Brand Building Activities of Service Sector MSMEs: Insights from Owner-Managers in India

Mr. Amol Randive
Department of Management, Vishwakarma University, Pune, India - 411048

Dr. Jayashree Vispute
Department of Management, Vishwakarma University, Pune, India - 411048

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The list of brand building activities used all over the world is long. The use of these activities or tools varies across geographies and sectors. As far as Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are concerned, their preferences are not the same as large ones. Furthermore, there is very limited research with focus on services sector MSMEs. This study analyses the same in the Indian context.

Objectives: a) To understand the extent of use of different branding building activities by MSMEs.; and b) To analyse key associated variables and factors influencing branding activities.

Design/Methodology/Approach: 210 service sector MSMEs in India are included in the study. A structured questionnaire was circulated to understand the level of use of varied brand building activities. The data is analysed to understand comparative use of brand building activities in the service sector and also to identify differences based on industry, customer base, scale, and other factors.

Findings: Considering the overall scope of brand building activities used by the MSMEs, they are found to be taking a cautious approach to brand building. Although in varying degree and less frequency, MSMEs are exploring alternate forms of brand building activities. Some of the common things amongst service sector MSMEs are customer loyalty, customer referrals, word-of-mouth, and brand owner or network activities.

Originality/Value: The study presents insights about the brand building activities based on responses provided by the MSME owner-managers. This can be helpful to the branding and marketing professionals dealing with service sector MSMEs.

KEYWORDS

Brand Building, Promotion Mix, Service Sector, MSMEs, MSME Branding, Marketing Communication, Brand Investment, Brand Equity

INTRODUCTION

Parameswaran (2018) asserts, branding is not a function of budget and scale. It can be done by all sorts of enterprises. Brand building improves the competitive strength of enterprises (ET Contributors, 2018) and is important for sustainability and long-term viability of every business (Nigerian Tribune, 2017). Another perspective is that, brand building activities and related investments are made by firms to support the management of product and corporate brands (Biedenbach et.al., 2022). However, MSMEs seem to take a more cautious approach to brand building (Sudhakar et al, 2017).

Brand building is a broad concept and covers aspects such as essentials to build a strong brand (Farquhar, 1989); way to build a brand, such as building the knowledge in minds of consumers (Campbell and Keller, 2003); key steps in developing a brand right from identify to brand value creation (Keller, 2013); everything a brand does is communication such as packaging, conversations, channels, etc. (Economist, 2009); and brand building activities (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010; Edelman, 2010; Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Kotler and Pförtsch (2006) assert that the brand building is essentially building brand equity through means such as brand awareness, linking brand associations, eliciting positive brand emotions, and facilitating strong customer-brand relationship.

The focus of this study in brand building activities i.e., initiatives and tools used by the firms to communicate and engage with customers. Reden and Swait (2004) have used the term Brand Investment for the activities carried out by a firm to assure its customers about brand promise and to demonstrate firm's long-term commitment. "Marketers are increasingly embracing alternative forms of brand-building activities," state Keller and Lehmann (2005).

A parallel for brand building in MSMEs, in the context of large organizations could be marketing communication. In large organizations, integrated marketing communication is considered critical for brand building (Spence and Essoussi, 2014; Reid et al, 2005). Raki and Shakur (2018) emphasise that, beyond brand identity creation, brand building also includes marketing programs for continuous and continued communication. Marketing communications in SMEs are primarily aimed at utilizing social networks, advertising, use of websites, interactions, loyalty, etc. (Khomenko and Pimonenko, 2021).

Service Sector in India is highly diverse (KPMG and CII, 2016; Balasubramanyam and Virmani, 2018); largest and fastest growing (Mukherjee, 2013); contributes to more than 60% of the economy and more than 28% of employment (Deloitte and CII, 2017). This study mainly covers Champion Service sectors, as classified by PIB, GOI (2018), such as information technology & information technology enabled services; tourism & hospitality; transport & logistics; accounting & finance; professional services; and education services among others. MSME branding research has not developed as much as service branding evolved over the last few decades since it is clearly distinguished from products (Horan et al., 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The brands are always evolving on the basis of market conditions and stakeholder expectations (Kotler and Pförtsch, 2006). Building brands around specific customer segments helps create more customer equity (Rust et al, 2004). This point of view is also supported by (Reklaitis and Pileliene, 2019) who state that "depending on the type of consumers a company is dealing with, marketing communication holds its own peculiarities".

In the service industry, it is not just heterogeneity of service but also that of markets has made branding increasingly important (Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006). The degree to homogeneity in the market is one of the key market factors influencing branding decisions (Cancan Lu, 2014). In case of service-based brands (as opposed to product-based brands), customers experience the brand at various levels and involve multiple customer interfaces; and service branding requires a tailored approach (McDonald et al, 2001). Service firms vary widely by size, right from large ones such as banks, telecom, insurance, etc. to accountants, instructors, carpenters, etc. offering services at a smaller scale (Prabhakar, 2018). "Branding plays a special role in service companies because strong brands increase customers' trust of the invisible purchase," states Berry (2000).

Wolfe and Moffitt (1991) define local brands as those that exist within a particular country or geographic area. Whereas international brands have globalized elements in the marketing mix, and global brands use the same marketing mix across all target markets globally (Schuiling and Kapferer, 2004). The key advantages of local brands, as summarized by Schuiling and Kapferer (2004) based on extensive research, are such as "better response to local needs, flexibility of pricing strategy, possibility of responding to local or international competition, possibility of balancing a portfolio of brands, possibility of responding to needs not covered by international brands, and possibility of fast entry into new markets"

Although brand building tools are not fundamentally different in B2C and B2B markets, priorities typically vary significantly (Kotler and Pförtsch, 2006). The marketing strategies have to be on different presumptions in B2B and B2C markets (Reklaitis and Pileliene, 2019). One of the challenges in branding building, as stated by Biedenbach et.al (2022) is, a variety of actions available for initiating and carrying out brand building adds complexity. Biedenbatch (2012) further adds, "the differences with regard to size and industry sector could affect decision makers and their assessment of the dimensions forming brand equity".

Considering above literature review-based findings, we have identified below key research objectives;

a) To understand the extent of use of different branding building activities by MSMEs.

b) To analyse key associated variables and factors influencing branding activities

METHODOLOGY AND MEASUREMENT

Research Methodology

- Survey Participants: 210 Owners-Managers of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises in the Service Sector
- Survey Conduction: Structured Questionnaire circulated online to the target enterprises
- Characteristics of participating enterprises: Presence in Pune, Maharashtra; Independently owned (not a subsidiary of large firm); and in existence for at least 2 years

Profile of enterprises

- Number of employees (headcount): 2-10 (68%), 11-50 (20%), 51-200 (8%), 201-500 (3%), and 501-1000 (1%)
- Average annual turnover of last 3 years in INR (Crores): Less than 1 (54%), 1-5 (28%), 6-10 (8%), 11-50 (6%), 51-100 (2%), and 101-250 (2%)
- Years since establishment: 2-5 years (37%), 6-10 years (27%), 11-20 years (22%), 21-40 years (10%), and 40+ years (5%)
- Customers by Geography: District-level (49%), State-level (25%), Nation-wide (17%), and Global (10%)
- Size of the Marketing Team (count of full-time sales and marketing employees): Zero (38%), 1 (22%), 2-5 (31%), 6-10 (6%), 11-20 (1%), and 20+ (2%)
- Sectors: Banking and Financial Services (6%); Courier, Logistics, Transport services (7%); E-Commerce (5%); Education (3%); Entertainment (1%); Event Management (4%); Healthcare Services (6%); Hospitality Services (6%); Household Services (7%); IT and ITes (5%); Media and Entertainment (1%); Professional services (7%); Real estate (2%); Repair and Maintenance Services (5%); Retail (13%); Trade (21%); and Travel and Tourism Services (1%)

Brand Building Activities or Tools:

"Brand building tools (or activities) are the means of marketing communication by which companies aim to inform, persuade, and remind customers – directly or indirectly – about its products and brands", state Kotler and Pförtsch (2006). As the customer decision journey spans across traditional offline as well as digital environments (Kannan and Alice, 2017; Bruhn et al, 2012), it is important to cover varied activities. To summarize, a statement by Aaker (2015) is most relevant here: "Brand builders now face a very different world, a world with a set of communications vehicles that are numerous, complex, and dynamic".

Table 1. Classification Brand Building Activities

S.N.	Brand Building Activities	Reference
1	advertising, public relations, events, sponsoring, internet domain with the same name, online marketing, newsletter, music, videos, uniforms / branded clothes, structured recruitment process, internal communication rules / policies, internal brand communication, and internal brand measurement.	Bresciani and Eppler (2010)
2	close and personal; mass-personalization; mass; and e-communication.	Centeno and Hart (2011)
3	advertising, consumer & trade promotions, public relations, event sponsorships and personal selling.	Hoeffler (2003)
4	advertising broadcast, print, outdoor, digital marketing, online marketing); sales promotion (sampling, coupon, gifts, sign-up rebates, price promotions); personal communications (personal selling, telemarketing, training, trade shows, word of mouth, online social networks); publicity & public relations (press releases, press conferences, special events, sponsorships, thought leadership, newspaper coverage); service delivery points (service outlets, frontline employees, self-service delivery points, websites & apps, brochures, FAQs); and corporate design (signage, interior décor, vehicles, equipment, uniforms, stationery).	Wirtz and Lovelock (2022)

Source: Prepared by Researchers

DATA ANALYSIS

Tables 2. Conventional Brand Building Activities preferred by MSMEs

S.N.	Conventional Brand Building Activities	Mode	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Variance	Min	Max	5 (%)	4 (%)	3 (%)	2 (%)	1 (%)
1	Personal selling / direct sales	4	3.92	4	1.14	1.3	1	5	35	41	13	3	8
2	Trade shows / Exhibitions	1	2.54	3	1.42	2.03	1	5	13	13	27	10	37

3	Brand owner activities	1	2.76	3	1.5	2.24	1	5	18	15	25	9	33
4	Press conference	1	2	1	1.33	1.77	1	5	8	8	17	11	56
5	PR, Publicity	1	2.26	2	1.45	2.12	1	5	13	8	21	9	50
6	Advertising – TV	1	1.92	1	1.35	1.83	1	5	9	8	10	12	60
7	Advertising – Newspaper	1	2.14	1	1.39	1.93	1	5	10	7	20	11	51
8	Advertising – Radio/FM	1	1.88	1	1.28	1.63	1	5	7	8	13	13	60
9	Advertising – Outdoor	1	2.3	2	1.46	2.13	1	5	12	12	19	10	48
10	Newsletters	1	2.08	1	1.35	1.83	1	5	9	9	15	15	52
11	Storytelling	1	1.93	1	1.3	1.7	1	5	8	6	14	13	58
12	Celebrity endorsement	1	1.78	1	1.23	1.52	1	5	6	7	10	13	64
13	Events by the company	1	2.15	1	1.4	1.97	1	5	10	10	18	10	52
14	Sponsorships to events	1	2.03	1	1.35	1.82	1	5	8	10	15	12	55
15	Stationary – branded	1	2.31	2	1.54	2.36	1	5	15	13	11	12	50
16	Uniforms - branded	1	2.28	1	1.51	2.29	1	5	12	16	10	11	51
17	Other	1	1.93	1	1.36	1.84	1	5	8	10	11	9	62

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the primary data.

Likert Scale for 'Use': Almost every time = 5, Frequently use = 4, Occasionally /Sometimes = 3, Almost Never = 2, Never = 1

- Top 5 (most used): Personal selling / direct sales, Brand owner activities, Trade shows / Exhibitions, Stationary – branded, Advertising – Outdoor
- Bottom 5 (least used): Celebrity endorsement, Advertising – Radio/FM, Advertising – TV, Storytelling, and Press conference

Table 3. Digital Branding Activities (Website, SEO, e-commerce) preferred by MSMEs

S.N.	Website, SEO, e-commerce	Mode	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Variance	Min	Max
1	Website	1	1.33	1	0.47	0.22	1	2
2	Search Engine Optimization	1	1.3	1	0.46	0.21	1	2
3	Search Engine Marketing/PPC	1	1.2	1	0.4	0.16	1	2
4	Website Analytics	1	1.2	1	0.4	0.16	1	2
5	e-commerce website for sales	1	1.18	1	0.38	0.15	1	2
6	Use of third-party portal for sales	1	1.22	1	0.41	0.17	1	2
7	Only listing on other web portals	1	1.15	1	0.36	0.13	1	2

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the primary data.

- Top 3 (most used): Website, Search Engine Optimization, and Use of third-party portals for sales
- Bottom 3 (least used): only listing on other web portals, e-commerce website for sales, and Website Analytics

Table 4. Digital Branding Activities (Social Media Marketing) preferred by MSMEs

S.N.	Social Media Marketing	Mode	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Variance	Min	Max
1	Facebook profile of owner-managers	1	1.38	1	0.49	0.24	1	2
2	Facebook Page of enterprise	1	1.36	1	0.48	0.23	1	2
3	Facebook posts boosting	1	1.23	1	0.42	0.18	1	2
4	Facebook Ads	1	1.19	1	0.39	0.15	1	2
5	Facebook Shop	1	1.13	1	0.34	0.12	1	2

6	YouTube Account of leader / business	1	1.09	1	0.29	0.08	1	2
7	YouTube Channel of enterprise	1	1.1	1	0.29	0.09	1	2
8	YouTube Ads	1	1.08	1	0.27	0.07	1	2
9	Instagram Account/Page	1	1.37	1	0.48	0.23	1	2
10	Instagram for Business	1	1.33	1	0.47	0.22	1	2
11	Instagram posts boosting	1	1.3	1	0.46	0.21	1	2
12	Instagram Ads	1	1.2	1	0.4	0.16	1	2
13	WhatsApp Number	2	1.62	2	0.49	0.24	1	2
14	WhatsApp for Business Account	2	1.51	2	0.5	0.25	1	2
15	LinkedIn Accounts of Owner-Mangers	1	1.21	1	0.41	0.17	1	2
16	LinkedIn Page of enterprise	1	1.21	1	0.41	0.17	1	2
17	LinkedIn Ads	1	1.15	1	0.36	0.13	1	2
18	Pinterest	1	1.08	1	0.27	0.07	1	2
19	Twitter	1	1.1	1	0.3	0.09	1	2
20	Quora	1	1.07	1	0.25	0.06	1	2
21	Signal	1	1.05	1	0.22	0.05	1	2
22	Telegram	1	1.08	1	0.27	0.07	1	2
23	Viber	1	1.04	1	0.2	0.04	1	2

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the primary data.

- Top 3 (most used): WhatsApp Number, WhatsApp for Business Account, Facebook profile of owner-managers, Instagram Account/Page, and Facebook Page of enterprise
- Bottom 3 (least used): Viber, Signal, Quora, YouTube Ads, and Pinterest

Table 5. Digital Branding Activities (Other Digital Marketing Tools) preferred by MSMEs

S.N.	Other Digital Marketing Tools	Mode	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Variance	Min	Max
1	Email Marketing	1	1.34	1	0.48	0.23	1	2
2	Webinars/virtual events	1	1.21	1	0.41	0.17	1	2
3	Content marketing - Videos	1	1.28	1	0.45	0.2	1	2
4	Content marketing - Blogs	1	1.2	1	0.4	0.16	1	2
5	Content marketing – Reports/Papers	1	1.2	1	0.4	0.16	1	2
6	Content Curation	1	1.2	1	0.4	0.16	1	2
7	Influencer/Affiliate Marketing	1	1.23	1	0.42	0.18	1	2
8	Own Mobile app(s)	1	1.2	1	0.4	0.16	1	2
9	Mobile Marketing	1	1.34	1	0.48	0.23	1	2

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the primary data.

- Top 3 (most used): Email Marketing, Mobile Marketing, and Content marketing - Videos
- Bottom 3 (least used): Content marketing – Blogs, Content marketing – Reports/Papers, and Content Curation

Table 6. Top sources of new business opportunities and more revenue for enterprises

S.N.	Top sources of new business opportunities and more revenue	% of MSMEs
1	More orders from the existing customers	78
2	Referrals and word of mouth by existing customers	66
3	Network and connections of the business owners	61
4	New customers through the efforts of sales team	37
5	New leads through branding and marketing activities	19

6	Orders through e-commerce portal or external partner	14

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the primary data.

Based on the findings, as presented in the Table 6, the MSMEs get most of their new business from existing customers followed by referrals and word of mouth by existing customers.

Table 7. Correlation between Brand Building Activities and other constructs/variables

S.N.		Conventional Brand Building Activities	Digital Brand Building Activities
1	Digital Brand Building Activities	0.478	NA
2	Enterprise Performance	0.113	0.058
3	Brand Performance	0.125	0.136
4	Brand Orientation	0.18	0.33
5	Customer Orientation	0.155	0.253
6	Competitor Orientation	0.372	0.191
7	Entrepreneurial Orientation	0.394	0.298
8	Brand Vision	0.051	0.259
9	Inter-departmental Cooperation	0.306	0.327
10	Brand Resources	0.208	0.095
11	Marketing Communication Capabilities	0.368	0.298
12	Innovation Capabilities	0.223	0.143
13	Number of Employees	0.186	0.314
14	Turnover	0.23	0.253
15	Agency Association	0.183	0.346
16	Full-time Marketing Employees	0.38	0.439
17	Part-time Marketing Employees	0.401	0.365
18	Branding Team Employees	0.43	0.417
19	Lead Source: More orders from the existing customers	-0.112	0.45
20	Lead Source: Referrals and word of mouth by existing customers	-0.197	0.459
21	Lead Source: Network and connections of the business owners	-0.057	0.429
22	Lead Source: New customers through the efforts of sales team	0.204	0.396
23	Lead Source: New leads through branding and marketing activities	0.068	0.357
24	Lead Source: Orders through e-commerce portal or external partner	0.016	0.596

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the primary data.

Variables that have moderate corelation with Conventional Brand Building Activities: 1) Digital Brand Building Activities; 2) count of Part-time Marketing Employees; and 3) count of Branding Team Employees

Variables that have moderate corelation with Digital Brand Building Activities: 1) Lead Source: Orders through e-commerce portal or external partner; 2) Lead Source: Referrals and word of mouth by existing customers; 3) Lead Source: More orders from the existing customers; 4) Lead Source: More orders from the existing customers; 5) Lead Source: Network and connections of the business owners; and 6) count of Full-time Marketing Employees

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

With respect to the first objective of the study (extent of use of different branding building activities by MSMEs): The most commonly used conventional brand building activities are Personal selling / direct sales and Brand owner activities. The next set of activities preferred by MSMEs in PR, Publicity; Uniforms – branded; Advertising – Outdoor; Stationary – branded; and Trade shows / Exhibitions. The activities less preferred by the service sector MSMEs are Advertising – Radio/FM; Advertising – TV; Storytelling; Press conference; Sponsorships to events; Newsletters; Advertising – Newspaper; and Events by the company. The least used activity is endorsements. As far as digital branding activities are concerned, most preferred are Search Engine Optimization, Website, WhatsApp Number, WhatsApp for Business Account, Facebook profile of owner-managers, Instagram Account/Page, and Facebook Page of enterprise, Email Marketing, Mobile Marketing, and Content marketing – Videos.

With respect to the second objective of the study (key associated variables and factors influencing branding activities): Top sources of business opportunities for service sectors MSMEs are more orders from the existing customers, and referrals and word of mouth by existing customers. The factors that have greater influence on brand building activities is team (marketing and branding) size.

Considering the overall scope of brand building activities used by the MSMEs, they are found to be taking a cautious approach to brand building as noted by Sudhakar et al (2017). Although in varying degree and less frequency, MSMEs are exploring alternate forms of brand building activities as noted by Keller and Lehmann (2005). The customer loyalty, customer referrals, word-of-mouth, brand owner/network activities are commonly found in the MSMEs in line with the findings of Khomenko and Pimonenko (2021).

It is observed that service sector MSMEs in India are relying more on the personal selling or direct marketing. Overall use of the digital brand building activities is quite less so far. The social media marketing is predominantly based on WhatsApp, Facebook (now Meta), and Instagram. The use of content marketing is limited.

The corelation between conventional brand building activities; and enterprise performance, brand performance, brand orientation, and customer orientation are found to be very weak. The corelation between digital brand building activities; and brand performance, competitor orientation, brand resources, and innovation capabilities are found to be very weak.

Surprisingly, new leads though branding and marketing activities are relatively less when compared with other sources of new business opportunities. This is the least used source only next to e-commerce portals or external partners.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The major limitations of this study are as follows: a) It is conducted in the Maharashtra State, in India; and b) the respondents are from the select 17 service sectors.

There is scope for further research: a) to study the usefulness of return of investment of various brand building activities; and b) to study in detail the impact of size or scale of the enterprise on the brand building activities.

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