



## Just what is it that makes today's employee branding so different, so appealing?<sup>1\*</sup>

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### review of

Brannan, M., Parsons, E., and V. Priola, Eds. (2011) *Branded Lives: The production and consumption of meaning at work*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. 201 pp. (PB, pp. 201, £26, ISBN 9781849800921)

### Introduction: 'Touching the core'

We are increasingly assailed by branding, straplines, advertising and slogans, in organizational, political, and 'everyday' life. Corporations have long projected 'visions' and 'values' to internal and external audiences, but now it seems every organization (and many individuals) are noisily broadcasting their brand narratives, clamouring for attention. Recent years have witnessed the endless 'rebranding' of political parties (see 'New' Labour), or of policy initiatives which require not just a 'launch' but continual 'relaunches' (see 'Big Society'). Companies issue punchy straplines that attempt to 'capture' the 'essence' of their values, workforce, and products. My favourite example comes from the secure money truck company Loomis – 'Managing Cash in Society' – a vision statement at once wonderfully matter-of-fact yet strangely vacuous. The production and brand name of the laptop that I wrote this review on has long since passed to China, yet the 'THINK' slogan of Thomas J. Watson's 1930s IBM lives on in the pre-installed desktop background. Public sector organizations follow the trend.

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\* With apologies to Richard Hamilton.

Universities, anxious to demonstrate their 'relevance to business', are hard at it with slogans of 'innovation, excellence, passion, and enterprise'. South Yorkshire Police muscled in with 'Dealing with the issues that matter to you most' (although that one now is sadly withdrawn it seems). Envisioned almost as personifications of the company, brands increasingly strain as they reach out ever closer to the slippery touchstone of 'authenticity'. But what purposes do these 'brand narratives' actually serve? What impacts (if any) do they have on employees who are exhorted to 'live' these brands?

Brannan et al.'s readable and timely text is a collection of chapters about employee branding – the processes whereby senior leadership attempts not only to set the public face of their organizations but also to inculcate these visions into the actions, behaviours, opinions, and 'mindsets' of staff, both inside and outside of work. Extending the frontier of marketing from sales to HRM, employee branding encroaches into the territory of recruitment and selection, in that prospective employees do not necessarily need to be encouraged to act 'on brand' as they would be expected to be 'living the brand' already as they are so 'delighted' and 'impassioned' by the company's 'authentic' and 'meaningful' products and services. The editors quote from evangelical marketing texts which claim that a brand should 'touch the core of why people work in the organization' (1) with employees only too willing to live the brand. If the 'right people' are brought 'on to the bus' then management need expend less time and effort in managing them. Employees enjoy work through their daily 'living' of a brand they 'love' and this enthusiasm rubs off on customers and service users. Effective employee branding, according to the mainstream views of marketers and branders, thus goes beyond a 'win-win' solution for management and employees; it's a 'win-win-win' solution for management, employees and consumers.

Thankfully this book probes well below the simple-minded shell of the prescriptive branding literature as it explores the multiple complexities and contradictions involved as employees interact with branding efforts. Many of the chapters explore the various ways in which staff receive, accept, translate, ignore, and often mock and reject managements' attempts to encourage them to lead branded lives. The authors draw on a familiar range of theoretical approaches, from labour process- and emotional labour-inspired critiques of branding as an attempt at managerial control, to discussions of employees as 'active constructors of brand meaning' as they reformulate the brand for the purposes of their own 'identity work' (129), or even 'appropriation work' (129).

## Overviewing the chapters: Employee branding as 'flux, dynamism and contestation'

The volume opens with a characteristically attractively-written foreword by Paul Willis, and a solid introductory chapter by the editors that is extremely helpful in making an explicit bridge between the theories and themes common to management, work and organizational studies, and the often more prescriptive literatures of marketing, branding and HRM. A wide-ranging chapter by Hugh Willmott then embeds discussions of branding into the wider context of the financialization and marketization of everyday life, exploring the reasons why organizations are now so keen to construct, protect, and project 'brand value' and 'brand equity'. He questions who is 'measuring' and rating brand value (often in league tables), and for what purposes. While branding and sloganeering can often seem ephemeral and vacuous, this chapter makes a powerful case that it's actually a very serious business for firms and investors in that brands are increasingly valuable items with huge dollar values.

The chapters from there on until the conclusion are empirical, mostly based on individual (or sometimes paired) workplace case studies, and are strongly qualitative, with most based on ethnographic observations and employee interviews. The chapters cover a range of case studies, such as a supposedly 'ethical' and self-consciously 'counter-cultural' clothes retailer, an IT company, hotels, and the iconic IKEA; the outfit formerly known as 'the furnishing store from Sweden' now marketed around the concept of 'Home'. (Social Democratic politicians in Sweden tried to create 'The Peoples' Home' with employee wage-earner funds, wage solidarity, and tax-and-spend welfare. Now it's left to corporations to create our 'homes', ideally furnished with various configurations of the BILLY 'system' of bookcases.)

As the reader moves through the case studies, it becomes increasingly clear that a central argument of the book is the idea of branding having multiple meanings, sometimes even mobilized as a kind of 'resistance', or at least appropriated for aims other than those intended by management. Themes of authenticity, self-identity, paradox, and plurality are very prominent, especially in the single case study chapters by Christopher Land and Scott Taylor on the clothes retailer 'Ethico' and Sandra Smith and Margo Buchanan-Oliver on a large financial services corporation. Many of the book's case study companies have adopted versions of the faddish 'just be yourself' or 'work as play'-style management culture (see Costea et al., 2006; Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009), with all the complex forms of employee and consumer acceptance, translation, appropriation, and rejection that these (and perhaps all) methods of attempted cultural control entail. At 'Ethico', for example, one of the founders of the

company claimed that part of the assessment of new hires included consideration of ‘what an employee could bring to the brand narrative as much as competence in performing the actual work’ (48), yet such claims typically appeared empty when the researchers spent time observing and interviewing staff at work, who often appeared ignorant of, or untouched by, the brand narrative. At the bank case study in Smith and Buchanan-Oliver’s chapter, staff taking part in the research were asked to draw diagrams depicting their own relationship to the brand which, combined with their comments from interviews and focus groups, threw up all kinds of interesting riders and complications, suggesting partial, conflictive, and often messy relationships of employee to brand (the illustrations are reproduced on pages 65-9). The case studies often also raise interesting issues of place and employee co-production and/or pro-sumption, in that employees are encouraged to ‘live the brand’ just as much outside the workplace as inside it, although the empirics reported in most of the book didn’t always demonstrate that staff actually did this.

The chapter by Jean Cushen connects branding specifically to the processes and goals of human resource managers. She describes employee branding as the HRM practice ‘de jour’ (75), in which HR departments can try to ensure ‘the ongoing sanctity of the brand’ (76) through ‘soft HRM’ practices, perhaps as part of those tempting-sounding ‘bundles’ of high-performance practices. However, interviews and observations in her case study of the Irish subsidiary of ‘Avatar Corporation’ reveal that employee branding often generated the opposite effects to those intended by management, namely worker anger, resentment, and distancing. Branding attempts rang hollow given non-stop cost-cutting, reorganizing, and increased workload. HR did its best with roadshows, pro-brand reading materials and DVDs, and what one interviewee described as ‘really cool’ training days ‘where you sat in beanbags rather than sitting in chairs and stuff like that’ (79). But to little effect. Cushen notes that this problem has consistently dogged HRM for decades: despite the best efforts of some parts of management to project ‘good’ HRM, there’s no employee buy-in because there’s nothing for them to buy into.

This kind of ‘just be yourself’ management (beanbags, pool tables, dress-down Fridays) has become very familiar at IT companies or clothes retailers whose products are often pitched at younger consumers. But in the chapter by Stephanie Russell we learn how staff at the industrial manufacturer ‘Aqua-Tilt’ are just as strongly exhorted to ‘live’ the brand. As with any discourse, however, employee branding jostles for dominance with others, such as the pervasive discourse of customer sovereignty, raising the interesting theme of management, staff, and indeed customers, rather than all ‘winning’, are instead struggling to navigate complex, choppy, intersecting cultural currents. Some staff have ‘bought

in'; one is even told by a co-worker that 'you *are* Aqua-tilt' (103), but most are keener to 'challenge and ridicule' (106) the narratives.

Similar discussions of the 'fit' between person and organization take place in Scott Hurrell and Dora Scholarios' comparison of employee recruitment and selection at the 'style' hotel known as 'Oxygen' versus the more traditional 'Fontainebleau' (chapter 7), and in Veronika Tarnovskaya's exploration of a Russian IKEA store in which two employees have quite different attitudes towards management's 'Home' theme. Throughout the book there are a range of reactions; a few staff seem to embrace the cultish branding with a wide-eyed enthusiasm that is almost scary. Others report a gentler satisfaction with their companies' image, style or working culture. Still others are cynical about, detached from, dismayed by, or oblivious to employee branding.

The penultimate empirical chapter by Melanie Simms explores the take-up of employee branding discourse in a somewhat different way, in the context of British trade union organizing. Facing decades of decline, unions face all kinds of problems 'marketing' themselves to potential members. Some of them have tried to do this by leveraging the brand and customer narratives of the companies where unions are trying to organize. Basing her chapter on a close analysis of union organizing campaigns at low-pay, service-sector case study organizations (charities, clothes retailers and casinos), Simms shows how union organizers attempt to turn brand narratives of customer care and service 'excellence' back on to managers, pressuring them to raise wages and increase staffing. If management claims the company's brand 'is all about quality service' then union members will try to hold them to these so-often empty promises. I was reminded of the fascinating paradox of the slogans 'On Strike for Boeing' or 'We Are Boeing' used by some of the striking engineers reported in David Kusnet's *Love the Work, Hate the Job* (2008: 208, 210).

Chapter eleven is also a change from much of the earlier content, with its more prescriptive-oriented discussion of the connections between employee branding and diversity. Martin Edwards and Elisabeth Kelan pose the interesting question of the extent to which companies' drives to inculcate branded workforces clash with the growing imperatives of diversity management. The editors return in chapter 11 with a useful conclusion which restates the aim of connecting critical organizational research across the boundaries of work and management studies and of HRM, marketing and consumption.

## Evaluation: Unbranding?

This is a valuable collection. The chapters repeatedly produce interesting and at times amusing counterpoints to the often crass simplicity of some of the managerial attempts at employee branding and the prescriptive texts upon which these attempts are at least partially based. It remains, however, something of a mystery why organizations persist with what are often vapid and empty attempts at culture inculcation, and why, for some employees, it even seems to work. Perhaps it means – in another contradiction – that those who ‘buy in’ were from the start the ‘right people on the bus’, already ‘living the brand’ outside of work. Does this mean that, in cases where the workforce is already successfully branded, companies are effectively preaching to the converted? In other words, does the ‘right’ kind of recruitment and selection mean that companies can stop bothering with internal employee branding?

While this book is certainly a useful theoretical and empirical discussion of the employee branding trend, there were times when I was left feeling I wanted a little more. In addition to the paradox about ‘already branded’ workers/consumers hinted at above, I was never sure about the extent to which employee branding really differs from 1980s-style culture management in the Tom Peters mould or the more recent ‘just be yourself’ neo-normative control or moves toward ‘authenticity’ as discussed by Fleming and Sturdy (2009), Spicer (2011) and others. At times I wanted just a little more convincing that employee branding really was new and unique. The introductory chapter provides a good answer to this question in the section ‘Why employee branding? Why now?’ (6-8), in which some powerful points are made about the drivers behind the growth of employee branding, relating to the shift to services work, the end of ‘jobs for life’, the rising managerial value-added inscribed into emotional and aesthetic labour and, perhaps most intriguingly, the growing realization (perhaps among management, employees, and citizen/consumers alike), of:

the context of the failure of work to provide sustaining and life-enhancing meaning and narrative [into which] processes of employee branding are making attempts to resuscitate and rejuvenate tarnished images and ideals. (8)

However, in some of the case study chapters I wasn’t always convinced that what was reported empirically could meaningfully be labelled as employee branding as if it were something distinct from prior management fads around employee commitment, management ‘visions’ and cultural control. Organizations have for some time attempted to co-opt play, humour, and authenticity at work, often with odd and sometimes self-defeating results (Costea, 2006; Thomas and Al-Maskati, 1997). Quests for ‘authenticity’ and meaning in products and in work go back even further. The management ‘fads and fashions’ literature suggests

that there is nothing genuinely new under the sun, and employee branding is thus vulnerable to the charge of being empty and worthless, just like many other forms of branding, marketing and advertising, and indeed many of the acts of pro/sumption more generally. This could mean, perhaps, that the concept of employee branding may turn out to be fleeting, and will proceed through the familiar 'life cycle' of fads (Birnbau, 2001: 125-142), merging with other concepts, going through reboots and updates, before finally being 'revealed' to have been 'a failure' and is superseded by the next managerial concept that promises to 'move beyond' the 'limitations' of employee branding. Will it end up on the ashpile of concepts, like POSDCORB or the Planning Programming Budgeting System? Could employee branding turn out to be not 'so different, so appealing' to management, after all?

Of course, none of this means that we should not critically explore employee branding. But this book did leave me wondering that if employee branding is so often manifested so weakly and problematically in workplaces (194), then perhaps many will regard it as little more than a fad (indeed the editors suggest that some analysts do indeed look upon it this way (3)). If employee branding is destined to live out life as a fad then does that mean critical study of it is also necessarily faddish – perhaps even a 'brand' of sorts itself (with a life cycle, unclear boundaries with other concepts, and its effects exaggerated)? But would it matter if it did? There will always be a 'Fad Residual' (Birnbau, 2001: 196-213). Just as concepts are never fully new, they also never fully die. Instead, they persist somehow, like nostalgic YouTube clips of retired sport stars or children's cartoons, or some non-updated lecture slides (perhaps containing factual inaccuracies) forever domained on long-forgotten pages of a customizable Virtual Learning Environment.

These misgivings are minor. The editors are clearly well aware of this line of argument, and do provide a useful justification for their use of, and critique of, the managerial concept of employee branding. Just because employee branding may be faddish and its projection sometimes weak, it does not make it any less real or any less worthy of study. All of the chapters are well-written and engaging, and the volume is likely to be very useful for those researching and teaching across the fields of organizational behaviour, sociology of work, HRM and marketing. I found that the 2011 hardback edition that I received was at times let down by a few presentation errors, such as typos and missing references. This was rather a shame. On the plus side it is now available in paperback, so it has the potential to reach the large readership that it deserves. The attractive cover design is reminiscent of the mock-Soviet images one often finds in the culture-

jamming *Adbusters* magazine<sup>1</sup>, suggesting a sinister, totalitarian, and deeply contradictory edge to branding and co-production. Having read and enjoyed this book I am now more eager than ever to 'unbrand' myself. Now how do I change the 'desktop background' on Windows 7, I wonder?

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1 [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)