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Competency Assessment for Branding Programs Development in Thailand's Higher Education

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Abstract

The ever-changing business environment resulting from changing consumer behaviors, fierce competition and advances in technology affect the strategic positioning of a brand. Maintaining healthy brands or embarking on a rebranding or repositioning strategy calls for a more creative set of branding management competencies in order to respond to the marketing challenges of the 21st century. This research paper attempts to assess brand management competences, attitudes and knowledge important in current business environment, to further accurately design branding-related curricula that truly reflect needs in the contemporary business and professional environment. Using a qualitative research approach, the data was collected from focus group interviews and questionnaires with seventeen management people from the private sector. The results identify the top-rated knowledge and/or competencies needed in branding a business, which are competence in research development, knowledge of brand strategic planning, ability to communicate added value in a clear way, knowledge of brand identity development, and ability to manage and keep the brand management process 'alive', respectively. The paper concludes with a discussion of the underlying key implications for both academia and business.

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1. Introduction

Under a changing environment, brands are vital factors in maintaining competitive advantage for successful organizations. It is not surprising, therefore, to see several brand management techniques, including revitalizing, reposition, rebranding, or renaming brands, being widely used in a variety types of organizations (Ishaq, Hussain, Asim, & Cheema, 2013; Horng, Liu, Chou, & Tsai 2012; He & Li, 2011; Ferguson & Brown, 2011;). The above methods also imply that developing strong brands involves consistency, active management and constant interaction between all stakeholders and the organization (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009).

This further implies that academics and management educators are charged with the task of producing graduates who possess brand management competencies and/or the knowledge required to achieve success in the business world. Extensive research regarding brand management competencies has been conducted in the context of academia and education (Shonhiwa & Ndudzo, 2015; Goi, Goi, & Wong, 2014; Williams & Omar, 2014; Sharma, Rao, & Popli, 2013; Waldeck, Durante, Helmuth, & Marcia, 2012). In particular, Hestien, Rotem, and Rivin (2008) evaluated the most needed marketing skills for students to become brand managers. Shonhiwa and Ndudzo (2015) especially made arguments that unique skills and capabilities, known as core competencies, are crucial for success in this industry. Although this stream of research has covered many aspects of academia and education, discussion of assessing brand management competencies and knowledge for the purpose of curriculum development in higher education has been limited, especially in Thailand.

With this background, this paper argues that competencies and knowledge obtained from voices in brand management will be valuable for academics and management educators to design brand management-related programs that truly respond to the current needs of industry. It should be noted here that this research and its findings are a first step in curriculum development for the brand management programs of a large public university in Thailand. We will first review current literature on the importance of brand management to business and competencies. Research methodology and the findings will then be explained. The paper concludes with theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Why brand management competencies and knowledge?*

Business researchers have long made the case of the importance of brand management as a strategic tool to successfully compete in an industry (He & Li, 2011; Ferguson & Brown, 2011; Merz, et al, 2009; Kapferer, 2008). Herstein, Rotem, and Rivin (2008) argued that as brand becomes the business core of any organization, it should be managed professionally so as to cope with business challenges such as an increased number of brands, increased power of wholesalers, channel dynamics, global forces, aggressive brand extensions, and competitive markets. In addition, Kotler and Keller (2006) pointed out that managers of successful 21st century brands must demonstrate strategic control of the brand management process. They must be able to create, design, and implement marketing activities or programs that manage brands so as to maximize their values.

2.1. *Competency*

Sims and Koszalka (2008) define competency as “a knowledge, skill, or attitude that enables one to effectively perform the activities of a given occupation or function to the standards expected in employment” (p.569). In other words, specific competencies are importantly required in order to perform a specific role. There is a growing trend in higher education to use competencies and standards to guide the development or evaluation of programs and curricula, and to obtain assessment data about student performances and abilities in specific areas (Dabbagh & English, 2015; Shonhiwa & Ndudzo, 2015; Landmann, 2013; Halpem, 1999). As argued by Acedo and Hughes (2014), curricula should be designed or restructured according to current needs of stakeholders in an industry, rather than case studies from textbooks.

3. Research Methodology

This research was preliminary part of competency-based learning outcome development for new curriculum branding management of a large public university in Thailand. We collected data from two different methods: focus group interviews and a questionnaire. The focus group interviews were conducted with two entrepreneurs who own and operate their own businesses in academic and restaurant areas, respectively. The other method, the questionnaire, was used with another 17 employees in middle management in different industries.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part was demographic information of the participants. The second part asked for comments regarding the importance and urgent needs of having competent brand managers for organizations. The last part was called “dual responses” assessing current brand management competencies as well as expected brand management competencies. It was a fifteen item scale that taped core competencies and/or managerial knowledge and skills important for the management of brands from brand managers’ perspectives. Means, standard deviations and a Modified Priority Needs Index (PNI modified) (Wongwanich, 2014) were used to analyze the data.

4. Results

The participants consisted of 10 females (58.82%) and 7 males (4.18%), ranging in age from 25-50. They were full-time employees in middle management positions at a variety of organizations, although most (58.82%) were in services. Six of them (35.3%) had had experience in brand management. We found that knowledge in brand building/establishment, ability to generate consumer awareness and positive image through communication, ability to creatively manage brands in the organization were ranked the highest competencies and/or knowledge in assessing current brand management competencies. However, it is interesting to note that ability to communicate added value in a clear way, ability to manage and keep the brand management process ‘alive’, and ability to analyze data were the top-three rated expected brand management competencies from a management perspective. The results are in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of current and expected brand management competencies. (N=17)

Competencies	Current		Expectation	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Knowledge				
Knowledge in brand strategic planning	3.41	0.62	3.94	0.75
Knowledge in brand building/establishment	3.76	0.66	4.01	0.71
Knowledge in brand research and development	3.18	0.18	3.71	0.77
Knowledge in brand identity development	3.59	0.80	4.00	0.61
Competence in external brand communication				
Ability to generate consumer awareness and positive image through communication	3.72	0.92	4.05	0.56
Ability to express brand identity in marketing communication	3.65	0.79	4.00	0.71
Ability to communicate added value in a clear way	3.53	0.94	4.06	0.75
Ability to convey consistent brand meaning through all marketing communication channels	3.71	0.69	3.88	0.86
Ability to present a network as a unified whole to external audiences	3.53	0.94	3.84	0.83
Competence in creative brand management				
Ability to lead the brand management team	3.71	0.77	3.82	0.81
Ability to manage and keep the brand management process ‘alive’	3.65	0.70	4.06	0.66
Ability to creatively manage a brand for the organization	3.82	0.81	4.18	0.64
Competence in research development				
Ability to design research for brand development purposes	3.65	0.86	3.65	0.86
Ability to design research instruments	3.35	0.70	3.53	0.80
Ability to analyse data	3.65	0.93	3.82	0.73

In addition, we prioritized the needs in developing brand management competencies and found that the most needed competencies and/or knowledge were knowledge in brand research and development, knowledge in brand strategic planning, and ability to communicate added value in a clear way. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the needs in developing brand management competencies.

No.	Needs in core competencies development for creative brand management	I	D	I-D	PNI Modified
1	Knowledge in brand research and development	3.71	3.18	0.53	0.166
2	Knowledge in brand strategic planning	3.94	3.41	0.53	0.155
3	Ability to communicate added value in a clear way	4.06	3.53	0.53	0.150
4	Knowledge in brand identity development	4.00	3.59	0.41	0.114
5	Ability to manage and keep the brand management process ‘alive’	4.06	3.65	0.41	0.112
6	Ability to express brand identity in marketing communication	4.00	3.65	0.35	0.095
7	Ability to creatively manage a brand for the organization	4.18	3.82	0.36	0.094
8	Ability to generate consumer awareness and positive image through communication	4.05	3.72	0.33	0.088
9	Ability to present a network as a unified whole to external audiences	3.84	3.53	0.31	0.087
10	Knowledge in brand building/establishment	4.01	3.76	0.25	0.066
11	Ability to design research instruments	3.53	3.35	0.18	0.053
12	Ability to analyze data	3.82	3.65	0.17	0.046
13	Ability to convey consistent brand meaning through all marketing communication channels	3.88	3.71	0.17	0.045
14	Ability to lead the brand management team	3.82	3.71	0.11	0.029
15	Ability to design research for brand development purposes	3.65	3.65	0.00	0.000

5. Discussion and research implication

Maintaining long-term brand success in today’s business environment is not an easy task for brand managers. After collecting data from 17 middle management people, the results showed some competencies and/or knowledge as being important for brand managers in order to combat the current business environment.

Several implications for both academics and practitioners can be drawn from this study. Scale measurement development on brand competencies can be developed as to our knowledge, there is no such measurement scale in this area. Researchers might want to find greater numbers of participants to assure validity and reliability of the scale. In addition, using competencies acquired from stakeholders as guidelines to develop curricula in higher education is fairly new, especially in Thailand, leaving a lot of room for further studies. For example, it would be interesting to compare the same set of brand management competencies and/or knowledge in different levels or types of education. Educators can apply this finding in incorporating such competences in brand-related courses. For example, the results pointed that communication should be an essential part when designing branding programs, as it helps increase awareness and positive image of brand as well as add value of brand to outsiders. As such, courses such as “creative brand communication” or “consumer behavior-based communication” would allow students to acquire such competences found from this study.

Last but not least, identifying brand management competencies and/or knowledge relevant to the contemporary workplace should truly help brand academics and educators in transferring practical concerns in their courses and/or classroom activities.

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