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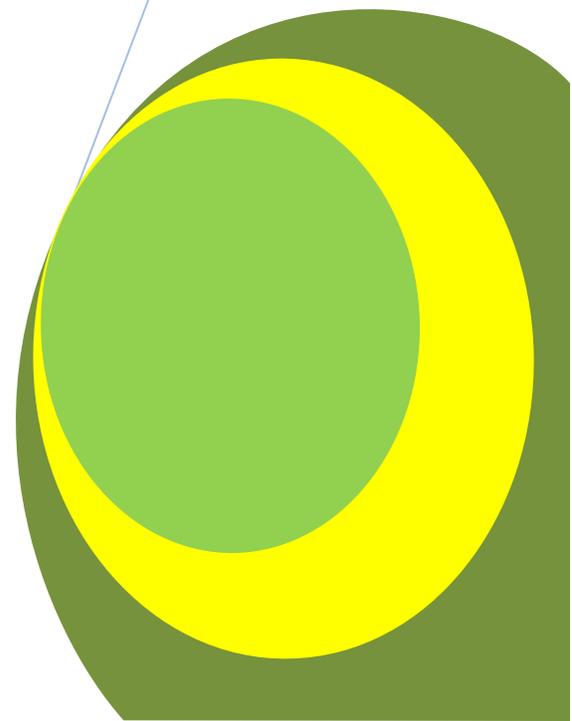
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## Using Employees as Brands: A Case Study of Driving Schools in Harare

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# Using Employees as Brands: A Case Study of Driving Schools in Harare

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## ABSTRACT

There are too many driving schools competing for clients in Zimbabwe, with the result that a number of players are struggling to survive. The study looks at how employees can be a differentiating factor in the fight for market share. A total of 200 driving school employees were taken as respondents. The data was collected through questionnaires with structured questions. Most driving schools did well on customer service and having experienced driving personnel. On the downside driving school personnel do not seem to value smartness with regard to their dressing.

**Key words:** Driving schools, branding, internal marketing.

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## INTRODUCTION

The economic meltdown that beset Zimbabwe beginning the year 2000 saw the closure of major industries and on the one hand the mushrooming of small indigenous businesses. Driving schools have been one type of business that has been flooded such that the margins are unattractive. Competition is so intense that at every corner of the city a driving school is found. Price cutting is the main competitive strategy which has proved unsustainable. With the businesses offering a largely undifferentiated service the human factor comes in as a key factor to the success or failure of a company. Driving school employees have become a valuable asset in enhancing a company's reputation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Employees as brands

On the marketing mix elements the other "P" on services refers to the people which are the employees of the organization. These individuals should possess the required technical skills, good interpersonal skills and positive attitudes that can become a key competitive advantage for the organization against other competing brands. Kotler (1999) asserted that another important aspect of the customers experience involves the contact personnel and service providers that directly interact with the customer. As far as driving schools are concerned these are the front office people responsible for the booking of the driving lessons. These people act as the company's brand which are visible to the clients. According to de Chernatony and Horn (2003) the most important communication channel is the staff facing the customers. When the staff is consistent in the way they are presented, with for example staff uniforms, they have the greatest impact on the brand perceptions (de Chernatony & Horn, 2003). Since there are so many points of contact with customers in the delivery of services it is important to uphold good communications also within the company so that all employees present the same image of the brand (de Chernatony & Horn, 2003).

One of the most important means to satisfy the customers' needs and ensure their loyalty and that they remember your brand is service quality. Javadein et al (2008) held that offering proper services quality is a substantial strategy for the organization to survive. Quality has two dimensions: technical and functional as noted by Kotler and Keller (2006). The technical quality points to the tangible aspects of services and that how the services are provided. The functional quality deals with the behavior of the employees providing a typical service and the interaction between the employees and customers over the process by which the services are provided. In a driving school set up if a client receives a flawless service from the point of booking lessons up to the actual driving lessons, rest assured you have that client for keeps. It always starts on first impression.. A courteous greeting is an excellent way to make a positive first impression on a customer, and there is the risk that a customer will not make a purchase

in the absence of a proper greeting. Driving school staff is required to do the same. There is an important element of psychology in greeting customers. When a salesperson focuses on greeting a customer, she can establish an emotional bond with the client before persuading the prospecting student to enroll with their school.

There is a relationship between the activities of an organization's personnel and the customers. Such activities serve as a critical factor in the development of efficient relations with customers. Therefore, the skills, attitudes and behavior of personnel are important, as people will eventually be responsible to render services of a quality which is expected by the customer. As a result driving school personnel should be able to give all the relevant driving school information to a client exceptionally well. If there is a problem that has arisen on lesson bookings, a solution should be implemented as quickly as possible. If a client's problem remains unresolved for long the client is bound to choose an alternative brand.

According to Arruda (2013) every well-managed company strives to have a strong brand. For most companies, the stronger the brand, the higher the premium they can charge for their products and services. An organization's brand is one of its most valuable assets and what differentiates it in the marketplace. Therefore the brand promise that an organization makes to consumers is not only delivered through products and services, but also through the appearance and behaviors of the employees or brand ambassadors who represent the brand with every move. The issue of smartness and wearing branded uniforms becomes important. According to Mark Twain, employers want their employees' attires to reflect their brand. "Employee uniforms are a great representation of where the brand is headed," says Paul Mangiamele, president and CEO of Bennigan's. Wearing the right clothes helps prepare employees for work, says Marilyn Schlossbach, principal partner of Kitchens Hospitality Group, Asbury Park, New Jersey. "Being in uniform puts you in a frame of mind of being at work and getting into your role" she says. "You need to act the part to get it into your head and into your mannerisms of where you are. When employees aren't dressed they can be lackadaisical about the job." This is even true for driving schools. A branded uniform forces one to behave in an acceptable manner. All in all the skills, attitudes and behaviors of personnel are important, as people will eventually be responsible to render services of a quality which is expected by the customer.

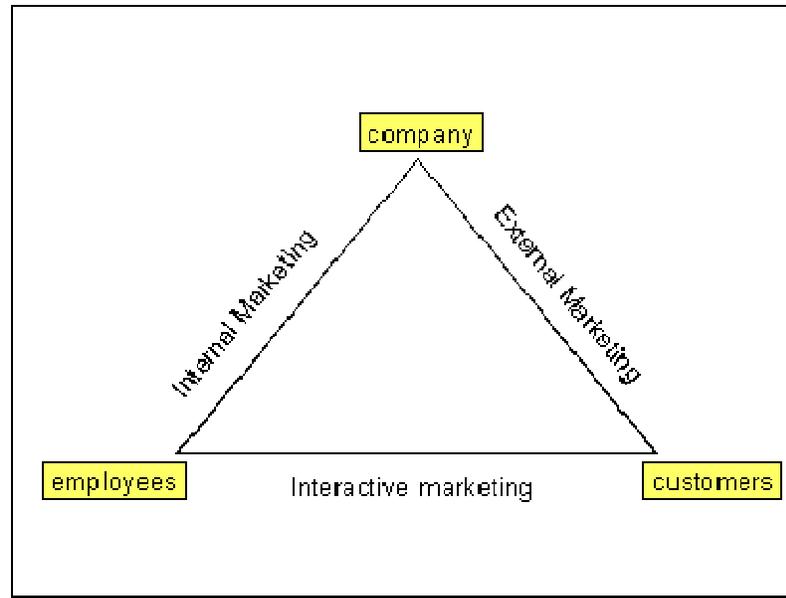
Arruda (2013) noted that many companies focus all their branding efforts on marketing activities such as advertising campaigns and packaging, yet one of the most powerful brand assets that a company has is its people. Ultimately, identifying what makes a corporate brand valuable and then helping employees to become active advocates who live and breathe the brand promise results in better employee and customer experiences. Always give employees the information they need. That way they are able to answer to customer's questions or queries as quickly as possible. Employees can't be brand advocates if they don't understand the brand. Therefore, it's important to communicate the organization's brand to employees — both implicitly and explicitly. Engaged and motivated employees who understand the brand and where it is going translate to happy customers. Helping employees to feel equipped and motivated to support the organization's brand may be one of the most important and effective ingredients in building market share. This all can be achieved through internal marketing.

## Internal marketing

The philosophy of internal marketing is important. The personnel are counted as internal customers. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2010) internal marketing is orienting motivating customer contact employees and supporting service people to work as a team to provide customer satisfaction. Kotler and Keller (2006) stated that services require three types of marketing: internal, external and interactive. External marketing means preparation, pricing, distribution and promotion of services rendered to customers. Interactive marketing explains the personnel's skillfulness in rendering services to the customer and is mostly concerned with the personnel's way of behaving toward the customer.

Internal marketing gives priority to the training and motivation of personnel in rendering services. In driving schools employees should continually be engaged in training programs and refresher courses in customer care as well as on different approaches on how to administer driving lessons in a way that will enable driving students to favour them over other driving schools. According to Kotler and Armstrong (1999) internal marketing must be ahead of external marketing. Narver and Slater (1990) remarked that the development of an internal marketing approach will lead to the creation of a certain culture which will act to form behaviors, in a most efficient and effective manner that will enable rendering superior services to customer that will be to the advantage of the companies' brand. Therefore, the most important element of the service marketing is internal marketing. When an organization lacks the internal resources and human capital appropriate to its marketing goals and strategies it will be so hard to attain the customer satisfaction goal which is aimed at achieving brand association as well brand equity. Take for example if a driving school lacks experienced driving instructors, the results will be failure of most of their students to attain driver's licenses. This will mean a negative brand image for the organization.

Below is the diagrammatical illustration of the internal marketing model taken from Kotler and Keller 2006.



**Figure 1: Internal Marketing**

Source: Kotler P and Keller K (2006).  
MarketingManagement.12<sup>th</sup>Ed.Prentice Hall

Here the principles of internal marketing play an important role. Staff is seen as the first customer of the brand. Kotler's (1999) typology of marketing in service industries applies equally to the marketing of brands in service industries. The theme here is that the customer not only receives the message from the companies external marketing activities, but also the message from the behaviour of the staff he has contact with. The impression the customer gets from the service, from the company and thus from the personality of the corporate brand is also influenced by the friendliness and responsiveness of staff, their perceived qualification and how the staff "lives" the philosophy of the corporate brand. Driving school should adopt internal marketing since it is important in delivering a service that will always exceed the expectations of their driving students.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The descriptive survey was applied in the research. The study used employees on 20 driving schools in Harare. A sample of 200 students was established through a multi-stage sampling. First 20 driving schools were selected through simple random sampling and 10 students were selected using systematic sampling. Data was collected using the survey questionnaire that had Likert scale items. Data analysis was done using the SPSS software. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. According to Creswell (2009) reliability is a measure of whether scores to items on an instrument are internally consistent, stable over time and whether there was consistency in test administration and scoring. Cronbach's Alpha values are derived from the research results processed by the SPSS software. In this study reliability was fair (alpha= 0,513). The benchmarks are that alpha should range from 0.50 to 1.00 for it to be acceptable (Creswell, 2009). The use branding variables derived from empirical research recorded in journals improved the validity of the questionnaire. Field (2009) said validity is whether an instrument measures what it was designed to measure. Construct validity was generally good since concepts in the literature review of employees as brands variables were those maintained in the survey questionnaire of this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 below shows responses on perceptions of driving school personnel as branding ambassadors.

**Table 1: Response on Driving School Personnel as Branding Ambassadors**

	Mean	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<b>1</b> Greeting of clients is carried out in a friendly and welcoming manner	3.29	12.2%	47.3%	0%	38.3%	2.1%
<b>2</b> The driving school staff is always smartly dressed and wearing branded uniforms	2.16	2.1%	12.2%	20.7%	29.3%	35.6%
<b>3</b> Front office staff seeks to provide an error free service when booking clients driving lessons	2.19	0%	8.5%	14.9%	63.3%	13.3%
<b>4</b> Driving school staff possess the skills and experience that allows them to give prompt service and driving information as soon as it is needed.	3.04	0%	36.2%	36.7%	22.3%	4.8%
<b>5</b> Customer service is excellent such that solutions to complaints are given as quickly as possible	3.88	12.2	74.5%	3.2%	9.6%	0.5%

### 1. Greeting of Clients Is Carried Out In a Friendly and Welcoming Manner

Then aim was to ascertain if the driving school staff was doing as expected in terms of upholding the brand of the organization. The mean value was 3.29 which is a good mean number because it spells out that there were positive results from students who answered questionnaires with a total agreement percentage of 59.5% and a disagreement figure of 40.4%. There were no students who were undecided on this matter.

More than half of the students felt that greetings of clients were being carried out in a friendly and welcoming manner. This could be attributed to well experienced staff that knows the true meaning of customer care and really appreciate the fact that first impression is very important since it is a point of making or breaking future business. For the 40.4% of students who did not feel that they were greeted properly, the main cause may have been because of inexperienced, less motivated and dissatisfied staff who will then fail to treat their customers as expected of them.

It becomes important for driving schools to learn and understand the need to treat clients satisfactorily the moment they step into the organization. This is so because first impression is really important on any given organization. Customer care programs must always be carried out so that employees do not get to forget how important their clients are, since they are the life blood of any given organization, because they are the very reason why the organization is in existence. If this is done properly it will always result in brand recall and brand preference.

### 2. Staff Is Always Smartly Dressed And Wearing Branded Uniforms

The researcher was seeking to make out if the driving school staff was always smartly dressed and wearing branded uniform. 14.3% of students totally agreed with the above mentioned fact. 20.7% were undecided while 64.9% were in total disagreement; as a result the mean figure was well below the average mark with a 2.16 value. This could also be because of pure ignorance of the advantages associated with smartness as wearing branded uniforms. A branded uniform is used as a distinguishing factor and for easy identification. The other reason for this could be because the employees may actually refuse to wear branded uniforms.

There is need to keep on educating driving school personnel on the need and importance of being smart all the time and wearing branded uniforms. According to De Chernatony and Horn (2003) when the staff is consistent in the way they are presented, with for example staff uniforms, they have the greatest impact on the brand perceptions. If staff wear branded uniforms no doubt students will build a positive toward the organization. They will have greater confidence to approach them and ask any kind of questions they will be having or if they need any kind of clarification on any subject. If personnel are not tidy, students lose confidence in them as they will not be looking serious in terms of serving clients and improving customer services. At the end of the day clients will always have a negative brand image with regards the organization.

### 3. Front Office Staff Seeks To Provide an Error Free Service

The aim was to find out of driving school staff was doing enough to provide an error free service when booking clients driving lessons. Mean value turned out to be 2.19 with a total disagreement percentage of 76.6%. where 14.9% were undecided and just 8.5% agreeing to this.

The results above showed that most driving school personnel did not do much in terms of finding way to minimize mistakes and errors. This meant a lot of mistakes were actually being made when booking students lessons. There could have been situations where two or three students are booked to the same instructor at the same date as well as the same time thereby creating havoc where some students will fail to have their lessons. The personnel may actually forget to notify some students in time that their lessons would have been overridden by driving tests which will also prevent the said students from carrying out their driving lessons. Only a very small percentage of 8.5% agreed to this fact which means just a few driving schools were able to offer an error free service when booking driving lessons.

This therefore meant that driving schools really have to introduce programs or software that allows booking of driving lessons with more accuracy and less errors. If an organization gets to be known for always being accurate and never making mistakes, this enables them to have a better client turn out. Students will always have a positive image towards that organization. As a result the brand of the organization would have been upheld.

#### **4. Driving School Staff Possess the Skills and Experience**

The main aim was to find out if the driving school staff was in possession of the skills and experience that would allow them to give prompt service and driving information as soon as it was needed. The mean value turned out to be 3.04 which are just a little bit above average. Not a single student strongly agreed with the above question. Only 36.3 were in agreement, while 36.7 were undecided on the issue and a total disagreement figure of 27.1%.

This was proof that some students felt that driving school staffs were experienced enough. This may have been attributed to the kind of personnel that would have offered the service. Some are just naturally good at imparting the very much needed information at just the right time compared to others. They actually know what is expected of them in order to be able to win more clients in the future.

It is important to place those very experienced personnel at the front office. They need to be in possession of all the skills needed to deal with clients. Putting employees who are not well knowledgeable about the company's products and services will result dissatisfaction. That will amount to bad image for the organization and a negative brand perception.

#### **5. Customer Service Is Excellent**

The researcher wanted to make sure if customer service was excellent enough such that solutions to complaints were always given as quickly as possible. The mean turned out to be 3.88. The total agreement figure was 86.7% while 3.2% of the students being undecided and only 14.6% of the students who answered the question were in total disagreement.

From the above results it can be deduced that most of the Harare based driving schools were offering proper customer care service as they were able to come up with solutions to problems that would have arisen as quickly as possible. The reasons to such positive responses could be credited to employees who are up to date with the changes in the driving environment such that they are able to realize the exact needs and wants of their clients, because failure to deal with problems that would have arisen will cause most clients to choose alternative brands.

For organizations that were not doing well in this area, there was, or there actually is need to concentrate on internal marketing first. Taking care of the welfare of the employees is very important. This is so because once an employee becomes fully equipped with product knowledge and if they also feel that their personal needs are being taken into consideration by the organization, rest assured these will be happy employees. Once employees are happy this can be evidenced by treating those customers exceptionally well by exceeding customer expectations. Customer care programs and workshops should be carried on regularly.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Driving school personnel score high on courtesy, driving skills, experience and customer service. However most driving school personnel were not smartly dressed most of the times and did not wear branded uniforms. Errors rate while booking driving lessons was high.

### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

There were no competing interests envisaged.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The two authors conceived and designed the study together. The corresponding author then collected, analysed, interpreted the data and compiled the final document.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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