

Employer Branding and Brand Building in the Aviation Industry

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Abstract: Businesses increasingly aim to attract new employees and customers by creating a unique brand identity. Airlines, particularly low-cost carriers, are no exception. After the staff shortages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, airlines use branding to regain their competitive edge and restore customer satisfaction. This paper explores the role of employer branding, a fusion of human resources and marketing, in the aviation sector. The research integrates both consumer and employee perspectives, helping to deepen the understanding of how a strong employer brand drives organizational success. It contributes to existing literature by addressing the gap in studies examining the interplay between these factors. A literature review and qualitative analysis of seventeen case studies, meeting three selected parameters (year, topic, and data used), were conducted to achieve the research goals. Results show that service performance and credibility are critical factors in aviation, more so than in other industries. To build customer loyalty, airlines should focus on meeting diverse needs based on travel types, offering memorable experiences, and ensuring website security. By strengthening their brand, companies can enhance their attractiveness to job seekers, boost employee and customer satisfaction and loyalty, and improve overall business performance.

Keywords: Brand, employer branding, aviation industry, marketing, management

1. Introduction

The marketplace is full of diverse businesses, companies and organisations that resort to different tactics, methods and procedures to capture attention of the workforce and customers. They are trying to stand out, make a lasting impression and have the opportunity to select the best talent to gain a competitive advantage. Consumers and the market both value businesses with a unique and distinctive brand identity, that lead in pricing and create value. It gives clients the impression that the company is dependable and trustworthy [1]. Businesses, therefore, build their brand, i.e. the name with which

they present themselves on the market. The topic of employer branding and brand building is thus gaining momentum. Service organisations are not exempt from this rush. According to Berry [2], consumers who are exposed to powerful service brands are less likely to recognize the perceived financial, social, and safety hazards associated with service purchases because they can more readily visualize and identify intangible things. Strong brands help businesses increase revenue by securing future demand from devoted customers and serving as a reliable indicator of a high-calibre product [3].

Air transport is a significant economic sector that contributes notably to the socio-economic development of nations and regions by increasing productivity, enabling international trade, and promoting tourism [4]. Companies in the transport industry such as airlines are no exception to the constant need to make a good impression. The aviation industry adheres to the service marketing literature that states the importance of branding, as customers require a high level of trust in their preferred supplier of an intangible purchase [5].

This trust is built by meeting the customer requirements. Staff shortages in the aviation sector, however, frequently result in ongoing delays in flights. During the COVID-19 epidemic, the aviation sector lost 2.3 million jobs worldwide [6]. It had a major impact on both domestic and international travel [7]. The effects of this have yet to wear off in the industry. Employment at major airlines is particularly affected. Employees involved in passenger interaction and flight operations are the most negatively impacted, with management personnel faring marginally better. Moreover, recovery is predicted to average four to six years. In general, the effects on the aviation sector are significant [8].

According to Boubker and Naoui [9] the key to corporate success in today's fiercely competitive airline industry is upholding lasting customer connections. Other researchers also agree, that improving services, fostering connections with passengers and satisfying their expectations are of utmost importance in the aviation sector [10,11].

The primary use for brand building and employer branding in the aviation industry is among those that do not prioritize pricing [12]. In other words, among those that refrain from focusing on catching up to their low-cost rivals who draw their clients' attention primarily to their prices. In order to compete and survive, these businesses that cannot match the seat-cost basis of their lowest-cost rivals must develop strong brands [5]. Because low-cost carriers are gaining market share, the low-cost carrier market is also becoming more and more competitive [13].

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Employer Branding

Employer branding was introduced in the 1990s as a profitable combination of human resources and marketing [14]. Human resource professionals tasked with finding and retaining talent have mastered

marketing techniques to promote their organization's unique 'brand' of employment. They have taken on the role of internal and external work experience marketing to attract the right employees, that is, employees who will create a unique competitive advantage for the organization [15]. Employer branding embodied the essence of what it's like to work for a specific company [14,16]. Employer brand has been transformed in research and practice into a means to win the quest to be the 'best employer', with definitions now characterising employer brand as a high quality, positive image of an organisation [17].

2.2 Brand Building

According to Adamson [18] brand represents a set of thought associations in people's minds that are created by brand signals. Branding is the actual process of managing and making these signals. To ensure the success of a brand, it is essential that its meaning is simple, differentiated and relevant. Most consumers form their opinion of a brand based on their perception of the various and numerous brand signals. Brand signals refer to evident and external things (logo, advertising, colours, name, visuals, typeface, packaging design, promotions, sales staff, exceptional customer care, etc.). All organizational units of the company are responsible for brand signals, so branding is not only related to the marketing department. All brand-related activities should be consistent. All employees must understand the brand idea, as consistency and understanding lead to trust and credibility. Similarly, employees who share the brand values should be selected in the recruitment process. A key component to brand and branding success is the buy-in of the entire organization to the brand idea.

Kristin Backhaus [19] states that a brand is made up of people. Some create it, some live it, and others break it. According to Adamson [18], the brand idea must be aligned with the business strategy; otherwise, delivering on the brand promise will be impossible. A brand can only be as good as the business strategy allows it to be, as it is how the organisation makes money. Employer brands are built and marketed deliberately. Their purpose is to promote the value the business offers to its employees [20,21]. This value may be, for example, the remuneration system, the location of the workplace or the employment policy [19].

Customers choose brands for the experiences of specific encounters and acquiring, using, and discarding goods and services that satisfy their needs [22]. According to Udchachone [23] brand experience is one of the most effective means of tying service providers and customers together.

2.3 Brand Building in the Aviation Industry

The airline is the main component of the air transportation system. In business travel, the primary focus is the success of the trip. The client is either the person deciding on the company's travel policy or the traveller. The high frequency of flights airlines offer for short-term business travel is one of its

distinguishing features. Passengers view punctuality and reliability as crucial components. In addition to demanding excellent in-flight and airport services (such as designated lounges or waiting areas), passengers are also aware of the airline loyalty programs. The client in a leisure or tourism trip could be the traveller directly or a tour operator (in a travel agency). In this instance, the ability to plan trips and cost savings are the primary issues. In contrast to business travel, there isn't a demand for flights at particular times of day (morning, afternoon, or evening) for tourism travel, while there is a seasonal demand throughout particular seasons of the year. These travellers are willing to accept later check-in hours and unusual departure times, such as in the middle of the night, and do not particularly expect exceptional in-flight service. Visiting friends and relatives, also referred to as affinity travel, encompasses a wide range of visitors, including migrants who return to their home countries regularly, those who travel for sporting or entertainment events, and others. They typically look for low prices and purchase their tickets well in advance, but they are not flexible about travel dates. On the other hand, the client in the context of cargo transport is the individual or entity needing a transport service whose needs can only be satisfied through air transport. The primary considerations are the ability to get beyond geographic barriers and quick delivery [24].

Airline companies often use brands to communicate and differentiate themselves from other businesses [25]. Because of this, a number of low-cost carrier companies (including Southwest, JetBlue, Spirit Airlines, and Frontier Airlines) look after their brands by attending to the demands of their customers [25,26].

According to Shobeiri et al. [27], there has been a noticeable increase in competition among airlines in recent years, forcing businesses to continuously look for appropriate ways to enhance passengers' travel experiences since their expectations have increased. Creating a strong brand in transport, namely the aviation industry is quite unique due to certain special features (e.g., the nature of the airline sector), measuring and managing airline services cannot be easily performed using the methods created to measure brands in products and most other service industries [5].

Yuan and Wu [28] note that the success of businesses in the tourist sector depends on delivering an unforgettable experience. To engage with consumers, airline brands host conferences and exhibits worldwide. During experiential marketing events, the airline brand stimulates customers' senses to the fullest extent possible. Rewards such as gifts, ticket upgrades, or a complimentary trip to an experiential marketing event are beneficial because they help customers remember their airline experience [29].

Belanger et al. [30] state that if buyers believe that a seller has a policy in place for safe transactions, secure online purchases, and other precautionary steps, they are more likely to have faith in the security of the seller's website while making purchases online. According to Damghanian et al. [31], customers are more likely to have a favourable opinion of an airline company's website

dependability and the calibre of their booking experiences if they think the website securely handles their personal and financial information. In order to create a visually appealing website, it is vital to take into account some key aspects, such as having a straightforward layout design, showing information in a comprehensible manner with appropriate font type and size, identifiable symbols or images, and acceptable animation colour [32,33].

2. Methodology

The main goal of this paper is to gain insight into the proper use of employer branding and brand building to attract potential new employees and entice new customers to use the services of companies in the transport industry, specifically in aviation.

Secondary data gained via a review of the most relevant academic literature and case studies on the topic of employer branding, brand building and the aviation and transport industry was used to conduct this study. The case studies were chosen via a qualitative content analysis according to three parameters: the year of realization of the study, the discussed topic, and the data used.

According to the first parameter, only recent studies, the latest from 2018, were used for the evaluation. The second parameter allowed only studies related to employer branding and brand building with case studies conducted in the transport sector or related to the aviation industry being preferred. The third parameter relates to the methodology used in the studies, namely its quantitative nature and the research being done on primary data.

The final number of analysed case studies, that meet all three parameters, is seventeen, with four being directly related to the aviation industry.

3. Results

Research revealed eight employer branding value propositions that matter to prospective IT employees, namely social value (whether it is a fun workplace with talented people and a great organizational culture), interest value (whether the work is interesting, challenging, but achievable), application value (whether the work is meaningful and encourages the application of knowledge and skills), economic value (whether the job is adequately rewarded with salary, benefits and other perks), management value (whether managers are good, honest leaders who inspire, trust, protect and respect employees), brand image (how the brand is perceived by employees and whether it is perceived as 'cool' and innovative) [34], the value of development (whether employees have the opportunity to grow and advance professionally), and work-life balance (whether working conditions are flexible enough to achieve success both on and off the job) [34,35]. Sharma and Prasad [35] also consider company reputation, acceptance and belonging, ethics, and CSR (corporate social responsibility) essential.

Previous studies have demonstrated that prosperous airlines prioritize delivering unique experiences to their clientele and enhancing their loyalty to the company [36]. Awareness, functional and technical service performance, credibility, differentiation, value, satisfaction, and loyalty are the factors that drive brand equity in the airline industry. Thus, functional and technical service performance, as well as credibility, are the characteristics particular to the aviation sector [5]. According to Boubker and Naoui [9], happy customers are likelier to love and be more devoted to the company. Passengers who are passionate about a brand are likelier to be devoted and spread good word of mouth. The results demonstrate that airline tangible, terminal tangible, empathy, and airline image provide a foundation for raising the degree of perceived service quality. Pabla and Soch [10] also confirm that experiences with an airline brand impact the satisfaction of passengers.

According to different researchers [10,28] marketing communication techniques impact the airline brand experience. Airline management should, specifically, concentrate on marketing communication and event marketing since they significantly impact customer experience.

Offering clients experiential values on airline businesses' websites has also become a crucial area of focus. Researchers and online retailers have paid close attention to website attributes, realizing their importance in creating brand loyalty and influencing word-of-mouth [37,38]. Because brand love (e.g. the emotional side of branding) is so personal, it significantly influences consumers' perceptions and expectations of online retailers [39].

Digitalization impacts the economy as a whole. No matter what industry they are in, all businesses understand that to stay competitive, they must innovate in the digital space [40]. Several studies' findings [41,42] show that perceived security significantly and positively influences brand love. This result implies that creating robust online security protocols is essential for online shopping. These protocols must include implementing an extremely effective defensive mechanism to ward off cyberattacks and reduce the danger of financial fraud. Additionally, marketing managers must implement solid security protocols to enable safe financial transactions. That will help to build customer confidence in online bookings and enhance their overall shopping experiences. Hanaysha [42] also attested that brand love is positively impacted by a company's website's aesthetic appeal. Previous studies have also demonstrated that a seller's website's design and layout benefit brand loyalty and intent for word-of-mouth marketing [39,43]. Additionally, proper use of white space can give important information breathing room without overpowering viewers with dense images. Moreover, images and graphics can improve visual appeal because they communicate ideas clearly and swiftly. Thus, the judicious use of visuals can help tell stories that emotionally connect with viewers [42].

If companies take the time to build their brand, it can bring them many benefits. In addition to increased attractiveness in the job market [44], an organization may see an increase in the intention

of potential employees to join the workforce [35], higher employee satisfaction and loyalty [45], or better employee engagement [46]. A focus on employer branding also enhances firm performance [47,48] by creating a positive workplace climate [47]. The impact of employer branding on employee attraction [35] and retention [49,50] is also an important benefit of employer branding. Ahmad et al. [51] suggest that if companies focus on providing market value, social value, career development, and a good image, they can gain a competitive advantage over other players in the market and ensure their success and growth. Focusing on employer branding can improve recruitment outcomes [52] by attracting talented workers who can adapt more quickly to the company culture. These talented new hires are expected to become future assets of the company that will along with satisfied customers bring competitive advantage to the company [53].

4. Discussion

Eight key employer branding value propositions that resonate with potential IT employees were identified. These propositions underscore the multifaceted nature of what candidates seek in an employer, suggesting that a robust employer brand can significantly enhance recruitment efforts and overall employee satisfaction.

In the context of branding strategy, airlines must recognize the distinct needs of various customer segments, particularly differentiating between business and leisure travelers. Business travelers tend to prioritize excellent in-flight and airport services, valuing punctuality, comfort, and personalized attention. Their expectations can be fulfilled by successful employer branding that will attract excellent new employees who possess specific skills and qualities essential for delivering high-quality service. By aligning their employer branding strategies with the demands of business travelers, airlines can cultivate a workforce that is not only adept at meeting these high service standards but also capable of creating a premium travel experience.

The findings emphasize that successful airlines focus on delivering unique customer experiences, fostering loyalty through superior service performance and brand credibility. Factors such as tangible service quality, emotional engagement, and effective marketing communication are pivotal in shaping the overall customer experience and loyalty to an airline brand. The analysed case studies suggest, that when airlines enhance their service quality and ensure consistent brand messaging, they can effectively build trust and a strong emotional connection with customers.

However, while these findings present a comprehensive overview of the strategies that can be employed in employer branding and brand building, there are limitations to consider. Firstly, the reliance on secondary data may restrict the depth of insights gained from direct interactions with employees and customers. The qualitative nature of the content analysis means that nuances in

individual experiences may not be fully captured, potentially oversimplifying complex perceptions of employer branding and service quality.

To build on this research, future studies could employ mixed-methods approaches that integrate both qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how employer branding impacts employee recruitment and customer loyalty in real-world settings. Additionally, exploring the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence in recruitment and customer service, could also yield relevant findings that further inform best practices in employer branding within the aviation sector.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the critical role of employer branding and brand building in the aviation industry, particularly in attracting and retaining both talented employees and loyal customers. The identification of eight key employer branding value propositions—social value, interest value, application value, economic value, management value, brand image, development value, and work-life balance—provides valuable insights into the expectations of prospective employees. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of delivering unique customer experiences as a strategy for enhancing brand loyalty, emphasizing factors such as service performance, credibility, and effective marketing communication. Additionally, perceived security plays a significant role in shaping customer trust and satisfaction, particularly in online interactions. The research underscores the necessity for airlines to implement robust security protocols to enhance customer confidence during online bookings, which is crucial for building lasting relationships.

The contribution of this study to existing literature lies in its focus on the interplay between employer branding and customer loyalty within the aviation sector, an area that has seen limited exploration. By integrating insights from both employee and customer perspectives, the research enriches the understanding of how a strong employer brand can foster organizational success. This study contributes significantly to understanding how effective employer branding and brand building can enhance organizational competitiveness in the aviation industry. However, addressing the identified limitations and expanding the scope of future research will be essential to deepen the insights into this dynamic field. For example, the reliance on secondary data may limit the depth of insights regarding individual experiences. Future research directions should consider employing mixed-methods approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of employer branding's impact.

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