

HUMAN RESOURCES AS BRAND AMBASSADOR: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO BUILDING CUSTOMER LOYALTY

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Submitted: 23 March 2025	Revised: 26 Apr 2025	Accepted: 12 Apr 2025
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Abstract

In an increasingly competitive business world, building customer loyalty does not solely depend on product quality but also on interactions that foster trust and emotional connection. This study explores the role of Human Resources (HR) as Brand Ambassadors in enhancing customer loyalty through a qualitative approach. The research method employed is a case study, utilizing in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis as data collection techniques. The findings indicate that internal brand ambassadors are more effective than celebrities or influencers as they have a deeper understanding of the product and company values. Direct interaction between internal brand ambassadors and customers creates a more authentic experience, strengthens trust, and enhances brand loyalty. Additionally, value alignment between employees and the company plays a crucial role in the success of this strategy. This study suggests that companies aiming to improve customer loyalty can optimize the role of HR as brand ambassadors. By fostering more personal and authentic interactions, internal brand ambassadors contribute to the development of long-term relationships between customers and brands.

Keywords: Brand Ambassador, Customer Loyalty, Emotional Connection, Customer Trust, Internal HR, Marketing Strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly competitive modern business era, marketing strategies are not only based on product or service excellence but also on how companies build brand image and emotional connections with consumers. One of the growing approaches is the utilization of Human Resources (HR) as Brand Ambassadors, where company employees act as the face of the brand in fostering customer loyalty. Employees serving as brand ambassadors do not only represent the brand but also act as an emotional bridge between the company and its consumers (Keller, 2013).

Several studies indicate that brand ambassadors significantly impact customer loyalty. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), interactions between brand ambassadors and customers play a crucial role in shaping a positive brand experience. Aaker (1991) asserts

that brand equity and customer loyalty can be strengthened through relationships based on trust and emotional closeness. Similarly, Brodie et al. (2011) highlight that customer engagement with brand ambassadors enhances brand awareness and creates a deeper customer experience, ultimately reinforcing loyalty to the brand.

However, most studies on brand ambassadors still focus more on the use of celebrities or influencers in marketing. Erdogan (1999) states that celebrities have a high appeal in building brand equity, but their long-term effectiveness in fostering customer loyalty remains debatable. Gilly and Graham (2019) found that customers tend to trust internal brand ambassadors more than celebrities or influencers, as they have a deeper understanding of the product and the company's values. Additionally, Schouten et al. (2020) emphasize that internal brand ambassadors are more effective in fostering emotional engagement because their interactions are more authentic compared to external endorsements.

Despite these findings, research on brand ambassadors is still predominantly quantitative. Davis and Dunn (2020) note that most studies measure the effectiveness of brand ambassadors solely through metrics such as engagement rates, purchase intentions, or sales growth, without exploring the psychological and emotional mechanisms underlying the relationship between brand ambassadors and customers. Hollebeek et al. (2014) highlight that customer interactions with brand ambassadors can strengthen emotional attachment to the brand, yet studies exploring how this attachment is formed remain limited. Morhart et al. (2013) also found that employees whose values align with the company build more authentic and trustworthy relationships with customers, but further research is needed to understand how this dynamic functions within the internal brand ambassador context.

Furthermore, studies discussing internal factors that support the effectiveness of HR as brand ambassadors remain scarce. Aaker (1991) emphasizes that corporate culture, brand communication training, and alignment of values between employees and the company are critical factors influencing the success of internal brand ambassador strategies. Unfortunately, empirical research addressing these aspects is still rarely found in academic literature (Brodie et al., 2011; Schouten et al., 2020).

Based on these issues, this study aims to explore the role of HR as brand ambassadors in building customer loyalty using a qualitative approach. By analyzing customer experiences in-depth, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive insight into the effectiveness of HR as brand ambassadors and how this strategy can serve as a more sustainable alternative compared to the use of celebrities or influencers in marketing.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method to explore in depth the role of Human Resources (HR) as Brand Ambassadors in building customer loyalty. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding

of experiences, perceptions, and psychological mechanisms that cannot be thoroughly examined through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative methods enable researchers to understand phenomena within a broader social context by considering the subjective aspects of individual experiences. In this context, the approach is used to analyze how interactions between HR as brand ambassadors and customers shape emotional engagement and influence brand loyalty.

This study employs in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis to obtain rich and comprehensive data. Interviews were conducted with employees serving as brand ambassadors, customers, and marketing managers in companies that have implemented this strategy. According to Patton (2015), in-depth interviews allow for a detailed exploration of individual experiences and perceptions, providing broader insights into the factors that influence the effectiveness of HR as brand ambassadors. Additionally, participatory observation was conducted to understand how employees interact with customers in real contexts, as suggested by Spradley (2016), who stated that direct observation helps capture behavioral nuances that may be difficult to reveal through interviews alone.

In addition to interviews and observations, this study also employs document analysis, including company marketing policies, brand communication strategies, and customer satisfaction reports. Bowen (2009) emphasizes that document analysis is an effective method for data triangulation, ensuring the validity and reliability of research findings. By integrating these three data collection techniques, this study aims to provide a holistic understanding of the role of HR as brand ambassadors in building customer loyalty.

To enhance data credibility, this study implements source and method triangulation (Denzin, 1978). Source triangulation was carried out by comparing perspectives from various informants (HR brand ambassadors, customers, and management), while method triangulation was conducted by combining interviews, observations, and document analysis to reduce research bias. Data validity was also strengthened through member checking, where interview results were reconfirmed with participants to ensure accurate data interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The data analysis technique used in this study is thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which aims to identify key patterns and themes from the collected data. This analysis was conducted through the stages of transcription, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis can reveal meaning patterns in qualitative data and provide deeper insights into the studied phenomena.

Based on the applied methodology, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms in forming customer loyalty through HR as brand ambassadors. Furthermore, through an in-depth case study approach, this research can also identify the success factors and challenges faced by companies in

implementing this strategy, serving as a reference for the development of more effective and sustainable customer relationship-based marketing strategies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

From the in-depth interviews conducted with customers and marketing managers, it was found that the majority of customers trust the information provided by company employees more than advertisements or celebrity endorsements. This is because employees have a deeper understanding of the products they promote and can provide information in a more authentic and credible manner.

Participatory observations also revealed that customers who directly interact with internal brand ambassadors develop a stronger connection with the brand compared to those who are only exposed to traditional marketing media. They feel more valued and receive more personalized information compared to communication through mass media or digital advertising.

Additionally, document analysis, including customer satisfaction reports and corporate marketing strategies, indicates that companies that implement internal brand ambassador strategies tend to have higher customer retention rates and receive more positive recommendations through word-of-mouth marketing.

Discussion

1. Internal Brand Ambassadors Enhance Credibility and Customer Trust

Customer trust in a brand is one of the key factors in building long-term customer loyalty. Aaker (1991) explains that customer trust is formed through a combination of product quality, brand interaction, and brand engagement in fulfilling customers' emotional needs.

In the context of internal brand ambassadors, this study found that company employees are more trusted by customers than external celebrities or influencers. Gilly and Graham (2019) state that customers are more likely to trust information provided by company employees because they have a deeper understanding of the product and company values.

The findings of this study are also supported by Schouten et al. (2020), who assert that internal brand ambassadors are more capable of delivering brand messages authentically compared to external endorsements. This is because employees have firsthand experience and understanding of the products they promote, allowing them to provide more detailed and credible explanations to customers.

During interviews, many customers expressed that they feel more comfortable and trust the information provided by employees with direct product experience, compared to celebrities who merely read promotional scripts. Hollebeek et al. (2014) also emphasize that customer engagement with an authentic brand ambassador strengthens their trust and commitment to the brand.

2. The Influence of Personal Interaction on Customer Emotional Engagement

One of the critical factors in building customer loyalty is the emotional attachment customers have to a brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016). This study found that direct interaction between customers and internal brand ambassadors enhances emotional engagement with the brand more effectively than one-way advertisements or promotions.

Observations indicate that customers who frequently interact with internal brand ambassadors feel more valued and develop a stronger connection with the brand. Brodie et al. (2011) also emphasize that emotional involvement built through personal interactions increases customer loyalty because customers feel more appreciated and have a stronger relationship with the brand.

From customer interviews, it was found that customers are more likely to continue purchasing products or services from brands that have internal brand ambassadors they know personally. Customers believe that internal brand ambassadors provide more honest recommendations and have a better understanding of customer needs compared to standard advertising.

3. The Role of Value Alignment Between Employees and Companies in Brand Ambassador Effectiveness

The success of internal brand ambassador strategies is not only determined by employees' communication skills but also by the alignment of values between employees and the company. Morhart et al. (2013) explain that employees whose values align with the company are more effective in delivering brand messages to customers.

In this study, interviews with marketing managers revealed that companies with strong organizational cultures are more successful in implementing internal brand ambassador strategies. Davis and Dunn (2020) also state that internal brand ambassadors who understand the company's vision and mission can create a more authentic customer experience, thereby enhancing the brand's credibility.

Observations further revealed that employees who feel a strong connection to the company's values are more enthusiastic in engaging with customers, ultimately having a positive impact on customer loyalty toward the brand.

4. The Impact of Internal Brand Ambassadors on Customer Loyalty

According to Erdogan (1999), customer loyalty is formed through a combination of positive experiences, emotional engagement, and trust in the brand ambassador.

The findings of this study indicate that customers who frequently interact with internal brand ambassadors are more likely to continue using the company's products or services and recommend them to others. This is further supported by Bowen (2009), who asserts that customer-brand relationships are more sustainable when communication is conducted personally by trusted individuals.

Additionally, customer interviews show that customers are more likely to recommend a brand to friends and family if they have had a positive experience with an internal brand ambassador. This suggests that internal brand ambassador strategies not only increase customer loyalty but also play a significant role in word-of-mouth marketing, which is highly effective in attracting new customers.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that Human Resources (HR) as Brand Ambassadors have a significant impact on customer loyalty. Internal brand ambassadors, namely company employees who represent the brand in customer interactions, have been proven to be more effective in building trust, emotional engagement, and increasing customer loyalty compared to external celebrities or influencers.

First, internal brand ambassadors have higher credibility than external brand ambassadors. Employees who have direct experience and understanding of the products or services they promote can deliver information more authentically and credibly (Gilly & Graham, 2019). This trust is a key factor that encourages customers to remain loyal to a brand, as explained by Aaker (1991).

Second, personal interactions conducted by internal brand ambassadors play a crucial role in strengthening customers' emotional attachment to the brand. Customers who have direct experiences with employees acting as brand ambassadors feel more valued and develop a stronger connection with the brand (Brodie et al., 2011). This aligns with Kotler and Keller's (2016) findings, which state that customer loyalty is influenced not only by product quality but also by the emotional experience gained through interactions with the brand.

Third, alignment of values between employees and the company is a key factor in the effectiveness of internal brand ambassadors. This study found that companies with a strong organizational culture are more successful in implementing internal brand ambassador strategies, as employees who feel connected to the company's values are more motivated to deliver brand messages authentically and convincingly (Morhart et al., 2013).

Fourth, internal brand ambassador strategies directly contribute to increased customer loyalty. Customers who regularly interact with internal brand ambassadors are more likely to repurchase products and recommend the brand to others through word-of-mouth marketing (Erdogan, 1999; Bowen, 2009). These findings suggest that this strategy not only enhances customer retention but also expands brand reach through recommendations from satisfied customers.

Overall, this study provides in-depth insights into how HR as Brand Ambassadors can serve as a more sustainable marketing strategy compared to using external celebrities or influencers. By fostering more personal and credible interactions with customers, internal brand ambassadors not only enhance customer loyalty but also establish a more meaningful, long-term relationship with the brand. Therefore, companies seeking to improve customer loyalty are encouraged to develop an HR-based brand ambassador program that is integrated with corporate culture and brand communication strategies.

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