Managing across a corporate and product brand portfolio: evidence from a large South African service organization

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand how a large service organisation with a brand portfolio manages its corporate brand relative to its portfolio of product brands.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors use an interpretivist research paradigm to investigate four research questions concerning the relative roles of corporate and product brands, the role of the CEO, the structures and capabilities that support the development of brand equity (including the role of the marketing function) and the role of employees in building corporate brand equity. A case study design was used, and the Tsogo Sun, one of the largest hotel and casino organisations in Africa, was the focus of the investigation.

Findings: The findings highlight the important role of both the CEO and the marketing department in optimising brand equity and managing across corporate and product brands. Employees were found to play a critical role and the need to clarify their relative roles as both recipients and expressors of brand identity across corporate and product brands emerged as an important theme.

Originality/value: Although the corporate brand has received much attention in recent years, much of literature remains conceptual. In addition to responding to calls for empirical research, the paper also contributes to deepening understanding about how to manage a corporate brand alongside a number of product brands.

Keywords:
Brand portfolio management, Corporate branding, Services branding

Introduction

There is a growing body of evidence linking brands with both the building of competitive advantage and increasing the firm's value (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Rao *et al.*, 2004; Wiles *et al.*, 2012). The resource-based view of the firm recognises that both product and corporate brands can be seen as organisational resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (Capron and Hulland, 1999; Grant, 1995). It is therefore important for firms to develop capabilities that enable them to acquire, build and develop brands that build a firm's competitive advantage and increase its value to stakeholders. Building strong brands requires the development of management processes that are systematic and structured (Merrilees *et al.*, 2011).

An important part of any organisation's brand management strategy includes the identification and implementation of an optimal corporate brand architecture (Urde, 2003). Architectural choices range from the adoption of a single "branded house" to the management of a portfolio of brands – a "house of brands" approach which incorporates the corporate brand and any number of product or even ingredient brands (Aaker, 2004b; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Muzellec and Lambkin, 2009).

In addition to the extensive literature that adopts a product branding perspective, research on corporate brands has burgeoned in the past 20 years. Balmer (1995) was the first to discuss the strategic importance of corporate brand management. Also, in the late 1990s, Ind (1997) popularised corporate branding with a book in 1997. In 1998, he outlined the benefits of becoming a powerful corporate brand and defined the barriers that undermine effective communications (Ind, 1998). In the early 2000s, there was a plethora of work on corporate branding. Harris and de Chernatony (2001) explored the implications of corporate branding for the management of internal brand resources. Hatch and Schultz (2001) stated that the three essential elements of a corporate brand strategy must be aligned: vision, culture and image. Balmer (2001, 2001a) argued that the well-being and survival of many organisations rests on the success of their corporate brand and introduced a new corporate marketing mix. Knox and Bickerton (2003) outlined six new conventions for understanding the processes of nurturing and managing a corporate brand, and they discuss the implications of these conventions for the emergent theory of corporate brand management. Knox (2004) outlined a framework which enables senior management to develop superior customer value through branding and positioning their organisation and to deliver this value through its business processes. Merrilees and Miller (2008) highlighted the importance of corporate rebranding in branding practice, and Vallaster *et al.* (2012) offered a framework for companies to address corporate social responsibility and their brands strategically.

Corporate branding has been linked to a growing body of research in identity and related concepts, spanning multidisciplinary domains and literatures (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007). According to Abratt and Kleyn (2012, p. 1050), "The corporate brand comprises two aspects, corporate expression and stakeholder images of the organisation's identity". The former includes all mechanisms used by the organisation to express its corporate identity to all stakeholder groups. Corporate expression links the organisation's corporate identity with its stakeholders and accordingly is classified as part of both the constructs. Corporate brands not only provide insight into "key features" of an organisation (Balmer, 2008, p. 22) but also can be leveraged to positively impact performance; therefore, they should be regarded as a strategic asset. To manage corporate brand equity, all stakeholders of the organisation need to share consistent perceptions of the “nature of the brand” (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001, p. 442). This involves the careful management of all the identity components, starting from the vision and including the translation of brand values (Dall’Olmo Riley and de Chernatony, 2000).

Much of the work on corporate branding has been conceptual (Aaker, 2004a, 2004b; Balmer, 2012); Aaker (2004b) makes the case that the role of the corporate brand is flexible. Results from a study of industry, company and product level drivers of branding strategy support the importance of flexibility (Strebinger, 2014). Urde (2016) explored the brand core and its management over time and developed a framework for managing the core of a brand for continuity and change. Whilst research on brand management systems has been conducted (Kim and Lee, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2008, Santos-Vijande *et al.*, 2013), scholarly understanding of how practitioners manage a corporate brand in the context of a brand portfolio that includes both the corporate and product brands is limited.

A further aspect of brand management that is of particular importance to corporate brand managers and product brands of service organisations is the role played by employees (Miles and Mangold, 2004; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). Employees are recipients of corporate brand promises and also play a role in expressing the corporate brand and delivering the promises of both corporate and product brands (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; King and Grace, 2008). The role of employees is particularly important in the case of building equity of services brands (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003).

The objective of this study is to understand how a large service organisation with a brand portfolio manages its corporate brand relative to its portfolio of product brands. The focus of the investigation is Tsogo Sun, one of the largest hotel and casino organisations in Africa.

Literature on branding highlights a number of key themes that are important for organisations seeking to build brand equity to take into account when developing and implementing brand strategies. Although much has been written about the relative roles of corporate and product brands, the identification and allocation of responsibilities and accountability for brand management, and the role of both the CEO and employees in building brand equity has not been explicitly investigated in the context of an organisation operating in a multi-brand services context. Accordingly, the following research questions are framed for investigation in this context:

RQ1. What is the importance and relative roles of corporate and product brands?

RQ2. What is the role of the CEO in corporate branding?

RQ3. What structures and capabilities support the development of brand equity and what role does the marketing function play in this?

RQ4. What is the role of employees in building corporate brand equity?

The paper is structured as follows. First, the authors begin by reviewing the literature on aspects of brand management including the relative roles of corporate and product brands, the allocation of brand management responsibility in an organisational context and internal and employee branding to derive a number of research questions about corporate brand management in a multi-brand service context. The research methodology and the chosen case, Tsogo Sun, are then described. This is followed by a discussion of findings. Finally, recommendations on how to manage a corporate brand in a multi-brand context are presented.

Literature review

The relative roles of corporate and product brands

An organisation's brands represent a potentially powerful source of value for a firm and thus need to be managed correctly (Hatch and Schultz, 2003; Ind, 1997). Customers are typically the primary audience for product brands (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), whereas the focus of the corporate brand includes a more varied group of stakeholders (Balmer, 2005). Although in some contexts, the corporate brand is a little more than a name that secures limited physical and financial resources (Uggla, 2006), corporate branding scholars have advocated a far more strategic approach to corporate branding that involves developing a clear understanding of the organisation's core values, which includes the organisation's business strategy "with the aim to develop the brand as a resource" to hold a position of "strategic competitive advantage" (Urde, 2003, p. 2012).

An organisation's commitment to build the corporate brand is important, as companies need to prepare for the allocation of resources and funds to grow and support the corporate brand (Balmer, 2001b). According to Balmer (2012, p. 1068), building the corporate brand requires the corporate brand manager to carefully consider the corporate marketing mix. This mix refers to character (corporate identity), communication (corporate communication), constituencies (stakeholder orientation), covenant (corporate brand promise), conceptualisation (corporate image) and culture (corporate culture). The corporate brand management function is an important strategic role preoccupied with maximising opportunities within the corporate brand architecture by managing the corporate brand portfolio (Uggla, 2006).

According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), brand architecture is an organising structure of the brand portfolio that specifies brand roles and the nature of relationships between brands. They developed a tool called the brand relationship spectrum, which recognises options defined by a continuum that involves four basic strategies and nine sub-strategies. The position on the spectrum reflects the degree to which brands are separated in strategy execution and, ultimately, in the customer's minds. Kapferer (2008) identified six main brand architecture strategies, the product brand strategy and its variants, the line and range brands, the flexible umbrella strategy, the masterbrand strategy, the maker's mark strategy, the endorsing brand strategy and the source brand strategy. They may be structured according to whether the value sought by the brand relates more to power and stature on the one hand, or personalisation, differentiation and identity on the other. According to Aaker (2004a), the corporate brand has access to organisational and product associations, and in some contexts, it can be a masterbrand that plays a driver and an endorser role.

Allocating responsibility for managing corporate and product brands

Historically, the marketing function has been responsible for communicating the product brand to the market, whilst management of the corporate brand has vested in the corporate communications function (Balmer, 2008). Despite this academic distinction, it is still very difficult to determine exactly how to demarcate the management of corporate and product brands (Shahri, 2011). There are a number of factors that contribute to this lack of clarity and these include contexts where product brands operate in the realm of corporate brands, as well as the uncertainty around whether brand images can be transferred from the corporate brand to the product brand and vice-versa (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2009).

Although not typically seen as accountable for the management of product brands, the CEO has an integral role to play in the ultimate management of the corporate brand (Shahri, 2011). According to Balmer (2001a), the corporate brand is driven by the CEO in line with the business strategy. In addition to aligning corporate brands with strategy, CEO's need to also underpin the corporate brand with an organisation's values (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Balmer and Greyser, 2003).

Questions are often asked about how to structure the organisation to support the corporate brand and where the management of the corporate brand function should be located (Hatch and Schultz, 2009). Balmer and Greyser (2003) acknowledge the broad sphere of corporate branding and the contributions from multiple management disciplines, but they believe that the marketing function has the strongest claim to be the custodians of the corporate brand. Most of the literature (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2009; Uggla, 2006) supports the view that the day-to-day management of the corporate brand happens as a function of marketing but that it requires access to the overall business strategy, which, in turn, requires close relationships with many key individuals across the organisation.

A key role of the corporate brand manager is to actively manage the brand portfolio. As product markets constantly evolve, it is the corporate brand manager's responsibility to seek opportunities and make recommendations in terms of changes, additions or reductions of brands (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). Having a strong corporate brand strategy with a visible corporate brand eases the brand portfolio management process (Aaker, 2004a). Corporate brand management processes also require corporate brand managers to build strong relationships with internal stakeholders. This role requires clear and consistent communication with the various teams operating centrally, as well as in the other brands in the portfolio, in an effort to close the gap between actual brand identity and intended brand identity (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Mitchell, 1997). The ongoing search of congruency in an effort to build a coherent intended brand identity is imperative to good external communication and therefore core to the role of the corporate brand manager, as it has a direct impact on the organisation's corporate reputation (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012).

The role of employees in building corporate brand equity

Although literature has emphasised the role and importance of supporting structures and processes, the importance of individuals in building strong corporate brands has received less attention (Melewar *et al.*, 2012). Employees, both as a collective and in their individual capacity, are both recipients of corporate brand communication and projectors of the corporate brand to each other, as well as to external stakeholders. Whilst a growing body of literature has addressed the importance of targeting and retaining employees through employer branding (Moroko and Uncles, 2008; Wilden *et al.*, 2010), another important dimension of corporate brand management concerns the role of employees as brand ambassadors and important stakeholders in creating corporate brand equity (Balmer and Wilkinson, 1991). Internal branding stresses the role of all employees in delivering the corporate brand promise through translating the espoused corporate brand values into reality during the delivery of the corporate brand promise (Foster *et al.*, 2010).

The likelihood of employees actively promoting their corporate brand to external stakeholders rests on both their engagement with their employer and their brand knowledge (Morokane *et al.*, 2016). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) have emphasised the importance of brand-centred human resources management, brand communication and brand leadership as key levers for generating employee commitment.

Although the literature has emphasised the importance of employees playing an active role in defining corporate brand values (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001) and the importance of aligning internal and external stakeholders for communication and brand delivery to be consistent across the entire organisation (Hatch and Schultz, 2009), the role of employees in a multi-branded service context that emphasises both corporate and product brands has received little attention.

Methodology

In seeking answers to the research questions, the authors used a qualitative and interpretative research paradigm. A case study design was used because there is a lack of empirical research on addressing the questions developed (Yin, 2009). A search for a services organisation that had multiple brands, as well as an active focus on corporate brand management, resulted in the selection of the unit of analysis, namely, Tsogo Sun, and its approach to strategic brand management (www.tsogosun.com/Pages/default.aspx). This organisation was selected purposively, as the authors had access to rich quality information and because it was a critical case for the purpose of our study (Yin, 2009). The authors gained access to the company's facilities, archives and key informants.

In addition to reviewing the secondary data, a series of in-depth unstructured interviews served as the most appropriate research design. The target population consisted of senior management of Tsogo Sun who have knowledge and are influential and who make brand decisions. The identified population could be considered experts, as their views and decisions directly impact the area of corporate branding within the organisation. Of the organisation's 12 senior executives, 10 participants who were equipped to answer the questions posed were interviewed. These included the CEO, and the following group directors: chief financial officer, chief operations officer, chief legal officer and treasurer, group human resources director, group marketing director and the managing director of gaming. In addition, three senior managers were also interviewed: group director of development, group corporate affairs manager and the group training manager. All interviews took place at the head office. Interpretive content analysis allowed us to thematise the empirical data accordingly (Miles and Huberman, 1984). The research team also collected secondary information about the company, including research surveys, press releases and advertisements. The variety of sources of data taken together with the literature allowed for multiple forms of triangulation (Yin, 2009).

Tsogo Sun

Tsogo Sun is a leading hotel and casino group that predominantly operates in Southern Africa, but with some presence in the rest of Africa, the Seychelles and the UAE. The brand portfolio comprises 14 casinos and 96 hotels, 6 movie theatres and over 200 restaurants. The hotel portfolio comprises 15 owned brands and one managed brand, Intercontinental. The hotel brand architecture spans from budget to ultra-luxury, and in most cases, the casinos are located in prime positions in the areas in which they operate, making them the local hub in terms of entertainment. The restaurants and movie theatres are all located within the hotel and/or casino complexes.

Tsogo Sun is a relatively new market-facing corporate brand and has been developed to function as a corporate brand bringing together all the brands in the portfolio. Prior to the launch of Tsogo Sun in 2012, the casino division operated under the trade name Tsogo Sun Gaming. Each casino was marketed as a brand on its own. The hotel group, known as Southern Sun, communicated the individual brands in the portfolio with all the brands except for the luxury brands being strongly endorsed by the group brand, Southern Sun. For example, Garden Court by Southern Sun. The owned restaurants were not marketed as brands at all and the cinemas were only acquired post the launch of Tsogo Sun.

With the merger and the acquisition of Gold Reef Resorts comprising seven additional casinos and hotels in 2011, and the listing of the group, it was decided to actively market the group under one brand – Tsogo Sun. Tsogo Sun had strong associations among stakeholders in the business world in which the casinos operated and had a positive reputation in the current South African landscape as opposed to Southern Sun hotels which, in some cases, conjured up memories of holidays that were exclusively for the white privileged population during the Apartheid years pre-1994. A small study however showed that the symbol of Southern Sun hotels, known as the sunburst, had mostly positive associations, particularly in the area of heritage and trust and this symbol was kept.

In the new Tsogo Sun brand portfolio, every single brand's logo included the sunburst as a way of endorsement, with the exception of Maia, the ultra-luxury Seychelles property. The size of the sunburst in the logo varied according to what the business believed the value of the endorsement to the brand would be. For example, luxury hotels such as Beverly Hills and Sandton Sun's logos had a very small sunburst, whereas the economy brand, StayEasy's logo comprised a prominent sunburst. A secondary level of endorsement was introduced to further entrench each product brand's relationship to the corporate brand. The mantra *Another Tsogo Sun Experience* was added to all external communication collateral, thus supporting the organisation's brand covenant of creating great experiences for its guests.

The rationale for the application of the sunburst, as well as the endorsement line, was that the brand portfolio was vast and that this would eliminate or at the very least minimise confusion. The potential confusion was compounded by the fact that there was another competitor in the casino and hotel industry known as Sun International. Both companies carry the word Sun in both the corporate name and in their brand portfolios.

The strategy of building the corporate brand was further supported by the philosophy that each brand in some way or another supports the corporate brand. This meant that, despite each brand in the portfolio having a unique brand identity, they should, to a lesser or greater extent, contribute to the growth of the corporate brand. This was built into the respective brands' strategy.

Tsogo Sun's new brand strategy supported the group's business strategy, which was to position the group, Tsogo Sun, first and foremost. The brand strategy made provision for the fact that some brands in the portfolio required individual brand building and marketing efforts. These, for example, included the casinos and the luxury brands. The brand-building strategy for Tsogo Sun was built predominantly by proactively seeking opportunities to sponsor sporting and entertainment events in an effort to build the corporate brand.

Findings

The relative roles of corporate and product brands

The respondents' comments largely reflected strong awareness of the organisation's multi-brand strategy, but many were unsure of the balance and emphasis that should be placed on the corporate brand relative to the product brands:

> I think the company needs to make a decision as to what is important, is it the Southern Sun experience that is important, or is it the Tsogo Sun experience that is important. And if it is the Tsogo Sun experience, then let's define the Tsogo Sun experience, let's do away with all these other product brands. You know […] and have Tsogo Sun.
>
> I would still push Tsogo Sun, but I would highlight a few of the brands, that fall under Tsogo Sun, because for me, the weakness right now is that we go and promote Tsogo Sun. We've done two TV adverts, both of them equally good, but I don't think they did anything [for the product brands][…].

Although some respondents were unclear about the relative purpose of the corporate and product brands, one respondent clarified the distinction between the corporate and product brands as follows:

> So our stakeholders will say that they are, hopefully, proudly Tsogo Sun stakeholders, I'm a Tsogo Sun employee, I'm a Tsogo Sun customer, I'm a Tsogo Sun supplier, I'm a Tsogo Sun shareholder […] What do you do? I like to go to Montecasino, I like to stay at Garden Court Marine Parade, I often use Sun1.

In acknowledging the needs for a strong corporate brand, another respondent cited the impact of the investment in sports sponsorships to build the corporate brand.

> I'd feel that we're kind of on a very good path with regard to building the strength around Tsogo, I […] think through our sporting visibility and I think that was a big change, the single biggest change for the Group, in terms of building up Tsogo, was the sporting, I believe.

Another respondent believed that the strong focus on the corporate brand had created a risk to the distinctiveness and positioning of product brands:

> So there was a point before the merger where I really believed that we focused on the brand standards, the minimum requirements per brand, the consistency in terms of delivery, making sure that the guests have a similar experience, making sure that an experience in one Garden Court is going to be similar, not the same, to another Garden Court, because the product is different, but […] there was a point where I firmly believed that, if you asked our clients, our customers, our guests, what Garden Court stands for, they would be able to give you the same kind of […] their perceived understanding of the brand. Right now I don't believe that we are that anymore […].

Most respondents agreed that both product brands and corporate brands needed to have clear strategies based on the overarching objectives of the business. One respondent cited the importance of leveraging the strong legacy created by previous investment in some of the product brands:

> […] it depends what your goal is, your objective, I guess the point is that, now there has been fourteen years of Montecasino, and everyone knows it as that, and we've invested X in developing the public understanding of what that is, how much effort would it take to change it?

All respondents were in agreement that the brands influenced each other. Most believed that the product brands needed to work harder, particularly the hotel brands, to remain unique and authentic in an attempt to not become too generic. One respondent related the relationship between the brands as one of a child and a parent stating that the product brand should always look towards the corporate brand for direction:

> […] if the corporate brand is strong enough in the public domain, the […] product brand needs to just enhance that corporate brand.
>
> I don't think the corporate brand stops at all, as far as I'm concerned the corporate brand doesn't stop, I think the product brand must be supportive of the corporate brand […].

Most respondents believed that the corporate brand played an important role in communicating values and driving trust both internally and externally and that product brands should reinforce these:

> […] draw people in through Tsogo, let them trust Tsogo […] that's why we've got those brand values, leadership, you know, passion, variety, seductive […] we create experiences […] throughout our entire business, and then when they get to the hotel, the hotel brand should be their hero […] and the dominating thing. It shouldn't contradict Tsogo Sun, it should build Tsogo Sun subtly.

One respondent stated that the product brands should take on the corporate brand values to some extent. This was supported to some degree by respondents who stated that there should be some kind of golden thread across the brand portfolio. Exactly how this needed to be done was unclear.

The role of the CEO in corporate branding

Most of the respondents believed that corporate branding decisions were ultimately the responsibility of the CEO. Two respondents felt that the role of the CEO was important and raised concerns around decision-making when he was not around. One of these respondents felt that the organisation had become less brand-focussed than before. This respondent was an employee of Southern Sun Hotels prior to the merger:

> I'm always very wary of this cult image of the CEO because, as you say, when the person leaves, everybody says the company is dead, and it is not true, you know. In most cases it is not true. So it is a very dangerous game to play, to hang your fortunes onto the name and the face of one individual.

In addition to this, the CEO was seen as playing an important role in internal communication of the corporate brand:

> The consistent message comes from the CEO, so where you've got the internal magazine which we do quarterly, which by the way I think is fantastic […] if you want to understand anything about what our Group is doing, read that. In fact when I write board papers, I make sure I've read that, because that talks about everything we do. That aligns people to what is actually happening in the business.

Structures and capabilities supporting brand equity building and the role of marketing

Most of the respondents felt that the creation of a centralised office and a brand council had played an important role aligning brand and business management, as well as sharpening the focus in the area of branding. This, they believed, had resulted in clearer and more thought-through decision-making. They stressed the importance of allocating custody of the corporate brand to an individual:

> […] but you do need a brand champion […] otherwise you can't just leave it, then nothing will happen, so […] I don't see a big office with 8 or 10 people, but you do need at least one individual who is the brand champion, who is the custodian of the brand.

With the listing of the organisation, certain changes had to be made. Communication to stakeholders and particularly shareholders became important and the board had become an integral part of decision-making. For the corporate brand to deliver on the brand values, communication needed to be on time, consistent and authentic. The creation of systems and processes to allow for co-ordinated brand communication to all stakeholders across multiple channels was emphasised:

> Consistency is important […] and I think as we move through this period, this last few years, that we've got better at it, and the order that you share the information is very important. So who is notified first, who is notified subsequent to that […] complying with JSE [Johannesburg Stock Exchange] requirements, etc. etc. […] is important. That people are all being informed at the right time, but also we are sending the same message to everybody.

A number of respondents stressed the importance of underpinning customer experiences of product brands with a strong focus on brand experience and linking product branding with iconography associated with the corporate brand:

> […] for us it is an exciting experience, whether it is a hotel or whether it is a casino, but you know you are going to get a quality experience wherever you go, experiences relevant to you […].
>
> My gut says it confuses the consumer […] at least we've got the sunburst which flows through everything, so that when you are a Garden Court customer, you still would have the sunburst on there. It's not building the Garden Court brand, what does the Garden Court brand stand for, what does the Daisy brand stand for […] there is not a lot of that.

Another respondent reinforced this view and emphasised the danger of simply applying the corporate logo and assuming that meaning would automatically be inferred:

> I don't think we are a brand focused organization, and I don't think we take our brands seriously, I don't think we think about the customer and what the customer thinks about the brand, we […] we are more focused on the delivery at the individual hotel, and we are more focused on putting the sunburst on everything that we have without necessarily understanding what the sunburst stands for.

All the respondents agreed that branding was a function of marketing and that therefore corporate branding, despite it taking its cues from business strategy, should reside in the marketing department. Some respondents made reference to corporate branding decisions traditionally being in the area of corporate affairs but that this role was not required in an organisation such as Tsogo Sun:

> What the regionalisation did was, it de-internalized it, if there is such a word […] the brand competitiveness, and moved branding back to its home, which is in marketing. Because branding is not operations […] that is what people don't understand. Branding is driven by marketing.
>
> Your corporate brand, as far as the directing of it, and the management of it, and those sorts of things […] I would think that you would need a strategic corporate brand office that managed and cared for those brands, because those are […]. sort of the soul of the company […].
>
> I don't think, if you go into that brand versus marketing, I don't think you are ever going to split them completely […] because they co-depend on each other so much.

The role of employees in corporate brand management

Respondents emphasised that although employees needed to affiliate with product brands, the corporate brand played an important role in aligning corporate values across the product brand:

> I think although we've done quite a lot of work in trying to bring it all together with Tsogo Sun, if you go and speak to an employee in Monte, they'll tell you that they work at Montecasino, and that living Tsogo single value system is incredible important in driving it even further, because you just entrench Tsogo more, but it […] it is not there, you still have people that work in a Garden Court to be passionate about the brand […] And where it is a bit confusing […]

One respondent felt that employees, particularly those working for strong product brands, were not always attuned to the corporate brand:

> Where do you work' and I say "Tsogo Sun", and then they look at me blankly and I say, "Montecasino", they immediately know who I'm talking about.
>
> There were opposing views in terms of how the relative emphasis of product versus corporate brands in the context of employees. Some respondents believed that more focus was required on positioning the product brands and others believed that, by focussing on the corporate brand, the product brands should take care of themselves as the behaviour and the corporate brand values would permeate the organization:
>
> I'm a big believer that people display your brand and whatever level you go down to, it is the behaviour of those people driven from the top brand […] so if we can live those values and bring them all the way through in our execution of service, attitude and caring and preciseness to customers, I think those brands will grow by that interaction.
>
> He said he doesn't understand our branding nomenclature, how we associate different names with different products and properties, he says he get terribly confused, he doesn't know what is in the business and not […] I think it has largely been cleared up, you just have to look at the names to see that we are part of one and the same group.

Discussion

In a multi-brand service context, *RQ1* is considered.

Although all respondents were clear that the corporate and product brands had important roles to play and were all familiar with the choice of the multi-brand architecture, the relative roles were not always clear. Most of the respondents highlighted the important role played by a few strong product brands, most consistently Montecasino and Southern Sun hotels. These product brands have, in themselves, corporate brand characteristics when considering the definition of a corporate brand in that they have multiple stakeholders and strong corporate identities (Balmer, 2008). Respondents certainly saw the corporate brand as being more than just a name (Uggla, 2006) and stressed the importance of shareholders and suppliers as important stakeholders of the corporate brand.

The literature states that the corporate brand can be leveraged to positively impact performance, but for this to happen, all stakeholders need to have fairly consistent views of the brand (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001). This involves the careful management of all the brand components, starting with the vision and including the translation of brand values. Using this as a starting point in prioritising what needed to be done, and considering the responses from those interviewed, all had positive views about the clear set of brand values that span Tsogo Sun and its role in aligning stakeholders. There was no mention of the vision by the respondents, but other documentation revealed this to be: Our vision is to provide the greatest possible variety of quality hospitality, leisure, gaming and entertainment experiences at each of our destinations (Tsogo Sun Annual Report, 2015).

Although all respondents were in agreement that the corporate brand plays an important role in communicating the organisation’s values and building trust in a consistent manner (Dall’Olmo Riley and de Chernatony, 2000), there was some confusion when it came to the management and communication of brand experience and whether this should be linked to corporate or product brands. The importance of ensuring that product brands communicated and delivered promises of specific brand experiences for their target customers was also emphasised. One respondent was clear that the corporate brand was the employer brand; however, other respondents were not sure that employees would see the corporate brand as their employer. This is in contrast to literature that typically considers the corporate brand as the employer brand (Moroko and Uncles, 2008).

The balance between investing in both the corporate and the product brand was also emphasised. In this case, the organisation was benefitting from strong legacy investments at the product brand level and investments in building a corporate brand presence largely through sports sponsorship. Although the findings confirm the importance of targeting customers when building product brands (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), the lack of consensus across respondents about the benefits of investments across the corporate and product brand portfolios suggest that the organisation had not clearly communicated the relative purposes and the need to build associations with both the corporate and product brands across a spectrum of stakeholders.

RQ2 investigated the role of the CEO in corporate brand management. Respondent opinions supported views in the literature about the integral role played by the CEO’s in driving corporate brand values, aligning brand management with the organisation’s strategy and being ultimately accountable for the corporate brand (Balmer, 2001a; Balmer and Greyser, 2003; Shahri, 2011). Respondents also stressed the need for the CEO to actively communicate the corporate brand to internal stakeholders. Although some literature has focussed on the importance of the leadership brand of the CEO (Bendisch *et al.*, 2013), the concerns expressed by one respondent that overemphasising the individual brand of the CEO could place the corporate brand at risk are noteworthy, as they introduce another dimension into the corporate/product portfolio management.

RQ3 interrogated the structure and capabilities required to support the development of brand equity and the role of the marketing function in facilitating this. Although the ultimate accountability for corporate brand equity lies with the CEO, the actual function is fulfilled by corporate communication, which, depending on the organisation, is usually either centrally located or a function of marketing (Balmer, 2008; Balmer and Greyser, 2003; Shahri, 2011; Uggla, 2006).

From the interviews, it was apparent that most senior executives did not see the need for a corporate communications department and that most of the corporate branding decisions were made by the CEO. Some felt that this put too much responsibility in the hands of the CEO, despite the fact that most acknowledged that it was currently working well. It was however clear that the corporate brand strategy, albeit it existing in the mind of the CEO, was not clearly communicated throughout the organisation. This could potentially mean that the marketing department becomes order takers from the CEO based on his strategic business objectives, as marketing does not have an overview of the business. Furthermore, internal communications are a central function reporting into human resources with a very informal relationship with the marketing department. Most of the literature (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2009; Uggla, 2006) supports the fact that the day-to-day management of the corporate brand happens as a function of marketing, but that it requires access to the overall business strategy, which necessitates close relationships with many key individuals across the organisation.

Another factor that needs to be considered when identifying what has to be done and in which priority, is the guests' view of Tsogo Sun and how their view affects their opinion of the product brands in the portfolio (Shahri, 2011). Tsogo Sun has conducted *ad hoc* consumer research in this regard, and they also have a very effective guest satisfaction tracking tool that takes the form of a post-visit survey sent to all guests of hotels, casinos and restaurants, which encourages each guest to give feedback on their visit. These results revealed that in most cases guests were aware of the fact that the product brand that they visited was a part of Tsogo Sun.

According to the literature, one of key roles of the corporate brand manager is to actively manage the brand portfolio. As product markets constantly evolve, it is the corporate brand manager's responsibility to seek opportunities and make recommendations in terms of changes, additions or reductions of brands (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). The respondents all supported this role; however, some believed that currently the product brands did not have clear enough brand strategies or sufficient support in maintaining and building these brands. The Tsogo Sun Annual Report (2015) stated that most marketing support revolved around retail campaigns and promotions for all the product brands, as well as sponsorships and partnerships that promote the corporate brand, Tsogo Sun. Very little support was given to building the product brands or communicating the actual size and scale of the Tsogo Sun brand portfolio.

Two respondents felt that the corporate brand management focus should be to first and foremost build the Tsogo Sun brand; according to them, the rest would follow. It is true that a strong corporate brand strategy with a visible corporate brand will make the brand portfolio management process less painful (Aaker, 2004a). However, as seen from the results of the feedback from Tsogo Sun guests, poor product brand experiences impact the corporate brand directly and, for that reason, the product brands should be managed as a component of the corporate brand strategy. The number of resources allocated to the management of each brand in the portfolio should be driven by the corporate brand strategy.

In essence, the corporate brand manager's role requires good relationships with internal stakeholders to allow for clear and consistent messages to the various teams operating centrally and in the other brands in the portfolio in an effort to close the gap between the actual brand identity and the intended brand identity (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Mitchell, 1997). This ongoing process in search of congruency in an effort to build a coherent intended brand identity lies at the centre of corporate brand strategy and will ultimately lead to consistent, external communication about the brand.

A potential way to overcome this is to ensure that marketing prepares a corporate brand strategy, considering the CEO's key business objectives, in discussion with all other departments that directly affect stakeholder relationships. This could then become the framework against which all branding decisions are made and communicated, considering all stakeholders. The framework should be clear, yet flexible, as it is very difficult to define exactly where the corporate brand starts and ends, as its role can change depending on the business objective (Aaker, 2004b; Strebinger, 2014). It should also be linked to the allocation of financial and physical resources as identified by Balmer (2001b). In addition to aligning communication across stakeholder groups, a corporate brand strategy in a multi-brand context should also align with the strategies and plans for product brands.

Then, *RQ4* is asked.

Although the interviews clearly supported the view espoused in the literature that employees play an important role in the branding of services (Balmer and Wilkinson, 1991), a tension emerged between the extent to which employees needed to adopt the values of the brand they represent to customers and how much influence the corporate brand should have. Although corporate brand values had been communicated to employees, a number of comments suggested that employees affiliated strongly with the product brands, and some cases viewed this as their employer brand. This lack of clarity needs to be addressed as, despite the fact that employees play an important role in bringing corporate brand strategy to life (Shahri, 2011), the expectations of employees to "live the brand" could result in confusion in a multi-brand services context. Whilst employees need to embody the values of the corporate brand, they play an important role in delivering brand experiences that may have been conceptualised at a product brand level. Corporate brand managers thus need to clearly articulate the relationships between the corporate brand and the product brands when developing internal branding strategies in a multi-brand context.

The key descriptive findings from this research are summarised in Table I.

Table I. Summary of descriptive findings

Items	Corporate brand	Product brand
Primary role	Primary driver of brand equity	Secondary driver of brand equity
Personification of primary role	Parent	Child
Accountability	CEO supported by the corporate brand office	Group marketing
Target markets	All stakeholders	Customers and employees
Key issues	Consistency and timing of stakeholder communications Creating meaning around the corporate logo	Consistency of delivery of the brand experience
Desired customer response	General affiliation with the corporate brand	Adoption of product brand depending on needs
Desired employee response	Living the values of the corporate brand	Supporting or delivering the brand experience of the product brand
Emphasis of marketing communication	Building trust by communicating values using sponsorship affiliated with sport (all stakeholders) and the internal magazine (employees)	Guest experience

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to understand how a large South African services organisation manages its multi-brand portfolio alongside its corporate brand. Many of the principles in the literature were supported including the importance of the CEO's involvement in corporate branding (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012), the necessity to link organisational values to corporate brand communication, the need to adopt a multi-stakeholder perspective in corporate branding (Balmer, 2005), the strong roles played by employees in a services branding context (Melewar *et al.*, 2012; Miles and Mangold, 2004) and the important role that the marketing function has to play in corporate brand management (Balmer, 2008).

Although most respondents supported the organisation's decision to implement a multi-brand strategy with strong support for both corporate and product brands, the relative roles of the corporate and product brands were not always clear. It was generally agreed that the corporate brand was the primary identifier for some stakeholders, notably suppliers and shareholders. The corporate brand also played an integral role in expressing the organisation's values across all stakeholder groups. Although it was assumed that employees would form strong relationships with the corporate brand, their affiliation with product brands was an important enabler in delivering value to customers who, although valuing the corporate brand for its reputation, made buying choices based on product brand promises.

Despite the CEO being seen to be the ultimate custodian of the corporate brand, the need to assign responsibility for corporate brand management to the marketing function was clearly emphasised. What was not clearly established was how internal branding should engage employees in building brand equity across the product and corporate brands. The roles of the corporate and product brand in employer branding were blurred. In some cases, employees would clearly affiliate with the corporate brand, but in others, particularly in the context of front-line employees, their frame of reference was the product brand.

Implications

Theoretical implications

The results of the study confirm much of the corporate and product management theories and processes. The fact that a service organisation needs to be flexible in its brand architecture and portfolio management conforms to the brand relationship spectrum suggested by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) and the flexible umbrella strategy proposed by Kapferer (2008). We also confirm the work of Balmer (2001a) and Balmer and Greyser (2003), who suggest that the CEO plays a key role in driving the corporate brand values and aligning them with the organisation's strategy. The actual management of the corporate brand in the organisational structure is through the marketing department or a corporate communications department, supporting the work by Balmer (2008), Balmer and Greyser (2003)Shahri (2011) and Uggla (2006). Our study also confirmed the important role the employee plays in the branding of services, supporting the work of Balmer and Wilkinson (1991).

Whilst prior literature has argued that there are clear roles for corporate and product brands (Balmer, 2005, 2008; Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony, 2000), inconsistent conceptualisations of the relative roles of corporate and product brands were identified in the current study. This inconsistency may have occurred because a number of product brands displayed some corporate brand characteristics, most notably that they served multiple stakeholders.

Practitioner implications

The findings of the study have a number of implications for practitioners. Organisations seeking to implement a multi-brand portfolio in a services context need to build a clear understanding of the relative roles that corporate and product brands play in implementing the organisation's strategy and building competitive advantage. Organisations can have a flexible brand architecture that does not have to totally conform to the "house of brands" or "branded house" alternatives as suggested by Aaker (2004b). Although Tsogo Sun has a brand hierarchy consisting of two levels, they appear to be moving towards the "branded house" approach with the installation of power structures that include a group head of brands and a branding committee. At the same time, it has adopted what Kapferer (2008) calls the product brand strategy. Tsogo Sun has multiple brands that generally reflect exclusive positioning in the hotel and gaming industries, often reflecting the level of service that consumers can expect. Each of the hotels targets a specific segment of the market. Although Tsogo Sun's symbol, the sunburst, appears on most of the product brands, acting as an endorser, the size of the sunburst differs, depending on the need for a powerful endorsement or not. In extreme case, the Palazzo and Maia are not endorsed at all, as these brands are unique and powerful in the markets that they serve.

Not only is the CEO's support of the branding strategy imperative but also their role in communicating brand values and building a strong corporate brand is integral to brand success. The findings suggest that the marketing function is well placed to be the custodian of both corporate and product brands. Adopting a stakeholder perspective when delineating the relative roles of corporate and product branding is the key. The findings also suggest that communication to shareholders and suppliers should be under the mantel of the corporate brand. When engaging with employees, both corporate and product brands have important roles to play. Corporate values need to be strongly linked to the corporate brand, which is also more likely to be the stronger employer brand. When engaging employees in internal branding, however, those who engage with customers of product brands need to develop a good understanding of how product brands support customer requirements and their roles in delivering positive brand experiences.

The results of this study have raised a number of opportunities for additional research notably at the interface between corporate and product branding in a services context. Building a deeper understanding of the value associations on the part of customers with corporate relative to product brands would enable organisations to better understand how to build stronger customer-based brand equity for both corporate and product brands. Building a deeper understanding of how employees identify with the corporate brands relative to the product brands would also contribute to enhanced employer and internal branding in a multi-brand context. A further source of investigation could be to study employee brand experience when transitioning from one product brand to another within the corporate brand portfolio. In addition to deepening our understanding of the corporate-product brand interface, investigation into the role and alignment of the leadership brand in the context of product and corporate brands is also a fertile opportunity for future research.

Limitations

Given that this research addressed a single case study, care should be taken not to generalise results. Additional research could investigate corporate and product brand management across multiple service contexts to test whether these findings can be extrapolated to broader contexts.

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