARKETING STRATEGIES IN HEALTHCARE <i>DR. SOMU.G</i>	76
16.	MANAGEMENT OF TRANSLATION EXPOSURE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MNCs IN INDIA <i>DR. MANISHA GOEL</i>	80
17.	DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS OF DEVELOPMENTAL PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL AND WORK PERFORMANCE <i>DR. VENKATESH. J, VIVEKANANDAN. K & BALAJI. D</i>	87
18.	A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF RURAL AND URBAN CONSUMERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE PRACTICE OF MARKETING CONCEPTS BY MARKETERS <i>DR. DEBASIS BHATTACHARYA & DIPAK SAHA</i>	91
19.	RELEVANCE OF TPM IN INDIAN INDUSTRIES: LITERATURE REVIEW <i>DR. A. K. GUPTA & NARENDER</i>	97
20.	CAPITAL STRUCTURE ANALYSIS IN TATA STEEL LIMITED <i>DR. ASHA SHARMA</i>	100
21.	AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON EFFECTS OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE DISCLOSURE TO FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE <i>PAYAL THAKAR, JAIMIN H. TRIVEDI & CHHAYA PRAJAPATI</i>	108
22.	A STUDY OF IMPACT OF WORKING CAPITAL MANAGEMENT ON FIRM'S PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM CEMENT INDUSTRY IN INDIA FOR THE PERIOD 2007-2011 <i>ZOHRA ZABEEN SABUNWALA</i>	115
23.	INDUSTRIALISATION IN HIMACHAL PRADESH: PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS AND ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES (A CASE STUDY OF KANGRA DISTRICT) <i>CHAMAN LAL</i>	121
24.	INTERNAL BRANDING AS A MANAGEMENT STRATEGY: A CASE OF ORGANIZED RETAIL SECTOR <i>GIRISH MUDE, SWAPNIL UNDALE & VRUSHALI DAIGAVHANE</i>	126
25.	FINANCIAL REPORTING FRAMEWORK FOR CARBON CREDIT ACCOUNTING <i>TULIKA SOOD</i>	130
26.	A STUDY OF INFLUENCES ON CONSUMER PRE PURCHASE ATTITUDE <i>ANILKUMAR. N</i>	133
27.	CONSUMPTION PATTERN OF BUYERS OF BAKERY PRODUCTS: A STUDY CONDUCTED IN KERALA <i>NEMAT SHEEREEN S</i>	141
28.	GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS - PERSPECTIVE 2007 TO DATE & BEYOND (LEADERSHIP OF INDIA'S FINANCIAL SYSTEM) <i>AMIT GUPTA</i>	146
29.	PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL OF INDIAN BANKING SECTOR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR BANKS <i>SAHILA CHAUDHRY</i>	155
30.	A STUDY ON INTERACTIVE MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON PURCHASE DECISION OF YOUTH <i>JATIN PANDEY</i>	165
	REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK	170

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RETAIL INDUSTRY OF INDIA

The Indian retail market, over the last decade, has shown greater acceptance for organized retailing formats. Domestic retailing is emerging from a multitude of unorganized family-owned businesses to organized modern retailing. Rapid urbanization, changes in shopping pattern, demographic dividend and pro-active measures by the Government are abetting the growth of the retail sector in India. Indian retail sector accounts for 22% of the country's GDP and contributes to 8% of total employment.

Indian retail business values at around US\$ 550 billion as of now and about four per cent of it accounts for the organized sector. A report by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) has revealed that the country's organized retail is estimated at US\$ 28 billion with around 7 per cent penetration. It is projected to become a US\$ 260 billion business over the next decade with around 21 per cent penetration. A report by CII-AT Kearney revealed that Luxury brands market in India grew at a healthy 20 per cent during 2010 reaching a size of US\$ 5.8 billion. It further stated that the Indian luxury market stood at a value of US\$ 4.76 billion in 2009 and is anticipated to be worth US\$ 14.7 billion by 2015.

The world's largest retailer Wal-Mart will open an innovation lab in Bengaluru by the end of 2011. The lab would be tasked to drive the US\$ 422-billion company's next generation innovations that impact shopping behavior among the customers. Real estate major DLF's subsidiary DLF Brands has struck a deal with Chicago-based Claire's Stores Inc to bring the latter to India and open its 75 stores over 2011-16. Claire's is a specialty retailer which targets young girls through over 3,000 stores globally.

From 2000 to 2010, Indian retail attracted about \$1.8 billion in foreign direct investment, constituting 1.5% of total investment flow into India. India has topped the A.T. Kearney's annual Global Retail Development Index (GRDI) for the third consecutive year, maintaining its position as the most attractive market for retail investment.

Arvind Brands, Madura Garments, Spykar Lifestyle and Royal Classic Polo are known for Indian apparel retailers, leveraging opportunity from Indian market. Future Groups, RP-Sanjiv Goenka Group Retail, The Tata Group, Reliance Retail, K Raheja Corporation, Lifestyle International, Vishal Retail are prominent players in Indian retail market accounting major market share of organized retail in India.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research aims to reveal use of internal branding in retail business and gain competitive advantage in complex business scenario. Also paper examines the essential role that internal branding plays in doing successful business. From our literature review, we derive several research questions to guide our study. Insights into these research questions help us develop the Internal branding concept further.

RQ1: What are opinions of sample employees regarding internal branding?

RQ2: What benefits these organizations achieved in adopting internal branding?

RQ3: Who are responsible for conducting internal branding in sample retail organizations?

RESEARCH DESIGN

For this study case study approach was adopted which included qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research consisted of eleven in-depth interviews conducted with executives/managers that are responsible for developing internal branding strategies within their organizations. These in-depth interviews revealed an expanded concept of internal branding and answered second (RQ2) and third (RQ3) research questions. Subsequently to answer first (RQ1) research question, the quantitative research portion of this study was managed through structured questionnaires survey of 36 respondents across industries who were employees involved in dealing customer directly. Sample retail store (With name of the retailer and Place) for study were Big Bazaar (Kothrud), Reliance Mart (Fatima Nagar), Mega Mart (Dapodi), Pune Central (University Road and Bund Garden), Shopper Stop (Camp), Lifestyle (Koregaon Park) and Croma (Hadapsar) from various part of Pune city.

For sample purpose, we thought that senior management typically develops brand strategy while the actual brand experience is most often delivered by the least-informed and lowest paid service associates or front line employees. Also, to further complicate matters, these front line associates are often part-time. Best practices in internal branding can build that crucial bridge between strategy and execution.

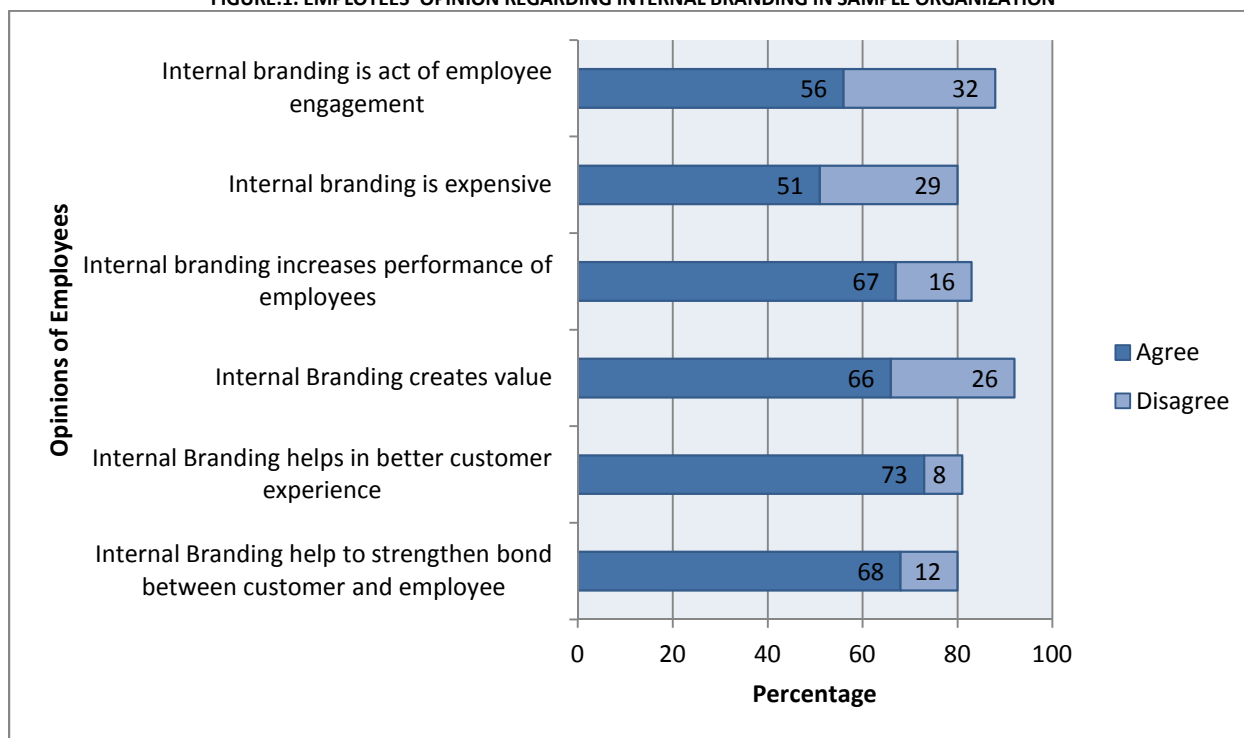
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Internal branding focuses on what should be done in-house so that it translates into the company's desired results outside. And this study revealed exactly how internal branding creates impact on overall image of organization. Brand in itself is a powerful word-evoking emotions plugged with a particular product. While massive efforts are undertaken to project the company's right image in front of the public, they stand meaningless if these are not applied towards the internal customers, namely employees of the company. If employees are happy, it would transpire into better clientele.

Benefits that revolve around internal branding are manifold. Effective internal branding mechanism gives the company an edge over its competitors as brand employers are known for their reputation, good retention tactics, less attrition levels, who value employees and their individuality, who breed a cohesive culture, provide growth and development opportunities, and there is inclusive growth and overall organizational development. The goal of an internal branding campaign is very similar to that of an external campaign to create an emotional connection to your company that transcends any one particular experience. In the case of employees, companies also want the connection to inform the way they approach their jobs, even if they don't interact with customers. Companies always want them to have the brand vision in their minds and to consider whether or not they are supporting the brand in every decision they make.

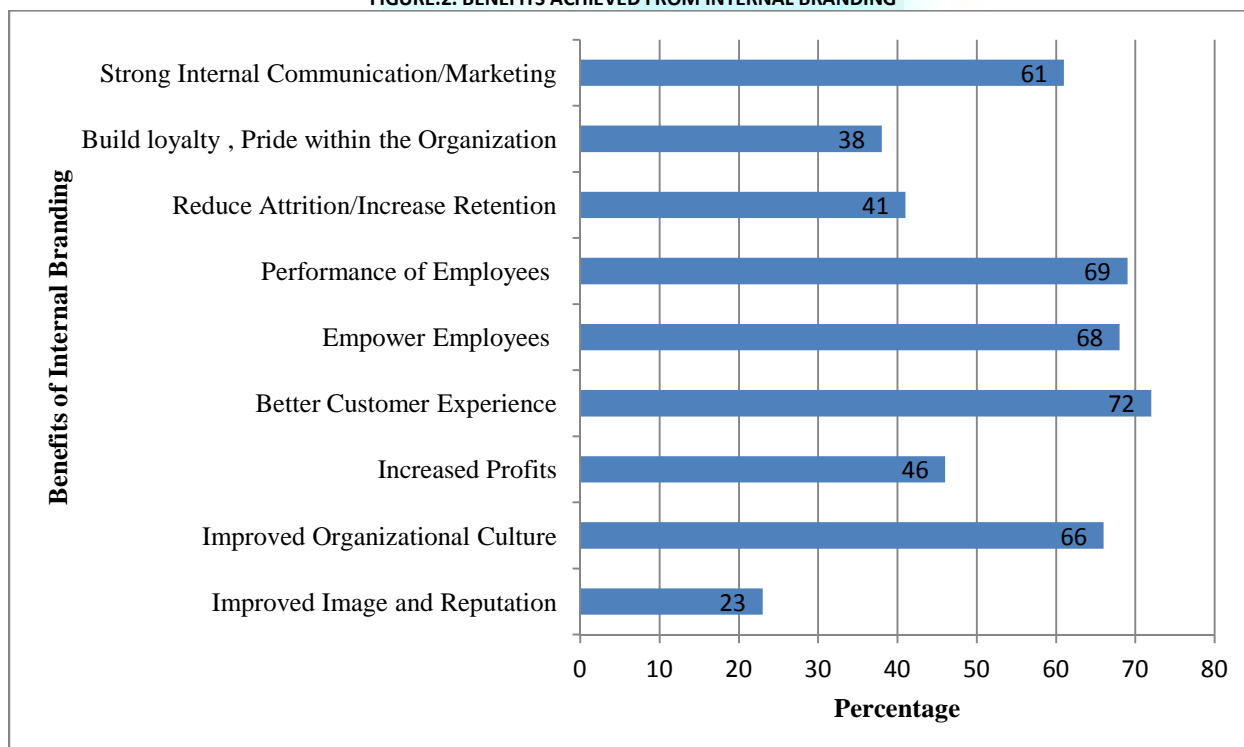
The effectiveness and overall success of internal branding program is dependent on an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the internal as well as the external environment of the organization, while market research provides such information (Berry and Parasuraman, 1992; Mitchell, 2002; Schultz, 2002; Beagrie, 2003). For study findings, research questions were analyzed respectively and outcomes are discussed in detail.

FIGURE.1. EMPLOYEES' OPINION REGARDING INTERNAL BRANDING IN SAMPLE ORGANIZATION



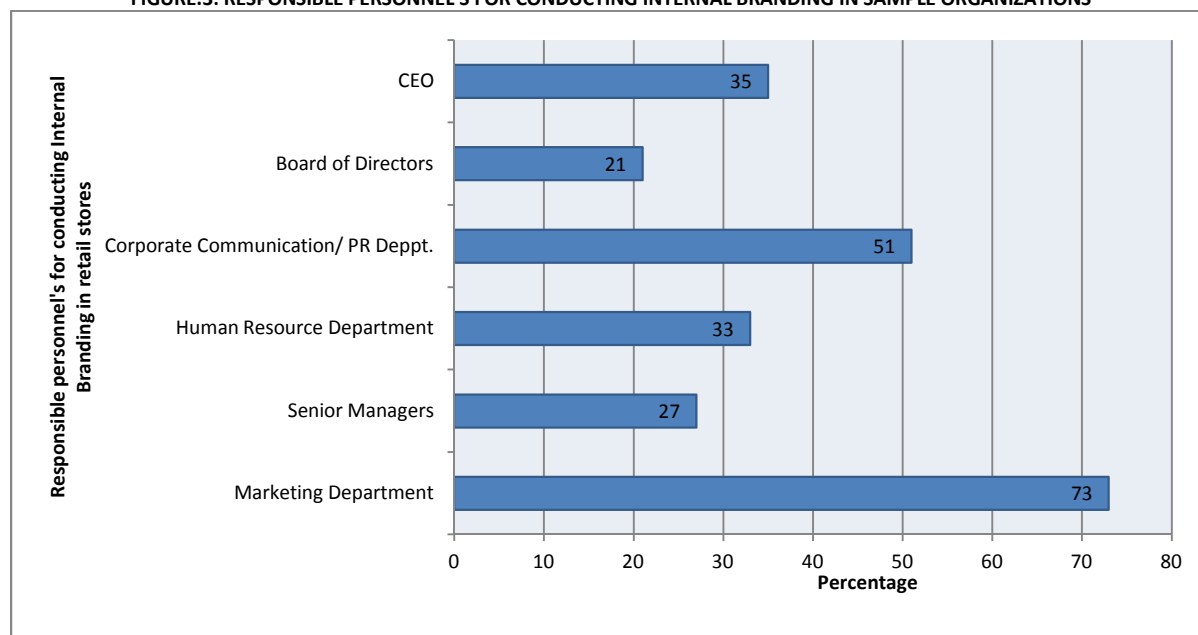
RQ1: First research question sought to know the opinions about internal branding from conducted sample employees in various retail stores of Pune. From above (Figure.1) we found that most of respondents were aware about internal branding and they agreed that internal branding helps in better customer experience (73%), and help to strengthen bond between customer and employee (68%), increases performance of employees (67%), create value (66%) for customer are subsequent opinions and perceptions about internal branding in sample organizations. Apart from that engagement of employee in internal branding and internal brand is expensive were considerably agreed opinions from sample. Output of this research question would help to understand different perception and opinion of employees related to internal branding and its execution.

FIGURE.2. BENEFITS ACHIEVED FROM INTERNAL BRANDING



RQ2: The overall results in (Figure.2.) indicate that, there are several benefits of internal branding but according to study, better customer service (72%), performance of employee (69%) and empower employee (68%) were prominent benefits out of internal branding. However sample respondents answered positively regarding other benefits of internal branding which include improved organizational culture, strong internal communication, build loyalty, pride within organization, increased profit and improved reputation of organization. Internal branding leads to an increase in efficiency and productivity levels of employees, which in turn makes customers happier. Effective internal branding mechanism gives the company an edge over its competitors as brand employers are known for their reputation, good retention tactics, less attrition levels, who value employees and their individuality, who breed a cohesive culture, provide growth and development opportunities, and there is inclusive growth and overall organizational development.

FIGURE.3: RESPONSIBLE PERSONNEL'S FOR CONDUCTING INTERNAL BRANDING IN SAMPLE ORGANIZATIONS



RQ3: Formulation and implementation of internal branding practices are crucial tasks in any organization and person who is responsible could play major role in creating better brand image in market. Our study revealed that Marketing Department (73%), Corporate Communication/ PR Department (51%), and CEO (35%) most often made internal branding related decisions. Many organizations in sample had Human Resource Department, Senior Managers and Board of Directors as decision makers for internal branding. This result would help to construct internal branding strategies for organizations.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The research is relevant as it addresses issues of internal branding and its implications in retail business. Brand development is the business strategy and internal branding help to drive a business forward in complex environment. Study indicates that Marketers would learn how to effectively integrate and leverage internal branding and marketing to improve the short-term and long-term success of your organization. Research only related to retail sector from Pune city. Implications on other sectors of businesses can be different. Extended research can be beneficial for strategy formulators who would deal with Internal Branding.

CONCLUSIONS

What makes internal branding such a compelling proposition is the fact of compounding benefits. A strong internal brand supports the human resource goals of total rewards. With talented, motivated, committed people working in the organization the external brand promise, and the business itself, are strengthened. Internal branding is the connected of any corporate brand. Internal branding strengthens a corporate organization's position in a competitive market place as well as enhances organization's effectiveness. Internal branding is important because like every other branding strategy, internal brand is a form of an attempt to gain further control of niche through shaping internal audience identities. The essence of internal branding is to help employee internalize and truly represent the brand identity desired by corporate brand.

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