

Effective Employee Engagement and Best Brand Breeding: A Case Study

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Abstract

Corporate branding is a "strategic tool" that fortifies firms to stay competitive in ruggedly saturated global market as it is exploited for market share increase, high profitability and operational cost reduction via reduction in employee turnover ratio. Maximally, achieving this requires that the greatest and most available asset of the organization, employees, are in good shape, in that they would be the first and best brand ambassadors. Better put, employees must be committed, connected and engrossed with their employer at emotional, social and physical levels, hence their engagement. This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of employee engagement strategies as a mechanism of breeding best corporate brand giving the practices of telecommunications organization in Ghana. The main research approach adopted was quantitative with 137 responses collected and analysed. In order to heighten the rigor and robustness of the findings, four additional interviews were conducted which qualifies the approach to best described as triangulation. Interestingly, the outcome of the findings revealed that the engagement practices in action at the company currently are yielding desired results which underpins why it was considered most valuable brand in the continent of Africa. Notwithstanding, the best could only remain best when there is persistent improvement.

Keywords: Employee Engagement; Breeding, Strategic tool

Introduction

The emergence of branding as a priority focus of management over the last decades is due to its value propensity as an intangible asset available to the firm. In this awareness, an unending interest had been invoked among academicians and industrial researchers in varied brand related topics leading to scores of articles, research papers as well as books [1]. For instance, Kelvin Lane Keller who had been some of the world's most successful brands' confidant highlighted the inseparable link between brand success and firm's profitability. Employee engagement on the other hand though had received some attention from investigators for some decades now, there's still a lot untapped potentials within the field [2].

Researchers such as Kahn [3] and Ulrich [4] had done some level of work in an attempt to find the best ways to engage a workforce and draw them into the vision and mission for which their employer exist. Further evidence from the research findings of Benson [5], shows that firms with high employee engagement are able to reduce recruitment cost by 57 percent annually and improve shareholders revenue by 37 percent. Similarly, Hui et al. [6] found in a study conducted among 73 multinational Corporations located in China, a strong correlation between engagement levels and employee attrition rate. Still, Gould-Williams [7], discovered that companies with potent employee engagement have fewer issues of conflict management and the other ranks in the workforce. These evidences bring deep conviction as to why most senior executive are banging the drums on the re-evaluation of the engagement trends as backup asset for competitive advantage.

The researchers' critical argument is underpinned by the premise that if branding could segregate firms such as McDonalds, Intel, Coca Cola, Nike and Gucci from their cohorts giving them a competitive

edge, then it has something more than the face value. This invites the logic that its potentialities could be further exploited when the firm's most valuable and readily available asset, the employees, are committed at both emotional and intellectual levels and become the first point of the branding process. Though branding and employee engagement are two different concepts, evidence shows they grossly impact the trends of market share and customer loyalty. For instance, Wal-Mart found that every single opportune interaction between customers and its employees is a moment where positive impression gets created or the otherwise, most especially with first-timers [8]. To highlight more explicit points Gittel posed these rhetoric questions: could AirAsia still be classified as world class competitive travel service providers in the air transport industry if the interest and comfort of passengers were trampled under feet? Or should Wal-Mart employees lose their friendly, warmly grinning faces and willingness to assist customers, would it still maintain its posture among the world's leading retail stores? He argues that the empowering force behind the success of institutions, firms, businesses and even individuals lies in their uniqueness. Branding aids niche creation, market access, customer attraction, and product affinity which largely reside in the psyche of the customers [9].

Branding includes everything about a firm: its logo, product quality, organizational philosophy, dress code, product design as well as value-added services. In short, the brand is "perceived image" of an organization externally. And most certainly this is powerfully accepted via what employees say and portray of their employer. However, as evidence have shown it is mostly difficult if not impossible to get employees to be positive about the organization they work for when they are less motivated and less committed with wavering minds and a despairing hearts [10]. Thus, this research findings is aimed to enrich the literature on the subject, provide practitioners with the possibility of leveraging on employee engagement to build enviable brands and finally, reduce recruitment cost and improve firm's profitability.

When Employee Engagement Gets the Right Attention

As the competition for talent intensifies in the global marketplace with every passing moments, critical demand is put on firms to strategize more pragmatic approaches of meeting up with the trends [11] which implies that more novel and internally available assets are exploited [12]. In other words, the fast dissipating trade and economic barriers is fuelling the momentum of employee mobility, giving more control and power to the worker to choose who and where to work at every given point. This means that the most preferred employer would be the one who have hands on the very factors that inform employees' choice for best employer.

The organizations that experience high employee engagement patterns are mostly noted for their strategic actions. Firstly, they have HR policies that are employee-centered and embraces diversity with high respect for cultural differences. For instance, [13] argue the strength of Apple global brand presence resides in employee diversity and 'hard' recruiting procedures which make it possible to get on-board the brightest and the best. Secondly, they have an organizational culture that reinforces creativity and innovation with unwavering team spirit. Thirdly, they believe a satisfying job makes a satisfied employee. Fourthly, they explore healthy relationships as core competency. And finally, they invest in both the physical and psychological work environment to enhance its conduciveness for high productivity. Rousseau found that high employee engagement creates the will and propensity for strong employee branding which in turn leads to brand identification, brand commitment, brand loyalty and eventually resilient brand performance [14]. He further postulates that employee branding gives a competitive advantage to a firm and it also reduces employee attrition rate with strong fuel up for vendor and customer satisfaction.

In addition, just as employee engagement enhances firm's profitability and thereby impacts returns on shareholders' investment so does employee branding spans through the company's bottom line [13]. Interestingly, as most employees are driven to work for particular organizations relative to its brand image, in same vein majority of customers hold their loyalty to a firm based on the employee-customer rapport. For instance, in the research work published by Miles and Mangold [2] on "employee branding process" holds the view that most customers unconsciously buy brands rather than products. In much explicit analogy, the question is why most kids would cry out for McDonalds or KFC rather than Jolibee Fast food even when located at relatively same joint? The answer most definitely might not be "taste" nor "environment serenity" or not even customer service. But rather the holistic projected corporate image of McDonald and KFC on global scale which turn to gain acceptance among customers of all nations and tribes, going beyond gender or educational barriers, taking on the fortitude of a psychological trend instead. Making the customers of these giant fast food restaurants assume a global family of which they are members rather a mere customer of multi-billion business firms [15].

Furthermore, effective employee engagement sparks up team-spirit and great cooperation among employees and with management to the degree most employees are more willing to put up with conflicting behaviours of colleagues to ensure that general goals of the organization are met [15]. And usually, it is in this spirit of oneness that customers get the most assistance from the company's workforce. For instance, southwest Airlines has its organizational mission highlighting customer service as its topmost priority yet did not state nor follow the old mantra "customer first", instead "employee first"

with customers as supreme guests [16]. Interestingly, however, employees are entreated to extend customers an equal amount of friendliness, dignity and warmth in company spirit just like it's being hipped on them by the company, which sound like reiterating the golden rule to the employees: do unto the customers just like it is being done to you.

In short, Hatch and Schultz [17] emphasized in candid terms that firms are just what their brands are perceived to be which implies that companies are made by their brands. They are what customers know of them, much especially the impressive transfer they receive from employees. And the best brand image could not be achieved with disgruntled and emotionally disconnected employees.

The link between engagement and corporate branding

The focus of corporate branding is geared towards aligning employees' behaviour and attitudes as well as beliefs and values with that of the organization. In view of this, a planned communication, and systematic management of employee responses in addition to symbolic representation of reputational image of the firm is required [18]. Ferguson [19] emphasizes the role of perception since employee action is usually being judged by stakeholders as the true image of what the brand stands for. According to Hatch and Schultz [17] one of the three most crucial elements needed in the success of a corporate brand is brand image-how the organization is perceived by stakeholders. However, they also stated that the culture-the feelings of the employees relative to the firm is as vital as the organizational vision- the utmost aspirations of management. According to Torracco [20] corporate brand is the composition of brand personality, brand positioning, brand vision and brand values which create sustainable competitive advantage that impacts the company's products and services. Still, he argues that customers could not be loyal to a brand whose employees are disloyal nor believe in a brand that is betrayed by its employee. It is on the premise of this argument that employee engagement stands crucial in the entire branding process of every organization as a source of competitive advantage. Having made the point for the relevance of effective employee engagement to the success of adept corporate branding, it is essential to take a brief introspection of what employee engagement really means from the perspective of some gurus in the field.

Kahn [3] defined employee engagement as the act by which the selves of organizational members are harnessed relative to their work roles and freely express their role performances in emotional, physical and cognitive tones. In this definition lies the three components as portrayed by In sync Survey framework: as head, heart and hand. To Truss et al. [21] employee engagement has to do with the strong affinity for work, a psychological connotation that comprises the three components of engagement discussed by Kahn [3]. Whilst, Saks [22] argues that though others [21] seem to look at employee engagement and organizational commitment in same light, they do differ, in that organizational commitment focuses on attachment and attitude of employee towards the firm they work for. Nonetheless, engagement goes beyond attitude, it is actually the degree to which employees are absorbed in their work role giving high attention to job performance [23]. Deductively, it could be inferred from the various definitions that engaged employees have great emotional attachment to their employer and are bent on ensuring that the goals of their employer are achieved. This they do by going the extra mile which the normal employee would not dare to travel.

Apparently, it is argued that due to high transparency in the job market, firms are caught up in the position where they must excite their stakeholders about what they do or else they stand the chance of losing them to their competitors [24]. In this vein, the first point of evidence relative to potential offerings and delivering of organizational promise behoves on employee excitement. In sum, it is worth noting that corporate branding as strategy to firm's profitability and market share is as good as mirage when the workforce is disconnected, disengagement and disgruntled.

Methodology

Instrument

A questionnaire of 35-item scale was constructed assessing five contributing factors of employee engagement using the 5-point Likert scale which ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It was first piloted and scrutinized before proceeding with the selected sample population.

Sample

Data were collected from 137 respondents of a telecommunication giant known as Mobile Telecommunications Network (MNT) Ghana.

The chunk of the respondents were male 82(60%) having the average age ranging between 26-30 years. The questionnaires were distributed and collected via a confidant who is an employee of the company after the consent forms had been filled. And respondents were assured in no uncertain terms of the highest level of confidentiality. After which the data was cleansed and reliability examination carried out.

Results

The findings produced a holistic overview of the employee engagement trend that exist at MTN Ghana digging deep into the environmental profile of work with cross-dissection view of HRM practices. The acute examination of employee-supervisor relationship, the satisfaction level of job and the overall culture of the company proved potent and prevailing. However, the prognosis of more critical findings are depicted in the table below. In accordance to previous findings discovered in the literature, items on the work environment were meticulously crafted to solicit relevant thoughts and views pertaining to the conduciveness of the physical, psychological and social terrain within which productive tasks are carried out at MTN Ghana. For deeper insight on this variable, two critical items (work area and physical safety) out of the five are depicted in Table 1.

Engagement variables		Cronbach's alpha/No. of items	Mean	Rate of resilience (%)	Pearson Correlation N	
1	Work Environment	5	0.89	1.59	86.9	0.461
	Physical safety			1.79	80.3	
	Work area			1.34	93.4	
2	HRM Practices	6	0.814	1.6	91.4	0.528
	Task review			1.45	87.6	
	Job progression			1.6	100	
3	Employee-Supervisor Relationship	7	0.885	1.72	86.3	0.53
	Task coaching			1.68	97.8	
	Opinion sharing			1.61	93.4	
4	Job Satisfaction	5	0.903	1.71	87.9	0.468
	Job security			1.8	86.9	
Suggestion scheme						
5	Organizational Culture	7	0.892	1.81	84.4	0.979
	Team Spirit			1.93	86.9	
	Spirit of Equality			1.4	100	
Overall means of engagement						
6	Engagement (MTN Ghana)	5	0.778	1.686	88	
	Total	35	0.962	1.71		

Table 1: Prognosis of findings.

Also, the HRM practices were fervently assessed to ascertain the degree to which they are centered on the generic well-being of

employees relative to motivational systems and reward packages. The rate of resilience of two critical items (task review and job progression)

out of six featured in Table 1 add momentum to the overall performance of this variable. All these are measured via the lens of employee engagement dynamics and improvement strategies.

Aside, the quality of relationship existing between employees and their supervisors was closely looked at with special interest in cooperation, communication and inter-personal interaction among the workforce. And under this variable task coaching and opinion sharing were most critical. Whilst the investigation also considered the parameters of employee excitement of their job roles and stress management capacities and outlets.

Finally, the culture of the organization was examined in the light of its ethics, values, propositions, and fundamental tenets and norms. And among the items for response, team spirit and spirit of equality were most critical.

The evidence, however, proves glaring as employees indicated their acceptance and affinity for company slogan... 'everywhere we go' with the response... 'MNT'.

Age		Marital Status		Years of Experience		Educational Background	
Mean		Mean		Mean		Mean	
20-25	2.3	Single	2.3	Less than 3 years	2.3	PhD	2.4
26-30	2.5	Married	2.3	4-6 years	2.5	Master	2.3
Above 30	2.4	Divorced	2.4	7-9 years	2.1	Degree	2.4
				10 years and above	2.4	Diploma	2.5
Total	2.4	Total	2.3	Total	2.3	Total	2.4
F	2.54	F	1.404	F	6.32	F	5.55
Sig	0.43	Sig	0.373	Sig	0	Sig	0.05

Table 2: The ANOVA results.

The ANOVA analysis indicates that no significant difference exist between age and effective employee engagement (Table 2). Given the means of the various age groups above, it is quite apparent that no much difference could be found, however the age groups between 20-25 years have the least mean (2.3) whilst the age groups between 26-30 years had the highest mean (2.5). Obviously, there is no significant variation at 5% significant level relative to age and employee engagement given F-value (2.535) with p-value (0.43) which is higher than the alpha (0.05).

Interestingly, it could also be inferred from Table 2 that the means of various marital statuses are extremely close. The significant p-value (0.373) has obtained F-value of 1.405 and an alpha of 0.05 which is less than the p-value. Therefore, it could be concluded that at 5% significant level, employee engagement does not vary with marital status.

Though, observing the means for years of working experience is not quite vicissitude, the F-value (6.323) had p-value (.000) which is grossly less than the alpha (0.05), leading to the conclusion that at 5% significant level employee engagement vary extensively with years of working experience. To Shaw [25] this confirms the fact time creates

ties at emotional and intellectual levels making it easier for employees to flow with colleagues, make more sacrifices to achieve their progression ambitions on the job.

With regards to educational background, the findings show that the existing difference relative to employee engagement is insignificant with means largely same. Since the p-value (0.05) is same to the alpha (0.05) having obtained F-value of 5.551, it is worth concluding that one's educational background does not necessarily vary with employee engagement at 5% significant level.

In sum, one thing is most crucial, in the interest of engagement HRM policies and practices must encourage relatively long term contracts to pin up high engagement trends.

Discussions

In this study the factors contributing to effective employee engagement are explored in creation, building and promotion of powerful brand image as strategic intervention to enhancing firm's profitability. Due to the critical role of the telecommunication industry to national and global market competition, the Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN) Ghana was selected as case.

The need of recruiting the best talent, developing and keeping them as source of competitive advantage to firm's longevity is getting more mind boggling.

According to Walker [26] the potency of great corporate brand is inherent in vibrant employee branding which could also imply that it is abject illusion without employee engagement. Given this underpinning, the researchers are quite confident the findings would fuel up the propensity for high spirit in talent nurturing with adept focus on leveraging its potentials to an irresistible brand image.

As indicated Table 1, employees were quite optimistic towards the work environment with an obtained mean of 1.590 and a resilience rate of 86.9% which confirms the opinion that the company has a competitive working environment. In addition, the Pearson's correlational coefficient (r=0.461) which positively affirms the impact of the environment on engagement trends.

Also, HRM practices as another critical factor pulled an overall mean of 1.600 with Pearson's correlation coefficient (r=0.528) and resilience rate of 91.4% compared to the overall resilience of employee engagement at MTN (88.0%). This paints the picture that no competitive organization could push employee engagement 'upstream' without giving in-depth consideration to its worker policies. To argue this further, Mary Barra (CEO of General Motors) said that management should view their employees as greatest asset, only then, their crucial needs could be factored into the policy bank of the organization [27] Imperatively, when the organizational structure follows a flat pattern approach it breeds a complex intricate relationship that solidifies trust and cordiality [28]. This encourages peer learning and self- development which reinforces speedy career progression, gives room for transparent communication and knowledge sharing, and eases the rough path of conflict talks. Drawing from the evidence of a qualitative findings of Mathieu it was highlighted that the smoother the relationship between employees and their superiors, the greater their commitment to organizational productivity [29]. In view of this, the aggregate mean obtained for this variable is 1.720 with its resilience rate at 86.3% and opinion on overall engagement being 88.0% ceiled up with Pearson's correlation coefficient (r=0.530).

Apparently, the literature supports a fit between job satisfaction and employee engagement which underpins its inclusion in this research [30] and quite interestingly, it produced a summative mean of 1.710. When compared with the entire engagement level at MTN Ghana, it shows a resilience rate of 87.9% and 88.0% respectively. The Pearson correlation coefficient on the other hand produced a positive moderate value ($r=0.468$) which is indicative of the homogenous views of employees.

One of the gurus of culture research, Hofstede posits that no expatriate succeeds when the individual or national culture of the people is ignored. It is in such culture agility that the success of the leader is largely determined and same is true for the organizational culture of every company [31]. For instance, MTN Ghana has a culture of giving out free SIM cards to rural folks and focusing their CSR policies on deprived villages [32]. A mean of 1.810 obtained implies a positive attitude of employees towards this variable with further approval of 84.4% resilience rate and Pearson's correlation coefficient ($r=0.979$). And it is worth noting that this is the highest correlated variable with employee engagement among the five controlling variables selected for this study.

In explicit terms it could be emphasized that as much as the cherished values of individuals which direct and chart the course of their lives align with each other, it also help create the avenue for companies to stand out as unique entities for which their core competencies may reside.

The implications of the findings could be intriguing, in that the literature came clear on branding as smart strategy to increase in firm's profitability and market share and the evidences are all over when we look at companies like Intel, Google, Microsoft, McDonald, KFC, Panasonic, Haier and the list goes on and on. But the challenge had always been on the best means possible to spark up great brand image among the company's most readily available asset and brand representatives, the employees. Since no organization could successfully segregate the actions, reactions, attitudes and behaviours of their employees from the corporate brand, it is crucial that corporations should first get their employees engaged and then, willingly they could stand in the position as loyal ambassadors of the corporate brand.

The reasons are that when they are highly engaged they buy into the vision of the organization at emotional and intellectual levels because it is easier to support, build up and ensure the success of what you love than to destroy it. In this logic, it is quite convincing that engaged employees would be the finest to treat their customers in the most pleasant ways compared to the disengaged ones.

Most definitely, when attrition levels are relative low in an organization it creates a generic impression that brands the employer as employee sensitive. This in no uncertain terms drives other potential employees to seek career opportunities with that firm and as long as the word of mouth could travel it leads to chain of good-will that enriches the bank of the company's intangible asset which could be leverage in building competitive advantage.

Still, engaged employees form strong attachment with their organizations which normally make them walk in such an irresistible passion and pride wearing paraphernalia of their companies even when they off duty or on weekends. This could even create family ties and admiration for that corporate brand.

Finally, when employees feel recognised they feel good about themselves and this impact their relationship with colleagues and superiors in a way that enhances self-confidence and positive outlook. In other words, failure to recognise outstanding or even subtle contributions of groups or individual is like indirectly saying to them 'you're not part' or 'your presence isn't felt', and when such message sunk down, believe us, their physical presence might be with that organization but psychologically they are gone [33,34]. No wonder, one thing is common with companies that have sound employee-centred policies, they are engrossed with feedbacks which keep them clearly updated on what they are doing right or wrong as far as their employees are concerned.

Conclusion

This study carefully examines in glare details how employee engagement works best and how it could be leveraged in building a corporate brand that stands out in global competition and largely preferred. The main approach deployed is quantitative to gather relevant data. In analysis of data, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. In order to add rigor and robustness to the findings, selected interviews were conducted also.

The variables for this research were meticulously selected through a rigorous literature review which include: the work environment, HRM practices, employee-supervisor relationship, job satisfaction and finally, organizational culture.

The analysis brought to the fore an intriguing insight highlighting the role of culture to the success of any competitive company due to the fact there is no individual or nation without a culture of some form. It might not be written or formally documented but it does exist anyway. And this is applicable to every business organization as they pursue different values and have different modes of operation. Possibly, employees join their preferred organizations giving considerations to what they do, why they do it and how it is being done. Furthermore, the findings revealed that one the core competencies of MTN Ghana is its corporate responsibility policies directed to the marginalized and underprivileged of social strata which form the chunk of the populace of countries where their operations are carried out. Aside, it is discovered that as employees stay longer with their employer they create deeper bounds with colleagues and other members of the organizations which makes it easier to share tacit knowledge and encourages peer learning. And it is arguably true that when employees could receive job related assistance from staff members it boosts their expertise and confidence in their job. Finally, when priority is given to employees' needs it serves as the foundation for employee branding which precedes effective corporate branding.

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