

TURNING EMPLOYEES INTO BRAND AMBASSADORS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FOUR COMPANIES IN DURRES AND TIRANA

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Abstract

The main aim of this study is to investigate some of the strategies that four companies of different sizes in Durres and Tirana Municipalities use for turning their employees into brand ambassadors. It is inevitable for the success of an organization to be measured by the importance that the organization gives to its employees. Employees are considered a significant asset of the organization: thus, they must be treated accordingly. Organizations must pay attention to the complex and increasing demands of their customers. In this regard, managers have to realize the importance and role of the employees in meeting the customer's demands. Employees represent the image of an organization, which is why activating new strategies and techniques that optimize the workforce efforts would help achieve the organization's vision and mission.

Under these considerations, four face-to-face interviews were conducted with the owners or HR Managers, or Marketing Managers of one shipping agency, one medium-sized production company in Durres, one big-sized production company, and one company that offers telecommunications services in Tirana, Albania. This study first underlines the importance of evaluating marketing and brand management objectives, and afterward explores the strategies that these companies use for turning their employees into brand ambassadors. Within the framework of this study, the advantages of turning employees into brand ambassadors and the problems that the companies face have been examined. The research results show that the motivation of companies to turn their employees into brand ambassadors is high, but most companies lack proper strategies. One of the big-sized companies chooses to turn into brand ambassadors only those employees who accept or have an interest in using their personal social media in this regard and/or have a great curiosity in marketing and technology.

Keywords

brand ambassador, marketing, employees, technology, strategy.

JEL Classification

M10, M31, M30

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Introduction

Globalization has already become a significant development in the world. Globalization influences a country and affects every aspect of its life, such as the economy, culture, job market, politics, etc. Technological advancement, the adoption of the free market philosophy, economic liberalization, and the supply of services across borders are some of the drivers of globalization. Globalization has a great importance for the development of human resource management as it puts the human resources functions of many organizations on a whole new trajectory. In the process of globalization, it is seen that human resources practices have changed, personnel and personal affairs continue to be carried out, while the importance of some existing practices has increased, and new concepts have emerged. (Gersil & Araci, 2014).

Human resources play a vital part in all strategic choices of the company. Boudreau and Ramstad discuss that the way employees are organized is considered critical for strategic success and competitive advantage in a company. (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007). Companies are aware of the importance of corporate reputation, but they should understand that this reputation cannot be gained in a short time. According to Quirke (2000): "An organization's best results can only be achieved when everyone's efforts are directed toward the same goal." (Quirke, 2000). In this context, all employees should work toward the achievement of the reputation of the organization. As a matter of fact, employees play an important role in the perception and reputation of an organization. What they produce and offer, and the way that they interact with external actors influences the reputation of the company. Many brands, today are faced with the problem of consumer mistrust. Companies, in order to deal with this rising phenomenon have tried to hire well-known individuals as brand ambassadors. Celebrities, who have become the faces of brands and play an important role in image transfer, are an effective group in creating purchasing behavior. According to research, the fact that celebrities appear in advertisements or use a product and declare that they are satisfied makes the consumer think that the message of the brand in question is more reliable and makes it easier to recognize and remember that product. However, it's worth noting that nowadays these brand ambassadors are being replaced by employees. Using employees as brand ambassadors is becoming increasingly popular, as it does not only shape consumer attitudes toward the brand but also appears to enhance the company's reputation. (Šontaitė-Petkevicienė & Vascegaite, 2022). It is noted that a brand ambassador makes the product more appealing to its costumers and can also influence the costumer's bond with the product through the words and visuals that he chooses to use.

There is a lack of research in Albania related to turning employees into brand ambassadors, therefore it emerges the necessity of studying this practice, which is now increasingly used by businesses in many countries. The importance of this paper is related firstly to the lack of literature in Albania on this topic which can be considered as a step toward paving the way to other research on the matter and filling the gap in this regard. Furthermore, the role and importance of using a marketing strategy for turning employees into brand ambassadors, discussed in this paper, will give a hint to

business administrators and managers on appropriate choices and practices for enhancing their brand image. Marketing managers, company leaders, or any individual who will read this paper will be able to understand that giving continuous information to employees about the company's brand as well as the tools that employees have at their disposal to represent the brand, can influence not only the company's image but also the customers' perception of the company's brand.

In this paper, a review of literature is made related to the use of employees as brand ambassadors which is followed by the methodology of research and the findings of the conducted interviews with four Albanian businesses in the matter of marketing and brand management approaches. Thus, the research discusses the problems of turning employees into brand ambassadors, and finally, conclusions are drawn together with some recommendations on the topic.

1. Review of the scientific literature

The customer is the focal point in modern marketing. (Aslan, 2021). Companies constantly try to understand and fulfill the needs of their customers. Limited resources of companies lead managers to analyze the structure of current and potential consumers and focus on the ones with the greatest value. The main reason a customer continues to purchase from a specific company is related to the value delivered to them. Today, the customer has begun to transform from a consumer who assumes a one-way role to a consumer who assumes a versatile role. The customer is now a co-producer and creator of value, a co-developer of knowledge and competence. This requires companies to have a deep understanding of the dimensions that form the basis of customer value. Customer value is customers' judgments about whether a product or service satisfies their particular needs better than competing products or services. One of the most significant aspects of a company is to offer a great experience to their customer, and for this, every employee who offers the contribution to the company has an effect on the success of the company. The competition is intense, and customers are flooded with many options. It is the job of the brand builders to use strategic imagination in order to deliver engaging, unique experience which cannot be replicated by other competitors. (Wheeler, 2013). Many research show that when employees have a shared understanding of the brand, they identify themselves with the brand and are committed to delivering the brand promise to external stakeholders. In this regard, they become very valuable brand ambassadors, who influence customers through their actions and communications. (Kang, 2016).

Various departments within a company such as Marketing and HR should work closely in order to identify the needs of employees and make them feel valued and offer them a sense of belonging. Similarly, the staff should be seen as a great asset of the company that can communicate with customers and manifest the brand. It is important that employees understand their role within the organization in conveying the brand externally, as this is a great step in communicating the right information externally. Businesses that want to develop their staff into brand ambassadors or brand advocates instill in them a sense of brand identity and brand devotion. (Al-Shuaibi, et al., 2016).

When employees actively engage in shaping the company, they will be inspired to offer the best of themselves and feel the contribution to the company's success. However, it is important for brand ambassadors to create a sense of trust. Therefore, brand ambassadors must be able to access a lot of information regarding the brand and must also be able to properly convey this information and engage audiences.

It is noted that there are three main types of brand ambassadors:

- Hired brand ambassadors (They represent the public figure from whom the company buys advertising by signing an agreement)
- Ambassadors from consumers (They represent those consumers who particularly like and use the products or services of the company)
- Brand ambassadors selected from within the company (They represent managers, owners, and/or employees of the company)

According to Tobias Weidemann (2019), an increasing number of companies are exploring the potential of their employees and often the company founders or managers engage or are active in advertising the company's product or service. (Weidemann, 2019).

2. **Research methodology**

The type of research philosophy pursued dictates the position from which research methods should be derived. Between the two main points of view: positivism and phenomenology, the latter derives from the point of view that business situations are unique, and generalization is not valid for business or managerial research. (Saunders, et al., 2000). This approach tries to understand and explain a phenomenon, rather than looking for external causes or fundamental laws. (Esterby-Smith, et al., 1991) (Remenyi, et al., 1998). According to phenomenology, the world and reality are not objective but socially constructed by people who give different meanings to different situations. Phenomenology is the philosophical basis of qualitative research. The qualitative approach is characterized by a methodological eclecticism, hypothesis-free orientation, and an implicit acceptance of the natural scheme of things. (Declan, 2005). Daymon and Holloway (2002) pointed out that interpretive research originally used qualitative methods because they allow the researcher to get close to the people studied and to engage directly with the target participants. Phenomenology is also a way to explore an uninvestigated area as well as to inform theoretical grounding. (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Two of the most important approaches to the theory are deductivism and inductivism. (Saunders, et al., 2000), According to Hyde (2000), inductive reasoning begins with the observation of specific instances and ends with generalizations about the phenomenon under investigation. (Keneth, 2000). An inductive approach enables the researcher to gain an understanding of the meanings that people give to events, to feel what is happening, and therefore to understand the nature of the problem more deeply. It is suitable for a study, such as ours, which includes a small number of participants.

Some of the reasons why the inductive approach is suitable for this type of study are related to the fact that:

- The inductive approach allows the author to understand and see the different perspectives of the participants.
- The inductive approach provides greater structural flexibility by allowing the author to change the focus of the study as the study progresses.
- The approach is less concerned with the need to generalize.
- This approach helps to choose research strategies and methods that are most appropriate, considering the author's preferences and abilities.

Depending on the nature of the collected data the research can be divided into two categories: Quantitative and Qualitative. Qualitative research focuses on words and observations that express reality and the possibility to describe people in normal situations. (Amaratunga, et al., 2002). It attempts to explain specificity and produce detailed data on a small number of individuals. (Patton, 1990).

For this study, it is used the qualitative method since the data will be collected from a small group of interviewees and will not be analyzed with statistical techniques as is the case with quantitative research methods. In order to provide valuable information on the study topic, the necessary qualitative data will be collected from business owners, administrators, or managers. In this paper, the interview will be used as a research tool, which is flexible and can provide researchers with a large amount of information. The interview was conducted for each interviewee, and it was based on semi-structured questions.

The focus of the research consists of enterprises operating in Tirana and Durres areas in different sectors that vary from manufacturing to shipping services. Considering the lack of research regarding the use of employees as brand ambassadors in Albanian companies of different sizes in Durres and Tirana area, it was thought that it would be an appropriate field for the purpose of this study.

Among the companies registered at the National Business Center, in the areas of Durres and Tirana, 6 companies were contacted, but only 4 of them have consented to be part of this study. Interviews were conducted between November 2022 and January 2023. The questions created for in-depth interviews consist of two parts. In the first part, the companies participating in the study were asked questions containing general information about the company, such as their establishment dates, capital, production capacities, and the number of employed managers/workers. The second part of the questions consists of open-ended questions to determine the current marketing and brand management approaches of the businesses and the problems they face in applying their strategies. The names of the businesses interviewed in the study were kept confidential at the request of the participants, although general information about the relevant businesses and participants is given in Table No. 1.

Table No. 1. General information related to participating businesses.

	Participant's Duty	Year of Foundation	Area	Type of business	Size of business	Number of Managers/ Employees
Business Nr. 1	Owner	2005	Durres	Shipping Agency	Small	1/3
Business Nr. 2	Administrator	2018	Durres	Production	Medium	2/34
Business Nr. 3	HR Manager	2018	Tirana	Production	Big	3/106
Business Nr. 4	Marketing Manager	2008	Tirana	Telecommunications services	Big	7/250

Source: The author of this study.

3. Results and discussions

In this section, the findings of the research are gathered under two main headings: marketing and brand management approaches and strategies of the companies, and the problems they face in implementing the strategies of turning their employees into brand ambassadors.

Marketing and brand management approaches and strategies of the companies

In order to better understand the interviewed participants, the first part of the interview consists of general questions about the participating companies. General information about these companies is presented in the above section of the methodology. In the second part of the interview, participants were asked about their marketing and brand management approaches. All four participants were asked about the marketing strategy that they use for the company. According to some authors, competitive analysis is a good place to start when developing a marketing strategy for a company. (Oana, 2022). Armstrong and Kotler, 2003, underline that the marketing strategy defines how the organization will allocate its financial, material, human, and information resources to meet consumer expectations and establishes tactics for achieving marketing objectives more effectively than the competition. (Armstrong & Kotler, 2003).

It has been noticed that only one of the companies participating in the study has a marketing strategy (Participant 4) while the targets stated by the other 3 companies within the scope of marketing strategies are sales-oriented targets. Participant number 4 underlines the fact that creative and innovative understanding has gained importance in marketing activities, which is why their marketing understanding is adapted to the innovative system in order to meet the satisfaction of the customers. Participant 4 believes that customers are more knowledgeable about the products and services they want. This situation pushes the company to analyze the market and provide information that satisfies the customer about the products or services they offer. They plan and

create their strategy accordingly, but also continuously control the strategy in order to keep it updated and in line with the innovative trends. It was noticed that only one out of the four companies has a marketing and sales unit, and for the remaining three companies the market decisions are taken by the administrator or the owner of the business. This showed that except for business number 4, the other 3 businesses generally carry out their business activities far from a holistic marketing approach. One of participating businesses which mainly works with foreign customers (business number 3) stated that they modified their existing products based on customer requests and needs. The manager underlined that:

“We understand the importance of a marketing strategy for the success of the company, but we have decided to not include a marketing department in our organizational structure, at least for the moment. We work with foreign customers who very often deliver their specific needs regarding the products, which is why we make modifications to the products according to these needs. We are aware that this is not a marketing strategy that will offer advantages in the long term, but we are trying to adapt in order to survive the competition and keep the customers.”

The participants were explicitly asked about the domestic market competition analysis in order to understand not only the capacity that the businesses have to plan and execute the analysis but also to understand whether the participants are aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

The foundation of effective strategy formulation and implementation is competitive analysis. This analysis assists executives in understanding and forecasting competitor strategic moves. (Zahra & Chaples, 1993)

The interview showed that except for participant number 4, the domestic market competition analysis was made superficially and based on owners' or administrators' observations. In this context, participants, number 2, and number 3 stated that they try to learn the sales amount of their competitors from their own suppliers or contacts, while participant number 1 explained that the company does not take into consideration the competitors as it already has regular loyal customers. It turns out that the first three companies do not constantly examine their competitors' main strategies, strengths and weaknesses, and relative competitive positions. Participant number 4, unlike the other participants, is a well-structured and organized company that periodically revises its strategies and makes regular analyses regarding the internal market and competitors. Participant number 4 stated that they research the strategies of their competitors and try to learn what their strengths and weaknesses are. Participant 4 explained that because the company offers telecommunications services, it is important to learn the target markets, marketing strategies, and offered services of their competitors. Even though the marketing department was aware of the usage of employees as brand ambassadors at one of the competitors, it was not until the penultimate domestic market competition analysis that the company started to build its strategy in this regard and decided to use a number of employees as brand ambassadors.

It is also interesting to note that none of the participating companies has a registered trademark in the country. These businesses stated that they were not aware of the need to register their brands, and therefore they did not take any action.

Regarding the use of employees as brand ambassadors, while the companies do not have a registered trademark in the country their answers did not reflect any strategy in this regard, especially the first three participants. The first participant even though it has only 3 employees comprising the owner of the business, it was very interested in this topic. The company did not have any specific strategy related to turning the employees into brand ambassadors but specified that the owner together with the other two employees voluntarily used their personal social media accounts to share content related to the shipping services they offer. The owner of the company stated that they believe there is no need for a strategy in turning the employees into brand ambassadors as long as they feel comfortable sharing the company's content without asking them to do so. The second participant explained that although it finds really interesting the idea of turning the employees into brand ambassadors, it does not have the possibility to put it into practice, because the employees of the business come mainly from the nearby rural zones and do not appear enthusiasts or do not have curiosity about social media and the internet. The administrator of the company stressed that the employees are a valuable asset of the company, and besides the lack of interest in new trends and technology, their educational background and personal life impose a barrier in this regard. The third participating company noted that while the number of employees working in the company is relatively big, the lack of a marketing department makes it difficult to plan a proper strategy related to brand ambassadors. Human Resources Department experimented by establishing a reward program to incentivize employees, and even though the interest was great, the lack of a proper strategy resulted in a non-coordinated social media advertisement. While reward programs can be considered as a strategy for attracting employees' interest in becoming brand ambassadors for the company, the lack of a marketing professional imposed a limitation in properly executing this program. The company, after a few months of trial, decided to stop the reward program, but instead of this, it offered training to interested employees in topics related to brand management, marketing, and image management. By the end of the reward program, most of the employees stopped sharing content about the company and the products it offered, which showed that the employees were interested in the reward they were earning. The fourth company participating in the study as it is mentioned above, has a well-defined organizational structure. Its marketing objectives are aligned with the general objectives of the company, and the marketing department regularly revises strategies in coordination with new trends. The marketing manager of the company explained that marketing strategies are planned in coordination with the general strategies of the company. The Human Resources Department cooperates with the Marketing Department in order to identify the most suitable practices regarding employees and brand management. According to the fourth participant, the most important strategy of the company is to make the employees part of the company's vision. According to the participant, the company has worked hard to make its vision inspiring and motivating to the employees. The company has tied its vision to individual

and team goals; thus, communication is a great way to share it with the employees and collect feedback from them. The manager continued by saying that when the employee is informed, it is created an environment of transparency, which helps employees better understand and care about the brand.

The manager explained that the company prefers to use only a small number of employees as brand ambassadors for a couple of reasons:

Firstly, they believe that a small group of motivated, internal brand advocates, is always better than a larger group of paid external brand ambassadors. Employees are genuine and know the company and the services it offers better than any well-known person. Employees offer their day-to-day effort for the success of the company, they understand the importance of customer satisfaction, and they understand their role inside the company.

Secondly, the company has chosen to use only a small group of employees as brand ambassadors over the privacy concerns of each individual as well. Not every employee is open to new trends. The company has also provided clear social media guides in order to make it easier for the employees to safely practice social media experience.

The fact that everyone comes from a different background, has different perceptions and gets motivated in different ways, makes it impossible for the company to include everyone in the brand strategy. The company believes that employees should have the right to choose and decide what to share on their social media, and if they do not feel comfortable using a personal social media account for job purposes, the company values its employees the same. "Employees drive the company's culture, and no one better than an employee can be a brand ambassador, but this should be a choice, not an obligation," concluded the Marketing Manager of the fourth company.

The Problems of turning employees into brand ambassadors

It has been observed that the main factor that motivates the companies participating in the study toward new trends of brand management is the desire for good reputation and growth. That is why it is observed that all the companies consider brand management as a good opportunity for attracting new customers. The first three participants noted that the lack of a marketing department and the lack of marketing strategies make it difficult for the companies to identify potential customers, but they still did not plan to insert a marketing department in the organizational structure of the companies. The fourth company even though has in place marketing strategies, stressed that it faces difficulties in finding and keeping professionals in the company. The fourth company noted that the company after identifying the employees that will be used as brand ambassadors, often after they follow the training programs and receive all the necessary support, the employees simply lose interest as they understand the length of their engagement, or sometimes even quit their jobs for other opportunities inside or outside Albania.

Another important problem that is faced with the use of employees as brand ambassadors is privacy concerns. Employees mostly do not accept being part of the

brand ambassadors' group as they believe that privacy is an important matter which should be respected.

It has been stated that since most of the participants do not have a separate marketing department, the decisions on brand management are taken by the business owners/administrators.

Conclusions

Referring to the findings of the research, businesses that want to use their employees as brand ambassadors should first review their current marketing strategies to be in line with the requirements of modern marketing and global market dynamics. While creating their marketing plans, they must analyze the market systematically and reliably. Competitor analysis helps the company become aware of the competition, learn, and grow, but also understand the weaknesses of the business. With today's technological development traditional marketing methods remain insufficient, therefore adopting new trends becomes inevitable. (Benli & Karaosmanoglu, 2017). Mankins and Gottfredson (2022) state that Business leaders must consider strategy development as a continuous process that results in a living, dynamic plan. (Mankins & Gottfredson, 2022). The challenge is how the company develops the strategy and how it deals with the market dynamics. Companies over the years have adopted brand ambassador programs that rely on their employees. This approach aims in transforming employees into brand ambassadors for the company as they are widely considered one of the most important communications channels.

The research results show that the motivation of companies to turn their employees into brand ambassadors is high, but they need support in various areas, especially marketing, to achieve their goals. In addition, once again, it becomes clear how important it is for companies to first review their internal marketing and brand management goals and strategies and then make external marketing management decisions.

The results also find that none of the companies is implementing a way to measure the impact of their employee brand ambassador program. Therefore, it is recommended for the participants that use their employees as brand ambassadors to evaluate the indicators that determine if the program is showing results in terms of brand-heightening efforts.

Among the limitations of this study, is the fact that the research focused only on a small number of companies operating in Durres and Tirana area and registered with the National Business Center, the number of samples and the inability to generalize the research findings in terms of being a qualitative analysis can be listed. Another limitation of the study is the fact that the interview is held only with managers of the participants, and it is not extended to interviewing the employees who have turned into brand ambassadors.

In order to fill the gap of research related to this topic the researchers may extend their studies to employees that turn into brand ambassadors, but also the impact that their involvement bring to the customers and the success of the company. Future research may rely on quantitative methodology in order to gain statistical information on the matter.

The role of employees as brand ambassadors in Albania is expected to increase. A few companies encourage employees to spread brand awareness, but in order to keep employees interested in sharing information about the company, it is important to maintain their natural motivation.

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