

Perceptions of non-profit brands through the lens of PCP

Introduction

The importance of branding to organisations is well established. There are very few (if any) sectors and areas that have not embraced the concept of branding ranging from personal brands of celebrities, businesses, non-profit organisations to political parties. Consumer perception of brands is a determinant of their willingness to engage in a relationship with an organisation (Fournier, 1998). This means that building a strong perception is a fundamental activity for many organisations including those in the non-profit sector.

Similar to that of commercial brands, charity brands have a heritage dating back to the early 19th century with the first known charity brands such as RSPCA and Battersea Dogs Home being in existence since 1822 and 1860 respectively (Haigh & Gilbert, 2005). The way in which non-profit organisations invest in and leverage their brands vary greatly (Haigh & Gilbert, 2005). Given that the importance of the brand and its perceptions to all organisations including those in the charitable sector are undisputable, it is important that organisations understand how their brands are perceived and what impact this has on their stakeholders.

This paper investigates the brand perceptions of service charities (non-profit organisations established to provide services for the UK armed forces community) from the perspective of its service users. This is an interesting context to investigate. The public support and awareness of the armed forces have increased considerably in the UK mainly due to various recent conflicts that the country has been engaged in (Ashcroft, 2012). This has extended to the support of the multitude of service charities that play a key role in the provision of health and welfare services to the UK armed forces community (Gribble, et al., 2014). The use of branding and people's perceptions of brands will be a key element in attracting attention in this crowded sector.

Theoretical Framework

Brand perceptions and all its related concepts have been well researched over the years. Keller (1993; 1998) explained consumers' perceptions of brands as the knowledge they have of the brand which incorporates brand awareness and brand image. This implies that brand perception is a multi-dimensional concept. Many researchers have followed this approach and studied the various dimensions of the brand including brand image, brand attributes, brand recognition, brand associations, brand personality, brand attitudes, and brand equity to name a few (e.g. Gardner & Levy, 1955; Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Keller 1993; Aaker D. A., 1996; Aaker J. L., 1997). However, other researchers have argued that the multi-dimensionality of the branding concept is not always prevalent. For instance, Low & Lamb (2000) found that only well known brands exhibit multi-dimensional brand associations whereas this is not always the case for less well known brands.

In view of this discourse in branding and its various complicated conceptions, Echtner & Ritchie (2003) argued for a more holistic approach to understanding and studying the brand concept. In line with this, this research adopts Dichter's (1985) conception of perception

where it is not individual traits or qualities but rather the total impression a brand makes on the minds of others.

Research on understanding the various facets of branding has primarily relied on cognitive theories on memory structure and attitude formation. Some of these cognitive theories include: associative network memory model (Keller, 1993), attitude accessibility theory (Fazio, 1986); and information integration theory (Anderson, 1981). All of the theories used in research to date are well established in various contexts. However, there is a need for a more holistic approach to understand branding and its many facets. As Aaker (1996) stated, one key criteria for the approach of studying branding is that it is able to include the complete scope including awareness, perception, loyalty and associations. This research uses Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) as it provides this comprehensive and rounded approach .

PCP was introduced by George Kelly to provide a more holistic theory to study people (Carroll & Carroll, 1981). Kelly (1963) described his theory as ‘a perceptual psychology without passivity’. The underlining principle on which PCP is based on is ‘constructs’ that people form about various aspects and events in their lives. The theory does not make assertions on how these constructs are formed and what influenced the formation of the constructs. In the context of branding, the constructs about a given brand could have been influenced by personal experience, marketing messages, hearing other people’s opinions or a combination of these and other factors. This idea of understanding the brand ‘constructs’ that people hold also aligns with Keller’s (1993) argument that marketers should take a broad view of marketing activities and their impact on the brand. This entails understanding the value of the brand and its associated concepts from the perspective of the customer/client or in the case of non-profit organisations, its key stakeholders. PCP also has similarities with information integration theory where the theory stated that people modify and change their perceptions as they receive new information or stimulus (Anderson, 1981). In PCP this is termed ‘constructive alternativism’ where all knowledge and information are subject to alternative constructions and all present perceptions held by individuals are open to question and reconstruction (Winter, 1992).

The use of PCP to understand brand perceptions has two advantages. It fits in well with existing and established theories and their viewpoints whilst at the same time overcoming the complexity of dimensionalities to provide a holistic perspective.

Methodology

An interpretive discovery approach was utilised in this research in line with the suggestions of Echtner & Ritchie (2003) and Venable et al., (2003). Even though there are a multitude of scales and items to measure brand perceptions and related concepts, these traditionally paper-and-pencil based techniques have a distinct disadvantage. As Low & Lamb (2000) point out, there is a possibility of respondents forming brand associations that are not within their conceptions when using pre-determined constructs. In order to overcome this concern, various researchers have used a qualitative approach to identify context specific brand perception and related elements and using these as a basis for developing scales (Pearce, 1982; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). This research adopted this approach and the first stage of this process of understanding context specific brand perceptions consisted of focus groups.

Three focus groups were conducted with officer ranked armed services personnel across all the three major services (Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force). The purpose here was to

understand the perceptions of service charity brands from the perspective of service users. Officers are recognised as a cohort with specific barriers to seeking help and assistance (Yassim, 2015) and therefore a more challenging segment to reach. Hence, understanding their perceptions of service charity brands would provide an interesting insight.

The focus groups were carried out at military bases and lasted two hours each. Each group was asked to name service charities that they are familiar with at the start of the session. Any key service charities that were not mentioned by the participants were then introduced to the group. Following from this, a repertory grid technique was used to understand the perception of the commonly identified brands.

In order to understand people's personal constructs, PCP developed the Repertory Grid. The effectiveness of the Repertory Grid as a research tool in an individual interview context is well established (e.g. Botterill & Crompton, 1996; Schoenfelder & Harris, 20014; Rogers & Ryals, 2007). Furthermore, researchers have also found the repertory grid elicitation method to be effective during focus groups in eliciting more richer data (Deliza, 1999; Hogan & Hornecker, 2013). Triadic elicitation was used in this research with service charity brands used as elements. Participants were asked to compare three service charity brands at a time. They were then asked to group brands that are similar in some way and thereby different from the other. This grouping was carried out individually by participants and then was shared with the group followed by a group discussion. The data from the focus groups along with the Repertory Grid constructs were content analysed.

Findings

The elements used in elicitation of constructs were the service charity brand names. The groups were asked to recall the service charities that they are aware of or are familiar with. Across all three groups, the primary service charities that were mentioned were: The Royal British Legion, SSAFA, Help for Heroes and Combat Stress. In addition to these, each service also mentioned the charities that are service specific such as Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund and Sandhurst Trust.

During the construct elicitation process and related discussions, it was evident that there was a clear distinction between awareness and understanding. Although the participants were aware of some of the major service charities by name, they had very limited understanding of the specific activities of these charities. This also meant that they perceived these various brands as being very similar. Given, this the Repertory Grid was very effective in getting participants to compare and contrast the charities and delve deeper into their differences. Even though the level of understanding of the various charities were very limited, understanding perceptions within this limited conception is still valuable. As Echtner & Ritchie (2003) explain, understanding the baseline perceptions of a brand can enable the organisation to understand the strengths, weaknesses and any inaccuracies about the brand that needs to be dealt with. This was an important perspective for the service charities as it would help them focus on brand attributes that are relevant to the service users.

The analysis of the constructs elicited showed that there are four key dimensions which participants used to differentiate between the various charity brands. These four dimensions are: Profile, Location, Range of Services, and Target/Orientation.

Profile relates to the public awareness of the related brand. Participants often grouped the brands as similar based on their perceived level of awareness amongst the general public as well as service personnel. Even though the focus group participants consisted of Officer

ranks, there were a significant number of officers who dealt with other non-officer ranked service personnel from a welfare and training perspective. This provided them an insight into the level of awareness of these charities amongst both officer and non-officer ranks.

Location in this context refers to the reach of the service charity as well as their physical bases of operation. Some charities such as The Royal British Legion was seen as being nationwide and therefore accessible by a much wider group of service users. Location also involved consideration of whether the service charity has any presence in the military bases. This could range from military based small offices to running regular awareness sessions and surgeries at the bases. Those charities that had a more national and/or military based presence were seen as being more accessible and able to build a better relationship with their users.

Range of services provided by the service charities was another key basis on which perceptions of the charity brands were formed. Some charities such as Help for Heroes were seen as providing financial help for the injured or wounded whereas SSAFA was seen as providing wide ranging help including housing, employment, and care.

Target/Orientation of the service charities is linked to the Range of Services in that it relates to the service users or beneficiaries of the charities. Combat Stress for instance was seen as only helping the service personnel whereas The Royal British Legion helps both service personnel and their dependants. Furthermore, service specific charities only benefit those who are part of the service whether it be RAF or Army or the Royal Navy. Other charities such as SSAFA and Help for Heroes were tri-service.

As well as the constructs related to the service charity brands, participants were also asked to consider their ideal charity brand and what elements or attributes the ideal brand needs to have. They were asked to think about this from the perspective of an ideal charity that they themselves would seek help from should there be a need. The analysis helped identify the key attributes as shown in Figure 1 below.

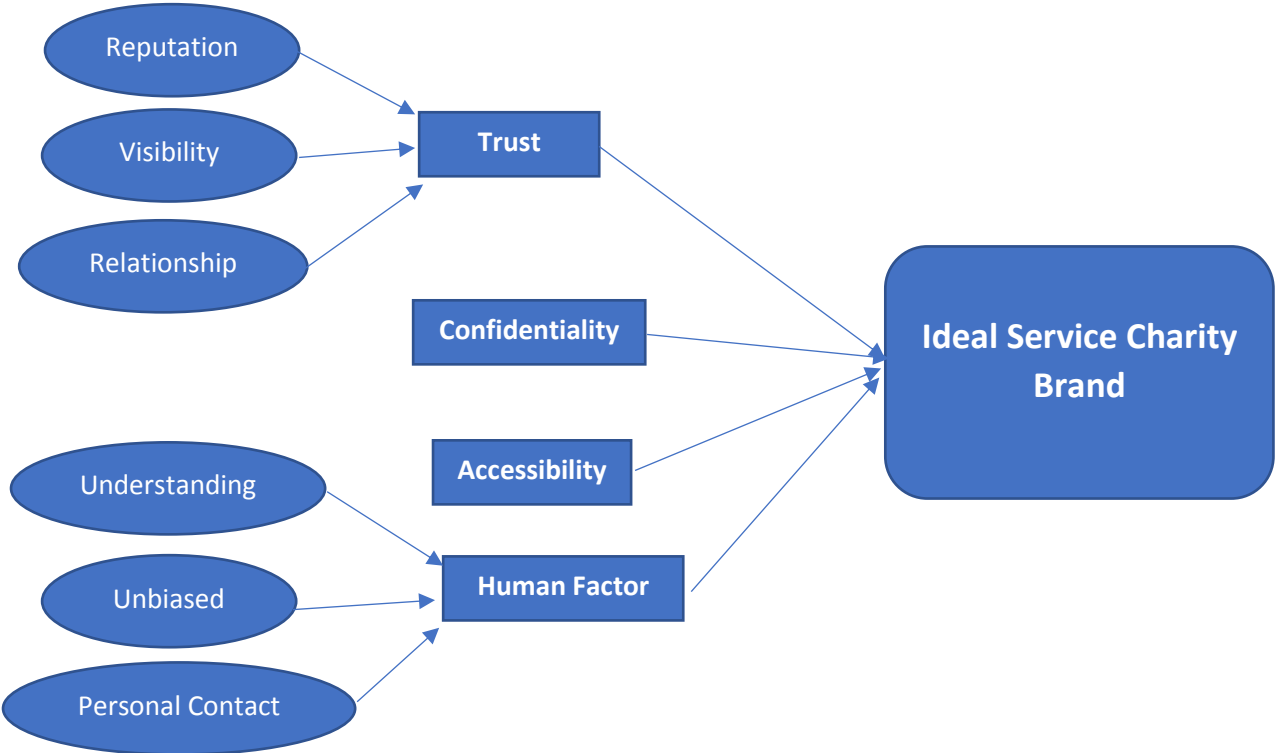


Figure 1: Brand Attributes of Service Charities

Trust was, unsurprisingly, seen as the key attribute of a service charity brand. It also comprised various dimensions. Participants felt the reputation of a charity is essential in building trust. Second hand accounts of how the service charity has helped other service users combined with media coverage of the given brand has a major influence on the brand's reputation. Visibility which relates to the level of awareness of the charity was seen as another element. As one participant explained, 'if I ever need any help, then I would first look at a charity that I have heard of before and able to recall quickly.' Participants also agreed that it is crucial for brands to start building a relationship with them over time. Regardless of when they are likely to access the service, if they felt that they have known the brand over a period of time and the brand has taken an interest in them over that time period, then they were more likely to perceive this brand in a positive light.

Human Factor was another key attribute with multiple dimensions. The perception of a charity as being unbiased was seen as important. The concept of bias here relates to the ability of the charity to be non-judgemental and treat all ranks in an equal manner. Understanding of the specific experiences and circumstances of service personnel was also key. Not having to explain to a service charity their background and the ability of the service charity to understand military life was seen as adding credibility to the brand. The ability of the service charity to provide a human contact point rather than an automated or online based assistance service was also seen as relevant as it was seen as being linked with the brand's perception of caring.

Accessibility of the brand was related to the construct of Location discussed above. The availability of charity personnel within easily accessible reach was seen as important. This was also linked to the perception that a speedy and more personalised service can be offered by those charities that are easy to contact and meet with. *Confidentiality* of service users and the brand's ability to offer this was very closely linked to the positive perception of the brand.

Implications and Future Research

The findings from this research provided insight into the brand elements that are relevant for service charities in the formation of brand perceptions by their service users. There are a multitude of service charities in the UK. And their *raison d'être* is to provide relevant services to the armed forces community. Thus, understanding how their brand is perceived by their service users and its impact on choice of charity to approach for assistance will enable them to build a stronger brand. As Low & Lamb (2000) explain, the consumers are inundated with information about various brands in any given category and they will rely on strong brands with clear and positive associations when making their decisions. The findings from this research agrees that this is also relevant in the context of service charities.

This research also highlighted the clear distinction between awareness and understanding. However, it is important to note that even with very limited understanding of what the charity is able to offer the level of awareness helped form strong brand perceptions. The level of awareness was also very closely linked with trust and service personnels' willingness to consider the charity as a potential source of assistance. This agrees with the findings of Nedungadi (1990) where the auther found that raising brand awareness increased the likelihood of the brand being part of the consumer's consideration set.

The perspective of only one sub-segment of the armed forces community, namely currently serving officers, was considered for this research. Also, the data here was limited to three focus groups. The next stage of understanding the perceptions of service charities would be to

use these findings to develop a scale to measure service charity brand perceptions. This scale needs to be tested and validated amongst a larger and more diverse sample including dependents of the service personnel.

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