Guest Relationship Management Principles as a Reference Point for building a Brand: The Case a Hospitality Group's Brand-building Process

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GUEST RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES AS A REFERENCE POINT FOR BUILDING YOUR BRAND: THE CASE OF A HOSPITALITY GROUP'S BRAND BUILDING PROCESS

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The objective of this paper was to gain insight into the delimitation of 'brand territory' and 'relationship territory', in these territories' interdependencies as well as relevant managerial attitudes and perceptions. Full support for this research was gained from a Dutch hospitality group which recently had formulated its new brand strategy and which was on the verge of entering into a rapid expansion track. Over a period of three years desk research, surveys and in-depth interviews created a clear picture of the process of brand building in practice. A striking outcome of the executed research was that most hospitality managers of the studied company were not aware of the differences between the relationship management and the brand management processes. By following a stakeholder approach, authors revealed a range of perspectives on Guest Relationship Management (GRM) that can enhance the probability of a successful outcome of the brand building process.

Keywords: *brand building process, customer relationship management, organizational change, stakeholders, perspectives*

INTRODUCTION

As the international hospitality industry keeps growing more competitive, companies have been striving to differentiate themselves by their brands during the past decades (Piccoli et Al., 2003). Brand professionals believe that the main reason for building brand equity as a cornerstone for business success is that it supports businesses to differentiate its products from the competition and, eventually, allows owners to charge a premium (Prasad & Dev, 2000).

The reason for many hospitality firms to build –preferably strong- brands is that the brand value mainly resides in the customers' minds and is based on brand awareness, quality perceptions and, eventually, brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991).

It is well recognized that acquiring new customers is estimated to be more expensive than keeping existing ones (Blattberg & Deighton, 1996). Having said this, it means that hospitality firms are constantly influencing customer loyalty, also because there seems to be a strong link between customer loyalty and corporate profitability (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990).

However, many brand managers are facing the problem that retaining customers based on features is becoming increasingly difficult, as many of those offers in the hospitality industry are similar to each other. Also, price competition has become less attractive, because nowadays customers are capable of comparing rates over the internet (O'Connor, 2002). Gamble et Al.(1999) have indicated that these developments result in less brand loyalty among customers. Moreover, Mattila (2006) points out that brand loyalty programs and the related accumulation of frequency points are not enough to create affective commitment, as most of these loyalty programs look alike. In conclusion, the hard benefits –features- of the loyalty programs do not show a significant correlation with the maintenance or enhancement of customer loyalty (Mattila, 2006). All above mentioned facts considered, companies are forced to look for other ways to keep customers loyal.

This is where Customer Relationship Management (CRM) comes into play. CRM enables firms to differentiate themselves by starting and maintaining relationships with their most loyal guests (Mitussis et Al., 2006). CRM also touches the territory of customization and the ability to treat different guests differently (Newell, 2000). Because CRM lacks a clear conceptualization (Zablah et Al., 2004) , many definitions have been assigned to it. The way Hermans and Melissen (2008) interpreted the theory of Mitussis et al. (2006), is that CRM should pursue meaningful dialogues with (loyal) guests, realizing a focus shift from mere service- and brand equity to relationship equity. To avoid any confusion with sales or account management, some, therefore, prefer to speak of Guest Relationship Management (GRM).

While brands strive to expose customers to a consistent message (Ehrenberg et al., 1990) and 'fault-free' delivery (Lassar et Al., 1995) as often as possible, it can be argued that brands were created because individual guest contact management is too intense, not always appreciated by the guest and not manageable for the organisation; by means of a (strong) brand, more information and credibility can be conveyed more efficiently to the market and the guest without entering into a –too- personal dialogue. However, De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998) mention 'being a party to a relationship' as one of the brand roles. Van Durme et al. (2003) describe how strong customer relationships rest on trust and reputation but raise the question if and when an interpersonal dialogue is needed to induce trust. Fournier & Yao (1997) argue that the brand is an active relationship partner. Leone et al. (2006) acknowledge that with the impact of a brand diminishing in the minds of repeat customers, focus shifts to customer equity and individual customer value optimization. This justifies efforts of customer bonding through e.g. the creation of a service brand (Brodie, 2009), a network

Table 1. extract from a survey (2006) among 206 Dutch hospitality marketing professionals

Statement	% agree	% disagree	% no opinion
In hospitality any guest-brand relationship can be outperformed by a personal –human- guest relationship proposed by a non-branded service provider	83	9	8
While developing new guest relationships we use our best relationships as prototype and reference point	59	24	17
Branding is a more effective method to distribute your message than GRM	3	52	45

(Gummesson, 2008) or a knowledge driven (Gibbert et Al., 2002) customer approach. This all tends to explain CRM/GRM current revival since brands have proven to not always be able to convey their values in a credible way to all different types of guests, nor to exploit the full potential of loyal guests by means of traditional loyalty programs. Table 1 shows how this idea is supported by the outcome of an unpublished survey (2006) among 206 hospitality marketing professionals, which was executed by the lead author of this paper.

While some inspirational reference works have helped to identify the research challenge of this paper, a full review of literature was not a primary goal. More specifically, additional reviews and research need to be conducted on the role that brand size and maturity have on any company's ability to introduce new and compelling attributes to a product category in the minds of customers or to prevail in existing ones. Readers of hospitality marketing literature will have noticed that, in general, relatively little attention is dedicated to CRM/GRM in hospitality, let alone to its contribution to the brand building process. In addition, it also shows that, apart from the customers, stakeholder interests, requirements and expectations of the long and complex brand building process, are often forgotten by brand researchers, professionals and managers. By following a systematic stakeholder approach this paper is aimed to detect possible contributions of GRM to the intensive brand building process.

RESEARCH METHOD

The case study focuses on a Dutch hospitality group who own and operate a portfolio of geographically spread hotels and meeting facilities in The Netherlands. In 2006, this hospitality group had recently formulated new brand values and value proposition after intensive conversations on both a headquarter and business unit level. The group claimed to have adopted a customer intimacy strategic orientation. Also, the company was on the verge of entering into an expansion track, which actually started at the end of 2007 when it merged with a smaller hospitality group with complementing products and competencies.

From 2006 to 2008 the company's brand building process was followed by the researchers as participant observers. Relevant and confidential information was available.

Desk research

The following documents were made available by the group's management for analysis

(1) Statement of brand values and their translation into service norms and standards
(2) Internal management presentations covering issues like market demand and demand evolution, industry trends, competitor analysis, portfolio analysis, operations and quality management,

brand development arguments, and property development opportunities

(3) The 2007-2008 strategic marketing communication plan which addressed topics, such as brand identity, marketing communications, positioning of the brand, communication of corporate values, budgets and the organization's restructuring

(4) Three client and market research reports.

The first research report involved a customer satisfaction survey (CSS) conducted in 2006 by a research agency. The surveys were handed out by the group's own staff members to the professional bookers, guests and meeting participants on a daily basis. Equally spread over the year, more than 430 respondents filled out their experiences with and perception of the company. Chief topics being addressed in the questionnaire are communication, choice of location, overall judgment, arguments underlying judgment, recommendations and propensity to return.

Secondly, the researchers had access to a familiarity and favourability client survey (2007) that was conducted by the group. Similar to the previously mentioned survey, these surveys addressed topics such as communication, choice of location, overall judgment, the respondent explanation of judgment, recommendations and propensity to return.

In 2006, another research agency explored new geographical markets in The Netherlands for the hospitality group. The focal point of this third research report was the following question: "In which parts of the Netherlands is there sufficient need for this brand, so that the desired penetration can be achieved?" The research addressed topics such as target group profiles, size and diligence of companies, results of national surveys, as well as the results local surveys. On a national level, 28 surveys of the total 141 surveys sent were completed (20% response). On a local level, of the 972 companies approached, 106 companies actually participated, an 11% response rate.

Client surveys

Under supervision of the authors, large scale corporate client research was conducted in 2007. It consisted of ten questions addressing expectations and preferences of corporate meeting bookers. Both open and multiple choice questions were used. 75 surveys were collected by telephone. These also served as a pilot survey for the development of a digital survey which was sent to 2,000 professional clients of the group.

11% of them went through the online answering process. Data quality issues in the company's professional and corporate booker database were detected while executing research indicating a pre-maturity stage in this area. The final results of the digital survey were used by the group's management as primary source of information for the 2007-2008 strategic marketing communication plan.

Management interviews

Two in-depth interviews were conducted during the period 2006-2008. The first interview was set-up in the fourth quarter of 2006. The in-depth interview, taken from the hospitality group's brand manager at the time, addressed topics with regard to brand strategies, brand loyalty, customer intimacy, communication and the role and meaning of b-2-b CRM. The second interview was set up in the fourth quarter of 2008. The interviewees were the commercial director – also brand manager - and the director of operations. As the researchers aimed to investigate the two-way impact of brand strategies on stakeholders, a clear stakeholder approach was adopted to question them on the brand development process. The following stakeholders were distinguished: 'market', 'owners', 'management', 'personnel' and 'customers'.

Key facts, statements and observations were distilled from all material and surveys and presented to a panel of brand and CRM specialists. Independently of one another they commented the case facts and observations, as well as the brand building process of the hospitality group. Combining their feedback the authors identified different ways of looking at the interdependency between both brand and guest relationship management.

OBSERVATIONS & DISCUSSION

The Market

Case study observations in 2006 and 2007

Management believes that the hotel market is saturated, that their company does not play a significant role in the market and that only a new and specific brand for the meeting market could and should be developed. In the price driven and mainly national meeting market, the group has a significant market share and above market occupancy. Bookers do not select their venues very consciously yet mention that value for money is highly important. Moderate quality meeting facilities are often booked in hotels for the sake of convenience.

The group is perceived as a mid-upper-class no-nonsense meeting service provider, with good accessibility by public transport. It also enjoys a solid reputation in terms of F&B; it simply 'gets things done'. Being respected for its dedicated and accurate service, guests evaluate the group with an average satisfaction of 7.7 (on a 10 point scale) in all properties. Competition consists mainly of local, detached properties without any well-known brands or quality labels. Market growth is mainly absorbed by existing players. Yield consistently and steadily grows faster than inflation. Yet the market for corporate events is still relatively small compared to the hotel market.

In spite of the fact that a majority of the corporate clients gauged three out of six of the group's brand values as unimportant to them, the group retains them all in its 2007-2008 strategic communication plan. The brand values are: accessible (unimportant to 6% of all respondents), genuine attention (unimportant to 34%), reliable (unimportant to 37%), specialist (unimportant to 75%), surprising (unimportant to 83%), distinctive (unimportant to 67%). However, as service characteristics these factors do show to be important. A vast majority of professional bookers states they are brand indifferent while making a booking.

The company does not have a consistent policy of communicating with the entire market, including the non-clients, nor analyzing it. For instance, trends in internet technology which play a role in creating and delivering the differentiating value proposition of the future are not systematically analyzed.

Case study observations in 2008

According to the current commercial director, the market has barely changed between 2006 and 2008. Only the expectations and demands of potential customers have increased. Customers consider it self-evident that a growing number of features like e.g. wireless Internet are always included in the packages. Also the range of services and products needs to grow steadily.

In 2007, a start was made to track complaints by means of daily surveys with corporate clients. Because of the merger, budgets have increased, resulting in more and more efficient investments with regard to promotion and brand building activities. Also, the merger was an ideal opportunity to offer the brand a restart. Because of the CAYA/BAYA

(Come As You Are, Be As You Are) principle that has been implemented (2007), the brand now is perceived as open and compatible.

Discussion from a brand management perspective

Increased complexity of decision making patterns, heating up of the competitive playground and the proliferation of information boosts the need for stronger profiled brands with explicit category leadership. Reassurance of the right choice becomes embedded in the brand personality. This component of brand personality includes a convincing customer satisfaction track record.

Category and brand related criteria define the perspective of expectations. Openness and compatibility are key success drivers for the entire industry. By claiming leadership and preference (The First Choice), the group can set the experience and meaning of these characteristics in a demonstrative way. By expressing innovative or differentiating elements, brands can activate new market needs and wishes. If successful, they become new category standards, defining renewed competitive characteristics.

Budgets must be oriented towards a fast and effective implementation of competitive brand characteristics in the reference market. The merger creates opportunities for activating in depth market contacts, in order to load the brand with reassuring leadership characteristics. Once accomplished, the group can formalize its category leadership based on proven trust components.

Discussion from a GRM perspective

Brands are associated with standards, consistent quality and recognition by the target audience. GRM implies living up to the knowledge a company has on guests. Apart from complaint handling after service failure, GRM can contribute to a strong claim in the market by promising that no two visits will be the same since we always know the guest or client better. Flexibility becomes the standard.

During the research period the group has not reached out to top clients in order to discuss changes in their intrinsic need structure nor to jointly develop new products with them. As of 2008 a systematic approach has been chosen by the group to analyse the behaviour and potential of the most important corporate bookers, checking out what the group's share of wallet is. Business growth can be pursued through active networking and co-creation.

The owners

Case study observations in 2006-2007

Owners take pride in their proven ability to implement and maintain similar levels of service quality in all properties. They see their priority in modernizing some properties, in developing specialization within their property portfolio. Awareness is established that synergies between ever more units need to be created. They wish to expand for reasons of achieving national market coverage –yet avoiding cannibalization of existing properties– rather than for reasons of financial efficiency. Owners have a strong preference for self-owned and managed properties and aim to take over and rebrand at least one existing property per year. The current brand efforts will cause a relationship between brand and customers (participants). Interactivity with the booker is the only thing that the organization is looking for.

Case study observations in 2008

Because of the merger, budgets have increased, resulting in more and more efficient investments with regard to promotion and brand building activities. Owners have more options with regard to strategic decisions, meaning that the brand has more possibilities when it comes to anticipating on and reacting to both external and internal events. Whereas management proclaims that interactivity with meeting participants supported by guest relationship management will only start within three years, the owners think that this process should start earlier, in order to stay ahead of competition.

Discussion from a brand management perspective

Owners must experience the group move towards category leadership and detect the trendsetting opportunities in it. Every process of change includes the roots of uncertainty. The group must focus on uncertainty reduction and replace it with an even more ambitious and prosperous perspective. Every contact with guests is interactivity as such. The group must use every contact opportunity to turn the interactivity into a relational and branding building block, supported as much as possible by knowledge management.

Discussion from a GRM perspective

Now that the brand strategy is carefully designed with bookers and participants in mind, the group and the brand would benefit from a major investment in integrated (guest) communication technology to endorse the ambition to remain market leader and to develop/gain customer loyalty. Clear rules need to be established as to who deserves and needs a relationship, and in which way and how different departments – not just sales – will contribute to long-term relationships.

A deep insight into the nature and value of many more clients and guest relations than only the top bookers of industry will consolidate the goodwill of the group and naturally prompt the next step, whether it be the development of new services, entering into a new market or partnership or developing a new property. Economies can thus be ascertained in the market communication budget.

The management

Case study observations in 2006-2007

Being convinced of the opportunity provided by the market to introduce new service concepts, the management team appoints a brand manager (2006) to develop a new meeting brand strategy. The hotels retain their current franchise brand. Sub-brands are created under the meeting brand e.g. in the F&B department. While the company introduces a number of brand outings, the brand manager finds difficulty in gaining support base in the operating environment. In 2006, the business units were already hoping that the brand would evoke more reservations, which eventually was not the case. A plan is presented to invest in market communication that will raise awareness. Some members of the executive committee do not agree with the planned brand strategy. A limited amount of resources is being allocated to the brand development program. This decision is partially inspired by the fact that overhead expenses are already above industry average for some time.

Case study observations in 2008

A brand house is created with different product pillars. These pillars represent the pledge of the brand: to be the provider of exciting corporate events. The brand values are renewed and reduced in number. B-2-b CRM – strong corporate relations - makes it into the four selected values.

Opposed to 2006, however, the data quality can meanwhile be considered more accurate, with a clear view on what accounts and prospects we need to focus on. There is no scepticism among management, but it goes without saying that changes cause resistance, both on tactical and operational levels. The renewed brand now aims to achieve a top-of-mind position in both the national and international corporate events market. At the time of the merger, the brand was restarted. In 2008 the group has prepared the brand management process internally. Early 2009 the group will communicate the new brand to the market. Management's guess is that total revenue will increase. After the merger, more budgets have come available for external communication ends. Furthermore, the increased budget also creates more possibilities for the human resources functions, necessary to obtain critical alignment and support base, both incorporating an important signal to the customers. In other words, with the current budgets, the group can focus on internal dissemination of and compliance with the brand values.

Discussion from a brand management perspective

The brand of 2006 and early 2007 was mainly emphasizing dissatisfiers, therefore not sufficiently differentiating itself. Analysis of the 2007-2008 strategic marketing communication plan (2007) shows a difficulty to translate market research findings into a coherent brand creation and communication effort. Brand values are not being translated into the different service categories of the group's portfolio. Principles of integrated communication are not yet being applied. A part of the stakeholder communication is outsourced before goodwill among these stakeholders is being secured. In 2008 management feels supported in their decision making processes by the recognized brand leadership in the category. This represents an opportunity towards a more offensive and category defining brand strategy, aiming for the harmony / maturity phase in development. GRM is a key identity driver of the company's brand. Systematically, a shift from active GRM-oriented market acquisition towards brand driven customer preference will be the result of the synergy. Brands set expectation standards; GRM capitalizes on the former experience.

Discussion from a GRM perspective

GRM offers management an add-on or alternative to an expensive reward or brand driven card program if it succeeds in equitably providing attention to clients and guests in clearly defined VIP classes. In such a program, policies regarding privacy, compliance, segmentation, data and communication need to be established by management to facilitate and secure operational guest dialogues in which individualized and meaningful benefits can be granted. Business objectives should be determined for different guests and client levels. Guests and clients see their relationship objectives become part of their profile. Sometimes growth can be achieved through database marketing which would allow cutting back on acquisition expenses and marketing head count.

GRM's methods of personalization, customization and networking allow the management to explore value creation for clients and guests through e.g. non-core services and social CRM, and such before, during, and after their actual stay or booking.

The personnel

Case study observations in 2006-2007

The intention is to introduce new specialist positions and functions to help deliver and develop the brand. The management is convinced that after a period of implementation, the back office will take on a more facilitating role. The management acknowledges that overall service level is high, yet not consistent.

The sole responsibility for operations lies in hostmanship, streamlining service processes and maintaining local relationship networks. Misunderstanding and unwillingness to follow the composed SOPs and to comply with the brand values is observed. Staff has the impression that the introduction of the newly proposed behavioral and operational norms and standards comes as an unnatural addition to their activities, thus, making their work more complex. Instructions like "staff working in reservations, reception and sales are expected to ask at least one open question during each customer encounter" or "all wishes need to be registered" or "mention the name of the client at least three times during a conversation" are typical. GRM only needs to be applied to improve guest complaint handling (guest recovery). In the service standards, the only knowledge about the guest that staffs are expected to use is the guest's name. .

The brand documentation of 2006-2007 shows little communication towards tactical and operational levels. CRM is the key word in corporate sales management. Head office intends to start an Academy. Yet no clear training procedures were developed in 2007. This indicates a resistance to this intention at business unit level.

Case study observations in 2008

The brand receives more time and financial resources to invest in personnel and, especially, in trainings. No personnel are dismissed after the re-launched brand strategy of the merged group. The merger was not a cost but a revenue efficient operation. A central reservation office is created. Because of the implemented CAYA/BAYA principle, employees feel the freedom to be as they want to be. They feel less restricted by SOPs than they felt two years ago. Employee criticism of 2006 has vanished, resulting in a better organization and an unresisting atmosphere. E-learning programs have been introduced, which enables employees to familiarize themselves with the brand values and standards. Furthermore, every location has its 'brand coach', who has the responsibility for employees to be trained in and live up to the SOPs. A daily '5-minute training' is introduced.

Discussion from a brand management perspective

As the brand increases its leadership positioning, organizational goodwill can grow, on condition the relation with employers remains in harmony with employer branding criteria: attract, develop and retain talented people. As an employer brand, a key competitive factor is the brands envisioned future, becoming a strong motivating driver to attract high potentials. On the other hand, the brands reputation includes a sustainable and motivating identification icon for all employees. The stronger the brand becomes a leadership reference in the addressed market, the more employees feel rewarded and motivated to be associated with the group. The brand personality must be expressed clearly by the management in the first place, in a way that identification with brand values represents a positive asset for all related levels. The focus: what's in it for me? As long as the association with the brand values contribute to personal self realization and well-being, goodwill and loyalty will be harvested.

Strongly profiled and positioned brands include a significant amount of trust. Because of this historical capital of trust, the brand is resistant to a reasonable level of complaints, as far as the brand deals in an active way with the complaints so they don't cumulate above the critical goodwill barrier of the company. This applies to both employees and customers.

One of the brands main assets is the ability to fit into the addressed markets' needs. As flexibility is one of the criteria, the company must excel in this field and even try to outperform its competitors in this characteristic.

Discussion from a GRM perspective

The brand is the universe within which all interactions take place. GRM is the functional instrument that deals with changed expectations of and new value creation opportunities with existing guests, as well as with all specific and concrete efforts directed toward new guests in view of making them loyal. It must be avoided that any client or guest can actually rebook or stay in a hotel several times without being treated differently or extending its profile.

GRM is staff oriented as much as it is guest oriented; to create seamless guest experiences and relationships it deals with issues like staff accountability, with corporate culture as well as with internal communication processes. GRM integrates CRM into service operations and solves the challenge of living up to the need of thousands of clients and guests looking forward to have a meaningful dialogue with a limited number of employees. Relationship tasks become part of the job profile of all staff members in direct contact with customers. A service and communication track record is being stored on every guest and emerges during guest arrival briefings or on special occasions. Although relationship building processes integrate fully with service processes they are designed and managed separately since the managerial tools are different (e.g. lifetime value calculation, relationship pricing, partnering).

The customers

Case study observations in 2006-2007

Through the brand, the group aims to develop excellent niche products that meet the ever more complex service requirements dictated by the market. Clients and guests will not know about the values, only experience the form in which these values will come to them through personalized service. Distinctiveness and Surprise – two of the brand values - are defined in terms of service quality (faster, cheaper...), not in terms of "living up to the knowledge we have on the guest or booker". Recognizing every guest is a formal part of the behavioural norms, yet not of the operating procedures where personal service is being defined in terms of eye contact, listening and adjusting to the preferred communication channel of the guest.

The corporate clients feel the trust to personally indicate when a problem or complaint arises. However, feedback from participants is only extracted from satisfaction surveys. The brand wants to apply a b-2-b kind of CRM in which also the complaint handling procedures of the company will be redeveloped.

Case study observations in 2008

The merger implies that it becomes easier to reach potential customers, as the budgets grow. Customers can be targeted by means of a larger set of advertisement techniques. Relationships with the bookers yield the trust necessary to obtain critical and legitimate feedback.

By means of satisfaction surveys – with an average return of 14% - customer feedback is continuously extracted. Customer satisfaction surveys are used for quality purposes, not for customer profiling purposes. In addition to the answer of 2006, within three to four years the group aims to deploy relationship oriented interactivity between employees and participants directly. Broad scale communication efforts are the most important efforts when it comes to brand loyalty.

Discussion from a brand management perspective

Brand efforts must be focused on the entire category: the entire decision making chain must share the same brand personality scope, based on quality, reassurance, and trust characteristics. The brand personality is unique and undividable. Whereas the key values and products remain the same the intensity of the relation can vary. Besides being a driver of cost efficiencies, company size is an important trust and leadership characteristic. The merger enlarges these characteristics and should improve the position of the group as a preferred partner (market share and network effect). Complaints express the will of customers to continue the relation on condition the (perceived) obstruction is removed. Consider the complaints as a key contribution to strengthen brand reputation, turn potential opponents into fans and improve the organization in a concrete way.

Discussion from a GRM perspective

Brands develop the power to make people pay more in return for higher expectations and also provide a ‘license’ to build a personal relationship. GRM could help the group to make clients and guests pay more for customized products and services once the first service encounters have successfully been accomplished.

Brand loyalty programs are generally benefit and reward oriented club or card programs. Brand relationships generally are value-based relationships. Relationships developed within a GRM program can also have an ‘ad hoc’ character: what needs to be done here and now to achieve ‘perceived (personal) relationship quality’.

In marketing environments client or guest profiling is generally a one-time issue; in GRM client or guest profiling is a dynamic challenge. In GRM guest feedback forms are part of the profiling effort. Meaningful guest dialogues aim for guest co-creation, thus, they avoid quality issues, reduce privacy as an issue and finally avoid (over)familiarity becoming a problem.

PERSPECTIVES ON GUEST RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Synthesizing the observations and discussions of the five previous stakeholder sections, 7 different perspectives can be distinguished on how GRM principles could serve as a reference point in the process of brand building:

(1) *Making the genuine relationship part of the brand values;*
By recognising that a majority of guests and clients consider a meaningful dialogue to be a need (Hermans & Melissen, 2008). Trust and recognition through personal relationship thus is a value and a reason for repurchase. This elevates the value-in-use theory by Woodruff & Gardial (1996), commented by Gronroos (2006), to a brand level

(2) *Promoting the brand loyalty program*;
By encouraging frequent guests to enrol into the frequent guest program and by giving card holders individualized attention and rewards, providing them with ‘a-hotel-within-a-hotel’

(3) *Living the brand service standard*;

By encouraging staff to assume accountability for the relationship they become the face of the brand, and build its credibility; returning guests will have their own storybook within a company

(4) *Substituting unprofitable marketing efforts*;
In some cases GRM projects are started to reduce marketing budgets; marketing responsibilities are shifted back to operations; the company chooses to grow through co-creation and networking

(5) *Compensating for the familiarity issues*;
By following up on all returning clients and guests whose original emotional experience is tainted or who experience a shift in the purpose or reason of their visit; relationship efforts also compensate for the fact of frequently changing staff, which induces de-familiarization

(6) *Managing spill-over effects and spin-offs*;
Capitalizing on increasing trust from guests, hospitality companies can explore value creation outside the core business, offering unreached levels of personalization and customization also outside the regular time frame reserved for service (before arrival and after departure, and in virtual and/or social networks)

(7) *Reversing the order of the brand development process*;
By first starting to understand individual clients, experiencing the path of relational growth and opportunity and guests and only then grow to the market level.

The complexity for companies lies in the change of the overall mindset; "the firm no longer markets to customers, but it fosters a relationship with all or a subset of them through interactivity programs that span marketing, operations, information systems, accounting and organizational functions" (Piccoli et al., 2003).

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluating the 2008 situation, the case company seems to meet all requirements of category leadership. Maybe the growth process could be summarized as follows: in 2006 the consensus was that "the group delivers excellent service and facilities at a sharp price". In 2008 that consensus became: "the group is most special and to make the most of your meeting it offers a wide range of specialist services at a very competitive price". The next logical step is to formalize this ambition and activate the suitable attributes to express this leadership.

In general terms and with the reservations towards generalization inherent to exploratory research, the conclusion of this case study is that GRM is unable to communicate its benefits to the market. This way, GRM will remain dependent on brand management. Conversely, as competition keeps increasing substantially, and it takes more for brands to be distinctive, brand management will need new advantages to communicate to the market in order to attract customers. Returning guests have different needs and a different perception of service. In view of the high value they represent (Bell et al., 2002) a brand cannot ignore their demands.

One of the findings of this study is that not all managers are aware of the differences between, on the one hand, CRM or GRM processes and competencies and on the other hand branding processes and competencies. In their own right, brands do build relationships but this relationship is not necessarily built on mutual knowledge and objectives, in contrast to GRM built relationships. Similar are the brand managers who think to possess the capability of speaking 'meaningful dialogue' language, yet clearly take a conceptual or value driven approach to relationship building, rather than a one-to-one approach. In GRM a clear distinction is made between pro-active service and relationship management. The misconceptions of CRM and GRM in relation to branding and vice versa can prove to be a pitfall for companies when considering implementing GRM properly. Still, the company under study in this paper expected to find interest in a planned and symbiotic approach to GRM to reinforce its brand building efforts. This paper has identified seven perspectives on how GRM can contribute to a successful brand strategy. These perspectives are based on which concrete GRM initiatives can be developed, respecting the delimitation of territories and authority of brand engineers and relationship managers.

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