

Strengthening internal brand equity with brand ambassador programs: development and testing of a success factor model

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Abstract Particular in service and b-to-b-sectors, employees' brand commitment is a prerequisite for building a strong brand. While many areas of interest within the field of internal branding have been tested by empirical studies, knowledge of internally oriented brand ambassador programs (BAPs) is predominately anecdotal. The aim of this article is to identify BAPs' success factors by first defining the corresponding term, followed by a BAP framework based on the literature, using 25 success factors in six categories. A longitudinal case study from the service industry tested the practical application of the framework, while the results of the case study were used to adapt the model. The findings show that a BAP is not an isolated instrument of internal brand management, but that its impact depends on important background factors such as brand orientation, brand management and C-level support. Overall, the updated BAP success factor model contains 31 factors. The research supports the planning and implementation of BAPs, as well as the monitoring of ongoing and the reflection of completed BAPs.

Keywords Brand ambassador · Case study research · Internal branding · Brand orientation · Success factors

Introduction

Internal branding is a relatively new term, which was first used in 1999 (Keller 1999; Thomson et al. 1999), followed by numerous books and articles that have been published since then. The increasing relevance of the internal anchorage of the brand is particularly reasoned by broadening the brand concept to services, b-to-b and non-profit markets, which are dominated by corporate brands. These markets are characterized by a lower relevance of mass communication and packaging and a higher relevance of face-to-face communication and personal interaction. Therefore, company employees are pivotal brand touch points and fundamental drivers of brand equity, while they are also positive brand communicators.

Much academic research has tested the link between internal brand anchorage and external brand performance (Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010; Burmann et al. 2009a; Henkel et al. 2007), while most studies have supported the positive impact of the former on the latter; hence, the question of how management can increase internal brand anchorage, has gained importance. Leadership, communication and human resource management were identified as potential areas of interest (Burmman and Zeplin 2005). While leadership (Morhart et al. 2009; Vallaster and de Chernatony 2006; Dunn and Davis 2004) and communication (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998; Wentzel et al. 2010) were tested by empirical studies, scientific knowledge of the impact of HR activities on brand anchorage has received less attention amongst marketing scholars. Therefore, knowledge about brand ambassador programs (BAPs) is predominately anecdotal (Causon 2004; Rehmet and Dinnie 2013; Koch 2014).

The aim of this article was to identify BAPs' success factors by first defining the corresponding term, followed

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by a BAP framework based on the literature that was reviewed. A longitudinal case study about an insurance company that we for reasons of anonymity called BetterLife tested the practical application of the framework, while the results of the case study were used to adapt the model.

Brand ambassador programs (BAPs)

The term brand ambassador (BA) is not well defined in the literature. For example, Upshaw and Taylor (2000) mention BAs in their framework without any further description. Different meanings of the term BA or synonyms such as brand evangelist (Doss 2014; Doss and Carstens 2014) and brand champion (Causon 2004; King et al. 2013; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos 2014; Merrilees 2016) increase the ambiguity.

The term “ambassador” is a metaphor, which was borrowed from the political world. An ambassador is a person who does or says anything in another’s name (Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster 2008) and, therefore, a BA can be described as a person who acts in the name of a brand. Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster (2008) identify three main interpretations of the term BA: customers (e.g. members of a brand community); celebrities (e.g. testimonial communication); and employees (e.g. sales people). The employee perspective can be classified as both external and internal perspectives. The external perspective involves employees delivering the brand promise via interactions with stakeholder groups. The internal perspective assigns to the BA a specific role within the context of internal branding; hence, the BA receives a specific mission to act on behalf of the brand (Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster 2008). This mission includes: authentic and trustworthy communication of brand-related information; sharing best practices and brand-related information to all employees; communicating feedback from employees to the brand management team; and developing recommendations to improve the brand (Braun et al. 2013; Ind 2007).

A brand ambassador program (BAP) or network (Anderson and Ekman 2009) is a planned program which selects and manages a group of BAs with means to anchor the brand inside the company. Hence, a BAP is characterized by the following attributes:

- Goal-oriented: the BAP should increase internal brand equity (brand knowledge, brand commitment and brand behaviour of employees);
- Planned program: the BAP should be initiated and managed and is characterized by explicit organizational settings (structure and process); and

- BAs network: the BAP is based on several linked BAs at different levels of the hierarchy, departments and locations within the company.

State of research and BAP framework

Review of BAP-specific literature

Few publications have explicitly discussed BAPs. From a practitioner’s viewpoint, Ind (2007) describes the functions and characteristics of “good” BAs, as well as a BAP’s success factors. Causon (2004) presents a project of internal branding for a specific company. One major building block of this project was the appointment of 50 BAs from all levels across the organization. Davis and Dunn (2002) discuss structured brand assimilation programs, and an important idea from this is the phase-oriented view of BAPs: they differentiated between “Hearing it”, “Believing it” and “Living it”. Furthermore, they recommend segmenting employees regarding their “closeness” to customers, as well as their attitudes and motivations.

Little empirical research has been conducted on BAPs. An intensive database search identified a total of only two research papers, which deal with the topic. Both use qualitative approaches and analyse BAPs in the context of place branding. Anderson and Ekman (2009) analysed the implementation of BAPs in 23 different cities, regions and countries. Firstly, they identified that BAPs fulfil an effective communication role by word-of-mouth, as well as by their expertise and creativity. Secondly, participation in a BAP as a BA increases citizens’ pride and commitment. First-hand information, quick updates, the opportunity of being involved in the marketing of the place and the opportunity of attending meetings and events were the most important motives for BAs. Thirdly, BAP could also create undesirable effects such as high costs and citizens’ negative attitudes, which are not selected as BAs for the BAP. Fourthly, the research revealed the pivotal role of the coordinator. Potential success factors include formulation of a clear purpose, support from top leadership and empowering the coordinator, as well as the coordinator’s skills (networking competency, place branding knowledge).

Rehmet and Dinnie (2013) explored the motivations of ten BAs who participated in a city branding campaign. The researchers found that the BAs’ benefit-driven motivation is more relevant than altruistic motivation. Additionally, the interviewed BAs fulfilled more the role of an information receiver than the role of an active message sender in their own networks. Hence, the two researchers



recommended more interactions with the BAs in order to increase benefits for the single BA.

General theoretical foundations

Three general research fields were identified, which are required for the development of the BAP framework and were divided into three levels, namely the macrolevel, which deals with brand orientation as a BAP background factor, the mesolevel, which delivers information about the superordinate field of internal brand management and the more general topic of change management, and the microlevel, which covers the functions, roles and competences of the person who acts as BA.

Macrolevel: brand orientation

The concept of brand orientation as an inside-out approach is a competing strategic orientation for the classical market orientation (Urde et al. 2013). Specifically, “brand orientation is an approach in which the process of the organization revolves around the creation, development and protection of brand identity in an ongoing interaction with target customers with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantages in the form of brands” (Urde 1999, p. 119). This relatively new concept is characterized by focussing on brands as resources and a strategic platform (Urde 1994, 1999). Baumgarth (2009, 2010; similar: Schmidt et al. 2015) broadens this view and interprets brand orientation as a specification of corporate culture. A brand-oriented company can be described by its brand-driven values, norms, symbols and behaviours. Conceptual (Hankinson 2001) as well as empirical research (Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010) shows the positive impact of brand orientation on the employee’s involvement and internal brand equity.

Mesolevel: internal brand and change management

A BAP can be interpreted as a specific type of change management project and as an instrument of internal brand management. On a strategic level, change management research pinpoints the relevance of different phases of change management. On the basis of the three classical phases of unfreezing, movement and refreezing (Lewin 1951), authors have developed phase models of change (Beverland and Lindgreen 2007; Kotter 1996). Internal brand management literature also recommends a phase-oriented approach (Davis and Dunn 2002). One major challenge of change management projects, as well as internal brand management, is overcoming resistance to change (Piderit 2000; Strebel 1996), which can be divided into personal (anxiety, low motivation, missing trust) and

organizational levels (political and cultural resistance). The literature offers several strategies and tactics to overcome these barriers (Cummings and Worley 2008), amongst them empathy, support, communication and participation. A prerequisite of change or the internal anchorage of the brand is basic acceptance and understanding of the brand. Xiong et al. (2013) identify employee perceived brand knowledge, brand importance and brand role relevance as key antecedents of internal brand commitment and equity.

On a more tactical level, both literature streams offer catalogues of instruments (Burmam and Zeplin 2005; Burmann et al. 2009b) and in-depth analysis of single tools. The most important instruments are: internal and external communication (Gilly and Wolfenbarger 1998; Swap et al. 2001; Wolfenbarger Celsi and Gilly 2010); HR management (Aurand et al. 2005; Punjaisri and Wilson 2007); leadership (Henkel et al. 2007; Morhart et al. 2009; Valaster and de Chernatony 2006); internal brand communities (Devasagayam et al. 2010; Saleem and Iglesias 2016); and artefacts such as brand books and corporate design guidelines (Henkel et al. 2007). Since a BAP can integrate all instruments, the literature on tactical tools of internal brand management offers insight into potential success factors.

Considering the outcome of internal branding, the literature offers different models and categorizations: single performance measurements such as brand commitment (King and Grace 2012) and brand identification (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos 2014); and summary approaches such as the buy-in-framework (Thomson et al. 1999) and internal brand equity (Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010). Correspondingly, the goal of a BAP is to increase those measures.

Microlevel: WoM, opinion leader, change agent and brand evangelist

The microlevel encompasses personal communication and the person who serves as a BA. Different research streams such as word-of-mouth communication (Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Richins and Root-Shaffer 1988), opinion leaders (Rogers 2003; Valente and Davis 1999), change agents (Buchanan and Badham 1999) and brand evangelists or fans (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004) confirm the superiority of personal communication with peers in comparison with top-down communication from leaders to the workforce, or the use of medial communication. These findings are motivation for the implementation of a BAP. For deduction of the BAP framework, it is more relevant that this research field analyses the attributes (competences, motives) of a powerful BA, which is relevant for the general selection of BAs. Important attributes are: (1) brand identification, motivation,



commitment and “buy-in” (Becerra and Badrinarayanan 2013; de Matos and Rossi 2008; Rehmet and Dinnie 2013; Thomson et al. 1999); (2) extraversion and openness (Doss and Carstens 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004); (3) sociability and good at involving others (Doss 2014); and (4) self-enhancement (Sundaram et al. 1998).

Finally, this research field mentions the relevance of the “right” method to identify BAs and the necessity for training and support (Cummings and Worley 2008; Valente and Pumpuang 2007).

Preliminary BAP success factor model

In order to structure the potential success factors of BAPs, a framework was developed (see Fig. 1) that, based on the BAP-specific literature (“Review of BAP-specific literature” section) and the general theoretical foundations (“General theoretical foundations” section), features seven elements (elements A to G).

Element A covers all background factors such as corporate culture, C-level and brand management. These factors have an indirect and supporting impact on the success of the BAP. The elements B-D are the BAP characteristics. Element B pinpoints the role of the BAP coordinator. Element C describes the design of the BAP. Element D covers the traits and tasks of the BA. Element E incorporates the target groups of the BAP, middle management, as well as the complete workforce. Element F emphasizes that a BAP is a dynamic process with different

phases. Finally, element G represents the outcome of a BAP and, therefore, is not a potential success factor. Potential measurements could be satisfaction with the BAP (top management), as well as the final performance (increase of internal brand equity).

On the basis of this framework and the mentioned literature, Table 1 summarizes a list of 25 potential success factors.

Life insurance company “BetterLife”

Methodological approach

The research goal sought to evaluate, generalize and possibly improve the preliminary BAP success factor model and to develop a corresponding model that could serve as a point of reference for the future design of such programs in practice. It was decided to use case study research. The study relied on a single object of analysis, which should serve as a critical case to determine whether the propositions the preliminary BAP framework were correct, or whether alternative explanations could make more sense (Yin 2014). This implies that the research focused on implementation of a BAP in one single company, which, for reasons of anonymity, will be called BetterLife. BetterLife was chosen because the researchers had direct access to its management, knew the company and its culture and hence had useful insider information, which could

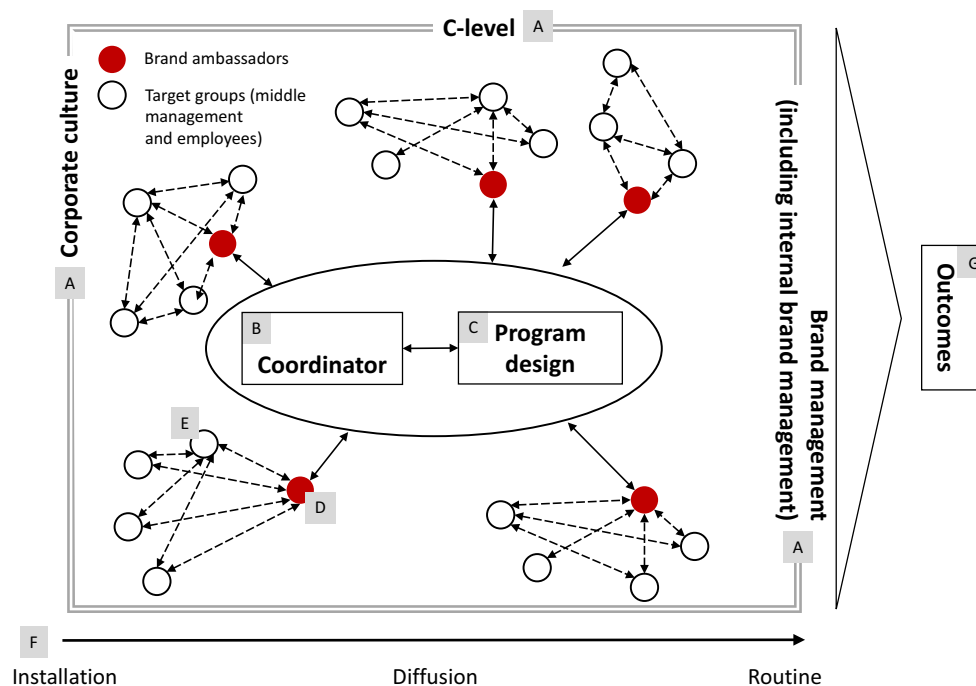


Fig. 1 BAP framework



Table 1 Potential success factors of BAP

Potential success factor	Explanation	Theoretical foundation
A. Background factors		
Corporate culture	A brand-oriented corporate culture supports the acceptance of the brand concept in the whole company and increases the internal support of the BAP by top- and middle management	Macrolevel*
Brand management	Internal, as well as external brand management supports the brand orientation indirectly and the BAP directly	Causon (2004) and mesolevel*
C-level	The C-level is responsible for the support of the BAP coordinator and the BAP's power and resources. Furthermore, charismatic leadership could increase the brand orientation, and hence acceptance and enthusiasm for the BAP	Causon (2004), Ind (2007) and mesolevel*
B. Coordinator		
Expertise in brand management and brand knowledge	The coordinator should be equipped with profound expertise in strategies and techniques of brand management, as well as brand values	Anderson and Ekman (2009)
Internal power and network capabilities	The coordinator is in need of a high level of internal (formal or informal) power and capabilities to build and maintain internal networks	Anderson and Ekman (2009)
C. Program design		
Controlling	A BAP should formulate clear and measureable goals. Also, monitoring these goals at different stages of the BAP could be an important building block	Anderson and Ekman (2009)
Resources	A BAP should be supported by an adequate and explicit formulated budget	Causon (2004) and Ind (2007)
Selection of BA	The BA should be selected by a deliberate process, based on explicit requirements and not by chance	Microlevel*
Identification and removal of resistances	At the beginning and throughout the whole BAP, identification and removal of organizational and personal resistances are pivotal	Mesolevel*
Enduring motivation of the BA	During the whole BAP, the BA's motivation should be high because of communication and pride	Anderson and Ekman (2009) and Rehmert and Dinnie (2013)
Training and support of the BA	The BA should be trained and supported at the beginning and throughout the BAP	Microlevel*
Interaction with the BA	In order to maintain motivation and to use critical feedback as an instrument in order to improve the BAP, a vertical, as well as a horizontal interaction, is necessary	Rehmert and Dinnie (2013)
Symbols and artefacts	Artefacts such as badges, certificates and brand books communicate the brand relevance on a symbolic level, as well as brand meaning and importance of the BA	Mesolevel*
D. Brand ambassadors		
Credibility within the organization	BAs should have high credibility amongst their own networks	Causon (2004) and Ind (2007)
Initiative and creativity	BAs should not only be senders of brand information, but should also be creative and proactive shapers of the BAP and brand management	Anderson and Ekman (2009) and Ind (2007)
Motivation of others	BAs should have skills to involve and motivate their peers	Ind (2007) and microlevel*
Deep understanding of the brand	BAs need a deep understanding of brand positioning and brand values	Anderson and Ekman (2009) and Ind (2007)
Brand identification	BAs should voluntarily identify with the brand	Microlevel*
Extraversion and openness	BAs should be extroverts	Microlevel*
E. Target groups		
Segmentation	The target groups should be segmented in accordance with closeness to the customer. A BAP should focus on employees having direct customer contact	Davis and Dunn (2002)
Participation	Communication with target groups should not only be a one-direction approach, but a two-way and participative communication approach	Mesolevel*
Brand knowledge	The target groups should have a basic understanding of brand management and the brand's values	Mesolevel*
Brand relevance		Mesolevel*



Table 1 continued

Potential success factor	Explanation	Theoretical foundation
	The target groups should recognize the relevance of the brand for the company's success	
Brand role relevance	The target groups should recognize the role of all employees and their own role in the brand's success	Mesolevel*
F. Time		
Phase orientation	A BAP should be organized in different stages because the number of BAs, knowledge, motivation, and resistances change	Causon (2004), Davis and Dunn (2002) and mesolevel*

* Macro-, meso- and microlevel and corresponding literature are discussed in “[General theoretical foundations](#)” section

be helpful for data interpretation. It posed an ideal situation to obtain access to critical data and unpublished information for a post hoc examination of BetterLife's BAP (Lindgreen et al. 2012). The authors wanted to find out more about the decision of this company to implement a BAP, to understand why it was taken, how the BAP was implemented, and what results were achieved (Schramm 1971).

To assess a case that is as specific as this one requires highly heterogeneous data (Cova and Pace 2006), and researchers recommend in-depth data collection, “involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell 1998, p. 61). Therefore, multiple means of data collection were used. As suggested by Yin (2014), the BetterLife case study considered different sources (see Table 2).

The generated data were carefully analysed in five phases: first, the sources of evidence were broadly explored by both authors of this article individually in order to understand the case in a holistic and detailed manner. Second, the researchers met to discuss their first impressions of the case and the general adaptability of it to the BAP framework (see “[Preliminary BAP success factor model](#)” section). Open questions that resulted from the discussion were defined and sent to the responsible managers of BetterLife. Third, both researchers individually analysed the now complete data. A content analysis was conducted, considering the 25 potential success factors and the material. At this point, the main insights of the case were assigned to the model's elements. Findings that did not correspond with the framework were individually marked. In the fourth step, the researchers compared their findings and made a common decision to support, drop or add success factors to the model. Finally, in the last and fifth step, and as proposed by Yin (2014), the case description and the most important conclusions were discussed with BetterLife representatives.

The researchers followed an epistemological interpretivist position, which judged the research quality based on its confirmability, credibility, transferability and dependability (Beverland and Lindgreen 2010). Building on this, research quality was ensured in various ways: conformability was given by considering multiple perspectives, using two different coders, discussing findings with informants, using general questions (“grand tour”; Lindgreen et al. 2012, p. 13) to allow the informant control and building on the trust between the informant and the researchers. Credibility was achieved by triangulation, using various data sources, informants and methods. The emergent findings were reviewed by informants. Transferability can be claimed because the case provided only some additional information for the BAP framework, as most of the information that was needed to develop the updated BAP success factor model emerged from the preliminary BAP success factor model, which was based on a broad literature analysis. Lastly, the findings did not depend on time and place: multiple entries to the site of interest were used, and informants were asked to reflect on current and past practices.

Case description

BetterLife is a major and internationally well-known entity in the finance and insurance industry and has millions of clients. It operates mainly in North American and European markets. The analysis focused on the BAP, which was implemented in one of the multiple country organizations of BetterLife in 2010. With around 500 employees at the end of 2015, BetterLife can be considered as a challenger in the market, while its market share is below the market average, and brand awareness is below that of most competitors. This is, *inter alia*, owing to the fact that BetterLife began its operations within this country long after others—the country of interest is not the home market of BetterLife, and this specific market can be characterized by multiple



Table 2 Sources of evidence

Sources of evidence	Sources
Interviews	Interviewee A: Female manager from the Marketing and Product Management department; younger than 40 years; joined the company in 2007; had been engaged with the BAP from the first day; interviewed via telephone
	Interviewee B: Director Marketing and Product Management; male; younger than 60 years; joined the antecessor of BetterLife in 1996; written interview after the researchers had talked to him personally about the research goals
	Interviewee C: Former Managing Director of BetterLife; male; over 60 years old; joined the company in 2000; agreed to establish the program and supported it for about 5 years before retiring; personal, semi-structured face-to-face interview
	Interviewee D: Head of Brand Communication and Sponsoring who also served as program coordinator since the introduction of the BAP in 2010; female; younger than 50 years; joined BetterLife in 2001; she was first interviewed via e-mail, open points were then discussed in a telephone interview in which she also critically reviewed the written case
	Additional open questions were discussed with Interviewee A and D on an ongoing basis via e-mail
Documentation and archival records	Official timelines of the program
	Job description and checklists for BAs
	E-mails to new BAs
	Agendas and minutes of meetings of the management board and for BA training
	Screenshots of the area that was reserved for BAs in BetterLife's intranet
	Presentations and welcome e-mails for new employees
	Results of a survey of brand ambassadors and senior management in the form of a PowerPoint presentation to the board of management (program evaluation)
General employee survey–2010 (the latest available survey)	
Physical artefacts	BetterLife's brand folder with all its content
	BetterLife's homepage
	Pictures of branded giveaways that were handed over to new employees by the BAs
	Poster for the initial recruitment of BAs
	Certificate of honour for BAs
Participant observation	Participation in three BA meetings and observation of BAs' interactions and discussions
	Participation in one management board meeting, where the BAP was discussed
	General observations when interacting with BetterLife's representatives

strong local players. Furthermore, when we mention BetterLife, we refer to the corresponding country organization.

The Director of Marketing and Product Management presented the idea of a BAP to the Board of Directors in 2009, and they decided to implement the program relatively independent of headquarters and the marketing team. Following approval, a program coordinator was named, and this part time role was assigned to the Head of Brand Communication and Sponsoring, who took care of it besides her daily job. Furthermore, it was decided to link the introduction of the BAP to an internal campaign, which focused on celebrating an important milestone of BetterLife's history. The campaign with the headline, "This is us", began early in 2010 with a motivational letter from the management board to the employees, and an introduction of the planned tasks in senior management meetings. Within the next weeks, the recruitment process began for

the BAs. A job description was distributed throughout the company. The job advertisement described the required competencies and tasks and mentioned that they would receive a 1.5 training day in respect of their new tasks. Candidates were encouraged to apply for the new additional role via their manager, who then forwarded the application to the Marketing and Communications department. For any additional information, candidates could contact the Marketing and Communications department directly. It was clear that the BAs had to fulfil their future role in addition to their current responsibilities.

The BAs were selected in mid-2010. Most of them applied by choice, while some of them were asked by their managers to do so. Training took place shortly after recruitment, where topics such as "what is a brand", "what does our brand stand for" and "how can we connect our brand strategy with the day-to-day-experience of our



employees” were discussed. Furthermore, the BAs were introduced to material that they could use when facilitating a similar workshop with their team members. On returning home, they had the necessary skills to hold a similar, but shorter session with their peers. In those sessions, they collected employees’ proposals on what management and employees themselves could do to strengthen the brand. The coordinator summarized and presented results of those workshops to the management board. Simultaneously, the campaign continued with different actions such as visualizing the brand at the two major subsidiaries within the country. At the end of 2010, the company gathered all its employees during a 2-day-event, which included speeches, interactive presentations and other activities that centred on the idea to celebrate the rich and successful history of the company, and to connect with the brand emotionally. Here, the BAP was explained and the BAs were introduced to all employees. The event closed with a hand-out of the new brand manual. In 2011, which was the first “regular” year for the BAP, there were between 25 and 30 BAs, and in the following years up to 2016, the number varied between 22 and 31. Participants came from different hierarchies, and all four BetterLife subsidiaries, as well as the major departments, were represented.

The motto “This is us” continued to be used from 2011 to communicate all brand-related issues to employees. Within the BAP, the work of the BAs was characterized by discussions within five task forces, which focused on brand-related topics within the areas of technology, training, internal communications, brand awareness and innovation. Until August, this work was informal, but a lot of focus was placed on the BAs by a special issue of BetterLife’s internal journal that was dedicated to report about the BAP. In August, all BAs met to discuss how the suggestions that resulted from the last year’s workshops with employees have been or could be implemented. Additionally, the BAs’ tasks were more formally defined. It was agreed that BAs should be:

- Motivators for the brand;
- The first contact point for colleagues in all brand-related matters;
- Observers of general brand awareness;
- Carriers of brand-related information to and from external stakeholders; and
- In permanent contact and discussion with other BAs.

A corresponding checklist was developed that helped the BAs to evaluate whether they fulfilled all BA tasks properly. At the end of 2011, the Marketing Department developed a starter kit for new employees, which would be distributed by the BAs. This starter kit contained several branded giveaways and included the following: a brief

history of the insurance industry and BetterLife; a folder with basic rules of the brand; a folder that explained the logo and its use; and a short introduction of the BA responsible for the new employees’ team.

During 2012, the motto of the formal internal brand-related campaign changed from “This is us” to “You are BetterLife”. More important for the BAP was that some structural decisions were taken, namely:

- Each year began with a formal meeting of all BAs, which was facilitated by the coordinator. Usually, a member of the board also participated in that meeting. The first yearly kick-off meeting took place in January 2012. The coordinator reflected on the past year, while celebrating the year’s successes and determining new tasks, which were identified by the process that is described in the following two points;
- Each year adopted a specific theme that helped the BAs to focus on an area of improvement. In the yearly kick-off meeting, the BAs provided input according to that theme and proposed concrete brand-related measures. In 2012, the theme was “transparency”, which is one of BetterLife’s brand values;
- The BAs proposals were collected by the coordinator and discussed at the next board meeting. The board members decided, which proposal would be chosen;
- To ensure ongoing communication between the coordinator and the BAs, monthly TelCos were introduced and conducted between the coordinator and the “Main BAs” (see next point). Additionally, local BA meetings, facilitated by the responsible “Main BA”, were established;
- The structure of the BA program was optimized: the BAs were divided into “Main BAs” and “Regular BAs”. The former ones were responsible for the coordination of all brand-related activities at one of the three subsidiaries of BetterLife, while the latter were in charge of the local team in which they worked; and
- The tasks of the BAs were integrated into their personal score cards.

During 2013 and 2016, no major structural changes were made. The BAs followed their regular tasks, but also contributed under the supervision of the coordinator to specific brand-related projects such as analysis of brand touch points, improvements in internal communications (e.g. employees’ use of social media) and development of a sponsoring concept. The BAP is still in place today. At the end of December 2016, the program was based on the shoulders of 27 BAs who had an average job tenure of 7.8 years.



Findings

The following paragraphs present the BAP framework and the corresponding success factors that emerged from the sources of evidence that were used. New insights are also discussed.

Background factors

Within the BAP model, brand orientation was defined as one of three background factors. Interviewee B stated that the brand is a major success factor within BetterLife's markets, and Interviewee C attributed "tremendous importance" to the brand. The above statements support the idea that the brand is seen to be of major value. Clearly defined brand values, which are described in BetterLife's brand book and even on its homepage, serve as norms for brand management. Symbols of BetterLife's brand can be found everywhere within the company, and many of them are included in the welcome package for new employees. Brand-related behaviour can be observed, for example, when BetterLife regularly analyses its brand awareness and image. Another example of brand-oriented behaviour is that the company uses its brand values within its slogan. Overall, there was evidence that BetterLife is a brand-oriented company.

In the BAP framework, the researchers argue that a systematic approach to brand management is required when implementing a BAP. Systematic means that brand-related decisions are not solely taken on the basis of a gut feeling, but that it follows a certain thought-out practice. Such a practice, for example, can be seen in the use of a brand management model, which is offered by various authors regarding the identity school brand management, amongst others (Burmann et al. 2009a, b; Keller 2001). Internal branding includes all actions that engage and inspire employees to deliver the brand promise (King and Grace 2008).

During analysis of this case study, the researchers learned that BetterLife followed a brand identity approach. Interviewee C mentioned that everything that they communicate to the outside must be in line with the company's reality internally, which is in line with a major assumption of the identity school. He also said that a major task for all employees and, more specifically, for the BAs, is to check whether the promises of the brand are grounded within the company. Furthermore, BetterLife followed an inside-out approach, which is a major building block of the identity based view by first defining their brand identity and communicating it to their employees (also with the help of the BAP), and then, in a second step, to communicate the brand to the outside world via marketing communications: though the BAP was already established in 2010, it was not

before 2015 that BetterLife invested in an external advertising campaign.

The support of the C-Level was defined as the third background factor within the BAP model. Interestingly, before the BAP was established at BetterLife, the management board participated in a brand management workshop. In the following years, as stated by Interviewee D, the key activities of the BAs were also regularly discussed by the board. The BAP coordinator received strong support from the executive team and, reflecting on this, perceived this support as being important. Also, Interviewee C told the researchers that the BAP was broadly supported by top management, while he also supported it. Interviewee B stated that he personally supported the program by providing it with his own time and presence, with further human resources and a budget. Since both are members of BetterLife's C-Level, there was evidence that this background factor was influential. Additionally, in all the researchers' contact with BetterLife's top management representatives, there was evidence of a high degree of appreciation for the program. Nevertheless, the researchers had no reason to believe that the top managers were exceptionally charismatic, or that they performed a transformational leadership approach, which is contradictory to the preliminary BAP model.

Brand ambassador program

In the preliminary BAP framework, the following elements are named to be of key interest: the coordinator, the program design, the brand ambassadors themselves and the group of middle management and employees. Concerning the *program coordinator*, the organization of the BAP was placed in the hands of the Head of Brand Communications, who enjoyed a strong marketing background and a long history within the company: before she joined BetterLife, she began her career working for an advertising agency. At the start of the BAP, still young of age, she could already look back to about 12 years in the insurance industry, and about 10 years at BetterLife. It seemed that she could rely on a strong favourable reputation and network within the company, which could partly be owing to the fact that she was one of the first employees who was hired when BetterLife entered the market. The researchers observed that she also enjoyed a high level of internal acceptance and was committed and motivated. Her personal scorecard included her responsibilities as program coordinator, and therefore, according to her, she always had enough time to fulfil this role. In line with this, Interviewee C strongly recommended that a program coordinator should always have a marketing background.

As far as the *program design* is concerned, the existence of clear goals and measurements was mentioned to be a



success factor. However, the researchers did not perceive this to be clear, as Interviewee C said that concrete objectives were not defined in the beginning. On the contrary, Interviewee B stated that goals were to focus the company on its brand and to render the brand consistently from the internal to the external world. Nevertheless, the program was evaluated in 2015 by asking general questions to managers and BAs about their personal perceptions of the program. It must be said that within the evaluation, there was a comment that the program would need more clearly defined goals.

Considering resources, only in the year of its introduction did the BAP have its own budget. In the following years, the costs of the program were credited against the overall marketing budget. As mentioned before, an explicit time budget was not available. Considering the recruitment of BAs, the process of selecting them was thoughtful when the program was introduced in 2010: potential candidates could apply via their team managers and were finally selected following synchronization between the coordinator and the team managers. The job advertisement described the ideal candidate as being open minded and enthusiastic. He/she was expected to have fun, while being progressive, identifying themselves with the mission statement of BetterLife and being eager to contribute even more than in the past to the team's success. Once the first BAs were selected, they received intensive training. Presently, the proposal to replace a BA with a new candidate is made by the team manager himself, usually after consultation with the team members, who then involve the coordinator. As described earlier, new BAs are personally welcomed by the program coordinator and obtain immediate access to brand management documents (e.g. the brand book) and other brand-related tools and symbols, but they are not trained in the same intense manner as the first ones.

The preliminary success factors include enduring motivation of the BAs. Hence, Interviewee A confessed that the emotional activation of BAs was difficult. Contrary to this, the program's evaluation, as well as the researchers' personal experiences when participating in BA meetings, showed a high level of motivation. A source of the motivation may have been the high level of interaction of the executive team and the coordinator with the BAs, and the interaction between the BAs: the program was designed in a way so that the BAs continuously had a chance to network within the company. They could not only meet their peers at the regular annual meetings, but were also involved in presentations at board meetings and at local entities. Interviewee C pointed out that the role of a BA could even speed up one's career.

The authors also discovered a potential success factor, which they did not mention in the BAP model: the authors

had access to a three page document, namely the job description, which clearly described the BAs' tasks and monthly workloads in the form of hours for the duties. The document stated that BAs should be a motivator for the brand and should be the contact person for colleagues who have questions about the brand. Furthermore, the job description was accompanied by a checklist, which the BA could use to evaluate his own performance against his responsibilities. Of course, this was a prerequisite for being able to fulfil the job description is the corresponding time. When evaluating the program, the BAs openly criticized that they lacked the time to engage more with the program.

Furthermore, the program coordinator and/or the BAs had access to professional tools that had been specifically developed for them. Marketing provided PowerPoint presentations about the brand and a brand-related starter package for new employees. There was a special space on the intranet, which was reserved for the BAs, where they could share information, chat about the latest brand-related news or discuss concrete actions.

Analysing the *brand ambassadors* themselves, there are several factors from the preliminary framework, which require discussion. Assessing the credibility of the BAs within BetterLife, the researchers found at least one comment amongst the program's evaluation, which indicated that, in the past, BA's sometimes carried out their tasks in an extreme manner, which was felt to be odd and far-fetched. This is partly connected to the high level of motivation and buy-in on the part of the BAs: most of them, according to the evaluation in 2015, regarded the BAP as something that was important for the overall success of the company, were proud to be in their current role and reported a high degree of motivation. The authors conclude that there is a thin line between inspiring the BAs and keeping their feet on the ground.

Various opportunities were afforded to the BAs to play an active role in the program. Though the researchers did not have too much information about the BA's degree of taking initiative, it must also be said that, according to a comment in the program evaluation, some BAs perceived that they are only used to forward information instead of being proactive. The researchers were also not able to evaluate the BAs' abilities to involve others. Furthermore, the researchers' participation in BA meetings only partially supported the idea that BAs are extroverts by nature.

The researchers were also not sure if the BAs firmly believed in the theories of brand management and fully understood what they mean, but at least, in the training workshop for the first BAs in 2011, general brand management theories were discussed.



Target groups

According to the list of potential success factors, target groups should be segmented according to closeness to the customer. This was not evident in the case study. Contrarily, the program first centred on the idea to implement projects, which would enhance the internal brand experience. But in line with the researchers' argument, a lot of emphasis was placed on involving the internal target groups: occasionally, managers were invited to the annual BA meetings. Besides this, managers and employees could participate in workshops that were organized by BAs and contributed to some of the projects.

However, the researchers did not receive any information about the brand knowledge and perceived the brand relevance of middle managers and employees. Concerning the acceptance of the BAP amongst middle management, the researchers received biased information: Interviewee C said that, overall, the BAP received plenty of support from managers. Interviewee D pointed out that the acceptance strongly depended on the concrete value, which was perceived by the manager for his own area of influence, as well as on the perceived qualifications of the local BA. More specifically, all managers who participated in the program evaluation rated the importance of the BAP, in terms of the overall success of the company, as being somewhere in the middle of a 4-point scale from unimportant to very important. One manager said that it would be more urgent to improve the external image than to work on internal issues, hence the common understanding that in brand management, external activities are more important than internal ones. Interestingly, according to further results of the evaluation, most BAs at BetterLife perceived that their managers supported them adequately to fulfil their roles, but many of them also stated that they could not, or seldom participated in taking brand-related decisions. This was mirrored by the managers' answers: the results indicated that managers are likely to assign working time to BAs, but that they are not keen to involve them in the decision-making process, even if the brand is concerned. Since it is clearly defined in BetterLife's job description for the BAs that it is not their task to replace team leaders or managers, but to support them in brand-related activities, this was not surprising. The researchers conclude that, generally, in BA programs, the question of how much influence can be given to BAs—especially in demarcation to managers who officially possess decision power—is a central one, while the degree of authority given to the BAs can be a source of dissatisfaction on both sides. Therefore, it was not surprising that Interviewee B said that the key success factor for such a program is to get the managers "on the boat". Interviewee C called this a golden rule.

Though the researchers did not have access to surveys that analysed employees' acceptance of the BAP who were not officially involved, overall, they perceived that the program was well received: Interviewee B stated that the overall acceptance of the program within the company was good. Notwithstanding, the researchers perceived that he may have misinterpreted the general tune: one manager stated that the BAP was smiled at, while another said that people could not identify with it. Due to the opinions of some managers, there were also employees who perceived the BAP as a marketing program that followed the task to sell the brand inside. Interviewee D stated that, correspondingly to what she said about the middle managers, employees' acceptance strongly depended on perceived improvements for their own working group.

Phases

The preliminary framework proposed that a BAP incorporated different phases. The results of the analysis support this idea: when the BAP was introduced at BetterLife, the BAs were able to shape the program. They worked on their own job descriptions, proposed projects and, therefore, at least in some way, influenced the overall program structure. This was not the case anymore after the introduction phase. It also seems that enthusiasm for the BAP has declined over time: Interviewee B, for example, admitted that after some years there appeared to be increasing criticism and rejection of the BAP. In the evaluation one manager stated the following: "It (the BAP) was great during the 10 year campaign, but I am not sure if the role of brand ambassador is necessary anymore ..." In line with this, Interviewee A said that people were naturally more euphoric in the beginning than some time after implementation of the program. Interviewee D supported this view and asserted that after about 5 years, in the so-called phase of stagnation, people perceived that everything was said and done. She argued that a company permanently experiences change and that, therefore, a BAP must change accordingly and must incorporate evolving company goals. Interviewee C proposed the idea that a BAP should continuously be adjusted over time and can be characterized by changing intensity.

Additionally, the authors found support for the idea that a BAP should be implemented at a favourable point in time. At BetterLife, a survey in 2010 showed that employees broadly identified with the company and its mission statement. Together with the fact that BetterLife celebrated a big birthday in 2010 and the introduction of the BAP was linked to this milestone, this may also have contributed to the overall success of the program, according to Interviewee D.



Outcomes

Though the researchers generally thought that the BAP at BetterLife was successful in directly improving internal brand equity and indirectly adding to a positive brand perception through external stakeholders, they did not have numbers to prove this: BetterLife did not measure internal brand equity or overall brand strength before and after implementation of the BAP. When asked for the main effects of the BAP on the internal (employees) and external environments (customers), Interviewee B stated that the BAP helped to increase the team spirit and to involve employees in the brand-building process. He said that the understanding of customer needs and expectations had grown and that the brand was more visible. Interviewee A stated that the program was successful and that the impact was positive for all stakeholders. He also argued that the internal improvements that were encouraged by the BAs indirectly improved the company's standing within its market.

So far, the BAP has not served as a blueprint for implementation within other country organizations of BetterLife. But in the market in focus, the CEO decided to extend and relaunch the program during 2016.

Updated BAP success factor model

Table 3 shows, which elements of the preliminary framework could or could not be confirmed in the BetterLife case study, and provides new aspects that were not considered in the preliminary model, and proposes a final list of BAP success factors.

Conclusion

Summary and research implications

The authors believe to their best knowledge that this research paper is the first that empirically analyses the concept of BAPs in a business context. The derived success factor model makes a significant impact on internal brand management literature. Most importantly, it brings to our attention that instruments of internal branding are rarely successful when used in an isolated context. On the contrary, background factors such as the support of the C-level, the brand orientation of the company, as well as a professional brand management, strongly influence the effectiveness of BAPs. A further contribution to research on internal brand management is the emphasis on a phase-oriented view.

On the basis of the general insight that the success of brand management partly depends on the internal

anchorage of the brand inside the company, this paper discussed the BAP as a concrete tool. The findings show some new insights: firstly, a BAP is not an isolated instrument of internal brand management, but its impact depends on background factors such as brand orientation, brand management, as well as the C-level support. Secondly, the success of a BAP is based on a combination of the specific characteristics of the coordinator, the program design, the BAs, as well as the target groups. Thirdly, BAP is not a static program, but a dynamic and phase-oriented approach. The derived BAP model, with 31 potential success factors, supports the planning and implementation of BAPs, as well as the monitoring of ongoing and the reflection of completed BAPs.

Management implications

There are various practical implications, which can be derived from this research paper. Most importantly, the following three areas of interest can be identified: firstly, when considering implementation of a BAP, the model does not only provide a holistic overview of the necessary steps and phases, but also, in the sense of a universal blueprint, offers specific and concrete recommendations that can be derived from every single identified success factor (e.g. person of the coordinator, favourable characteristics of the BAs). Secondly, the framework can be used to monitor the BAP during its implementation and following its possible termination. Monitoring can be done by an internal auditing team, which evaluates the program with the help of the success factors. Thirdly, the model can support internal communication. Confronted with the framework, new managers and employees, in particular, can quickly grasp the purpose and objectives of a BAP.

It must also be mentioned that the research revealed at least four general areas of conflict that practitioners should be aware of when implementing a BAP. The relationship between managers without any specific role within the program and the BAs will be one of those four. Their dissimilar information levels and abilities to influence daily business bear room for mutual misunderstandings. This highlights a second point that needs consideration: BAs that are enthusiastic about their role could overemphasize the importance of the program. A third possible area of conflict is presented by the need for a BAP's clearly defined structure and precise goals and, at the same time, a certain degree of flexibility, which is required to adapt the program to the specific needs of an ever changing organization. A final paradox emerges regarding implementation by two different organizations (similar to Kotter 2012) with different philosophies: the BAP organization (lateral communication, network) versus the organization of the daily business (top-down communication, hierarchy).



Table 3 Updated BAP success factor model

Final BAP success factors	Comment	BetterLife case
A. Background factors		
Brand orientation (formerly: corporate culture)	Interview C, the existence of norms documented in a brand model, as well as a several artefacts (e.g. brand book, welcome package), show characteristics of a brand-oriented corporate culture	++
Brand management	Interview C, the BA training, the corporate design, external communication and actions of brand controlling, prove the existence of professional brand management	++
C-level	Interviews B and C, the brand management workshop for the board and own observations document the support of the BAP by the C-level. However, a charismatic and visionary leadership was not supported by the case study	+
B. Coordinator		
Expertise in brand management and brand knowledge	The program coordinator presently has more than 20 years of experience in brand management and marketing and has worked for BetterLife since 2001	++
Internal power and network capabilities	The researchers' observations showed that the coordinator has a strong intra-company network, but there was no proof of her internal power	+
<i>Motivation (new)</i>	The researchers' observations showed high levels of internal motivation for the program coordinator for the BAP	++
<i>Time (new)</i>	The coordinator did not receive a formal time budget that she could spend on her role, but could decide how she spent her working time	+
C. Program design		
Controlling	Clear goals and measurements did not exist in the case study, but Interviewees B and C formulated this gap and the need for clear purposes	-
Resources	An adequate and explicit formulated budget (money, time) did not exist. The cost of the program was credited against the overall marketing budget	-
Selection of BA	Job adverts, which included personal traits, show that the selection process was thoughtful. Later, a clear job description existed, which helped to identify new candidates	++
Identification and removal of resistances	No major resistances could be identified	0
Enduring motivation of the BA	Interviewee A confessed that the emotional activation of BAs was difficult. Results of the program evaluations, as well as the researchers' personal experiences when participating in BA meetings, showed high levels of motivation	+
Training and support of the BA	The agenda and minutes of meetings for BA training proved that there have been intensive investments in this field	++
Interaction with the BA	Vertical interaction was supported by BA meetings and a specific online community for BAs. Horizontal interaction was confirmed by interviews C and A	++
Symbols and artefacts	The welcome package and the brand book are examples of symbols that are used in the BAP	++
<i>Clear job descriptions (new)</i>	An explicit job description existed. It was formulated by the first BAs themselves	++
<i>Professional tools (new)</i>	BAs had access to professional tools (PowerPoint presentations, training guidelines, online community)	++
D. Brand ambassadors		
Credibility within the organization	Program evaluation only partially supported the idea that BAs enjoyed high credibility within the organization	+
Initiatives and creativity	Interview C, our participation in BA meetings and selected results from the program evaluation show that BAs showed initiative and possessed an active personality	++
Motivation of others	The researchers did not obtain any information about BAs' skills to involve and motivate their peers	0
Deep understanding of the brand	Agendas and minutes of the meetings of the initial BA training sessions showed that at least the first BAs should have had a deep understanding of the brand positioning and brand values. Mails to new BAs with corresponding information and the brand book served as additional sources for the brand values	+
Brand identification	Program evaluation and the researchers' participation in BA meetings showed a picture of BAs who highly identified with the brand on a voluntary basis	++
Extroversion and openness	The researchers' participation in BA meetings only partially supported the idea that BAs are extroverts	+



Table 3 continued

Final BAP success factors	Comment	BetterLife case
E. Target groups		
Participation	Managers and employees could participate in workshops that were organized by BAs and contributed to some of the projects. Managers were occasionally invited to the annual BA meetings	++
Brand knowledge	There was no information available about the target groups' brand knowledge	0
Brand relevance	There was no information available about the target groups' perceived brand relevance	0
Brand role relevance	There was no information available about the target groups' perceived brand role relevance	0
<i>Acceptance of the BAP (new)</i>	Interviews B and C, as well as selected results from the program evaluations, showed a high (but declining) acceptance of the BAP within the organization	++
F. Time		
Phase orientation	Results from interviews B and C suggest that a BMP should be handled differently within different phases of the program	++
<i>Adjusted and changing intensity (new)</i>	Interviewee C proposed that a BAP should be adjusted over time and can be characterized by changing intensity	++
<i>Timing of the introduction (new)</i>	Interviewee D proposed that the timing of the introduction of a BAP must be carefully chosen	++

++: strong support; +: partial support; -: contradiction; 0: no information available

The potential success factor "segmentation" was not included in the final framework. The analysed BA program did not focus on employees who had direct customer contact

Limitations and further research

The study has revealed certain limitations: firstly, the complexity and huge number of identified success factors are a limitation. Future research should try to reduce the number of factors and analyse the causal links between the most relevant factors in more detail. For example, in a first step, workshops or a Delphi study (Linstone and Turoff, 1975) with managers who have experience in managing BAPs could support the identification of the main success factors. On this reduced basis, in a second step, a more quantitative-based approach with a heterogeneous sample of companies with BAPs could test and quantify the impact of the various success factors on output measurements such as satisfaction with the BAP. Also, a combination of a management survey for the measurement of potential success factors and an employee survey for the measurement of internal brand equity (similar, e.g. Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010) could provide additional quantitative results. Secondly, the study is based only on one in-depth case study in one industry (insurance) and on one country in Europe. Future studies should use the adjusted BAP model and discuss it in other context: sectors (e.g. b-to-b, other service industries), companies (e.g. with different corporate culture, different level of internal branding activities or alternative organization structures) and regions

(e.g. Asia). It may be possible that the lateral approach BAP is not so efficient in cultures that have a higher power distance (Hofstede 2001). In these cultures, more central and top-down approaches of internal branding could be more efficient and effective. Thirdly, the researchers had good, but not perfect access to the field. For example, some of the potential success factors regarding the characteristics of the BAs and the target groups could not be analysed in the case study. Future research projects should try to close the gap by using approaches with stronger ties to the empirical field (e.g. action research, McNiff and Whitehead 2011). Lastly, the research study is generally based on the idea of success factor research. This type of research framework is keenly criticized regarding the method and the content (March and Sutton 1997). Future research should complement this research by implementation of additional empirical master techniques (Kornhauser and Lazarsfeld 1955) such as experimental research, expert interviews or surveys.

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