



Branding culture: the missing link between top level managers and general employees in Zimbabwe's small to medium tourism enterprises

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Abstract

This study was based on understanding brand culture practices in the operation of Small to Medium Enterprises in the Zimbabwe tourism industry by looking at the separate influence of top level managers and lower level employees. The study applied a QUAL to QUAN sequential mixed methods approach. Qualitative research was used to establish themes for the study and a quantitative research survey instrument was used to conduct the research on established themes. The findings from in-depth interviews revealed that a brand culture in SMEs can be enhanced through promoting effective communication with the customers, the dress code of the employees, a positive media publicity, effective marketing strategies, outweighing competitor's quality and also through using logos and symbols. A further survey of these responses informed that a brand culture is grounded upon a collaborative effort between the top level managers and general employees. This is since the top level managers have been identified with the roles of: facilitating a positive media publicity, effective marketing strategies, outweighing competitor's quality, effective logos and symbols. The general employees are responsible for effective communication with the customers and a dress code that promotes a suitable branding culture. The study recommended the further empowerment of lower level employees through team building, training and development, and provision of brand toolkits so as to enhance general quality and organizational sustainability. Every customer desires exceptional customer service and unparalleled tourism experiences and general employees in a strong brand oriented culture are the ideal conduit for this to materialize.

Keywords: Small to Medium Enterprises, brand culture, tourism destination, strategic marketing.

Introduction

There is a growing development of Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Zimbabwe. This is as a result of government and communities' pressure to recover from an economic decline and increased rate of unemployment (Manuere et al., 2012). The economic meltdown has affected Zimbabwe in the past two decades to date. In the periods between years 1999 and 2008 the country has witnessed high rates of inflation eroding the value of the local currency, which also resurfaced in the year 2018. This has resulted in the closure of industries as they could not meet their day today operation expenses (Matutu, 2014). It became expensive to maintain investments and even attract any Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Many industries including the tourism sector



have retrenched employees as they have either reduced their operating capacity, or closed due to these viability issues.

The tourism sector in Zimbabwe has been identified as one of the pinnacles for the development of the Zimbabwean economy since independence was granted by Britain. It has contributed immensely to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Balance of Payment (BOP) of the country (Chidamoyo & Dumbu, 2012; Gono, 2005). However, due to these continuous socio-economic and political downfalls resulted in reduced tourism inflows and revenues. Many of the big operators in the Zimbabwe tourism industry reduced their operations too. Like any other sector in the country it resulted in the development of SMEs as a survival strategy for those retrenched and those who have failed to run big businesses. There is an increased development of SMEs in Zimbabwe's Accommodation, Travel and Resorts sectors of the tourism industry and these are viewed as an indispensable sector for national reconstruction and development in the country. A strong branding culture then is required as it will offer huge potential as a catalyst for the country and its needed economic and social development.

Globally SMEs have failed to operate into the unforeseeable future due to various challenges especially inability to craft and implement effective operating strategies (Shane & Stuart, 2002). The failure of many SMEs has been attributed to management deficiencies especially in the area of financial, marketing and information technology. However, the concept of branding as a marketing philosophy is growing and becoming an injector for success of various tourism businesses globally.

In light of this study, the remarkable performance of tourism businesses due to branding has not been shared by many SMEs in this sector. As announced by Krake (2005) many SMEs think that brand management is not of any significance such that they do not give the concept attention in their day to day operations.

It therefore shows that various SMEs are even operating without brands. As reported by Boyle (2003) many SMEs fail due to lack of marketing expertise, it was then important to understand the practice of branding as a culture by SMEs in the Zimbabwe tourism industry. This is supported by Bresciani and Eppler (2010) who postulated that owners of SMEs are giving more attention to financial and production issues and less on branding, which might be the reason for them failing to survive on the market for a longer period.

Statement of the Problem

There is an increasing development of SMEs in the Zimbabwe's tourism sector. Like anywhere else in the world emerging and upcoming tourism businesses face a marketing challenge. According to Boyle (2003), SMEs have been viewed to be immature in a market. This is because their knowledge in marketing and its practices is not only limited but superficial (Carson et al., 2001: 29). In reality many of these organizations do not understand the branding culture in business practices and are not viewed as brands, but just providers of products and services. There is need to share a common vision in branding. However, this study was based on the view that in operations of SMEs there is no clarity on the main custodian of a brand culture. In this regard Merrilees (2007) announced that there is missing literature on branding of SMEs. Also Wong and Merrilees (2005) postulated that even with many researches on branding, there has been little focus on SMEs brand management. Usually the top level managers in SME are the ones with dominance to craft and implement marketing strategies.

This study intended to understand the custodian of a brand culture by focusing being on a positional relationship between top level managers and lower level employees in their day to day



segregation of duties. Ojsalo et al (2008) concluded that decision making on branding matters for SMEs is usually done by few managers not recognising other levels. This study therefore investigated on the main sources of a brand culture within SMEs operations looking at the separated duties of top level managers and general employees in Zimbabwe's tourism industry. This was with an aim to improve on visibility and overall performance of the brand for SMEs operating in Zimbabwe's tourism industry.

Research Objectives

- To establish the relationship between top level managers (leadership) and the brand culture of SMEs in the Zimbabwean tourism industry
- To understand the level of influence of low level employees (general staff) on brand culture for SMEs in the Zimbabwe tourism industry
- To evaluate the top level managers in relation to general employees on their level of influence on the brand culture of SMEs in Zimbabwe tourism industry
- To produce a framework for top level managers, low level employees, brand culture and brand performance of SMEs in the tourism industry.

Literature review

Small to Medium Enterprises and branding

SMEs does not have a precise accepted definition from the available literature (Inyang, 2013). However Sadi and Henderson (2010) made an effort by informing that SMEs refers to startups, family businesses and spin-offs. According to Appleby (1999) SMEs are independently owned and operated to an extent of having little contribution to capital with a limited number of individuals and not having dominance in the field of operation. These businesses have failed to survive in the market though Maunganidze (2013) postulated that the Zimbabwe government has formulated and implemented some policies as a strategy to address the challenges, promote development, growth and survival of the SMEs.

The marketing guru Peter Drucker divided what he saw as the 'primary functions' of a manager into five discrete components. He stated that there should be set objectives in which there is a setting of goals for the lower level employees , and determining how best to meet the goals. He asserted that management should divide work into manageable activities, and allocate these to relevant team members to drive the brand forward. It is then important to motivate and communicate decisions clearly and engender a team ethos amongst all employees. This should be followed by creating appropriate yardsticks and targets, and analysing and interpreting business performance. The main component is arguably to develop the employees as they are very important company assets (Drucker, 2003).

There is however little literature with regards to branding as a survival strategy for the SMEs especially in the tourism sector. SEDCO (2004) further concurred by divulging that there is high failure of SMEs in Zimbabwe due to various challenges. This then contradicts with Badoc (2001) who alluded that SMEs can win rivalry form giants in the market by establishing effective brands that are known in targeted markets. In the context of this study, Krake (2005) suggested that owners of SMEs should develop a passion of branding for the company. This is because there is intense competition for the SMEs especially due to globalistaion and technological advancement (Bedbury, 2002). The available literature therefore shows that there has not been much research with regards to brand culture as a concept to stimulate and instill values of a brand within the

members of an organisation. As alluded by Urde (2003) a brand should be associated with specific core values that complement with the culture and values of an organisation. This study therefore looked into the owners of a brand culture for the SMEs in the tourism industry.

Organisational culture

Organizational culture has grown to be one of the most vital determinants in developing a company strategy (Romanowska 2001). This is because, organisational culture has been regarded as the assumptions that affects the direct operation of a business, together with the norms and values emanating from the history of the organisation that ultimately influence productivity and overall performance of the business (Reiman & Norros, 2002). From a business marketing perspective, Slater and Narver (1995) postulated that the organisational culture can be regarded as a market orientation that should encompass inter-functional coordination in an organisation.

Therefore, the culture that is within an organisation should be aligned to beliefs, practices and values that built an organisation's characteristics (Chegini, 2010). Within an organisation's culture are issues that a built within the organisation and might not be known by other externals unless an effort is made by members of the organisation to inform the world. As presented in Figure 1.1 below, the concept of organisational culture can be viewed in the form of an iceberg, whereby a greater percentage (90%) is embedded with the organisation and what the world only see are the artifacts (10%). In a drive to build a vibrant brand, an organisation should therefore understand that the culture that is within the organisation builds or destroy the brand which is the artifact that the world sees at any given time.

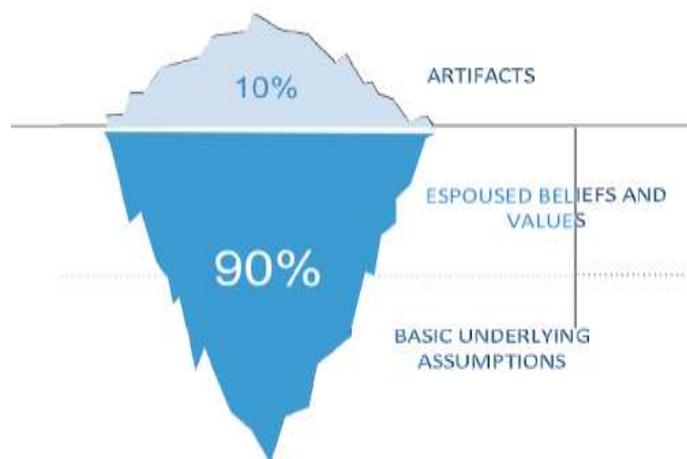


Figure 1.2 Organisational culture as an iceberg Source: Schein (2010)

Since organizational culture is hidden within the members, Sharifirad and Ataei, (2012) expressed that it has the ability to influence innovation by either encouraging or discouraging its supremacy. For this study, branding was considered as one form of innovation that a business can adopt. Streets and Boundary (2004) concurred by stipulating that management of innovation is based on creating a culture that encourages the creation of new ideas within the business that are valued and given maximum support. Consequently, if we consider for example, hotels that are SMEs, the general managers must come to see themselves as the leaders of their marketing process



and be contented with that role. This does not mean that they are experts but rather that they do get to comprehend the whole picture of what is needed and appreciate when to bring in general employees with exceptional skills and talents, when to apply what tools, and in which manner they should judge the effectiveness of the process. This means using general employees in the marketing process as an organizing concept for fashioning a branding team of employees that the leader can use in a well put together marketing process which enhances the brand. Every employee should view themselves as joint operators/marketers, on a customer-centered hotel that has a strategic competitive advantage, and strong brand and an ethical culture even if it is an SME.

In this regards Lai (2002) informed that, organisational culture has a great influence on human capital as when an organisation has an appropriate culture, it encourages the humans to be innovative, creative and to be unique so as to distinctively promote innovation. In tourism businesses, Erdogan and Tosun (2009) postulated that various scholars announce any poor performance with poor culture in delivering products and services by tourism resort businesses. Therefore, Potocki (2005) expressed that organisational culture is highly involving and strenuous process that requires effort of both employees and management of a company. Aaker (2014) then announced that, various components of an organisation including people, their capabilities and heritage are difficult to imitate when faced with competing brands since they are unique. In this case a brand culture cannot be separated from organisational culture and a culture can help in building uniqueness, which became the thrust of this study.

Branding culture

Brand culture can be viewed as cultural codes emanating from a brand, looking at the myths, values, beliefs and other aspects that have an influence on the brand's comprehension and its market values (Barbu, 2012). This means that, for brand management to be successful, the brand's holistic meaning should also be managed (Schroeder, 2009). The holistic meaning is built from an existing culture within the organisation. Noble et al. (2002) postulated that Nike as a company has built a culture in all areas that impacted positively on its branding process. Such organisational culture are visible to an extent that they are observed from the attitude of the members, their behavior and language (Sathe, 1985). Marketing and branding a cultural process is not just a business process (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). In this case organisational culture is neither theoretical nor practical anchored on creativity (Guldenmund, 2000; Reiman, 2001). Branding is still a creative concept. This is reflected by the value condensed in a brand that attracts consumers making them accumulate pleasure and confidence in the culture of that brand (Yan, 2011). Employees have a vital role to play in the development of a brand culture and Urde, (2009) informed that employees are the face of the brand and their way of communication and behaviour influence the impression that consumers have on a brand. Brands are the focal point of exchange between customers and producers (Hankinson & Cowking, 1993). When there is a dominant culture, members will then know how to express their perceptions, feelings and act at any given situation (Schein, 2010). This becomes a benefit transferred to the customers as pointed out by Abratt and Kleyn (2012) brand values are developed in order to give an appeal to the customers such that they should be developed through interaction with customers. Culture will then go further as an asset that forms the core values and identities of a brand (Kapferer, 2008).

Hecht and Ramsey (2002:43) further maintain that culture reflects the identity of the organization. In this case, then a brand is there to infuse culture with meaning the branded world we live (Shroeder, 2007). A strong brand is therefore a cultural icon (Närvänen, 2011). As presented in Figure 1.2 below, a brand culture unifies all the crucial stakeholders which are the firm, customers, influencers and popular culture. This is supported by brand stories that talk about a brand culture.

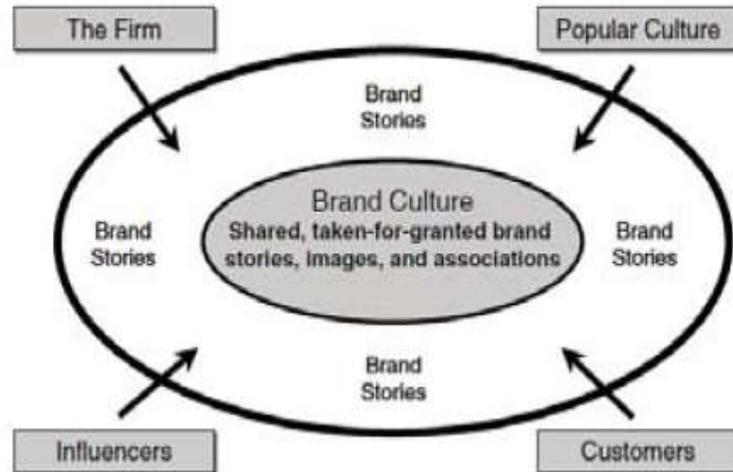


Figure 1.2 Brand culture components Source: Holt (2003)

From a branding perspective, SMEs must be given opportunities to explore, investigate and experiment, so that they can produce creative products and services to organisation (Fauzi et al., 2010). A constant culture will mean a strong culture that is needed by those organisation which are still to develop (Ogbonna & Harris, 2000). From this perspective it was important to carry out this study in relation to SMEs in Zimbabwe tourism sector. The desire of this study was as presented in figure 1.4, to make brand values dominant in the operation of a business to an extent of being the underlying assumptions of the business.

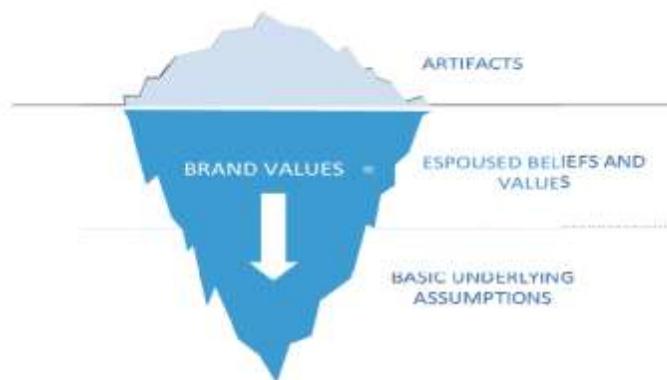


Figure 1.3 Brand values as an iceberg Source: Schein (2010)

As presented in Figure 1.3 the brand values should take dominance in the business processes. It means that, the artifacts presented to the world will become what is really share and taking a large chunk of an organisational culture. This study therefore, intended to develop a standpoint for a strong brand culture in the operation of SMEs within Zimbabwe tourism sector.



Research methodology

This research used a sequential mixed methods in order to establish data by starting with a qualitative research then followed by a quantitative research. It was therefore a QUAL to QUAN sequential mixed method. A qualitative research was used to establish themes for the research which were used to design a survey questionnaire for a further quantitative research.

In-depth interviews

These were carried out in order to complement a qualitative research. The participants were selected using a purposive judgmental sampling method. This was based on their knowledge, expertise, years of working experience and sector. The participants for the in-depth interviews were taken from the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality (2), Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (1), Ministry of Small to Medium Enterprises (2), and Hospitality Association of Zimbabwe (1) making a total sample of n=6.

Surveys

The study used a stratified random sampling in order to identify respondents for surveys from the three main sectors of the Zimbabwe tourism industry which are Accommodation, Travel and Resorts. In each sector a convenience sampling was done in order to distribute questionnaires to whoever was available at the time of the research. The sample of the respondents was then Accommodation (45), Travel (30), and Resorts (25) making a total sample of n=100.

Data collection

The data for qualitative research was collected using in-depth interviews. For a quantitative research data was collected using survey questionnaires.

Data analysis

A content analysis was done for the qualitative data in order to establish themes for the research. Quantitative data was analysed by turning frequencies into percentages that were then tabulated.

Findings and discussions

The results from the in-depth interviews (n=6) revealed the following themes in relation to building a brand culture in the tourism sector:

- Effective communication with the customers;
- Dress code of the employees;
- Positive media publicity;
- Effective marketing strategies;
- Outweighing competitor's quality;
- Logos and symbols.

The established themes were then further investigated looking at how they relate to the main two parties responsible in the operation of tourism businesses, which are the top managers and general employees. This investigation was done through a survey for which questionnaires were distributed to the relevant respondents. The results from the survey are as presented in Table 1.1 below.



Table 1.1 Responses on the parties responsible for building organisational culture in tourism business

Themes	Responsible member of the organisation	
	Top level managers	General employees
Total sample	n=100	
Effective communication with the customers	45%	55%
Dress code of the employees	15%	85%
Positive media publicity	70%	30%
Effective marketing strategies	75%	25%
Outweighing competitor's quality	60%	40%
Logos and symbols	80%	20%

Therefore, these results from the survey helped in separating duties between top level managers and general level employees in forming brand culture within a tourism business. Table 1.2 below shows the specific roles of the two parties in developing a brand culture.

Table 1.2 Separated roles of top managers and general employees in building brand culture

Roles in developing a brand culture	
Top level management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive media publicity • Effective marketing strategies • Outweighing competitor's quality • Logos and symbols
General employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective communication with the customers • Dress code of the employees

The presentation in Table 1.2 shows that the top level managers have their specific roles in building a brand culture with the tourism business. Their specific roles as identified from this study include: crafting ways for having positive media publicity about the organisation, producing effective marketing strategies, improving quality so as to outweigh competitors and producing logos and symbols for the organisation. This shows that the top level managers are strategies who provide a guide to be followed by all members of the organisation.

They might not be the implementers but they frame, structure and provide standard operating procedures in relation to a desired brand culture within the organisation. In responses to the same view, the presentation in Table 1.2 also specified the roles of the general employees as to promote effective communication with customers and conforming to a dress code that is specifically for the organisation. This is supported by Abratt & Kleyn (2012) that a brand culture should be transferred to the customers and in this case it is through the general employees. Also it makes a brand a focal point for exchange between customers and the organisation (Hankinson & Cowking 1993). The main reason for the established results might be due to the fact that general employees are the implementers of a brand culture, since they are the ones closer to the customers at any given point in time. This therefore helped in coming up with a framework for brand culture by SMEs in the tourism industry as shown in Figure 1.4 below.

Towards a framework of culture for SMEs



Figure 1.4 Framework for brand culture of Small to Medium Enterprises in Tourism
Source: Research Findings (2019)

The presentation in Figure 1.4 above shows that there is a symbiotic relationship between the top level managers and general employees in developing a branding culture for SMEs in the tourism industry. This is supported by Potocki (2005) who announced that organisational culture is highly involving and strenuous process that requires effort of both employees and management of a company. The top level managers might be the custodians of resources and strategic decision but are not there to discuss with customers on a day to day basis. Low level employees are closer to the customers and they should reflect a positive brand in the eyes of the customers. This then means that a combined effort of both parties can result in improved brand performance for SMEs in the tourism industry. In essence then, a consistently good brand does not merely arise from conformist employees. Each employee, guided by the manager needs to determine how he or she can deliver on the brand promise in a way that is reliable, leveraging the business identity with what makes them function well and makes them exceptional in all they do.

Conclusion

The main aim of the study was to establish the roles of top level managers and low level employees in promoting a branding culture for SMEs in the Zimbabwe's tourism industry. The results showed that there are key roles for both parties such that the top level managers are the strategists whilst the low levels are the implementers. It therefore concluded that an effective brand culture can only be achieved through combining efforts of the two parties so as improve brand performance of SMEs in the tourism industry. Thus, employees must have a highly visible role in branding which gives them the opportunity to move beyond the usual hierarchy. Managers must grow their brand with their whole team, and allow lower level employees to take on a role that is critical to the success of a small to medium tourism enterprise. This is why an employer's decision for hiring a candidate for any position in any business but especially in SMEs must be based on their education, understanding of the business, soft skills, self-assurance and personality which is able to promote a brand effectively. SMEs have an important role to play in



economic development in Zimbabwe if they follow international best practice and develop a brand culture which is able to incorporate all levels of employees in a meaningful manner.

Recommendations

The study recommends that there is need to empower low level employees through team building mechanisms, training and development, and the needed provision of brand toolkits. The study also recommends a further study in relation to the strategic dominance of lower level employees in brand development for SMEs in the Zimbabwean tourism sector.

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