The Curious Case of Church Branding and its Impact on Church Participation

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Abstract

There are mixed opinions in the literature in regards of the appropriateness, relevance, and significance of church branding in encouraging church participation. This study developed and applied ‘perceived brand orientation’ construct in church context and examine its impact on church participation. The results indicate that ‘perceived brand orientation’ is significantly related to ‘perceived social benefits’, ‘perceived spiritual benefits’, and church participation. This study highlights the importance of being brand-oriented in order to attract members’ participation. Relevant implications for church leaders and non-profit researchers are also identified.

Introduction

Although there are conflicting opinions about the application of branding in the church context, some authors have supported the notion of a church as a ‘brand’. Djupe (2000) went so far as to propose that there is a resemblance between religion and products, and thus used the term ‘religious brand loyalty’ to refer to denominational loyalty. More recently, Einstein (2008) has asserted that given that brands contain meaning for our lives and that products become part of our identities, it is easy to see why religious organisations see the value in inventing their products and services as ‘brands’.

According to Stevens et al. (2005), a church with a ‘good name’ in the community (that is, positive ‘brand image’) is likely to have more committed members and will not suffer from as much member-switching behaviour as other churches that are less well regarded. A positive image is also a key component of effective positioning and targeting strategy. As Shawchuck et al. (1992, p.205) observed: “a responsive church will actively take steps to develop its image and position because this determines the target publics it will attract”. These statements underline the importance of branding for religious organisations to attract attendance.

The Present Study

Review of the literature revealed that, despite the increasing number of church-related studies in the marketing domain, there are several gaps of research that the present study aims to address. In particular, although the implementation of branding techniques in the church context has been discussed in the literature, there has been little examination of the effectiveness of the techniques in encouraging church attendance. The majority of previous studies have focused on the application of branding within the church context, rather than its impact on church participation (Webb et al., 1998, Abreu, 2006). As a consequence, previous studies in this area have failed to contribute to a theoretical understanding of how branding can be used to motivate church attendance. It is thus apparent that there is a need for more research into consumer behaviour in this area to examine individual motives for participation in church activities, and to ascertain the potential role of branding in affecting church participation (Webb et al., 1998).
The main objective of this study is to investigate the role of brand orientation in encouraging church participation. More specifically, this article examines whether church members’ perception of the organisational brand orientation (‘perceived brand orientation’) significantly affects: (i) their perception of the benefits associated with the church’s offerings (‘perceived benefits’) and (ii) the extent of their participation in the church activities (‘church participation’). Furthermore, the paper develops a theoretical framework to empirically test the relationships among ‘perceived brand orientation’, ‘perceived benefits’, and ‘church participation’.

**Brand Orientation**

Although the brand concept and its implementation have been well established in the commercial sector for more than a century (Low and Fullerton, 1994), it is only recently that researchers have begun to examine the relevance of brands within the non-profit sector. Within the non-profit sector, brand orientation is defined as “the extent to which charity organisations regard themselves as brands, an indication of how much (or how little) organisations accept the theory and practice of branding” (Hankinson, 2001a, p.231). Hankinson (2001b) examined the impact of brand orientation on the practices of charity managers. A comparison of strongly brand-oriented managers and those with a lower level of brand orientation revealed that the former were: (i) better able to influence others in adopting a brand focus; (ii) more skilful at translating this commitment to the brand into managerial practice; and (iii) better able to raise voluntary income. These findings are consistent with those of other studies in this area, which have proposed that a strong brand can: (i) enhance an organisation’s ability to communicate its values to stakeholders (Tapp, 1996); (ii) change public opinion (Lindsay and Murphy, 1996); (iii) build loyalty (Ritchie et al., 1999); (iv) achieve short-term and long-term objectives (Hankinson, 2002, Simoes and Dibb, 2001); and (v) attract a greater proportion of voluntary income (Hankinson, 2001b). Despite these apparent benefits, brands are still largely under-utilised as a strategic asset in the non-profit sector (Stride, 2006).

**Brand orientation and church participation**

In the mainstream marketing literature, strong organisational/corporate brands have been positively associated with repeat purchases (Porter and Claycomb 1997) and customer loyalty (Keller 2003, Ailwadi and Keller 2004), as well as increased monetary contributions in the charity sector (Webb et al., 2000). It can be argued that respondents’ *extent of participation* in church-related activities reflects the notion of ‘repeat purchase’ and ‘customer loyalty’ as applied in the church context. A church with a strong brand is likely to be perceived as being able to deliver superior values to the congregation which in turns positively affects members’ participation in the programs/activities that the church offers. Therefore it is hypothesised that church members’ perception of the extent to which a church engages in brand-oriented activities and behaviour (‘perceived brand orientation’) is positively related with their extent of participation in church-related activities. Within the church marketing literature, researchers have argued that positive church image is linked with stronger members’ commitment (Stevens et al., 2005). The strategic importance that a church places on its branding is also conceptually linked with the church’s ability to attract prospective members and enhance the participation of its existing members (Shawchuck et al., 1992).

**H1:** Perceived brand orientation is positively associated with church participation.
Brand orientation and perceived benefits

The ‘perceived benefits’ construct in the present study reflects the benefits that people anticipate from participating in church-related activities. Siegel and Scrimshaw (2002) found that people engage in religious activities such as prayer and meditation to gain spiritual support through a personal relationship with God (spiritual benefits) as well as social support gained through their interactions with other members/attendees (social benefits). Further to Siegel and Scrimshaw’s (2002) findings, the inclusion of ‘spiritual benefits’ and ‘social benefits’ as the antecedents of church participation in the present study is also consistent with the ‘intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity’ concept of Allport and Ross (1967). On the basis of intrinsic-extrinsic religious orientation, Attaway et al. (1995) argued that intrinsically-oriented individuals’ participation in religious activities are driven by ‘spiritual motives’, whereas extrinsically-oriented individuals are driven by ‘social motives’. In essence, the scholars argued that people participate in religious activities to satisfy their spiritual and social needs (Attaway et al., 1995).

The literature has suggested the importance of having a strong brand orientation for organisations to continue delivering superior value to its stakeholders. Within the commercial branding literature, corporate brands are seen as a guarantee of quality or insurance against poor performance or financial risk (Balmer and Gray, 2003). In a similar accord, it can be argued that churches with strong brand orientation are more likely to be perceived as having superior quality as compared to other religious organisations. ‘Poor performance’ within the church context can be regarded as the church’s inability to satisfy its members needs through relevant services and activities. A strong church brand does not only provide an insurance against poor performance but also a guarantee of quality. That is, an assurance of the church’s ability to deliver benefits relevant to its members’ needs and expectation. In light of these arguments, it is hypothesised that positive perceptions of a church’s brand orientation will lead to a greater level of perceived benefits.

H2a: Perceived brand orientation is positively associated with perceived spiritual benefits.
H2b: Perceived brand orientation is positively associated with perceived social benefits.

Method

The choice of respondents for this study was considered in relation to the knowledge required on the particular issues under examination. Since the study incorporates sections on people’s perception of the brand orientation of the church, the respondents must have substantial exposure to the church organisation based on their church-going experiences. Consequently, we employed a convenience sampling technique to recruit respondents. The researchers approached a district leader of Assemblies of God (AOG) in Melbourne, Australia, to send an invitation to participate in the study to AOG-affiliated church leaders throughout the Melbourne metropolitan and suburban areas. Thirteen church leaders, of the 40 invited, responded positively to the invitation and agreed to allow the researcher to approach their congregation for data collection. 1085 questionnaires were distributed in thirteen churches that participated in the study. The respondents’ age range between 18 – 65 years old and are equally distributed among the five age groups (less than 30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, more than 60). However, there is an unequal distribution in terms of Gender (Male 38%, Female 62%).

Perceived brand orientation. This study initially attempted to adapt the Non-profit Brand Orientation (NBO) measure (Ewing and Napoli, 2005) in developing the ‘perceived brand
orientation’ (PBO) construct in this study. However, the adaptation of NBO construct based on customer/members’ perspective is a rather complex issue because the assessment of the importance of branding in an organisation’s strategy is typically assessed by top managers (Urde, 1999). Following the complexities involved in the adaptation of existing brand orientation scale, the present author self-developed the PBO construct which reflects the three *brand orientation themes* used by Ewing and Napoli (2005) in their development of the NBO scale. The refined 6-items PBO constructs in this study reflect the three themes of ‘uniqueness’, ‘reputation’, and ‘orchestration’.

**Perceived Benefits.** Whereas numerous work has been done in the conceptualization of perceived benefits construct in marketing literature (Forsythe et al., 2006, Kinard and Capella, 2006, Shoham, 2000), the research context of the present study necessitates the adoption of scales relevant to church-related benefits. This research utilised Emmons *et al.* (1998) instruments of personal goals, which have been extensively used in literature pertaining to the psychology of religion (Hill and Hood, 1999, Zinnbauer et al., 1999), to measure ‘spiritual’ and ‘social’ benefits. The scales were designed to examine the extent to which respondents believe that church participation can help them to achieve relevant spiritual and social benefits.

**Church participation.** For the purpose of this research, ‘church participation’ is defined as the extent to which respondents participate in programs offered by the church including worship services, fundraising events, special events with guest speakers, and social activities. We developed the scales in this section based on a summary of the ‘most common’ type of activities shared by the thirteen churches participating in this study.

**The Measurement Model**

The measurement model was tested using the incremental modification approach of Segars & Grover (1993), and Cheng (2001). The model was revised by deleting some indicators with low factor loadings, squared multiple correlations, and those that attempted to load on more than one dimension as reflected by high modification indexes (Cheng, 2001). The deletion of the variables was also done one by one as the elimination of one variable in the model may concurrently affect other parts of the model (Kline, 2005). Both the measurement and structural models were analysed through the application of AMOS 17. The AVE for each construct is greater than all related correlations, thus indicating discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The final measurement model demonstrated good fit with the data as reflected in the fit indices including $\chi^2 (100) = 230.874 \ (p = .000)$, NC (2.309), RMSEA (.062), TLI (.944), CFI (.953), and NFI (.921).

**Analysis of the Structural Model**

A structural model was employed to examine the relevant hypotheses under examination. In this structural model, perceived spiritual benefits (PBSPI) and perceived social benefits (PBSOC) were incorporated as the mediating variables. An observation of the GOF indices suggests that the structural model is statistically significant and possesses construct validity. Although the Chi-Square was found to be statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 199.734, \ df=99, \ p=.00$), the Normed Chi-Square (2.018) is within the recommended range. Other indicators including RMSEA (0.054), GFI (.936), AGFI (.912), TLI (.957), NFI (.932), and CFI (.964) are all above the recommended fit level.
PBO was found to have a statistically significant relationship with church participation ($\beta = .25, p < .01$). Thus, support was found for the first hypothesis. Further, PBO was found to have a significant relationship with both perceived spiritual benefits ($\beta = .32, p < .01$) and perceived social benefits ($\beta = .37, p < .01$). Thus, support was found for H2a and H2b respectively.

**Discussion**

This study contributes to a better understanding of the role of brand orientation in affecting church participation by analysing the relationship between ‘perceived brand orientation’, ‘perceived benefits’, and ‘church participation’. The topic of brand orientation is still at its infancy and thus no studies have been done to examine the construct from the perspective of the customers/organisational members (O’Cass and Ngo, 2009). This study attempts to fill this gap by assessing the brand orientation construct from the perspective of the customers/members (‘perceived brand orientation’) and examine its impact on perceived benefits and church participation.

First, it was found that PBO is positively associated with ‘church participation’. This implies that church members’ positive evaluation of the church’s brand leads to higher extent of participation in church-related activities, thereby providing an empirical support on the link between church branding and church participation as proposed in the literature (Stevens et al., 2005, Shawchuck et al., 1992). Second, the analysis found a significant association between PBO and ‘perceived benefits’. This implies that the more positive image people have about a particular church, the more they perceive church participation as relevant in delivering significant spiritual and social benefits in life. This is consistent with the ‘insurance’ proposition of Balmer and Gray (2003), which suggests that positive organisation image is an insurance against poor performance as well as a guarantee of quality.

The positive association between ‘perceived brand orientation’, ‘perceived benefits’, and ‘church participation’ found in the present study further highlights the importance of customer perception of the brand orientation level of an organisation. Managers of non-profit organisations should ensure that their organisations are perceived by their members as performing well in the respective dimensions of brand orientation, as this is likely to lead to: (i) positive perception of the benefits associated with an organisation’s offering, and (ii) active participation in the programs/activities offered by the organisation. There is a need to establish distinctive characteristics which makes the church stands out from other churches. The church also needs to maintain a good reputation among the community. Any negative publicity associated with the church may have adverse effects on church participation. Finally, the ‘orchestration’ dimension requires church leaders to implement effective integrated marketing activities that deliver consistent brand messages to internal and external stakeholders of the church.

With the declining rate of church attendance in Australia over the past 10 years (NCLS, 2001), this study has provided significant theoretical and managerial implications for non-profit researchers and church leaders alike in terms of enhancing the participation of customers/members in non-profit environment. Church leaders should strive to engage in brand-oriented activities to develop a strong church brand with relevant appeals to its existing and prospective target audience. Positive evaluation of the church’s brand orientation as well as spiritual and social benefits associated with the church’s programs is likely to lead to active participation in church activities.
References


