IS EMPLOYER BRANDING A CHALLENGE FOR HIGH-CONTACT SERVICE INDUSTRIES? INSIGHTS FROM THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR IN POLAND

Marlena A. Bednarska[1]
Marcin Olszewski[2]

Abstract: High-contact service industries involve close and direct customer-employee interaction for a prolonged period; consequently they rely on the knowledge, skills and abilities of their staff. Growing recognition of the significance of this interaction for service organisations' performance has led to the need to increase efforts to attract and retain high-quality human recourses. Effectiveness of these efforts can be supported by applying employer branding practices. To develop a sound employer value proposition, company needs to examine internal employer brand image first. The purpose of the paper is twofold: first, to identify the hospitality industry's strengths and weaknesses in the context of employer branding, second, to investigate the differential effects of selected factors on perceived industry attractiveness as a workplace. The research was conducted on the group of 331 hospitality workers in Poland. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires. The study revealed that the best perceived employer brand dimension was social value, the worst – economic value. There was a significant negative association between the willingness to recommend the sector as an employer to others and all of the employer brand dimensions under investigation, with job content yielding the strongest relationship. The analysis further showed that perceptions of rewards received in the workplace were higher for men, self-employed or having indefinite contracts, occupying managerial positions, and working in micro entities and in accommodation services. Results of the investigation prove that it is a challenging task to position hospitality firms in the minds of potential employees as a great place to work. Organisations that try to attract human recourses by presenting an overly positive picture of their employment experience are likely to encourage unrealistic expectations in newcomers with subsequent disappointment and decreased job performance.

Key words: employer branding, hospitality industry, employees, Poland

INTRODUCTION

High-contact services are characterised by high levels of communication time, intimacy of communication, and richness of information exchanged during interaction between customers and employees (Kellogg and Chase 1995). Therefore high-contact service organisations rely above all on the abilities and intentions of personnel to understand and enact their service strategies (Goldstein 2003).

Increasing competition within the sector, combined with the significance of the customer-employee contact in the service delivery, has resulted in an intensified awareness amongst practitioners and researchers to better appreciate how to attract and retain employees who are committed to the set of values and organisational goals and who can become a source of company's sustainable competitive advantage and contribute to its market success (King 2010).

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[1] PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism, Faculty of International Business and Economics, Poznan University of Economics, Poznan, Poland.

[2] PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism, Faculty of International Business and Economics, Poznan University of Economics, Poznan, Poland.

The role of the service provider in the consumer's evaluation of the service experience is paramount. This is particularly true when market offering is produced by means of co-creation between employees and customers (Lusch, Vargo, and O'Brien 2007; Andreassen and Lanseng 2010). Employees constitute the interface between a brand's internal and external environment and can have a powerful impact on how stakeholders perceive the service organisation (King and Grace 2006). De Chernatony, Cottam, and Segal-Horn (2006) highlight the impact of staff on current and potential customers' organisation perceptions through their role in delivering both functional and emotional brand values. According to Mosley (2007), employees are increasingly key in developing sustainable service brand differentiation, not only through the development of a positive service attitude, but also through the emotional values that tend to be evoked by a particularly distinctive style of service. Dowling (2001) claims that interpersonal communications between employees and external entities is far more influential in terms of shaping attitudes and image than any communication sponsored by the firm itself.

A significant impact of employees on the service organisation's performance has been confirmed by the numerous studies (generally referred to as the service profit chain) that have diagnosed causal links between business results and customer/employee satisfaction (Heskett et al. 2008; Yee, Yeung, and Cheng 2011) as well as customer/employee identification (Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer 2009). Findings of these studies support a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work – developing strategies to become an employer of choice helps recruit suitable employees who will contribute to the efficient and effective delivery of services.

Most jobs in the hospitality industry are not bestowed with high status and respect. There are many factors contributing to this image. A lot of occupations in the industry are seasonal, part-time, law-skilled, law-paid, and born upon unsocial working hours. Internal labour markets are weak and career development perspectives are limited. What's more, employees are often confronted with customers' unfair and inappropriate demands on service providers (Riley, Ladkin, and Szivas 2002; Wood 2003; Poulston 2009). Since employees' engagement is affected by organisation's ability to reciprocate with economic and socioemotional benefits (Saks 2006), the perceived law status of hospitality employment is regarded as a major obstacle to the recruitment of quality labour. In consequence, it makes it a particularly challenging task to position the firm in the minds of potential employees as a great place to work (Baum 2008; Bednarska and Olszewski 2013).

This study seeks to contribute by identifying the hospitality industry's strengths and weaknesses in the context of employer branding. It also examines the differential effects of selected individual and organisational factors on perceived industry attractiveness as a workplace and on willingness to recommend the sector as an employer to others.

To reach the objectives proposed, the paper proceeds as follows. First, the concept of employer branding is discussed on the basis of the existing literature. Next, research methodology and findings of the study on hospitality career perceptions are presented. The last section concludes by summarising the most important findings.

EMPLOYER BRANDING STUDIES – LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, employer branding has received a growing attention in both the practitioner and academic literatures. Interest in this approach has been driven by increasing competition within the labour market for the talent required by companies to realise their corporate goals (Mosley 2007). The concept has emerged from applying marketing principles to the field of human resources management (Edwards 2010; Martin, Gollan, and Grigg 2011). The term *employer brand* is believed to be coined by Ambler and Barrow, who described it as the "package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company" (1996, p. 187). Employer branding thus can be defined as the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity that differentiates the firm from its competitors, in other words it is a specific form of managing corporate identity by creating, both within and outside the firm, an image of the organisation as a desirable place to work (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004; Ewing et al. 2002). A closely related to the employer brand concept is the notion of employer attractiveness, which may be considered an antecedent of the more general idea of employer brand equity (Berthon, Ewing, and Hah 2005).

Employer brands play a dual purpose. The employer brand proposition needs to clarify what potential and current employees can expect from the organisation in terms of rational and emotional benefits. However, it also needs to clarify what is expected of employees in return (Mosley 2007). Given its dual nature, employer branding yields positive consequences for both parties of the employment contract. Primarily, it provides an organisation with the benefits of increasing applicant quantity and quality (Turban and Cable 2003; Collins and Han 2004). Companies with strong employer brands can reduce costs of acquiring employees and decrease employee turnover. Moreover, such companies can offer lower compensation for equally qualified employees compared to those with weaker employer brands (Berthon, Ewing, and Hah 2005). Strong employer brands play a key role in creating and protecting reputational capital (Martin, Gollan, and Grigg 2011) and in enhancing the perceived value of the company in the job market, enabling segment-specific recruitment strategies to be developed (Wilden, Gudergan, and Lings 2010). Employer brands are also assumed to have the abilities to differentiate, to satisfy, to create loyalty, and to develop an emotional attachment (Davies 2008) as well as to support favourable employee attitudes that enrich the customers experiences during interaction (Schlager et al. 2011). Finally, employer branding influences positively job seekers' information costs, perceived risk and work quality associated with the prospective employer (Wilden, Gudergan, and Lings 2010).

A critical component of employer branding is an employer value proposition, which is a representation of what the firm offers to its employees and provides the central message that is conveyed by the brand (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004). To develop a sound employer value proposition that helps attract and retain quality human resources, company needs to examine internal employer brand image first.

A message about the organisation as an employer is transmitted to target groups through different channels, word-of-mouth communication being one of them (Van Hoye and Lievens 2005). If actual employment conditions are perceived as inconsistent with signals about employment offering communicated as a part of the employer branding activity, this could be interpreted as psychological contract breach (Edwards 2010; App, Merk, and Büttgen 2012). Unmet expectations may lead to negative consequences for both the strength and the length of the employee-employer relationship (Bednarska 2014). As stated

by Wilden, Gudergan, and Lings (2010), employees shouldn't have doubts about the willingness and ability of the employer to deliver what is promised.

To date, there have been very few attempts at empirically exploring perceptions of employer brand in the hospitality industry. Taking into account that one of the major challenges for the industry is attracting and retaining high potential employees (Enz 2009), the shortage of investigations in this field is quite surprising. The present study attempts to address this gap.

RESEARCH METHOD

To reach the objectives of the study field investigation was conducted. The target population comprised current employees in the hospitality industry in Poland. A total of 331 participants from 12 locations were recruited for the study. 45% of them worked in accommodation establishments, 55 % – in food service companies. Females represented the majority of the sample (71%) and the mean age of respondents was 33 years. More than a half of those surveyed had an upper secondary level of education and only 21% of the staff completed tourism-related school programmes. 59% of participants reported they had gained work experience in different sectors and the mean tenure in current organisation was 5 years. Moreover, employees held mostly non-managerial positions (80%), their work arrangements were primarily fixed term (48%) and full-time (77%). The majority of the sample (64%) worked in micro entities. Table 1. shows descriptive statistics for the sample.

Based on a review of previous research on employer image (Berthon, Ewing, and Hah 2005; Schlager et al. 2011; Bednarska, Janta, and Olszewski 2014) the questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study. The research instrument consisted of three sections. Section one dealt with job and organisation attributes describing five core dimensions of employer brand, these are: job content, economic value, development value, social value, and reputation value. Section two sought information about respondents' willingness to recommend the sector as an employer to others – employment referrals are a form of word-of-mouth communication, which can enhance the effectiveness of employer branding practices. The third section collected demographic data that were used to identify the different groups of respondents for purposes of comparative analysis.

Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires. As a growing body of empirical evidence supports the notion that employee attitudes and behaviours are affected by fit between individuals and their work environments (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson 2005), the study investigated both expectations towards careers and perceptions of hospitality careers. Respondents were requested first to imagine an ideal employer who they would choose to work for and evaluate 26 job and organisation characteristics based on their expectations. Afterwards, they were asked to assess the analysed items regarding current employers in the hospitality industry. A seven-point Likert scale was used, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). The data enabled the computation of the gaps between preferred and perceived job/organisation attributes. The gap was calculated as a difference between expectation and perception for desired attributes and as a difference between perception and expectation for undesired attribute (Bednarska and Olszewski 2013). Accordingly, a positive number denotes unmet expectations, and a negative number denotes exceeded expectations.

Tab. 1. Sample characteristics

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	233	70.6
	Male	97	29.4
Age	24 years and below	102	31.9
	25 – 34 years	102	31.9
	35 – 44 years	68	21.3
	45 – 54 years	24	7.5
	55 years and above	24	7.5
Level of education	Tertiary	96	30.1
	Upper secondary	168	52.7
	Primary/lower secondary	55	17.2
Field of education	Tourism-related	56	21.0
	Tourism-unrelated	211	79.0
Prior work experience	In the same sector only	67	20.5
	In different sector(s)	193	59.0
	None	67	20.5
Organisational tenure	Less than 1 year	80	26.8
	1 – 2 years	84	28.0
	3 – 4 years	32	10.8
	5 – 9 years	48	16.0
	10 – 19 years	33	11.0
	20 years and more	22	7.4
Position	Managerial	60	19.5
	Operational	247	80.5
Employment contract	Self-employment	36	11.4
	Indefinite contract	99	31.2
	Fixed term contract	151	47.6
	Other	31	9.8
Work arrangement	Full-time	236	76.9
	Part-time	71	23.1
Organisation size	Micro	208	63.6
	Small	68	20.8
	Medium	51	15.6
Type of economic activity	Accommodation	150	45.3
	Food service	181	54.7

In order to analyse the questionnaire, data descriptive statistics and correlations were employed to portray the main features of variables under study and relations between them. Because the assumption about normality in the data was violated, as confirmed by Shapiro-Wilk test ($0.813 < W < 0.977$; $p < 0.001$), non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was applied to detect significant differences between groups. The statistical processing of the survey data was conducted using the SPSS software package.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis are reported in Table 2. It presents means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal reliability estimates for the variables of interest. Measures of employer brand dimensions demonstrate the level of subjective misfit between employees' expectations and perceptions of job content and context. A measure of employment

referrals shows the level of respondents' engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication about the industry as a workplace.

Tab. 2. Variable means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal reliability estimates

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Spearman's correlations				
			1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Job content	1.59	1.33	(.768)				
2. Economic value	2.43	1.62	.630*	(.794)			
3. Development value	2.27	1.74	.690*	.795*	(.891)		
4. Social value	1.40	1.26	.515*	.567*	.551*	(.862)	
5. Reputation value	1.61	1.44	.565*	.630*	.675*	.605*	(.806)
6. Employment referrals	5.80	1.36	-.479*	-.383*	-.396*	-.360*	-.392*

* Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
Note: Values in parentheses along diagonal are internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) for multi-item constructs.

The descriptive data in the table prove that hospitality employees rated economic rewards and development opportunities as the greatest weaknesses of the industry as a workplace. The smallest expectation-perception gap was found for social relations. The computed correlation coefficients indicate that there was a significant negative association between all of the employer brand dimensions under investigation and the willingness to recommend the sector as an employer to others. In other words, the higher discrepancy respondents perceived between their needs and rewards offered in the work environment, the lower was their inclination to make employment referrals.

Table 3 provides information about differential effects of selected factors on employer brand image and employment referrals in the hospitality industry. All of variables under study led to significant differences in at least one dimension of employer attractiveness. Gender was linked to economic, development and reputation values; women perceived each of them worse than men. Field of education displayed relationship with job content, with those who got tourism-related education reporting smaller misfit. Position held was linked to all dimensions under study except social value; managers tended to rate the degree to which their needs were fulfilled by rewards in the workplace higher than operational employees. Those holding managerial positions were also more engaged in employment recommendations.Employment contract demonstrated relationship with all of the variables under investigation; self-employed and those with indefinite contracts held more positive views about their careers and declared higher level of work-related positive word-of-mouth communication. Work arrangement was associated with economic and development values, with part-time employees experiencing greater expectation-perception gaps in these areas. Organisation size was related to development, social and reputation values and with employment referrals;respondents employed in micro entities perceived their work as more fulfilling and they willinglyspoke positively about their jobs. As far as the type of activity is concerned, food service companies were evaluated as inferior employers with regard to job content and development value.

It is noteworthy that the largest differences in mean ranks were identified for development value, the smallest – for social value. With regard to explanatory variables, the largest average differences were attributable to the type of employment contract, the smallest – to the type of economic activity of the employer.

Tab. 3. Differential effects of individual and organisational factors on hospitality employer brand image and employment referrals

Variable	Job content		Economic value		Development value		Social value		Reputation value		Employment referrals	
	Mean rank	U value	Mean rank	U value	Mean rank	U value	Mean rank	U value	Mean rank	U value	Mean rank	U value
Gender		9844.5		8175.5 **		9497.0 *		9961.5		9444.5 *		10343.0
Female	171.1		173.0		170.9		170.6		172.1		160.8	
Male	150.5		134.1		147.4		151.7		146.4		171.8	
Field of education		4705.0 *		5611.5		4616.0		5236.5		4961.5		5563.5
Tourism-related	113.6		113.0		116.0		123.2		118.2		136.8	
Tourism-unrelated	138.7		135.1		136.7		136.2		136.9		132.0	
Position		4061.0 **		5223.5 **		4277.5 **		6100.0		5047.5 **		6080.5 *
Managerial	98.8		120.6		102.5		133.4		115.6		171.9	
Operational	166.6		157.5		164.5		158.3		162.0		147.8	
Employment contract		8071.0 **		7037.0 **		6834.5 **		9667.5 **		7590.0 **		10047.5 **
Self-employment and indefinite contract	127.8		119.8		118.5		139.6		124.2		172.5	
Fixed term contract and other	182.2		183.4		187.2		173.4		184.1		146.3	
Work arrangement		7060.0		6526.0 *		6673.5 *		7813.0		7381.0		7394.0
Full-time	148.4		143.9		146.0		155.4		149.4		156.5	
Part-time	170.4		170.4		174.2		147.1		165.1		141.1	
Organisation size		11004.5		10704.0		10569 *		9949.5 **		10448.0 *		10269.0 *
Micro	157.2		154.3		154.6		152.1		154.5		171.7	
Small and medium	174.5		169.8		176.2		183.4		178.0		146.5	
Type of economic activity		11197.5 **		12680.0		11409.0 *		13416.0		12369.0		12256.0
Accommodation	150.2		163.4		151.6		166.0		158.1		171.7	
Food service	178.1		160.8		175.1		165.1		170.7		158.6	

* Significant at the 0.05 level, ** significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Given the acknowledgement of the significance of the customer-employee interaction in the service delivery as well as the growing imperative to attract and retain talented job candidates, surprisingly scant attention to date has been drawn to employer brandingin the hospitality industry. The present investigation seeks to fill this knowledge gap by examiningthe hospitality internal employer brand image. Specifically, by assessing the degree to which employees' needs are satisfied by rewards in the work environment, this study aimed to identifythe hospitality industry's strengths and weaknesses in the context of employer branding.

As advocated by numerous researchers (e.g. Backhaus and Tikoo 2004; Knox and Freeman 2006; Wilden, Gudergan, and Lings 2010) development and communication of employer brand can become a critical tool for attracting and retaining talents. To reach this goal, however, the message that an organisation sends to potential recruits needs to be reinforced by itscurrent employees, which requiresemployer brands communicated internally and externally to be consistent. When an employer is presented in a manner not congruent withactual working environment, potential applicantswillperceive brand signals as untrustworthy or will form unrealistic expectations towards employment relationship and their post-entry performance and retention will be negatively affected.Hence, employer should clearlyunderstand what promise of benefits couldbe offered to prospective and current employees to avoid theperceived violation of a psychological contract (Foster, Punjaisri, and Cheng 2010).

The study revealed that economic benefits and development opportunities are those dimensions of hospitality employer image that employees found the most unsatisfactory. Concurrently, they evaluated relatively favourably the extent to which their needs were met with regard to social relations and job content.These results correspond with previous research on the hospitalityindustry as a workplace.In line with this investigation, others observed that limited avenues for career progression were key drivers to exit the industry (McGinley et al. 2014) or even not to enter the industry upon graduation (Richardson 2010).The study also showed that the industry's image of being low paid holds true (Poulston 2009; Gallardo et al. 2010).On the other hand,relationships with colleagues and

working with people were commonly pointed out as attractive aspects of careersin the sector (Brown, Thomas, and Bosselman 2015; Gallardo et al. 2010).Researchers also found that challenging and stimulating job was a valued attribute of hospitality employment (Lub et al. 2012; Mkono 2010).

The findings of the study suggest that, when developing an employer value proposition aimed to attract and retain quality human resources, hospitality organisations should emphasise job content and social values. Friendly atmosphere, feeling of integration, supportive attitude of colleaguesas well as challenging work assignments and variety in daily activities appear to be the greatest strengths of the industry as a workplace. It is also important not to neglect opinions of current employees as their engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication is closely related to perceived rewardsobtained in the workplace. And, as noted byWilden, Gudergan, and Lings (2010), employee referrals are considered one of the most credible sources of employer brand information.

The results reported in the paper must be tempered by several limitations. First, all variables were measured with self-reports. Although the use of a survey methodology was appropriate, given the perceptual nature of the study variables, it does raise concerns about common method bias, especially social desirability, which may have influenced the results. Another aspect to keep in mind is that some of the unique characteristics of the hospitality industry may limit the generalizability of the findings to service sectors not considered here. However, accommodation and food service establishments provide a useful environment for investigating high-contact services.

CONCLUSION

In today's, characterised by increasingly fierce competition economy, employees are focal to the process of service brand building and their attitudes and behaviours can either reinforce a brand's values or, if inconsistent with these values, undermine the credibility of market communications. If companies wish to gain a competitive advantage through attracting and retaining talented workforce, they should engage in the process of placing an image of being a desirable place to work in the minds of current and potential hires.

Employers ought to invest in clear and consistent brand signals. Those signals must be credible – organisations that present an overly positive picture of their employment experience are likely to encourage unrealistic expectations in newcomers with subsequent disappointment, which could lead to reduced job satisfaction, decreased job performance, and increased voluntary quit rates. In other words, it is critical that actual employment conditions not contradict the signals delivered to job seekers in the pre-employment phase. Effective employer branding requires then understanding of the factors that are important for employees and of the current image of the organisation as a workplace.

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