

Employee Branding: A Tool for Academic Brand Image Creation

Dr. Amit Kumar

IBMR, IPS Academy Indore
Email : amitkumarices@gmail.com

Dr. Gunjan Anand

PIMR, Indore
Email : gunjan0029@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Employee branding is an emerging concept that has been recognized as the most comprehensive and cost competitive strategy to build brand image. It suggests the best way to use employees as a brand ambassador and brand representative. The current study examines the use of employee branding in academic brand creation. It covers various dimensions of employee branding concept and evaluates how workable they are for academic brand image creation. 200 Management graduates are targeted with a set of questionnaire to observe their opinion on strategic use of employee branding concept for building academic brand. Various parameters are identified that represents how an employee becomes a brand ambassador in academics. Respondents also asked to give their opinion on important factors required to become brand ambassador in academic world.

Keywords: Employee Branding, Employer Branding, Brand Identity, Brand Innovation, Academics

INTRODUCTION

Brand plays crucial role in customer interaction point and delivers better returns to the organization and their stakeholders comparing to relatively weaker brand (Balmer et. Al., 2003). According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), the brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to create significant difference among competitors of similar goods. Brand is an identity of particular organization in consumer's mind (Minchington, 2010) and it is characterized by a noticeable name or symbol which can differentiate the goods and services from the rivals' (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1998). An effective brand boost confidence in employees and facilitate efficient tool to face the competition. A brand covers multi-dimensions for business prosperity. The most valuable jobs a brand does are, first- a good brand ensures product's presence in customers' wish list. It is very important for the brand to perform in the market also provide cutting edge to be competitive. Second- a brand represents the experience and expertise the organization possess. It provide various non-monetary benefits along with estimated cash flow. Long experience shows the firm's ability to meet diversified customers' needs. Third- a competent brand helps to create significant difference from rivalries. And forth- brand's identity, which means what a brand is known or famous for? How the brand is perceived in the market?

Brand as Influencer

Brand act as influencer to encourage customers for making their purchase decision towards a particular brand. It uses various rudiments of marketing mix to get the confidence of the customers. There is a lot of buzz in the market for finding the influencers. Customers rely on authenticated influencer to trust upon because of their knowledge and expertise in the subjected areas (Manhaimer, 2006). For example, a person investing in stock market, first go for searching information about the product to invest into or on the other hand go for

specialist advice before investing. In this case, customers do believe on specialist advice because of his knowledge and expertise in the area. These peoples act as an influencer who helps a brand to acquire customer attention and trust. This would imply that brands that enjoy high customer awareness and positive perceptions are more apt to endure the occasional negative referral by an influencer than brands with limited awareness (Pieterse, 2008).It revealed that the brand with strong awareness and positive customer perception enjoy advantage of existing users who act as a brand influencer for the company.

Employee Branding Concept

Employees are considered as strategic tool to represent brand's strength. Best employees represent the strength and ability of the organization to fulfill the commitment with desired quality. Employee branding shapes employees' behavior so that they project the brand identity of their organization's products through their routine work behavior. Employee branding is used to create employee-brand identification, a psychological connection between the employee and the brand. Employee branding is the process through which employees adopt the organizational culture and how the culture influence employees in achieving the brand image. It is a process of training employees and making them understand their responsibilities and duties with proper motivational factors to reach and build good brand image of the organization in front of the customers.

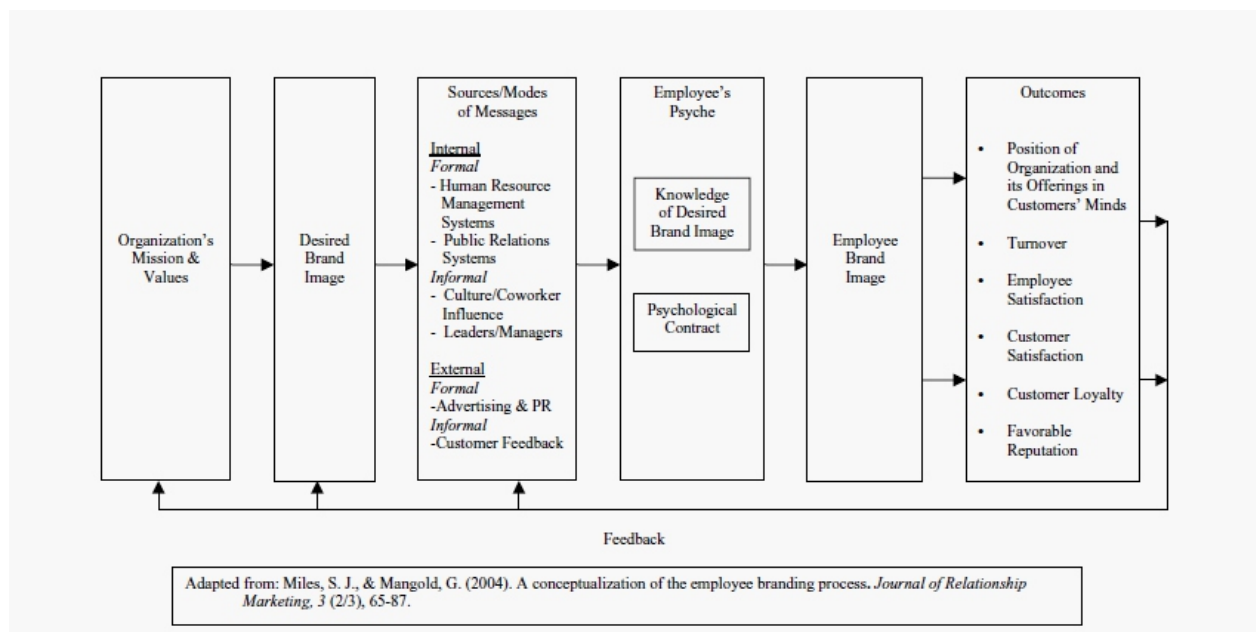


Figure 1: A conceptualization of the employee branding process.

Another angle of employee branding concept says, use employees as brand convener or ambassador. Employees become serious brand identification factor especially in service industry. For instance- the capability of a software company is judged by their technical workforce, similarly the strength of an educational institute is judge by its faculties. Employee branding talks about employees' functionality towards the greater achievement of organizational strategic objectives and to perform according to the organizational desired line and length. The above figure 1 shows the process of employee branding. It is a continuous and regress process that ensures brand equity in long run and offers financial freedom on account of desired price charged from the customers.

Role of Employee Branding in Educational Institute

Employee branding relates more to service industry wherein products are invisible or intangible. The overall product configuration depends upon how effectively the executive describes it to customers (Philippe, et al. 2016). Similarly, in an educational institute the quality of education can easily be measured by teachers' attributes. The renowned and most popular educational institute are known for its faculty fleet. The teachers represent the real potential of the institute not the tangible assets. Infrastructure plays important role but not much. All the government aided institutes are very popular across the nation but probably they are not as much equipped with hi-tech infrastructure as private institute are. Today, competent educational organization use concept of employee branding to attract students and show their potential. Institute shapes their faculties behavior in such a manner who represent the institute name as the only source of their dream fulfillment. Showing brand promise and commitment is the key element of employee branding mechanism (Schreiner, 2018).

Teachers' performance resembles in their service delivery process and delivery quality reveals the employee's association with the organization. It ensures the configuration of teachers' intellectual ability to perform their task. A competent teacher work for institutes' brand building through his expertise and knowledge, this is so called employee based brand image creation mechanism. The institute become beneficiary of employee's performance and gain long term sustenance with students' acceptance. Employee relationship management is a crucial part of 'employee branding' wherein organization take their employees as internal customers and work for their satisfaction, because if internal customer (service delivery executive) is not happy and satisfied he/she cannot make external customers satisfied (Stephen et al., 2007). Hence, today organizations are working to enhance employee's capabilities to build their own strength. This philosophy can easily be seen in IT industry, wherein company's strength is purely represented its IT specialists. Similarly, educational institutes can win over the competition by making their employees a brand representative and ambassador.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Customer interaction point is an event wherein customer and sales executive come across for their exchanges that is the point where brand name often made or broken (Bernoff and Schadler, 2010). Therefore, organizations work for brand image creation to have better financial performance, financial freedom to gain a sustainable competitive advantage. Defining brand intention to the employees is a key part of employee branding through which organization try to inculcate the belongingness and sense of accountability among the executives. Alder (2018) in his article discussed about the long term skill required and availability of that in the industry. The author propounded that, for efficient use of employee branding role of employer branding is very crucial. Various authors including Farooq (2017) named it 'internal branding' wherein, organization internally ensures that every employee must understand the desired outcome from the corporate branding and are supposed to act accordingly. Employee branding was introduced in American market during 1990s to communicate the significance of employees to the organization and later on it developed as marketing technique that significantly contributes to the organizational outcomes and performance. It also ensures customer satisfaction, loyalty, and reputation along with company's position in the mind of the customers (King and Grace, 2010). Employees are being treated as the most important business world's untapped resources used for marketing and business development purposes. For achieving desired results company must focus on employee engagement and recruitment (Kemp, 2017).

A potential brand lives in consumers' mind in the form of best solution to their problems (Verma, 2006). In this globalized era, brand is the one which create distinction and bring equity to the company. Brand is an important tool to win the competition at market place and established a trust of better delivery, competitive pricing, consistent quality and promised product performances. Because brand is sign/symbol of quality, trust or performance hence, it is perceived by the customers as association of various attributes which provide need satisfaction better than any other offering.

Kapoor (2010) & Gurav (2017), in their study exhibited that customers' perception of employee satisfaction, loyalty and commitment have an impact on his perception of product and service quality. In order to bridge the gap between these two, employee brand endorsement is needed. The author explained close relationship between internal branding, employee brand and brand endorsement (Natrajan et al. (2017). Employee brand endorsement ultimately assert customer loyalty to brand as well as to that service executive. It can thus be deduced that customers can be pleased by the employees but the call is to motivate the employees by virtue of whom they shall internalize the brand. This technique builds employee based brand equity which provide a cutting edge to the brand in long run strengthen brand through developing repeat purchase behavior among the customers (Ulas, et al., 2016).

Education is a service industry where significant portion of brand image is represented and observed by teachers. An academic brand is known for its faculty fleet and their uniqueness. It is important to strengthen faculty (service delivery executive) in order to deliver and fulfills brand's promise to the ultimate customers (students). Employee branding signifies the role of faculty members in drawing potential brand image before students while delivering their best to them. Hence, role of employee branding can easily be observed in academic sector and its implementation is essential and required (King & Grace, 2009).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The current study is an attempt to investigate implication of employee branding concept on academic sector and determine the potential parameters essential for academic brand image creation through employees. Also discover the important factors that make an academician a brand representative. The broader aspects have been summarized into following points as main objectives of the research:

1. Determining important parameters required to be brand representative in academic world.
2. Studying students' perception towards 'teacher as a brand ambassador' along with gender influence on perception of respondents (if any).

INSTRUMENTS & METHODOLOGY

Research instrument and methodology represent important part of the research. The current study is based on primary data research targeting MBA students as potential respondents to record their views regarding use of employee based branding in academics. The respondents are approached with self designed questionnaire using employee branding scale. Questionnaire's validity has been checked with the help of 'Alpha' test with value obtained of 0.84. The statements were prepared on 'five point likert's scale' using 1-5 score range. Factor analysis and Independent T-test has been used in the study.

RESULTS

The first objective i.e. 'Determining important parameters required to be brand representative in academic world' is met through factors analysis. The factors identified are considered as essential elements to become a brand ambassador in academics.

Before applying factor analysis, sample adequacy has been checked with the help of KMO test. The result of KMO is found to be:

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.805
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2.527E3
	df	198
	Sig.	.000

The value of KMO sample adequacy test is observed 0.805 which is 'Marvelous' according to the KMO scale.

The detail discussion of factor analysis is as follows:

Factor Analysis

Data reduction was done using 'factor analysis', initially 32 items were there as the most significant and close statements to the research problem. The test was performed using 'Principle Component' matrix with 'Varimax Rotation'. The reduced items were selected on the bases of their 'eigen' value. The eigen value 1 or above is selected to choose the factors. The extraction process brought out ten potential factors with eigen value one or more. 32 variables are grouped together in different factor category based on their scores. Each factor represents the unique characteristic required to become an academic brand ambassador.

The below table 1 represents the summarize form of factor analysis and presenting the potential factors identified.

Table 1 : Factor Description

	Items	Item Load	Total Factor Load	Factor
1	Personal Relationship	.700	3.181	Popularity
2	Social Networking	.690		
3	Web Presence	.689		
4	People Interaction	.558		
5	Group Membership	.544		

1	Teaching Experience	.786	3.797	Experience
2	Industry Experience	.720		
3	Practical Exposure	.614		
4	Total Working Experience	.594		
5	Technical Knowhow	.559		
6	Expertise	.524		
1	Institute Association	.879	2.272	Association
2	Professional Body Association	.878		
3	Technical Body Association	.516		
1	Academic Participation	.823	1.635	Involvement
2	Non-Academic Participation	.812		
1	Total Working Years	.676	2.362	Industry Experience
2	Type of Industry Served	.629		
3	Type Work Handled	.593		
4	Position Held	.464		
1	Teaching Method	.734	1.763	Diversified Approach
2	Practical Learning	.615		

1	Qualification	.777	1.498	Academic Background
2	Achievements	.721		
1	Field Covered in Research	.688	2.199	Research Experience
2	No. of Research Publications	.534		
3	Projects Undertaken	.503		
4	Industry Research	.474		
1	Subject Related		1.172	Knowledge
2	Current Scenario			
1	Organizational Membership	.741	.741	Institutional Membership

Source: Self Prepared

FACTOR DESCRIPTION

The above mentioned factors have been extracted from the factor analysis. Ten potential factors are identified with the help of respondents' view. A group of 32 statements questionnaire was administered for the respondents on 'employee branding' and asked them to rate their view on the same. According to the data recorded, the factor analysis (Using SPSS 20) was performed and brought out 10 important factors which closely related to the research question. These factors reveal the basic elements of employee branding concept and explain what parameters can make an academician 'a brand ambassador'.

Popularity (3.181): This is the prime factor to make someone really beneficial brand ambassador. Strategists believe that only 'popular' personality can become effective brand ambassador. Like 'Amitabh Bacchan' a very renowned and popular Indian actor has great worth in viewers' psyche. Any brand who keeps 'Amitabh Bacchan' as their brand ambassador will take advantage of his recognition and popularity. Similarly, a popular 'faculty' can earn significant acceptance for the institution and create a competitive image in students' mind.

Experience (3.797): Experience in any field earn significant competency and expertise which gives a competitive edge and long customers' loyalty. Brands which is long back established or having long experience in the market get advantage over newly entered brands. Therefore, 'Experience' is the second most

prominent factor which makes a person an effective brand ambassador. Faculty having long experience in the field is found to be more competitive in the market. Through, their experience an institute can earn so much credit from its customers and win over the market.

Association (2.272): Here, 'Association' represents the person's affiliation with other closely related organizations. For example, a 'Faculty' along with his/her college affiliation is also associated with other organizations viz. research firms, corporate houses, NGOs, University Board etc. has more gravity and credibility in the field. Therefore, 'Association' is found as the third most important factor which helps to make someone an effective 'brand ambassador' in academic brand image creation and representation.

Knowledge (1.172): 'Knowledge' is an essential parameter in every field for differentiation. A knowledgeable person always wins over the competition and gets customers' love and affection. In service industry knowledge of service provider is really very important to make customer happy and satisfied. In academics, subject knowledge of the faculty is the key parameter at which he/she is judged. Diversified knowledge and multi-tasking ability helps faculty to win students' heart and become very popular brand in academics.

Involvement (1.635): 'Involvement' is nothing but participation of service executive (provider) in buying-selling activity. Executive's involvement in service selling plays crucial role comparing to tangible goods selling. Sellers who involve himself physically and psychologically in buying-selling process usually win the customers' heart and convert the prospects into potential sales. Also, ensures greater satisfaction at customers' end. Similarly, in academics teacher who involves into class room activities, flows into teaching-learning process earns students' preference and appreciation. Such faculties actually represent the brand he works with and through their honest and concern behavior, students estimate institute's honesty towards its promises.

Industry Experience (2.362): Industry experience outshines the person's ability, expertise and knowledge in the concern field. The more the experience more the value, this is the phenomenon of the every industry. In services selling, executives' total experience does matter a lot, it shows the percentage of success in selling service products. Similarly, industry experience gives immense chance to the faculty to outperform in the academics and differentiate themselves from the others.

Diversified Approach (1.763): Attitudinal diversification is a key mantra for success in today's competitive world. A person, specialist or a firm follows diversified approach increases the chances of success and competitiveness. Diversification strategy now becomes an essential tool of survival and sustenance against keen competition. Similarly, in service industry including academics, a faculty should be diversified in his approach, skills and qualification, then only he/she become competitive and attractive. A person with multi-tasking ability is known as a true brand representative in academics.

Academic Background (1.498): As industry background gives immense possibilities of growth in corporate world similarly, academic background opens endless opportunities in academics. A teacher with strong academic history creates unforgettable image in students' mind. Such personality represents the real means of brand's existence. Strong academic background injects energy in the overall performance of the faculty and resembles institute's worth to the students.

Research Experience (2.199): One of the important elements of an effective brand representative in academics is 'Research Experience' of the faculty. Research is an integral part of an academician which gives him universal approach to see an issue and to find solution. Research experience gives multi-dimensional

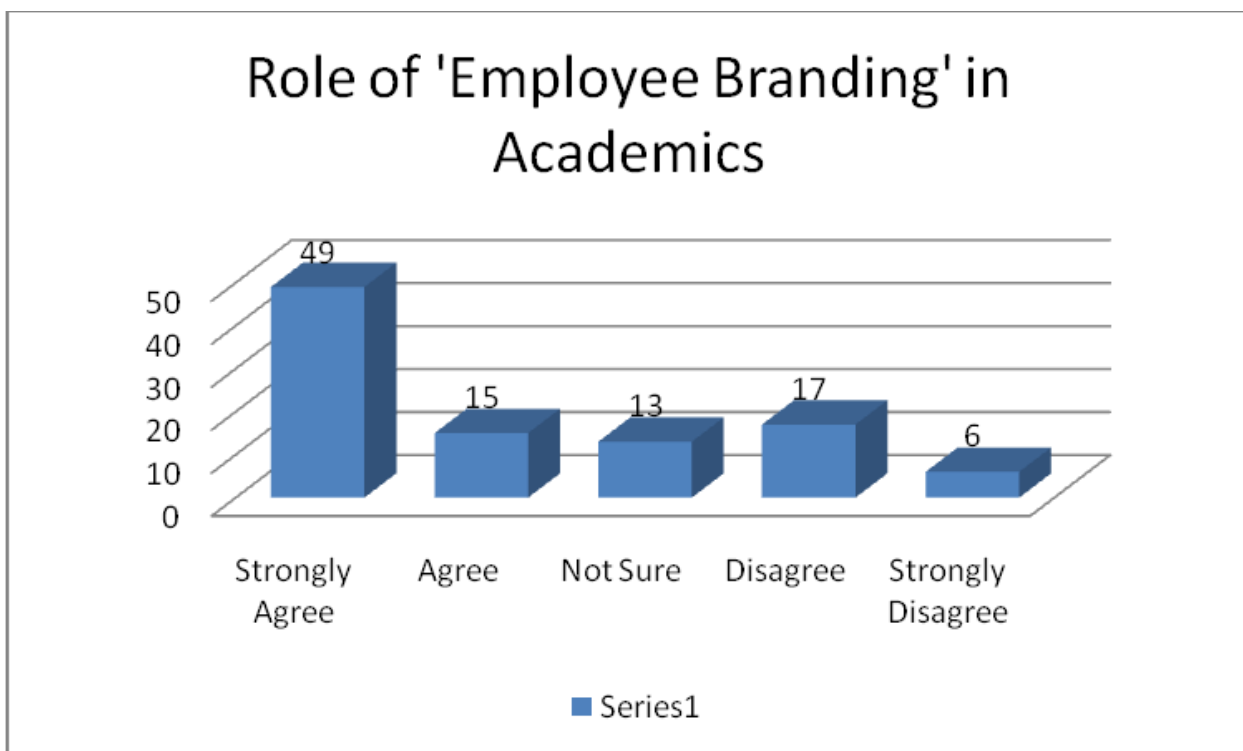
thought to the person and enables him to relate subjects with real academic world. Enriched faculty executes institute's image more powerfully and become a real representative of academic brand.

Institutional Membership (.741): Affiliation and association in academics proves presence of academic brand across the world. Faculty's membership with other institutes, organization or corporate resemble the person's strength in academic world. Such personality brings so much attraction and name to the affiliated institute and the person become an untold brand ambassador.

The second objective of the study i.e. 'Studying students' perception towards 'teacher as a brand ambassador' is met with the help of opinion recorded in likert scale and demonstrate through histogram. The below graph 1, representing the figures in graphical form for easy and clear understanding.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS USE OF 'EMPLOYEE BRANDING' IN ACADEMICS

Graph 1



The above graph 1 reveals students' perception towards use of 'employee branding' concept in academics. The students were interviewed personally and discussed various dimensions of employee branding and rate their view about role of employee branding in academics. How much faculty's attributes matter in their academic brand selection was asked and whether faculty fleet does really creates a psychological space in students' mind? The answer was quite surprising, students really see faculty's strength while selecting an academic brand for studies. With an example they explained that, for selecting 'coaching institute' for competitive exams they do concern about the faculty teaches there. In this, word of mouth branding also very prominent in mind making of students. A renowned name become face of an institute which significantly affects students' choice. On data front, out of 100 respondents 49 says they are strognly agree on the use of employee branding in academic brand image creation followed by 15 are 'agree', 13 are 'not sure', 17 are 'disagree' & 6 are 'strongly disagree'.

Further extending to the research, it also study 'gender' influence on perception of respondents towards the concept. With the help of this research question, the study would know whether male and female students differ in their view regarding employee branding concept in academics.

Based on the research problem one null hypothesis has been framed to check whether male and female students differ in their view regarding strategic use of 'employee branding' concept in academic brand image creation. With this hypothesis the study would examine the perceptual difference between the two independent groups.

H01: Male and female students do not differ in their perception towards the strategic use of 'employee branding' concept in academic brand image creation.

Table 2
Group Statistics

Students	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Respondents Male	100	3.7904	.62868	.06287
Female	100	3.8936	.29453	.02945

The above table 2 represents the descriptive statistics of the respondents including mean and standard deviation. Out of total 200 respondents 50% are male students and rest 50% are female students. Both were responded on 'employee branding scale' and gave their important views on use of employee branding concept in academic brand image creation.

Table 3
Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Respondents Equal variances assumed	28.016	.000	-1.485	198	.139	-.10312	.06942	-.24003	.03378
Equal variances not assumed			-1.485	140.461	.140	-.10312	.06942	-.24038	.03413

The null hypothesis H01 is found accepted. The sig. value for the test is found to be $0.139 > 0.05$, that reveals that the test is found not significant at 5% level of significance. It is examined that the respondents (both the group) do not differ in their perception with respect to use of employee branding strategy in academic brand image creation.

The strategy of employee branding work efficiently in 'service industry', since academic also belongs to service industry here, service brand delivery has significant role in consumers' perception making towards the brand. In academics, brand's perceived value is important for selecting academic brand. Another important aspect of academic brand creation is brand personification through faculties (service delivery employees). Renowned B-schools across the world use their faculties as brand promoters, they keep them upfront to show brand's strength and soft skills the brand possess. What an academic brand promise, faculty is the prime source of that promise delivery. Therefore, the researchers of academic science, management and humanities stressed upon strategic use of employees for creating and promoting service brand image in this highly competitive market scenario.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Employee branding is an innovative and cost effective branding technique in today's market scenario. It is become the most preferable method among various costlier branding techniques. The brand perceived image reveals the market potential of the firm and competitive position of the product. Brand often creates magic in the market by giving strength to the company's products and enable executives to stand at challenging position before the competitor. The concept of 'Employee Branding & Employer Branding' is an emerging concept through which corporates creating an attractive brand for their customers as well as employees. The current study investigated the role and function of employee branding concept in academics. The study found that, employee branding works in academic brand image creation, it carries significant portion of brand building. Respondents revealed their perception in much positive manner and supported the use of employee branding in academic brand image creation. Successive brand promotion leads to strong brand image creation and create brand equity. Hence, it is concluded that employee branding in academics is an advisable strategy to attract and retain students. Service industry acknowledges the importance of employee branding strategy for easy and cost effective brand building. This mechanism offer ease of operating marketing plan with much convenient and controlling manner. At last employee branding is the trustable strategy for service firms.

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