

A Discourse Approach to Brand Leadership Management

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Abstract

This paper examines existing viewpoints on brand leadership management and presents discourse analysis as another efficient, coherent and sustainable approach to this concept. Importantly, existing works on brand leadership management are critiqued – opening up a gap in the literature. Consequently, a discursive brand leadership model that advocates the *action of talk* via corporate communications following the delivery of a brand promise is presented. It is hoped that this study would help in creating a greater understanding of brand leadership.

Keywords: brand leadership, brand promise, corporate communications, discourse theory, organizational leadership, social constructionism

1. Introduction

Theoretical literature on organization studies, has within the last two decades, witnessed an unprecedented rise in the volume of research contributing to organizational leadership. A number of recent works (see Douglas, 2012; Palrecha, 2012; Hur et al, 2011; Balthazard et al, 2009; Schippers et al, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Fleming and Waguespack, 2007; Avolio et al, 2009; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009; Tranter, 2009) which appear in some first class journals provide a good evidence in this regard. Central to organizational leadership concerns are issues relating to performance improvement, raising of product quality level, increased output, good return on investment – all which are to a large extent dependent on the ability to lead competitively through effective brand leadership management in the marketplace.

Unlike organizational leadership, which is consistently debated, brand leadership, though important and inextricably linked to organizational leadership, is yet to receive any form of attention in organization or leadership studies literature. As such there has been no form of cross-fertilization of ideas between the two disciplines. This may be so because brand leadership is conceived as being deeply rooted in the field of marketing – as opposed to organizational leadership, which is a discipline that is traditionally grounded in organization studies. However, the pursuit of brand leadership, while popularly conceived as a marketing discipline, can also be proficiently understood as an exercise in the management of discourse (Phillips et al, 2004) between business organizations and stakeholders. Contrary to existing marketing texts, this paper argues that brand leadership is not only achieved through consistent innovation, higher market share, international presence, ability to offer consumers a wide variety of choices and so on. Rather, it is birthed through a discourse system that compel business organizations to say and action what is said in all corporate communication texts. In essence, brand leadership, from a discourse point of view, highlights the repeated delivery and expression of brand promises through a variety of corporate communication activities, which are decoded and interpreted at all times by stakeholders.

This paper makes a conceptual analysis of how brand leadership is achieved through discourse analysis. In contrast to existing literature on branding that takes a cursory look at the processes through which brand leadership evolves, this study dives into brand leadership literature from a critical angle – and then opens up a gap based on the critique. The gap is then filled through the development of a discursive brand leadership model. Finally, the implications of the study for brand leadership literature is highlighted and discussed.

2. Brand Leadership Literature: A Critique

Knowledge on brand leadership, the variety of approaches deployed by firms to stay ahead of competition within markets, is typically grounded on two theoretical assumptions. The first advocates a *built-in system* that demands

a systemic organizational construction of branding philosophy into all operational processes (Tilley, 1999). The second is a *built-out system*. It champions the development of brand leadership through consistent innovation, higher market share, international presence and the ability to offer consumers a wide variety of choices regardless of the peculiarity of cultural nuances that may exist within social institutions across the world. This position is fully and firmly supported in the works of Gehlhar et al (2009); Beverland et al (2007); Macrae et al (1999); Campman (2001). Succinctly, the key argument under the *built-out system* is simply that the attainment of brand leadership in the marketplace is determined and squarely dependent upon the extent of business innovation, higher market share, international presence etc. The built-in system is underpinned by a variety of organizational-wide activities that requires employees operating throughout the value chain process to be mindful of a brand positioning. So, if for instance, a brand is known for a particular level of quality, it then becomes imperative for employees at every stage within the value chain system to bear this in mind with a means of ensuring that the brand attains the prescribed level of quality expected of the brand. Ultimately, the built-in system then becomes the foundation upon which a brand becomes a leader (Tilley, 1999).

The problem with the built-in system is that it fails to recognize the role of corporate communications in the brand leadership development process. Tilley (1999) is quick at giving the built-in system a conceptual grounding on the value-chain theory (Porter, 1987), but discounts the corporate communications process that makes the achievement of brand leadership at local and international levels possible. This is a ghastly and catastrophic error. As observed in some corporate marketing texts (see Melewar and Karaosmanglu, 2006; Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Balmer and Greyser, 2003; Melewar, 2003; Bernstein, 1986; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Argenti, 1998; van Riel, 1995), branding whether at corporate or product level is shaped through corporate communications. Corporate communications is that system that articulates and profiles the corporate identity behind a brand – thus translating the corporate identity to corporate image instantaneously and then to strategic corporate reputation if the corporate identity is maintained over a long period of time. It is an exercise that would normally encode a coherent identity, promote a good cultural system and champion a well articulated business philosophy. Corporate communications is responsible for disseminating strategic messaging about a corporate brand with the aim of creating favorable starting points with stakeholders on whom the survival of the brand depends (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). Given its important role in the brand building process, the blacklisting of corporate communications as witnessed in Tilley's (1999) work incapacitates the built-in system from providing insights into the processes through which brand leadership status are constructed, developed, managed, attained and sustained consistently over time.

Another problem with the built-in model and indeed other models to be reviewed later in this study is that they lack any form of grounding in organizational leadership theories, which are precursory to brand leadership studies. As we are made to understand in the literature, leadership studies date back to the late 1920s when it was conceived as an internal quality with which a biological being is born (Bernard, 1926) and not made. This means that leaders are created biologically with leadership qualities and abilities right from the womb. The epistemological cum ontological reasoning underpinning this philosophy is that if the traits that differentiated leaders from followers were effectively defined, successful leaders would be quickly assessed and put into positions of leadership (Horner, 1997). Human personality, physical, and mental characteristics are thought to be some of those inborn leadership characteristics. Another philosophy, which emerged towards the late 1950s, was the assumption that regardless of whatever profession they find themselves, leaders would naturally exhibit actions, attitudes and behaviours that are capable of driving or increasing effectiveness in business organizations (Halpin and Winer, 1957; Hemphill and Coons, 1957). Further studies from authors belonging to the 1950s leadership philosophy emerged in the 1980s to challenge Bernard's (1926) theory. For the likes of Saal and Knight (1988) leadership is not necessarily an inborn phenomenon but instead a role that could be taught to employees to attain their maximum leadership potentials. Following Saal and Knight (1988) a recent philosophical movement in leadership studies, which draws on contingency theory of management emerged. This movement is of the opinion that the effect of one leadership variable is contingent on other organizational variables. This means that there are possibilities for leadership to emerge under specific circumstances as well as under planned or unplanned opportunistic situations (Horner, 1997). Following Bernard (1926) therefore, it is argued that in order to achieve brand leadership, promoters must prior to the set-up of business organizations imbibe a manifesto that integrates brand leadership philosophy into all policy decisions and actions. The rationale for assimilating such a philosophy prior to business set-up is to create an organization with an inborn character to lead in the marketplace.

In similar vein, the *built-out system*, which conceives the attainment of brand leadership as being heavily dependent upon the achievement of brand leadership in the marketplace, lends itself to the functionalist philosophy

of the social and human sciences. The functionalist lens is unashamedly rooted in the notion that social phenomenon are of the same principle throughout the world and are therefore generalizable enough to be construed as a universal law (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Gioia, 1998) binding on all social institutions across the world – regardless of cultural differences. Functionalism is candidly and unapologetically realist and objectivist in ontological outlook (Gioia, 1998). In view of this realist cum objectivist hindsight (Burrell and Morgan 1979), it is possible therefore, given the availability of a sound methodological rigor, to probe and interrogate the relationship between the factors of innovation, higher market share, international presence etc on the one hand and the concept of brand leadership management, development and sustenance on the other hand. An issue of concern within the framework of the *built-out* system however is the failure by its proponents to recognize that the factors upon which the development of brand leadership depends are relics of human interpretations and therefore subjective in nature. Consequently, a strong functionalist assumption appears to weaken the built-out system of brand leadership.

Furthermore, the built-out system (see the works of Gehlhar et al, 2009; Beverland et al, 2007; Macrae et al, 1999; Campman, 2001) fails to recognize the relational processes that subsists between corporate/brand communications and the delivery of brand promise – and therefore provides no empirically grounded framework that could be deployed to understand this phenomenon. Put another way, works belonging to the *built-out* system of branding lacks any form of disclosure on how the duo of corporate/brand communications and brand promise work collaboratively towards the development and achievement of brand leadership.

Unlike other aspects of branding, which are fraught by disagreements, disparity and incongruity, it appears that academic debate within the field of brand leadership has enjoyed relative calm and some level of consensus. There is currently no evidence of any dissenting voice challenging some of the popular viewpoints in brand leadership, which were theorized by some leading authors. A good example in this regard is Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) work, which is popularly cited by academic and practitioner authors. The rationale for the popularity that this text has enjoyed is attributable to the corresponding similarity and congruity between Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) positivistic orientation and the philosophical mindset of many branding academics. Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) notion of brand leadership is predicated on a model, which emerged in view of P&G's classic model's inability to address emerging market complexities, competitive pressures, channel dynamics, global forces, business environments with multiple brands, aggressive brand extensions and complex sub-brand structures. Unlike P&G's classic model of the 1930s, Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) brand leadership model is driven by brand identity and sales. It is strategic and tactical but advocates a global perspective. An important goal in this model is the management of brands across markets and countries. Additionally, the model calls for the positioning of the brand manager at the top echelon of business organizations and encourages the development of close linkages between brand equity and image. The model espouses the development of brand equity measures to supplement short-term sales and profit figures and advocates the broadening of communication activities towards internal audiences and evangelizes a movement from a single brand to a product category. A closer look at this model however indicates that little or no credence was given to the mechanics behind the delivery of brand promise, thus making brand leadership a mere communication exercise. In this paper, it is argued that the pursuit of brand leadership in business organizations is not and should not be a lopsided approach involving either corporate/brand communications or the delivery of brand promise to stakeholders. The management of brand leadership is about the communication and the delivery of brand promise. This is particularly true for all business organizations – especially those belonging to the FMCG sector. Although, Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) presented a variety of cases to strengthen their model, this is however void of how brand communications and the delivery of brand promises enhances, drives or contributes towards the achievement of brand leadership.

Put together, the built-in and built-out brand leadership oriented systems together with Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) popular brand leadership model are void of empirically grounded theoretical frameworks explicating how brand leadership emerges from brand communications and the delivery of brand promises – and how these phenomena interrelate. The aim therefore is simply to fill this gap. This is the bane of the next three paragraphs.

3. Managing Brand Leadership through Discourse

In this paper, it is conceived that brand leadership is not merely a signification of brands at the forefront of innovation, market share, internationalization etc as we are made to believe in existing brand leadership texts (see Tilley, 1999; Gehlhar et al, 2009; Beverland et al, 2007; Macrae et al, 2003; Campman, 2001). Rather, it is a social constructionist (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) cum discourse phenomenon (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1997) highlighting the consistent and repeated delivery and expression of brand promises through a variety of

corporate communication activities, which are decoded and interpreted repeatedly by stakeholders. As Phillips et al (2004) points out, discourse must action talk – meaning that visionary business organizations do not just describe things – rather, they engage themselves squarely in doing (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) what is professed in their corporate communications. Consequently, the consistent and repeated delivery of brand promises habitualizes and institutionalizes this activity (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) – thus creating symbolic meanings (see Smircich and Morgan, 1982) or psychological formations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) in the minds of stakeholders. Put another way, brand leadership does not just thrive on corporate communications or the publication of brand advocacy statements as commonly witnessed in today business environment. For brand leadership to be fully activated, business organizations must develop systems cum policy guidelines that support corporate communications with an effective delivery of brand promises. Essentially, this would enable the generation of positive meanings that will further support brand leadership positioning in the minds of stakeholders. Failure to action the messaging in corporate communications may lead to consumer boycott, loss of market share, protests and so on. It may in fact lead to the death of a brand – no matter how big or successful it may be. But how can business organizations achieve brand leadership beyond corporate communications? In the next subparagraphs, a discursive brand leadership model is presented to address this issue.

The discursive brand leadership model (see Figure 1) gives a representation of how the fulfillment of brand promise and the strategic construction of leadership cues in corporate communications work collaboratively to create the notion of brand leadership in the minds of stakeholders. Here, the *delivery of brand promise* is conceived to mean the fulfillment of a covenant or pledge made with stakeholders through corporate communication messaging. The pact with stakeholders may be a pledge to provide: a) first class innovative services that customers demand across the world; b) human capital policies of international standard; c) higher return on investment that competitors across the world find difficult to achieve; d) responsible/sustainable business practices that are genuinely enacted, and so on.

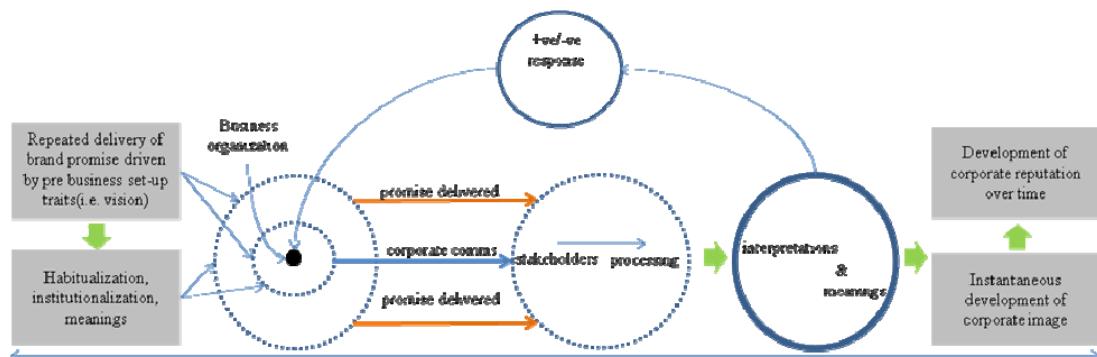


Figure 1. The discursive brand leadership model

Source: developed by author

It is clear from Figure 1 that business organizations construct themselves as brand leaders in the marketplace repeatedly by conveying messages that are grounded upon inborn characteristics (Bernard, 1926) or what could be described here as pre-business set-up leadership traits such as a powerful business vision that is capable of charting organizational movement towards a specific direction. These are then conveyed through formal and informal lines of corporate communications. Whilst the formal lines of communications are represented by corporate advertising and other forms of below the line campaigns, messages within the informal lines of communications symbolize the delivery of brand promise to stakeholder. The repetition of this activity makes the fulfillment of brand promise a habitual exercise – thus institutionalizing the process (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In essence the repetition, habitualization and institutionalization of this exercise gives off a meaning that signifies organizational ability to fulfill a brand promise. This is expressed through formal and informal lines of communication and then conveyed to stakeholders who process, interpret and develop meanings based on the message. At this point, two important things are likely to happen. First, because the brand has fulfilled its promise, the brand would linger in the mind of stakeholders over a long period of time. Hence, the brand becomes socially constructed as a leader in the minds of stakeholders. Importantly, this positioning, in the minds of stakeholders, will influence a positive behavior and attitude in favor of the brand. Second, the positive construction of the brand arising from the fulfillment of brand promise together with a well articulated corporate

communications will endear the brand with a positive corporate image in the short run and a favorable corporate reputation over time. The reverse may be the case if the promise made in corporate communications is not delivered.

4. Conclusion

This paper makes an analysis of works on brand leadership and makes a case for the use of discourse analysis as another approach to the management of brand leadership. Essentially, three important contributions to brand management and the general field of marketing were made. The first finding focuses on the development of conceptual analysis of two types of assumptions in brand leadership literature – namely the build-in system and (2) the built – out system. While the build-in system advocates a systemic organizational construction of branding philosophy into all operational processes (Tilley, 1999); the *built-out system* profess the development of brand leadership through consistent innovation, higher market share, international presence and the ability to offer consumers a wide variety of choices regardless of the peculiarity of cultural nuances that may exist within social institutions across the world (Gehlhar et al, 2009; Beverland et al, 2007; Macrae et al, 2003; Campman, 2001). The second finding inspires the adoption of discourse analysis in the management of brand leadership and explains how discourse can be brought into brand leadership management. The third makes case for a discursive brand leadership model that rests solely and firmly on the *action of talk* via corporate brand communications following the successful delivery of brand promise.

Findings from this study are deemed to be unique because they touch on issues that are yet to be addressed in marketing and brand management literatures. It is important to note at the point that while a lot of contributions have been made towards the understanding of brand leadership, very little has been said about how discourse analysis, which is constructed in this paper as the *action of talk*, can help in the building and management of brand leadership.

In spite of the contributions made in this study, this paper is weakened by the absence of empirical information which could have helped substantiate, strengthen or dispel the claims made by the author. However, absence of empirical evidence encourages future research.

While adding to literature, the implication of this study for theory is that it helps to create a deepened and greater understanding of the notion of brand leadership. More importantly, it offers a new platform on which more advanced theories and arguments can be built. For industry practitioners, the paper makes a call, in a subtle way, for managers to deliver on their promises. Failure to deliver on brand promise may lead to customer protest or boycott.

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