Towards a Typology of Human Brand-Organisational Relationships

The purpose of this paper is to explore the interaction between human brands and organisational brands. Human brands represent an area of research that has begun to develop from some atheoretical origins (e.g. Peters 1999, Andrusia and Haskins 2000, Graham 2001), and where some theory building has recently been attempted (Thomson 2006, Lair, Sullivan and Cheney 2005, Hearn 2008). The most widely cited paper in the area defines the human brand as “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (Thomson 2006 p.104).

The concept of human brands has clear relevance to a number of areas of marketing. However, the point of departure of this work in progress is to note that, to date, human branding work has focused almost exclusively on what might be termed “free standing human brands”. The interaction between a human brand and an organisational brand is an area that has been subject to limited attention to date, but is clearly essential to understanding how well-known individuals can work as human brands on behalf of an organisation. Here we offer a contribution to the application of human branding in marketing, and indeed a full development of human branding theory, by investigating this interaction.

Our methodology for this paper is a theory-building one. As a first step, we propose an original typology of well-known personae in organisations. This is an a priori classification of cases based on their similarity to “ideal types” which have been derived from a defined conceptual framework. Doty and Glick (1994 p.232) define a typology as “a conceptually derived interrelated set of ideal types … each of which represents a unique combination of the … attributes that are believed to determine the relevant outcomes”. In this case, the relevant outcome is the potential of the human brand as a marketing resource for the organisation. Each ideal type has the potential to be a high value marketing resource. However, because of the differences between ideal types different management would be required to exploit that potential. In the following sections we attempt to identify the attributes of human brand-organisational relationships that might be utilised in defining a set of ideal types. We illustrate these ideal types by reference to business organisations and celebrity office-holders, an area which has received attention in the management literature (Rindova et al 2006, Wade, et al 2006, Hambrick and Hayward 1997), but not in branding. Finally, we identify some implications of this typology that can be examined empirically in a subsequent stage of this research.

Framework

The power of a typology arises from the ease with which cases can be accurately classified and the degree of insight that is generated by the differences identified between the ideal types. Accordingly we seek the simplest possible conceptual framework that yields useful results. We suggest that the performance of a human brand as a marketing resource for an organisation will be affected by two factors. We outline these factors briefly, and then illustrate their relevance through discussion of the resulting ideal types.

The first factor that affects the performance of a human brand as a marketing resource for an organisation is the origin of the role or the source of celebrity. The traditional elements of brand strength – awareness, coupled with strong, favourable and unique associations in the mind of consumers – will form part of this, but also relevant is how their human brand strength relates to their organisational role. Following Thompson’s definition, if a human
brand is required to be “well-known”, we propose that the origins of that “well known” status is an important discriminating variable between alternative human brands as a marketing resource for a particular organisation. In particular we seek to distinguish between those who are famous because of their role in the organisation and those who have achieved celebrity outside of the context of that business or organisation.

The reason that source of celebrity is a relevant consideration in predicting the performance of a human brand as a marketing resource for an organisation is because a key framework in branding: the meaning transfer model (McCracken 1989). The value of a human brand as a marketing resource for an organisation will vary depending on where the human brand’s meanings are derived from: Do they come from the context in which the organisation operates? Or are they derived from a different context and bring some change to the organisation’s brand associations through a transfer process or mechanism?

The second factor is the nature of the relationship between the human brand and the associated organisation. Our focus here is on the organisational decision rights held by the human brand. The human brands under analysis in this model are, to a greater or lesser extent, internal to the organisation, they have decision rights within the organisation as corporate officers or employees. However we make a further distinction with this group in an attempt to further distinguish between human brands on the basis of decision rights. We suggest that founders of the organisation will have more decision rights and more power within that organisation. If this is known to consumers, the human brand will therefore also have a different credibility as a marketing resource for that organisation.

To illustrate the differences between the resulting ideal types, we highlight three variables where we expect to see significant differences that affect the effectiveness of the human brand as organisational marketing resources (Treadway et al. 2009). The expectations for each group form testable hypotheses for the next stage of the project.

- Organisational credibility (OC) - the likelihood that consumers will believe undertakings given on behalf of the organisation
- Expert credibility (EC) – the authority the human brand possesses to speak on industry issues
- Organisational dependence (OD) – the degree to which consumers believe the organisation is unsustainable in the absence of the human brand.

Illustrative Application

The value of this typology can be illustrated through application to celebrity business people. Each ideal type has high potential as a marketing resource for the organisation, and for each ideal type, we provide examples and then discuss what the typology leads us to expect about the challenges of using their potential as a marketing resource for their organisation. This is summarised in figure 1.
The first ideal type, “Founder entrepreneurs”, established the organisation and rose in celebrity as the organisation has succeeded. Examples include Donald Trump, Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, and Rupert Murdoch. Their value as a marketing resource is high because of high organisational credibility through their ownership and high expertise due to their industry background. The risk to be managed is high dependence because of succession issues.

The second ideal type, “celebrity leveragers”, founded a business organisation but already had celebrity from another source. The business exists to leverage the human brand. Examples of might be chefs, (e.g. Gordon Ramsey) or media figures (e.g. Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart). Similar to Founder Entrepreneurs, they have high organisational credibility and create high dependence, but, since they are less likely to be seen as business experts, they have lower expert credibility.

“Celebrated employees” form the third ideal type. They have garnered celebrity status as employees of an organisation, rather than as founders. Examples are Michael O’Leary at Ryanair, Jack Welch at GE, and Michael Eisner at Disney. Celebrated employees have high expert credibility, often gained from a consistent record of success (Hayward, Rindova, and Pollock, 2004). However they do not have the organisational credibility of owners, and therefore may not create such organisational dependence issues.

The final ideal type, “Celebrity employee”, has a level of celebrity from another source, and is employed by an organisation. Where a celebrity endorser is an employee of the organisation they represent this type (Silvera and Austad 2004). This group would have the lowest level of perceived organisational or expert credibility. However organisational dependence could vary significantly, depending on the strength of the celebrity’s personal reputation.

The diversity within the business celebrity population enables a between case approach to be adopted, and the strengths and weaknesses of each ideal type, and the challenges of exploiting their potential can be investigated in a comparative manner.

**Cross Sector Potential**

Business is not the only domain where human and organisation brands intersect. Media, sport, entertainment and politics are all examples of areas of public life where there are well-known personae, the subjects of marketing communications efforts, who are associated with branded organisations. The existence of alternative populations where human brand-organisational brand interaction occurs means that a between group approach can be adopted.
Each of these populations is likely to have a different mix of ideal types. For instance, the celebrity business people population contains a high proportion of founder entrepreneurs, and comparatively few celebrated employees. Politics will show a very different mix, since relatively few political parties are founded, but their leadership changes frequently, meaning celebrated employees are comparatively common.

The existence of different population groups means that a between group approach can be adopted, and differences between groups used to assess the impact of context upon the strengths and weaknesses of each ideal type.

Summary

This paper contributes to understanding the interaction between human brands and organisational brands by proposing a simple typology that can be used to classify human brand- organisational brand interaction. The resulting types all have the potential to be valuable marketing resources, but their use and management will have to be different to exploit that potential. The typology has potential for empirical investigation, and also for extension to other areas where human and organisational brands interact, such as politics or entertainment.
References


