Employee Perceptions of Branding Materials and External Communications for a State Forestry Organization

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the Florida Forest Service (FFS) employees' perceptions of the organization's external branding materials through an online survey. Employees had positive perceptions of the mission statement, including it being accurate and differentiating FFS from other organizations. Perceptions of the new change were relatively neutral. Employees believed the public received most its information about FFS from television, workshops, websites, and print articles. Employees believed television, websites, and print articles were the most important communication channels for FFS to communicate to the public in general. Employees believed television, radio, and websites were the most important for emergency information. While employees believed FFS's external communications were important, they did not consider the communications effective or consistent. There are three recommendations for practitioners: use multiple channels of communication to reach the public, understand target demographic groups when selecting communication channels, and consistently represent the brand in external communications. There are three recommendations for research: assess the relationship between employee and public perceptions of which communications channels should be used, compare employees' perceptions of the importance of different communications channels to actual effectiveness of the different communications channels, and continue research into internal perspectives of public organizations' brands.

Keywords: communications; forestry; employees; branding; public organizations

Introduction & Literature Review

The Florida Forest Service (FFS) began in 1927 "to gather and disseminate information on forests, their care and management, to prevent and extinguish forest fires, and to enforce all laws pertaining to forests and woodlands" and was organized by the Florida Board of Forestry to protect and develop forests in Florida (Florida Forestry Association, n.d., para. 5). FFS's activities include suppression and prevention of wildfires, managing state forests, and landowner assistance (Florida

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Forest Service, n.d.). FFS changed its name from the Division of Forestry to Florida Forest Service during the summer of 2011, which led to research about the rebranding efforts, including this study.

FFS is a public organization. Public organizations face unique barriers because they are mandated through government and political processes (Moore, 1995). Public organizations have faced increasing pressures for accountability, including implementing more private sector approaches (Moore, 1995; Walsh, 1994). This includes increasingly using private-sector communication and marketing strategies, though implementation of these strategies is not well understood for public organizations (Butler & Collins, 1995; Laing, 2003; Moore, 1995; Walsh, 1994). Public organizations require public support to remain viable (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995) and effective branding is a way to build relationships between the organizations and the public (Whelan, Davies, Walsh, & Bourke, 2010).

First, branding as a framework will be discussed, including the importance of employees and external communications for branding. The section will conclude with a discussion of public organizations and how being a public organization affects branding efforts.

Branding as a Framework

"A brand is a complex, interrelated system of management decisions and consumer reactions that identifies a product (goods, services, or ideas), builds awareness of it, and creates meaning for it" (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 6). To understand branding requires a systems-based approach because, while branding consists of individual components (e.g., external communications, employee perceptions), it is how these components come together that determines what the brand becomes (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Brands are similar to icebergs, where the visible component (e.g., external communications, logos) is important but less important to the overall brand than the component below the surface (e.g., organizational culture, employees and their perceptions; de Chernatony, 2001). Two of the major areas where members of the public shape their perceptions of the brand are the external communications of the brand and the public's interactions with the organization's employees, who are an internal component of the brand. The systems-level approach to branding underpins the approach of the current study to assess internal perceptions of FFS's external brand. Past research has studied public perceptions of the FFS brand (Settle et al., 2015), but research is needed on internal perceptions to fully understand the brand.

Branding & Employees

Branding began as a concept related to selling a product or service to external stakeholders. In recent years, the internal branding of the organization directed toward members of the organization has begun receiving more attention and importance because the actions of the organization and its employees are the largest portion of the brand (Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2000; de Chernatony, 2001; Devasagayam, Buff, Aurand, & Judson, 2010; Veloutsou, 2008). Branding shapes the interactions between the employees and the organization, not just the interaction between the organization and the public (Kornberger, 2010).

Internal and external branding efforts intertwine (Roper & Davies, 2010). When measuring employees' perceptions of the brand's image (i.e., employee perceptions of public perceptions of the brand), there are direct and indirect effects on employees (Corley et al., 2000). Direct effects are the interpretations employees make based on images and messages they receive about an organization. Indirect effects are based on the feedback employees receive from the public's perception of the organization. Employees are regularly influenced by messages either received or filtered through external stakeholders (Scott & Lane, 2000). While external communications are an

important means of helping brands stand out, the public's perceptions of the organization are also affected by interactions with employees, including employees' perceptions of the organization (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2001; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010).

Because most of a brand's success stems from employees and their actions (de Chernatony, 2001), a brand needs to be successful with its employees before it can be successful with the public. Effective branding serves as a promise to the public that an organization is going meet a certain level of performance, and everyone in the organization needs to work to carry out this promise (Tybout & Calkins, 2005).

An interesting relationship between branding and external communications comes from the proliferation of media and information sources. Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård (2004) stated that because there is too much information available to the public, impressions from branding are what members of the public use to make decisions. Given that brands exist primarily as the public's perceptions (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009), external communication has a key role in branding because that is one of the primary ways the public interacts with a brand, even though the internal brand structures will still have the largest role in the success or failure of a brand (de Chernatony, 2001).

Public Organizations

Increased competition in the public sector is leading to public organizations increasingly using marketing techniques (Walsh, 1994). Public organizations depend on maintaining public value for viability. This public value stems from providing a service or product that cannot or is not reasonably met by private organizations and satisfies those who directly benefit from the service or product, as well as the general public (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995). Public value is especially important because governmental budget problems are decreasing the amount of funding available for public organization (Chernew, Baicker, & Hsu, 2010).

Branding helps foster relationships between the public and the brand, which improves the public's satisfaction with the organization (Whelan et al., 2010). A positive brand reduces uncertainty for members of the public when selecting the brand, which is advantageous in a time where competition is increasing over limited public funding (de Chernatony, 2001; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Moore, 1995; Tybout & Cornelius, 2006; Walsh, 1994). Through relationships with members of the public, employees affect public perceptions of organizations and their brands (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009).

In general, the application of private-sector strategies is not well understood for public organizations (Butler & Collins, 1995; Laing, 2003; Moore, 1995; Walsh, 1994), including a dearth of branding literature (Wæraas, 2008). Part of the reason application of private-sector strategies is not well understood is because there are factors that typically make public organizations more complicated than private organizations: Public organizations must have approval from the majority of the public, not just individuals who receive the service or product (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995); public organizations need to represent their multiple roles and identities to avoid hurting the brand's credibility, such as those represented in a mission statement (Hoggett, 2006; Wæraas, 2008, 2010), and this credibility is needed for their success (Erdam & Swait, 2004); public organizations need to avoid duplicating the roles of other public organizations to avoid negative public perception (Settle et al., 2015); and public organizations need to accurately reflect the organization and its multiple roles in external communications to avoid harming credibility (Trueman & Cornelius, 2006; Wæraas, 2008, 2010).

Purpose & Objectives

Public organizations need to effectively communicate with the public to ensure their viability (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995). While it is important to understand public perceptions of the brand's communications materials, it is also important to understand employees' perceptions of these materials because of the cyclical relationship between internal and external brand perceptions (de Chernatony, 2001; Devasagayam et al., 2010). This research addresses the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda's Research Priority 1: Public and Policy Maker Understanding of Agriculture and Natural Resources (Enns, Martin, & Spielmaker, 2016) by addressing how organizations, specifically the Florida Forest Service, can improve their brands. Previous research has shown that the public holds positive perceptions of FFS but mixed perceptions for many external branding materials (Settle et al., 2012), but research is needed to assess employees' perceptions of the brand. The purpose of this research was to assess employees' perceptions of branding materials and external communications of FFS. The objectives of this study were

1. Describe employee perceptions of FFS's name and mission statement.
2. Describe employee perceptions of FFS's external communications, including perceptions of sources of information and overall effectiveness of FFS's external communications.

Methods

An online survey was used to assess the perceptions of all full-time employees of FFS (N = 1175), which was the target population for the study. To solicit participation in the study, the director of FFS sent the employees an e-mail asking for participation. A reminder e-mail was sent four days later. The final number of respondents was 593 (50.4%), which excludes incomplete responses. Because the director of the organization sent the e-mails soliciting participation, it was not possible to ensure contacts completely adhered to the recommendations of Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009) to send successive e-mail waves until the number of new responses was no longer great enough to warrant further contacts.

Early respondents were compared to late respondents to address the potential for non-response error (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001). Operationally, early respondents were those who completed the questionnaire before the reminder e-mail was sent, and late respondents were those who completed the questionnaire after the reminder e-mail was sent. There was a statistically significant difference between early and late respondents for one item, which is noted in the results section. Results for all other questions did not differ at a statistically significant level, indicating the results can be generalized beyond the respondents to the entire organization, which included all full-time employees of the organization.

The questionnaire was researcher-developed to address the purpose and objectives of the study. Researchers familiar with survey methodology and individuals within FFS evaluated the instrument for face and content validity (i.e., the extent the items appear to measure the intended construct; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). This panel also aided the development of the questionnaire to address the branding concepts that would be appropriate for FFS. The sections of the questionnaire in this paper included employee perceptions FFS's mission statement, new name, external communications, and communication channels used for reaching the public, including which channels are used the most and which are the most important. Five-point scales were used for all questions, except for addressing where employees believed the public received most of its information about FFS, which was measured with frequency counts and percentages.

Results

Objective 1: Describe employee perceptions of the Florida Forest Service name and mission statement

Table 1 shows that employees liked the mission statement ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.0$), believed it was an accurate representation of the organization ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 1.1$), and that it helped differentiate FFS from other organizations ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.2$). Evaluations of the name change ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.5$) and the name itself were not as positive ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.4$). While employees' evaluations of the name and name change were not negative, they were not positive either.

Table 1

Employees' Evaluation of the FFS's Mission Statement and Name Change.

	M	SD
I like this mission statement.	4.5	1.0
I believe this mission statement is an accurate representation of the Florida Forest Service.	4.3	1.1
I believe this mission statement helps differentiate the Florida Forest Service from other organizations.	4.0	1.2
I believe the name Florida Forest Service is effective for communicating the duties of the division.	3.6	1.4
I believe it was a good idea to change the name from Division of Forestry to Florida Forest Service.	3.3	1.5

Note. Scale ranged from 1 = *Disagree* to 5 = *Agree*.

Objective 2: Describe employee perceptions of the Florida Forest Service's external communications

Table 2 shows employees' perceptions of where employees believe the public receives most of its information about FFS. Television (32.0%) was the medium employees believed the public received most of its information. Workshops, demonstrations, and presentations (17.1%), websites (15.9%), and print articles (15.1%) were the next tier of information sources. E-mail (0.2%), radio (1.2%), and social media (1.6%) received the fewest responses from FFS employees.

Table 2

Employees' Perceptions of Where The Public Receives Most of Its Information About FFS

	f	%
Television	185	32.0
Workshops, demonstrations, and presentations	99	17.1
Websites	92	15.9
Print Articles (newspapers, magazines)	87	15.1
Advertising, such as billboards, movie theater ads, and other signs	53	9.2
Flyers, posters, and handouts	45	7.8
Social Media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.)	9	1.6
Radio	7	1.2
E-mail	1	0.2

Table 3 shows employees' perception of the importance of different communications channels for communicating FFS's duties to the public. Television (M = 4.7, SD = 0.8), websites (M = 4.5, SD = 0.8), and print articles (M = 4.5, SD = 0.8) were perceived as the most important. Like their evaluation of being the least-used information sources, text messaging (M = 2.8, SD = 1.2), e-mail (M = 3.5, SD = 1.2), and social media (M = 3.6, SD = 1.3) were viewed as least important for conveying FFS's duties to the public.

Table 3

Employees' Perceived Importance of Communications Channels for Communicating FFS's Duties to the Public.

	M	*SD*
Television	4.7	0.8
Websites	4.5	0.8
Print Articles (newspapers, magazines)	4.5	0.8
Workshops, demonstrations, and presentations	4.3	1.0
Advertising, such as billboards, movie theater ads, and other signs	4.2	1.1
Radio	4.1	1.0
Flyers, posters, and handouts	4.0	1.0
Social Media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.)	3.6	1.3
E-mail	3.5	1.2
Text Messaging	2.8	1.2

Note. Scale ranged from 1 = *Unimportant* to 5 = *Important*.

Table 4 shows which communication channels employees believed were the most important for conveying emergency information to the public. Television (*M* = 4.9, *SD* = 0.5), radio (*M* = 4.7, *SD* = 0.7), and websites (*M* = 4.3, *SD* = 1.0) were rated the most important. The least important were text messaging (*M* = 3.3, *SD* = 1.4) and e-mail (*M* = 3.7, *SD* = 1.3). Employees' perceptions of the same communications channels reported in Table 3 differed when they were evaluating the communication channels' importance for FFS to communicate emergency information to the public reported in Table 4. The differences were the widest for radio (+0.6); text messaging (+0.5); workshops, demonstrations, and presentations (-0.5); and advertising (-0.4).

Table 4

Employees' Perceived Importance of Communications Channels for FFS to Communicate Emergency Information to the Public.

	M	*SD*
Television	4.9	0.5
Radio	4.7	0.7
Websites	4.3	1.0
Print Articles (newspapers, magazines)	4.2	1.1
Social Media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.)	3.8	1.3
Workshops, demonstrations, and presentations	3.8	1.3
Advertising, such as billboards, movie theater ads, and other signs[a]	3.8	1.3
Flyers, posters, and handouts	3.8	1.2
E-mail	3.7	1.3
Text Messaging	3.3	1.4

Note. Scale ranged from 1 = *Unimportant* to 5 = *Important*.

[a]Results for this item cannot be inferred to all employees of FFS because of a statistically significant difference result between early and late respondents.

Employees also evaluated FFS's external communications, with items for these questions ranged from 1 representing *unimportant*, *ineffective*, and *inconsistent* to 5 representing *important*, *effective*, and *consistent*. While external communications were perceived as important (*M* = 4.8, *SD* = 0.6), the effectiveness (*M* = 3.5, *SD* = 1.2) and consistency (*M* = 3.4, *SD* = 1.2) of FFS's external communications received relatively neutral evaluations.

Conclusions

Employees had a positive evaluation of the mission statement, but they held mixed perceptions of the name change. Employees' perceptions that the mission statement aided differentiation from other organizations are important given the value the public places on differentiation between public organizations (Settle et al., 2015). The name change perceptions were consistent with members of the public who held mixed perceptions of the Florida Forest Service name change (Settle et al., 2012). As for communicating FFS's purpose to the public, the employees' perceptions favored certain communication channels. Effectiveness of external communications will be affected by choosing the appropriate communication media (Weiss &

Tschirhart, 1994), which is important because members of the public have varying preferences for communication channels (Settle et al., 2012).

In making these communication channels choices, it is important to note there are sometimes conflicts in pleasing the public. For example, the public values low-cost communications for public organizations' communications (Settle et al., 2012), but past research has found that email, which most Americans use, would not be well-received by members of the public (Settle et al., 2012; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Public organizations need to walk a tightrope of employing effective, low-cost communications that the public and employees perceive positively. In FFS's case, both employees and the public did not positively perceive email, which is one of those low-cost options. This complicates communication decisions.

Compared to communicating about FFS's purpose, there were differences for communicating emergency information to the public. Employees placed more importance on channels that could be updated frequently, such as radio and television, and were less favorable toward channels that were more time intensive, such as workshops. While text-messaging was one of the higher-rated channels for emergency situations compared to other options, employees only evaluated it neutrally. This contrasts with research showing members of the public who live near forests want to receive text message alerts from FFS (Settle, 2012), which illustrates a gap between what the public and employees believe is the correct option.

These differences that are based on the type of information the organization is communicating are indicative of the larger issue of complications that occur for public organizations due to their multiple roles (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995; Wæraas, 2008, 2010). FFS must make choices on how it communicates with its stakeholders based on the type of information being communicated, which is affected by the organization's multiple roles. This same concept is important for other agricultural and natural resources public organizations, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Cooperative Extension Service. Each communication choice could be affected by the role being embodied in that moment.

The employees' evaluations of FFS's external communications were relatively neutral in terms of effectiveness and consistency, though they attributed high importance to FFS's external communications. The employees recognized the value of communicating with the public, but the employees did not believe it was being done well when the survey was administered. As the base of the organization, the employees' perceptions will affect external perceptions of the brand through their interactions with members of the public (de Chernatony, 2001; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). The potential effect on external perceptions is important because FFS is a public organization that requires public support to remain viable (Moore, 1995). Past research found the public was not well aware of FFS and its activities (Settle et al., 2012). External communications are vital for helping the public be more aware of FFS and its brand (Anschuetz, 1997; Ehrenberg et al., 1997; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Miller & Berry, 1998).

Recommendations

For Practice

While these recommendations stem from research conducted with FFS employees, the recommendations may be applicable to other settings, particularly other public organizations. The first recommendation for practitioners is to use multiple channels of communication to reach the public, depending on purpose and audience. Employees' perceptions varied based on what was being communicated, and past research has found audience members have varying preferences for

how they would like to receive information (Settle et al., 2012), which provides support for using multiple channels of communication, depending on the audience and message. Other public organizations are likely to have a similar need for diverse communication choices due to the multiple roles public organizations have and needing to communicate with different audiences (Hoggett, 2006; Wæraas, 2008, 2010). In making choices between communication channels, practitioners need to understand their target audiences. Gathering employee feedback could also be advantageous because employees can gain valuable insight through interactions with members of the public. The better option is to collect information directly from target audiences, though costs of accessing a representative sample of the audience can limit viability for this option. As it relates to teaching students who will go into public organizations, such as Extension and USDA, faculty members should stress the importance of being able to effectively use multiple channels of communication, especially in agricultural communications and Extension education. Faculty members should also stress the importance of audience analysis to assess audiences' preferred communication channels.

The second recommendation is to maintain consistent representation of the brand in all external communications (Thorson & Moore, 1996). Employees in the study believed FFS lacked this consistency and effectiveness. Inconsistency and ineffectiveness are likely to hurt brand perceptions. Students going to work for public organizations must understand the importance of building this consistent representation, which is made more difficult by public organizations' multiple roles that need to be represented to avoid hurting credibility (Hoggett, 2006; Wæraas, 2008, 2010).

A note of caution is necessary when using external communications to promote the brand of a public organization. Because public organizations use public funding, money spent to promote the brand could be perceived negatively by members of the public, but communications that accomplish the purpose of the organization, such as public service announcements, are not likely to be perceived negatively (Settle et al., 2012; Whelan et al., 2010). With this in mind, the final recommendation for brand managers of public organizations is to avoid promoting the brand for the sake of promotion because it could negatively impact brand perceptions. Instead, communication efforts should be tailored toward accomplishing the purpose of the public organization. The perceived mismanagement of public funds is particularly important in today's political climate where government finances are gaining prominence in political discourse (Chernew et al., 2010; Koba, 2012; Settle et al., 2015). As it relates to students, faculty members should convey how this era of increased scrutiny of public organizations will affect communication with audiences.

For Research

There are three recommendations for future research. The first is to quantitatively assess the similarities and differences between employee and public perceptions of which communication channels each group believes public organizations should be using. A public organization's brand depends on approval from both groups, so it is important to understand commonalities and discrepancies between the perceptions of both groups. The discrepancies could be problematic because satisfying one group could lead to dissatisfaction for the other.

The second recommendation is to the compare perceived importance of different communication channels with the actual effectiveness of those communication channels. Understanding actual effectiveness provides a fact-based reason for selecting certain communication channels over other options. This could help justify selection of communication channels and improve internal perceptions of the brand's external communications.

The third recommendation is to continue research about internal perspectives of public organizations' brands. Internal brand structures, including employee perceptions of external branding, affect public brand perceptions (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Employees help shape the external brand of the organization through their interactions with the public. Trying to understand the external brand without understanding the internal brand could be putting the proverbial cart before the horse.

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