

Chapter 4

Understanding the Use of Social Media for Employer Branding

Maxim Viktor Wolf
University of London, UK

Julian Mark Sims
University of London, UK

Huadong Yang
University of Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

Employer branding applies marketing tools to promote an organisation as an employer to current and potential employees. The importance of strategic alignment between parts of the business has been highlighted in literature: marketing and human resource activities are no exception. On the contrary, the alignment of customer brand and employer brand is equally important to marketers and human resource managers. This chapter frames the creation and communication of the employer brand as a “strong communication system”. A framework for assessment of the system’s strength is introduced and a practical application of this framework is demonstrated in two case studies. The conflict between the traditional top-down one-way marketing communication flow and bottom-up bi-directional communication on social media is highlighted and the impact of this apparent conflict on the system strength is discussed. Social media appears to change the way in which employer brand is created, communicated and perceived and this chapter aims in aiding the understating of this changes.

INTRODUCTION

Utilisation of social media in organisational communications changes the communication flows, rhetorical practices and other aspects of organizational life (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2013). Looking at how organisations communicate

their employer brand identity, this chapter evaluates how these communications are influenced and formed by social media by examining how Human Resource (HR) departments use social media to interact with various categories of users in the course of Employer Branding activities. Practitioners’ understanding of how to utilise and

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manage social media for branding today has been described as the “Wild West” (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011), but this chapter attempts to bring some law and order into that space.

The aim of the chapter is twofold: first, considering the need for more theorizing on the impact of social media on HR practices and Recruitment (Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Guest, 2011; Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge, & Thatcher, 2013), a theoretical framework to investigate the ways in which social media is being used, policed and embedded into day-to-day employer branding communication practices is introduced. Second, utilising the theoretical model presented in the first part, this chapter presents empirical insights gained from two case studies in organisations which currently use social media for communication with former, current, and potential employees. The case studies evaluate employer branding communications within these organisations and highlight the gaps in the communication processes and weak points of the system.

A communication system is considered to be strong, when it is rich on consensus, distinctiveness and consistency (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). A theoretical framework based on this definition allows the assessment of consistency, consensus and distinctiveness content in employer branding activities. The framework helps to understand how social media is being utilised, how the utilisation contributes to establishing an understanding between the sender (organisation) and receiver (employee) and the return communication from sender (employee) and receiver (organisation), thus allowing the evaluation of the effectiveness of employer branding activities.

This chapter starts with an overview of literature and some key definitions. Two case studies of large UK employers demonstrate the application of the framework and the findings of these two studies are compared and discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary of current developments and some suggestions for future research.

Social Media is a loosely defined, but a widely used concept (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Scholars from several areas attempt definitions of social media and several studies have been conducted explaining how social media are being used in a variety of fields. In this chapter social media is seen as a User Generated Information System: a collection of integrated technologies and platforms that build upon Web2.0 technological stack and open access and shared information philosophy. Social media are being used as tools for internal communication between employees (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfeld, 2013), selection and assessment (Roth et al., 2013), brand community building in online environments (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012), business to consumer as well as business-to-business marketing and innovation (Hanna et al., 2011; Jussila, Kärkkäinen, & Leino, 2011), and Employer Branding (Mosley, 2007; Nandan, 2005). In its short history since the launch of SixDegrees.com in 1997 (it went out of business in 2001), social networking sites became more and more ingrained in daily individual, societal and organisational lives. Today’s major players (in terms of number of users, brand value and market value) such as Facebook, LinkedIn, twitter, QQ were all released between 2003 and 2006 (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). This makes social networking sites and platforms a very young and developing phenomenon still to be further explored, understood and theorised.

Different from product branding, employer branding is an activity of making the organisation as an employer attractive to external public (similar to traditional marketing) and to internal public (employees, not commonly the concern of marketing activities but perhaps similar to engaging with existing customers). The added degree of complexity is explained through the fact that employees have many more touch-points with the “product” than consumers (Mosley, 2007). Rather than the price/value and quality promise of a traditional product, employer branding needs

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