

MODERATING ROLE OF INTERNAL MARKETING ON BRAND EQUITY IN A SERVICE ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The internal marketing elements for services basically consist of seven elements (product, price, place, promotion, people, processes and physical evidence). The present study includes another element, performance, so as to determine the influence of these eight elements on the brand equity as perceived by customers of car rental companies. Although car rental companies may have a strong brand position, the brand's successful equity depends on the role the employees play in delivering the service (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2012:249). This research aimed to provide guidance to car rental companies to improve their respective brand equity, enabling them to expand customer bases whilst retaining existing customers through improvement of internal marketing programmes.

Keywords: *Services organizations, internal marketing, Brand equity, and Structural equation modeling.*

Introduction:

The internal marketing mix for services basically consists of seven elements (product, price, place, promotion, people, processes and physical evidence). The present study includes another element, performance, so as to determine the influence of these eight elements on the brand equity as perceived by customers of car rental companies. Irrespective of the fact that service organisations, such as car rental companies, may have developed a well-conceived positioning for their brand, the brand's successful positioning and equity depend on the role the employees play in delivering the service (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2012:249). In order to achieve the goal of internal marketing, service organisations need to recognise that marketing strategies should not only be aimed at external customers, but should also be implemented internally and achieve better internal communication (Lindman, Pennanen, Rothenstein, Scozzi & Vincze, 2012:3). This research aimed to provide guidance to car rental companies to improve their respective brand equity, enabling them to expand customer bases whilst retaining existing customers through improvement of internal marketing programmes.

Literature Review:

The traditional marketing mix for products consists of the well-known four elements, product, price, place and promotion. A key factor distinguishing the services marketing from the marketing of physical products is the human element. The distinctive characteristics of services require the addition of three more Ps to overcome the limitations of the traditional marketing mix (Wilson et al., 2012:23). The elements of the three additional Ps of the marketing mix are:

- People – the appearance and behaviour of service personnel;
- Process – how the service is delivered, the actual procedures and flow of activities; and
- Physical evidence – everything from the appearance, design, layout of the service setting to brochures, signage and equipment.

The unique characteristics of services cause customers to search for evidence of the service in each of their interactions with the organisation. The additional elements of the service mix, namely people, process and physical evidence, provide customers with that evidence and allow them to form their own judgement (Chen, Chen & Huang, 2012:107). Since employees are a powerful element tool of customer persuasion and a major parameter affecting the customer's perception on the delivered service quality, Grove,

Fisk and John (2000) added performance of employees as another critical element to the marketing mix (Gummeson, Lusch & Vargo, 2010:13; Constantinides, 2006:421). Kotler & Keller (2009:288) stated that marketing and branding theories support the idea that there is a functional connection between the marketing of services and the equity of the brand. Establishing favourable brand equity is an important factor to ensure business success (Park, Cho & Kandampully, 2009:134). Brand equity refers to the strength of a brand's presence in the customer's mind. Equity is measured according to the different ways in which customers remember a brand, ranging from recognition (exposure to the brand) to recall (what can be recalled about the brand) to first in the mind (the brand appearing first in the mind) and finally to dominant (the only brand recalled) (Brewer & Zhao, 2010:36). Brand equity is created by increasing the familiarity of the brand through repeated exposure and strong associations with the relevant cues enabling the customer to recall the brand effectively. Brand associations are divided into three major categories, these being attributes, benefits and attitudes (Keller, 2009:139). In this study attributes refer to the trustworthiness of the vehicles; benefits refer to perceived quality, translating into the overall evaluation of the service customers receive; and attitudes refer to the customer's loyalty towards the brand (Kapferer, 2005:149).

Although most car rental companies' brands are well-known, formal research is required as it is not evident that internal marketing programmes are implemented in these companies. Furthermore, it is also not evident what the influence of internal marketing is on brand equity of car rental companies as perceived by their customers.

Problem Statement:

Although car rental companies have internal programmes, such as loyalty and other incentive programmes to motivate employees, the success of these programmes have not been researched nor linked to the internal marketing elements applicable to this study (First Car Rental, 2011; Hertz, 2011; Avis, 2009). Furthermore, despite a strong interest in internal marketing research amongst marketing researchers, little research has been conducted related to brand equity in service brands (Song et al., 2012:331). This is relevant because if all elements of the internal marketing mix do not contribute positively to the overall brand equity of car rental companies, it could receive reduced attention, which could damage the overall image of the brand of the car rental company. Additionally if certain activities demonstrate ineffectiveness, they could be altered and improved, thereby creating more competitiveness for car rental companies. Customers in a services environment become aware of the brand through their

experience during consumption of the service, which is created by employees of the organisation. This raises the question of whether the internal marketing (internal product, price, promotion, place, people, processes, physical evidence and performance) presented to employees have a positive influence on brand equity (brand recognition, trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty) as perceived by the external customers of car rental companies.

Research Objectives:

The primary research objective is to determine the perceived influence of eight internal marketing mix elements on the brand equity of selected car rental companies.

The secondary research objectives are:

- To determine whether there is a difference between the perceived influences of the eight internal marketing mix elements on brand equity of selected car rental companies.
- To determine which of the eight internal marketing mix elements have the largest influence on brand equity of selected car rental companies.

Conceptual Framework:

For the purposes of the study, empirical research was applied to measure the building blocks or concepts identified by the services marketing and branding theories. Concepts are generally accepted as bundle of meanings or characteristics associated with certain events, objects, conditions, situations and behaviours (Cooper & Schindler, 2008:39). However, a bundle of meanings does not provide a clear framework for research. Therefore, constructs are used to turn these bundles of meaning into an image or idea specifically invented for a given research and/or theory-building purpose (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:39). In this study the constructs derived from the concepts contribute to the empirical investigation of the research objectives. Research constructs are described as unobservable abstract concepts that are measured indirectly by a group of related variables. Variables are described as latent variables (independent or exogenous) and observable variables (dependent or endogenous) which are measurable elements of an object and are measured directly (Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2009:233). Therefore, the latent variables that will be measured in this study are the eight internal marketing elements, namely product, price, place, promotion, people, process, physical evidence and performance. These elements are the independent (exogenous) variables or constructs, since they predict or explain the outcome variable of interest (Hair et al., 2009:234). Brand equity can be measured as recognition of the brand and recall of the brand (Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009:55). For the purpose of this study, the dimensions of brand recall are trustworthiness of the

vehicles, overall evaluation and loyalty towards the brand. The brand recognition and brand recall are the dependent or endogenous variables or constructs as they are the variables the researcher is seeking to explain (Hair et al., 2009:234).

Research Methodology:

Research Design:

A quantitative process was used to seek data that could be expressed in numbers and statistically analysed (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:92). The research format was described as descriptive research. As recommended by Aaker, Kumar, Day and Leone (2011:345), this research included a descriptive survey design to gather the necessary data from a large sample size. As the objectives of this research were to describe a current situation, a cross-sectional format was appropriate.

Population and sample:

The target population in this study includes car rental companies. Although seven car rental companies were invited by the researcher to participate, only three agreed to participate, namely Company A, Company B and Company C. Therefore, the sampling unit for this study included customers of Company A, Company B and Company C over a period of three months, between November 2010 and February 2011. These three companies are representing car rental companies due to all three companies having more than 30 branches and fleets in excess of 6 000. Company A, Company B and Company C combined have a market share of more than 55%, thus it was believed that they were a fair representation of the car rental industry. They are also regarded as large (Company A), medium (Company B) and small (Company C) car rental companies, so all three categories were represented.

Probability sampling in the form of directly proportional stratified sampling was used in terms of selecting only customers of the three car rental companies, not including employees. The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of internal marketing on the brand equity perceived by customers, therefore, only customers were selected for the purpose of the study. In probability sampling, there is a likelihood that any given population element will be included in the sample, because the final sample elements are selected objectively by a specific process (Iacobucci & Churchill, 2010:287). Directly proportionate stratified sampling was used in the study, as the goal was to draw a probabilistic sample from a population to describe the population's characteristics or parameters, based on statistics calculated from the sample. A stratified sample divides the population in mutually exclusive and exhaustive subgroups and samples are chosen from

each of the subgroups (Churchill, Brown & Suter, 2010:340). In a directly proportionate stratified sample the population is divided into groups according to characteristics (Aaker et al., 2011:345). In this study, the subgroups were Company A, Company B and Company C customers because of the car rental company of which they are customers. The 80-20 rule was applied, as customers of the car rental companies rented vehicles regularly during the period of observation.

The sample unit that was used in the study included customers who rented cars from Company A, Company B and Company C over a period of three months, which included business and holiday months. The sampling elements were customers of Company A, Company B and Company C who rented vehicles at airports. The airports and related cities were identified as the major airports and therefore they were selected for this study. The required sample size of respondents was between 375 and 750 and the actual sample size was 581.

The customers of car rental companies would aid in measuring the perceived influence of internal marketing elements on the brand equity of the selected car rental groups.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection was conducted by means of a survey. The questionnaire included a demographic section to classify respondents, being customers. In the second section of the questionnaire, the eight internal marketing mix elements were tested based on information from the literature. The third section of the questionnaire focused on brand equity, namely brand recognition and brand recall (trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty). A five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', was used for all questions within the questionnaire (Vagias, 2006:1).

Statistical analysis procedures to process the quantitative data collected were performed in this research. The measuring instrument used and the data gathered were subjected to thorough analyses to determine the reliability and the empirical results of the hypothesized relationships among the variables investigated.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was the statistical technique used for the empirical investigation because SEMs are well recognized as the most important statistical method to evaluate a series of simultaneous hypotheses about the impacts of latent variables and manifest variables on other variables, and take the measurement errors into account (Lee, 2007:1). Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2010:634) describe SEM as a multivariate statistical technique for building and testing statistical models, sometimes called causal models. It is a hybrid technique that encompasses aspects of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), path analysis and multiple regression to

estimate a series of interrelated dependence relationships simultaneously (Hair et al., 2010:634). SEM has the ability to assess relationships comprehensively and therefore it is suited for theory testing which focuses more on a systematic and holistic view of research problems than on theory development (Hair et al., 2010:635). Furthermore, SEMs are suitable to incorporate latent variables into the analysis, and to account for measurement error in the estimation process (Cooper & Schindler, 2008:583; Lee, 2007:2)

Findings:

Descriptive statistics, namely frequency and percentage provide information on the demographics of respondents.

The majority of respondents were in the age category 56 years or older (22%; n = 122), followed by respondents between the ages 36 and 40 years (15.9%, n = 88). Only 11 (2.0%) of the respondents were between 18 and 25 years old. The majority of respondents were male (69.4%, n = 385), while females were represented by 170 (30.6%).

The majority of respondents hired vehicles most often from Company A with 225 (40.5%) respondents and Company B with 207 (37.3%) respondents. Most respondents use car rental for business travel as indicated by 343 (61.8%) respondents, while 212 (38.2%) respondents indicated that they use car rental for leisure purposes. The survey was done covering the business months, November and January, as well as December, which represents the holiday season, but still the majority of customers 316 (56.9%) travelled for business purposes.

It was assumed that business customers did not have a choice in car rental, since the company they work for normally has an agreement with a particular car rental company. Therefore, respondents were requested to indicate that if they had a choice, would they choose the same company to which the majority of respondents (80.5%, n = 447) answered yes. Only 38 (6.9%) respondents indicated that the question was not applicable.

The demographics, namely age, gender and race of respondents were cross-tabled with the internal marketing elements and the brand equity constructs. The statistical results, following a Chi Square test of significance, are listed next:

- The age of respondents had a significant influence on internal promotion, with the majority of respondents experiencing there was a lack of internal promotion ($\chi^2(182) = 216.950, p < 0.05$).
- The gender of respondents had a significant influence on internal price, with a slight majority of respondents feeling that employees paid a high price by being an employee of the car rental company ($\chi^2(27) = 43.704, p < 0.05$)

- The gender of respondents had a significant influence on internal promotion, with a slight majority of respondents feeling that the car rental company they were using had done internal promotion ($\chi^2(26) = 41.165, p < 0.05$).
- The race of respondents had a significant influence on the traditional internal marketing element product, with respondents feeling that employees were friendly and knowledgeable ($\chi^2(88) = 132.265, p < 0.05$).
- The race of respondents had a significant influence on the traditional internal marketing element price, agreeing that employees kept their promises and were accountable ($\chi^2(104) = 105.651, p < 0.05$).
- The race of respondents had a significant influence on the services internal marketing element physical evidence, agreeing that the car rental company's offices and employees conduct were professional ($\chi^2(88) = 126.771, p < 0.05$).
- The race of respondents also had a highly significant influence on the recent internal marketing element performance, agreeing that the car rental company's performance was not efficient ($\chi^2(116) = 176.488, p < 0.05$).

Structural Equation Modelling:

Hair et al. (2010:672) indicated that for a sample size larger than 250, as in the case of this study, the χ^2 normally resulted in insignificant p-values, even with a good fit. Therefore, more emphasis was placed on the other goodness-of-fit indices. Generally accepted values are as follows: Normed Chi-square (χ^2/df): < 3; RMSEA: between 0.05 and 0.08; CFI: > 0.9; TLI: > 0.9; and SRMR: < 0.05.

The exogenous variables had a goodness-of-fit, because three of the values, namely CFI, TLI and SRMR for all constructs were within the stipulated norms.

Table 1: Goodness-of-fit indices for the exogenous latent variables

Variables	$\chi^2(df)$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Product	1.877	0.043*	0.997	0.990	0.012
Price	2.125	0.048*	0.994	0.989	0.014
Promotion	1.470	0.031*	0.997	0.991	0.014
Place	3.505*	0.075	0.980	0.940	0.024
People	(7.551*)	0.122*	0.961	0.922	0.029
Process	1.971	0.047*	0.989	0.978	0.020
Physical Evidence	(5.402*)	0.100*	0.956	0.911	0.033
Performance	(5.163*)	0.106*	0.965	0.931	0.035

*Values not meeting the required minimum levels

Table 1 confirmed satisfying levels of goodness-of-fit, because three of the values, namely CFI, TLI and SRMR for all constructs were within the stipulated norms. Therefore, the RMSEA values can actually be ignored due to the sample size as indicated by Hair et al. (2010:672).

The endogenous constructs were also tested to determine their goodness-of-fit. Brand equity was broken down into brand recognition and recall, and recall consisted of trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty. The values of these constructs are displayed in Table 2.

The endogenous constructs indicated a moderate goodness-of-fit. Recognition and trustworthiness especially did not provide a good fit, but since the TLI value for both was close to 0.9, it was still acceptable to maintain the constructs for further analysis.

Table 2: Goodness-of-fit indices for endogenous latent variables

Variables	$\chi^2(df)$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Recognition	6.830*	0.110*	0.860*	0.791*	0.131*
Trustworthiness	11.903*	0.150*	0.860*	0.790*	0.186*
Overall evaluation	5.240*	0.102*	0.975	0.924	0.022
Loyalty	(7.838*)	0.129*	0.967	0.902	0.035

* Values not meeting the required minimum levels

In order to improve the goodness-of-fit of the final structural model, the researcher also examined the paths between the constructs. The paths with factors significant at the 0.05 level or less were trustworthiness on process (0.009); trustworthiness on performance (0.001); and loyalty on performance (0.006).

To improve the fitness of the model, the traditional marketing mix elements, namely product, price, promotion and place, which seemed to be insignificant, were omitted for further analysis. After omission of the traditional four marketing mix elements, the goodness-of-fit of the exogenous latent variables had clearly improved. The results can be seen from the comparative indices in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparison of goodness-of-fit indices for exogenous latent variables

Index	Results for exogenous latent variables	Refined results for exogenous latent variables
RMSEA	0.048	0.056
CFI	0.897	0.906
TLI	0.888	0.896
RMR	0.057	0.056

The indices in table 3 display an improved model fit. According to the criteria stated by Hair et al. (2010:672), the RMSEA (0.056) in the refined data was still within the parameter of the recommended < 0.07 value. The CFI and TLI improved to be closer to the recommended 0.9 level (0.096 and 0.896 respectively), and the SRMR value of 0.056 was very close to the recommended 0.05 value. The refined data was fit to the model and the results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Goodness-of-fit indices for the final SEM Model

Index	Result for SEM model
RMSEA	0.055
CFI	0.865
TLI	0.860
SRMR	0.086

The SEM results indicated a standard scaled Chi-square measure of 2877.632. The normed Chi-square (χ^2/df) for the hypothesised SEM model was 2.359. Since the normed Chi-square was within the recommended value of 3 or less as recommended by Hair et al. (2010:672), it can be concluded that the data had a reasonable fit with the model. As can be seen from the results above, the RMSEA equalling 0.055 indicated a good fit for the model as it was well within the recommended value of less than 0.07. The CFI (0.865) and TLI (0.860) were very close to the recommended 0.9 level and were regarded as indications of a satisfactory model fit. Although the SRMR was slightly above the 0.05 recommended value at 0.086, the goodness-of-fit of the model still proved to be satisfactory.

The estimated parameters of hypothesised relationships were not all positive and therefore indicated that not all independent variables had a positive influence on and a positive relationship with the dependent variables. The positive estimated parameters indicated that the customers of car rental companies regarded these factors as satisfactory when they were utilising the services of the car rental company. Table 5 indicated the hypothesised relationships that were statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance.

Table 5: Parameter estimates and p-values to Evaluate hypotheses

	Estimate	P-value
Services Ps		
Brand recognition <- - - People	-.310	0.081
Brand recognition <- - - Process	.537	0.014*
Brand recognition <- - - Physical evidence	.112	0.723
Brand recognition <- - - Performance	.120	0.556
Trustworthiness <- - - People	-.303	0.078
Trustworthiness <- - - Process	.986	0.001*
Trustworthiness <- - - Physical evidence	-.558	0.170
Trustworthiness <- - - Performance	.908	0.000
Overall evaluation <- - - People	.160	0.183
Overall evaluation <- - - Process	.398	0.033*
Overall evaluation <- - - Physical evidence	.014	0.958
Overall evaluation <- - - Performance	.291	0.026*
Loyalty <- - - People	-.397	0.082
Loyalty <- - - Process	.717	0.043*
Loyalty <- - - Physical evidence	-.064	0.897
Loyalty <- - - Performance	.829	0.001*

Findings:

The findings from the SEM analysis are described next:

- Process had a significant influence on all four dependent variables, namely brand recognition, trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty.
- Performance had a significant influence on trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty.
- Performance and trustworthiness were the second strongest relationship (estimate .908; $p < 0.05$).
- There was a strong relationship between performance and loyalty (estimate .829; $p < 0.05$).
- Physical evidence was the factor that had the smallest or lowest influence on brand recognition (estimate .112; $p \leq 0.05$) at a 0.05 level of significance.
- People (employees) had a negative influence on brand recognition, trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty.
- The empirical investigation indicated that process had a stronger influence on brand recognition, trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty than the other factors.

The fact that people (employees) had a negative influence on brand recognition, trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty was an interesting finding, since the literature states that employees played a significant role in creating a positive customer experience, especially in a services industry. This means that car rental companies have to focus more on employees to ensure that they are correctly trained and equipped to deliver a positive service experience.

Based on the findings of the research, the hypotheses were accepted.

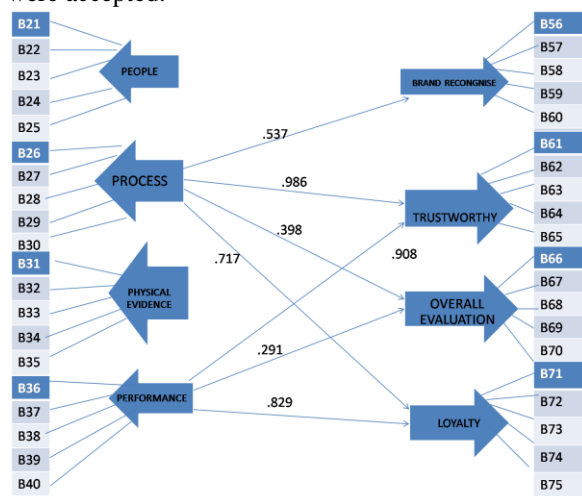


FIGURE 1: SEM MODEL

Managerial Implications for Car rental Companies:

The findings of the study indicated some areas where car rental companies could improve their internal

marketing efforts to enhance the overall brand equity of the company has experienced by customers. People displayed negative or weak positive relationships with trustworthiness, overall evaluation and loyalty. Therefore, people require special attention by car rental companies to improve the relationships and influence of brand equity constructs as perceived by customers.

The dialectic process between employees and customers further requires that managers understand the value proposition involved, and that capturing this interactive process is important for successful service definition, development and delivery. However, these interaction points with customers provide many opportunities for mistakes, and therefore, car rental companies need to pay specific attention to their front-line staff and the services they are providing (Angelis, De Lima & Siraliova, 2010:11).

Employees of car rental companies play a significant role in the performance of the organisation, and car rental companies will only be able to perform well if their internal performance is managed effectively. Employees should have the same values as the company and should be able to adopt the culture of the car rental company. Performance cannot be sustained if there is no measurement in place. Therefore, car rental companies have to measure employee performance, as well as the overall performance of the organisation.

Suggestions for Future Research:

Future research regarding the topic of the research can be extended to include employees of car rental companies and comparative studies can be conducted between employees and customers. The research can also be extended to other services industries, such as the banking or insurance industries, and comparisons between those studies and this study can be drawn. The model and measuring instrument of this study can be applied to other industries, for example, the tourism and hospital industries could perhaps benefit. It is also possible that other constructs, not included in this study, can have an influence on the brand equity of car rental companies' customers. It is observed that structural equation models, such as the one used in this study, suffer from the shortcoming that data can never confirm a model; it can only fail to disconfirm it. Thus, it is possible that other models with different constructs could possibly also fit the data collected, and therefore the internal marketing mix elements and brand equity of car rental companies' customers need further empirical testing.

Conclusion:

The model developed through the findings of this study provides car rental companies with guidance on what internal marketing elements are important for

positive brand equity as perceived by their customers. In addition to the model, the study indicated that car rental companies should implement strategies to improve their internal marketing programmes. These strategies will contribute to improvement of employees' satisfaction and subsequently customer satisfaction. Satisfied customers will remain customers of their car rental company and ultimately profits and competitiveness of the particular car rental company will prosper. Car rental companies function in a very competitive industry and therefore they should recognise the importance of the brand equity they are creating with customers. They are also participating in a global economy. Should they succeed in ensuring positive brand equity, employees, customers and car rental companies and the whole economy of South Africa will eventually benefit from their successes.

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