

Internal branding as a tool for integrated organisational alignment

ABSTRACT

Within an evolving business environment, it is central to the continuing success of organisations that internal communication be taken into consideration in the quest to increase organisational competitive advantage. This paper explores the importance of an alignment existing between internal organisational values and the external organisational image. As such, to guarantee the promotion of employee satisfaction through an internal organisational alignment strategy, improvement should be made to internal communication strategies. As it implemented internal branding initiatives so as to align internal stakeholders with the core organisational values and its external corporate brand image, Absa Bank is the chosen sample. Through qualitative research, the participants concur that the aim of the internal branding initiative is to improve the quality of service rendered, to retain external customers, and to impact positively on the bank's profitability. Based on the research, the data analysis reveals that a key contribution is the conceptualisation of the term 'integrated organisational communication'.

INTRODUCTION

Research conducted by Christensen (2002:162) and Proctor and Doukakis (2003:275) illustrates the fact that some organisations have felt the need to adapt and change the organisational communication strategies they have in place so as to optimise the organisational communication. This is described by Asif and Sargeant (2000:200) and Pace and Faules (1994:22) as a process by which individuals share meaning and it offers the means of creating and implementing the behavioural changes, both internally and externally, of the organisation. In this regard, Sanchez (1999:9) postulates that two-way communication is vital in establishing a clear mission and purpose among employees, and in securing the support the organisation needs to achieve the desired organisational objectives in the ever-changing business environment. In such a business environment, Duncan (2003:2) indicates that the implementation of organisational communication principles and practices will enable organisations to build internal and external customer relationships that create profitable corporate brands.

Claassen and Verwey (1998:73) concur with Duncan (2003:2) and postulate that the South African business and organisational communication environment has been characterised by redefinitions of business practices since the beginning of the nineties and by the repositioning of boundaries as an expression of the global trends. According to research conducted by authors such as Daly, Teague and Kitchen (2003:154), Kaplan and Norton (1996:75), Kitchen and Daly (2002:46), as well as Wells and Spinks (1994:24), these trends include globalisation, amalgamation and mergers of organisations, technological innovation, and customer-centricity. Moreover, Greenall (1994:5) is of the opinion that adopting the notion of a learning organisation, an organisation is forced to recognise that future changes will be necessary both to ensure future competitiveness and organisational success and sustainability. In this regard, Mersham, Rensburg and Skinner's (1995:5) postulation that communication underlies all organisational change such as the amalgamation and merger of organisations, is particularly pertinent.

In essence, a successful internal communication and branding strategy has the power to build and sustain the strategic competitive advantage of an organisation, and in turn promotes a shared identity, coordination, motivation, team spirit and synergy for the internal organisational audience (Einwiller & Will, 2000:4). In this regard, Schultz (2000:18) indicates that branding efforts within the organisation enable an organisation to build cooperation, collaboration and alignment with their internal and external customers on the products, policies and functioning of the organisation. An internal branding approach creates the need for a continuous support process that ensures effective organisational development. As such, the brand must be so powerfully appealing that not only the organisation, but also the employees therein, find self-fulfilment in aligning themselves and their behaviours with said brand. Moreover, a strong corporate brand can only be achieved if the employees support it. Stanier (2001:28) notes that communication plays a vital role in developing programmes to shape an organisational culture into one that engages employees. The establishment of an organisational culture that embraces the core values of the organisation and the internal communication practices enables the alignment between internal branding, organisational values and the organisation's external brand image.

Although there are other communication techniques that could be used as tools for bringing about internal organisational alignment, internal branding has been chosen because a Nexus (NRF, 2004) search revealed that no other studies have been conducted on this topic, yet the available evidence (Tosti & Stotz, 2002:8) points to the fact that internal branding is a successful tool in bringing about internal organisational alignment with the external organisational image. Bearing this in mind, the key premise of the research conducted by Stanier (2001:31) and Tosti and Jackson (2000:2) is the role that internal branding strategies play in the alignment between internal organisational core values, the organisational culture and the external image the organisation portrays. As such, attention is paid to the importance of internal branding and organisational culture to the overall organisational communication strategy owing to the fact that internal branding is an organisational tool that needs to be managed to create an alignment between the culture of an organisation and the external image it portrays. Essentially, this research will add to the existing body of knowledge in that it introduces a new theoretical concept, integrated organisational alignment, and moreover has a unique focus on the above-mentioned key concepts. In this regard, it is possible to describe IOC as: a cross-functional, strategic, meaning-generation process of interaction, which plans, executes and monitors organisational messages designed to motivate or influence behaviour and to communicate with the organisation's internal and external audiences to the mutual benefits of both and to the organisation's improved competitive advantage.

The approach in order to achieve this is presented in the overriding research design in the form of a one-shot intrinsic case study utilising a documentation study and telephonic and e-mail interviews as the methods of qualitative data collection, thus establishing the use of a qualitative mix.

Structurally, the article evolves thus: methodological issues are dealt with first, focus is then placed on the research problem, the methodological orientation including the literature review, the findings and interpretation, while the article concludes with the overall recommendations.

1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Farner, Luthans and Sommer (2001:351) indicate that in the pursuit of organisational success, organisations traditionally have focused on building and sustaining relationships with external customers, the belief being that the external, paying customers would ensure the financial success of an organisation. As such, the potential impact of internal customer on the successful functioning of the organisation was largely overlooked. Whilst organisational communication focused on external organisational branding, communication within many organisations was not considered to be of equal importance. However, Kitchen and Daly (2002:45) report that the ever-evolving global environment in which the organisation operates emphasises the concept of change and the organisations' abilities to adapt to change. Moreover, Stratecom (2000:3) note that this cognisance of the impact of change on the organisation has lead some contemporary organisations to realise the inherent importance of internal customers to successful organisational functioning.

Expanding the discussion on change into the context of the financial services sector, Balmer and Stotvig (1997:168) postulate that the financial services sector is a sophisticated and over-traded sector. The first consideration for the financial services sector as a parameter for study is the considerable change that Payne, Holt and Frow (2000:267) have observed in the financial services business environment over the past ten years. According to research conducted by Kitchen and Daly (2002:46) and Wells and Spinks (1994:24), the most dominant of the changes include consumer demand, new competitors and technological advancements. In order for these service organisations to continue to exist in such changing times, Farner et al. (2001:351) postulate that new business strategies, which include new communication strategies, need to be implemented. Moreover, Payne et al. (2000:268) are of the opinion that as a result of these changes, banking service organisations are paying more attention to increasing employee salience and value through internal marketing efforts. Farner et al. (2001:350) and Kuei (1999:784) indicate that, in this rapidly changing environment, financial institutions are investing in training programmes and have put a considerable effort into internal branding, which is an effort to enhance employee value. As such, the American Productivity and Quality Center (1995:3) conclude that focus needs to be on the implementation of internal communication techniques so as to align the core organisational values with the external image the organisation portrays. Moreover, the Performance Enhancement Group (2002:2) indicates that the organisation needs to ensure that the message it communicates to its external audience is built upon its key organisational values and vision, and that these values are communicated internally throughout the organisation.

Given the above, the research problem is: What is the role of internal branding as a tool for internal organisational alignment amongst banking service organisations in South Africa that have undergone an amalgamation?

Based on the above, the specific research aims addressed are:

1. To determine the role of internal organisational communication as a tool for internal organisational alignment amongst banking service organisations in South Africa that have undergone an amalgamation
2. To determine the role of corporate identity as a tool for internal organisational alignment amongst banking service organisations in South Africa that have undergone an amalgamation
3. To determine the role of organisational culture as a tool for internal organisational alignment amongst banking service organisations in South Africa that have undergone an amalgamation.

2. METHODOLOGY

Based on the preceding discussion regarding the identified problem statement, the ensuing section is a review of the various stages of the research methodology implemented.

2.1 Literature review

Three key concepts are identified as pertinent; namely internal organisational communication, corporate identity and organisational culture. As such, the following presents discussions on these three key concepts:

2.1.1 Internal Organisational Communication

Based on the acknowledgement by Dolphin and Fan (2000:100) regarding the importance of organisational communication, Sanchez (1999:9) postulates that an organisation must first acknowledge who its internal and external customers are and then develop relationships with these customers. Thus, the focus is traditionally on the needs of the customers. However, Stanier (2001:31) postulates that focus first needs to be inside the organisation before it can be outside the organisation. In essence, the needs of the employees are addressed first so as to ensure increased organisational performance. Satisfied employees deliver a better quality of service to external customers, thus ultimately attaining greater customer-centricity. The primary focus is thus on the satisfaction of internal customers' needs. In this regard, Sanchez (1999:9) is of the opinion that it is of strategic importance that management and employees engage in open dialogue, as management should know how the employees perceive the organisation, while the employees should know how the organisation perceives their inputs. This is known as organisational communication and the successful management of employees requires such communication. Kitchen and Daly (2002:47) expand upon the research conducted by Sanchez (1999:9) by indicating that the quality of communication between the people who comprise the organisation is a crucial determinant of organisational success.

Moreover, research conducted by Argenti (1996:77) indicates that as a result of the changing business environment, organisations have to take cognisance of how they communicate with employees, which is also known as internal communication. According to Power and Rienstra (1999:504) and Trout, de Leon and Bateman (1995:51), internal communication is described as a process of communication within the organisation itself, and with other business divisions within the organisation. The process involves gathering, processing, disseminating and storing information. In addition, Quinn and Hargie (2004:146) believe that effective internal communication is a key concept that attempts to increase participation, increase organisational affinity, secure the widespread ownership of corporate goals and implement total quality management programmes. Newstrom and Davis (1997:49) moreover indicate the importance of communication within an organisation in stating the belief that communication acts as a vital mechanism in the functioning of an organisation. Dolphin and Fan (2000:104) further also view internal communication as a means for organisations to gain and sustain competitive advantage through the successful communication with their key audiences. Such an internal communication focus indicates that an organisational strategy, which encompasses effective corporate identity positioning and the communication of the organisational benefits, is a crucial aspect in the development of strategic competitive advantage.

Therefore, it can be deduced that one of the ways to communicate effectively within the organisation is to adopt an internal branding strategy. McGoon (1998:16) indicates that the scope of internal communication activities is broadening to include internal branding to employees, suppliers, and other business associates. Furthermore, Bak, Vogt, George and Greentree (1994:38) postulate that the premise of internal branding is that internal exchanges between the organisation and its employees must already be operating effectively before the organisation can be successful in achieving its goals regarding external markets, thereby implying that there needs to be an alignment between the messages the organisation is sending to both its internal and external stakeholders. In order for this to be effective, employees need to feel involved in the functioning of the organisation, and employees need to be engaged as active participants in the organisational branding processes. Accordingly, Hugo-Burrows (1998:91) believes that effective communication with and among employees encompasses a substantial part of the internal branding communication of an organisation and that it is crucial to its success.

2.1.2 Corporate identity

Expanding upon the dynamism of organisational communication and the identified importance of internal branding as an internal communication strategy, it can be argued that organisational communication comprises various communication disciplines. Each of these disciplines contributes to the holistic functioning of the organisational communication strategy of an organisation. In this regard, Blumenthal (2001:1) postulates that internal marketing and internal branding are such functions. It is significant to note that the term 'internal branding' is used even though internal marketing is addressed, as it is the functioning of internal branding that is pertinent. Expanding upon Blumenthal's (2001:1) suggestion, Stratecom (2000:4) is of the opinion that, from an organisational communication approach, internal branding involves marketing and human resource functions strategically supporting each other's communications, thus ensuring they are brand-driven and aligned at the core level of the organisation. Furthermore, internal branding is an aspect of corporate branding – which refers to any branding initiatives in which the organisation engages – and corporate identity is an element attributed to corporate branding.

Thus, with regard to the trends in the business environment, Macrae and Uncles (1997:65) are of the opinion that the concept of corporate identity has assumed renewed importance in management processes. Alessandri (2001:173) indicates that corporate identity is perceived to be an endorsement of the brand and of corporate values and that it is evident in every aspect of the corporate brand experience, from the visual aspects to the emotional associations people have with it. Thus, the consistent use and exposure of this corporate identity in all forms of communication aids in the public's learning about the organisation and influences the public's perception of the organisation. Expanding upon the suggestions by Alessandri (2001:173), the definitions of corporate identity by

Cornelissen and Elving (2003:116) and Van Riel (1997:289) describe corporate identity as the strategic development of a distinct and coherent image of an organisation that is consistently communicated to stakeholders through the corporate identity mix, which comprises symbolism, planned communication and behaviour. From this definition it can be summated that the nature of the corporate identity characteristics set will affect performance positively, if the characteristics are appealing to the internal audiences of the organisation and to external stakeholders. Stanier (2001:29) therefore, indicates that the role of the employee becomes increasingly important as employees are the link between the customer and the organisation. Thus, the role that the employees can play in an organisation needs to be viewed as an asset to the organisation's strategic performance.

2.1.3 Organisational culture

The discussion on organisational change and corporate identity forms the foundation upon which the concept of organisational culture – as an aspect of internal organisational alignment – is reviewed. With regard to the impact of change on organisational alignment, Mersham *et al.* (1995:5) indicate that the business environment has become less predictable and is synonymous with change. All organisations are faced with change; it is the way the organisation manages such change that ensures strategic success. Consequently, change can act as a catalyst for a positive move towards internal organisational alignment. Kitchen and Daly (2002:50) concur with Mersham *et al.* (1995:5) in reiterating that organisational communication is considered to be a key factor in the successful implementation of organisational change and alignment strategies. An organisation, according to research conducted by Varey and White (2000:5), is made up of two inter-related communication systems. Internal communication processes are directed towards the establishment of structure and stability in organising, whilst external communication processes are directed towards innovation by facilitating identification of directions for organisational development. Thus, internal organisational alignment indicates that organisational values should be compatible with organisational goals, as should day-to-day behaviour be consistent with shared values. It requires both communicating relevant organisational values and ensuring that typical organisational behaviour is a reflection of those values and are perceived as such by employees.

Tosti and Jackson (2000:8) are of the opinion that the fact that organisational alignment focuses on business drivers and meaningful results implies that it is often readily accepted and implemented by the management team of the organisation. This is the key to the success of an organisation-wide alignment effort. Employees are viewed as important in that they are ultimately the ones who can successfully implement new internal branding strategies and influence the internal alignment of an organisation. This is because employee behaviour should be aligned with both organisational values and with the organisational culture; these in turn should be reflected in the external image the organisation portrays to the external environment. If these values and behaviours are not internally aligned, the likelihood that external alignment will occur is reduced.

Moreover, research conducted by Rashid, Sambasivan and Johari (2003:708) indicates that organisational culture has received increasing attention in the past few years because of its effects and potential impact on organisational success. Hatch and Schultz (2003:1047) thus describe organisational culture as the internal values, beliefs and basic assumptions that embody the heritage of the organisation and communicate its means to its members.

In this regard, Stanier (2001:29) expands upon research conducted by Hatch and Schultz (2003:1047) and Tosti and Jackson (2000:8), by concluding that the establishment of an organisational culture that embraces the core values of the organisation, employee participation and internal communication practices, enables the alignment between internal branding, organisational values and the external image the organisation portrays to the external environment. Stanier (2001:29) further purports that alignment reflects the extent of an employee's emotional investment in the organisational purpose, regarded as the meshing of organisational purpose with organisational practice. In essence, this occurs when individuals have internalised organisational values and beliefs and can act instinctively in accordance with those values. The establishment of a successful organisation requires the organisation to create structures and develop processes that are aligned with the market the organisation is striving to capture. The vision, mission, values and strategy statements of the organisation are the foundations on which these structures and processes are built. Furthermore, it is of the utmost importance to align the whole organisation to reach that goal with a passion. Internal organisational alignment aids in employee satisfaction, which in turn influences the service quality rendered to external customers.

2.2 Methodological orientation

Qualitative research, which aims to describe and explain a set of concepts, to explore and interpret the relationships between the concepts, and to build theory about a topic (Allan,1993:80), was the method used in this research as the relationship between the concepts of internal communication, corporate identity and organisational culture are explored and interpreted. Moreover, because of the sparseness of research in the fields of organisational communication, internal branding and internal organisational alignment, this is an exploratory study.

2.3 Sampling design

The sample was selected via non-probability purposive sampling, as it does not represent the general population but rather a specific portion thereof. In this regard, the following are the reasons for the selection of Absa Bank as the sample:

- 1) Absa Bank was formed through the merger of a number of smaller banks and insurance companies, namely Allied Bank, TrustBank, United Bank and Volkskas Bank. This

merger resulted in the amalgamation of four bank brandnames into one: Absa Bank. This occurred because the organisational communication practices implemented, especially those relating to internal branding, were first aimed at the employees so that they could accept the changes and be part of the branding exercises. Hendrikse (1999:22) indicates that the aim of Absa Bank's communication campaigns, after the amalgamation in 1998, was to change employee perceptions concerning the organisation and to make Absa Bank an organisation for which people would want to work.

- 2) Absa Bank, according to Hendrikse (1999:23) has implemented major corporate branding and marketing campaigns so as to align its internal brand with its external brand. Reference has been made to the importance of employees (internal customers) to the success of the internal and external brand campaign, as well as to the overall service success of the organisation (Adfocus, 2001:109).
- 3) The amalgamation of the four banks led to the development of a new organisational culture embodying the key tenets of the new bank operating in the new South Africa. As a result of the amalgamation, everything was 'Absadised' internally, and the core value communicated throughout the bank is that "The customer is in charge" (AdFocus, 2001:109). Employees were led to believe that their attitude toward customers and the conversations among themselves, even after hours, have a direct effect on how people actually perceive the bank and the Absa Bank brand (Irwin, 2002:2).
- 4) Seery (2006:1) indicates that Absa Bank has traditionally invested millions of Rands in training staff and implementing internal communications and marketing plans (Harding, 2006a:1) to live up to the brand promises it makes.
- 5) In 2002, Absa Bank was voted Most Loved Financial Services Brand by Markinor/Sunday Times, Best Company to Work For by The Deloitte & Touche Human Capital Corporation, as well as Best Customer Care by The Banking Adjudicator (Absa, 2003d:1). In 2003, Absa Bank was once again voted Most Loved Financial Services Brand by Markinor/Sunday Times and one of the Best Companies to work for. Absa Bank reached the top of the overall banks rating in South Africa in the Markinor Sunday Times Top Brands Survey 2006 (Marsland, 2006:2).

2.4 Research design

The overriding research design is in the form of a one-shot intrinsic case study utilising a documentation study and telephonic and e-mail interviews as methods of qualitative data collection, thus establishing the use of a qualitative mix. The research methodology used comprises a review and analysis of 50 newspaper articles and Absa Bank documents, as well as three semi-structured, in-depth telephone and e-mail interviews held with Angela Bruwer, Dr Johan de Jager and Riana Prins, members of the Absa Bank Group Division of Communication. This department has been chosen in that this particular department disseminated all of the internal communication to the employees throughout the various branches of Absa Bank after the amalgamation of the banks.

2.5 Data analysis

The qualitative data was analysed according to the Morse and Field approach (De Vos, 1998:340). This approach consists of four cognitive processes integral to all qualitative data analysis methods: comprehending, synthesising, theorising, and recontextualising the data.

2.6 Validity and reliability

A valid measurement is described by Delpont (2002:166) and Huysamen (1998:25) as doing what it intends to do, measuring what it is supposed to measure and producing scores whose differences reflect the true differences of the variable being measured rather than mere random errors. However, research conducted by De Vos (2002:351-352) reveals alternate constructs that accurately reflect the qualitative paradigm. These four constructs are identified by De Vos (2002:351-352) as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Within the one-shot case study, the validity was produced because the parameters of the case-study were clearly stated, the population was known and the sample identified. Thus, according to the guidelines set out by De Vos (2002:351-352), the validity has been confirmed. With regard to the documentation study stage of the one-shot case study, research conducted by Strydom and Delpont (2002a:324) reveals that when documents are being analysed, it is of great importance that the researcher should evaluate the validity of the documents. This is because the authors of the documents may harbour ulterior motives, such as seeking prestige and making money. For the purpose of this phase, the documents were collected from a variety of sources, thus increasing the chances of validity as documents from various sources were used and not just from one source. Moreover, the verification of the data was done by means of interviewing people who were knowledgeable about the subject. Thus, the content was benchmarked against the literature review. Moreover, the content of documents studied was discussed with members of the sample group in order to gain their knowledge on the subject, thus further enhancing the reliability and validity of this phase. It can thus be deduced that methodological validity has been attained in that more than one method of research – namely the one-shot intrinsic case study via the documentation study and the telephonic and e-mail interviews – was used.

Reliability refers to the extent to which independent application of the same instrument consistently yields the same or similar results under comparable conditions (Delpont, 2002:168). A pilot study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the questions asked. Within this pilot study, it was determined that the questions were adequate and did not need to be modified. The pilot study was conducted on Linda Hendrikse, an employee within the Absa Bank Group Division of Communication. Reliability was achieved because the questions in the interview were clear and relevant to the common concepts of the research.

3. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

The main sections to be discussed included internal organisational communication, corporate identity and organisational culture.

3.1 Internal organisational communication

The first research aim related to the internal organisational communication aspect of the research question. It was found that within the context of Absa Bank, communication aligns internal organisational processes, systems and stakeholders to support the overall organisational strategy (de Jager, 2003). Prins (2003), moreover indicates that the crux of Absa Bank's organisational communication campaigns are to enable open communication between employees so as to share meaning amongst them as well as to encourage employees to accept organisational change and to adapt their behaviour so as to be aligned with the organisation. Hendrikse (1999:22) highlights that the major goal of Absa Bank's communication campaign has been to inform and to educate so as to encourage change and to obtain acceptance from all stakeholder groups. In this regard, de Jager (2003) states that "Absa Bank considered it of critical importance that all stakeholders understood why the communication strategy was changing".

Barrett (2002:217) maintains that the focal point of communication should be the internal employee, which will enhance the process of cultural change that will result in new behaviour. When the internal culture has changed, an organisation can target the relevant stakeholder groups to ensure that the latter are informed about the changes and how these affect the specific groups. Moreover, a significant number of the interview participants concurred that the drivers bringing about strategy change are often increased customer sophistication, increased competition, globalisation, and technological developments. Based on the research findings by Absa Bank Economic Research Department (1997:5) and Hendrikse (1999:118), garnered from the documentation and De Jager (2003) and Prins (2003) within the e-mail interviews, the most dominant of these trends identified as impacting upon Absa Bank were environmental changes and customer-centricity. As such, Workplay Training & Communications (1998:65) ascertained that Absa Bank is a successful customer-centric organisation in that it builds lasting relationships by listening to, understanding, and responding swiftly to changing customer wants, needs and expectations. According to De Jager (2003), this is achieved by means of the continuous monitoring of customer and employee feedback obtained through employee opinion polls on the intranet and intra-branch focus groups as well as through customer satisfaction interviews. Bruwer (2003) postulates that in order for Absa Bank to adopt a customer-centric business model, internal and external publics were introduced to various organisational initiatives designed to achieve this business model. These initiatives encourage South African financial institutions to move closer to their clients and provide more added values. Thus, Absa Bank realigned its business activities to match a dynamic market environment (Hendrikse, 1999:3). In this regard, Prins (2003) purports that "these issues are forcing Absa Bank to constantly review its purpose and reason for existence and are all indicative of a new, dynamic, ever-evolving business environment, and to thus implement innovations which are intended to make Absa Bank more competitive."

De Jager (2003) moreover indicates that economic, socio-political and technological changes have forced Absa Bank to reposition itself strategically. Bruwer (2003) expands upon De

Jager (2003) by indicating that these changes can be achieved through the identification of key strategic imperatives, namely: increasing market share through focus and service quality; changing the social composition of the workforce; and, broadening access to banking services through information technology and electronic banking systems (Hendrikse, 1999:112). In answering the question, “How are the problems of existence, attributed to the environment, overcome?” all of the participants to the interviews indicated that Absa Bank overcomes these problems through continuous reengineering and improvement of the current customer-centric business model. Service quality and employee and customer retention are only possible if the organisation exercises strict control over service delivery via an integrated approach to service quality and communication. Moreover, it was found that the same was true within the context of Absa Bank in that findings gathered both from the Absa Bank Economic Research Department (1197:5), and from Bruwer (2003), de Jager (2003) and Hendrikse (1999:118) all reiterate the premise that organisational communication and change are mostly prompted by factors external to the bank. In this regard, organisations should strive to facilitate change from the inside of the organisation outwards.

Millar and Rose (1994:15), Dolphin and Fan (2000:100) and Wood (1997:11) purport that the changes impacting on various organisations as a result of the changing nature of today's global economy, indicate that organisational communication provides a competitive advantage for the organisation by helping the organisation to convey its most significant points of distinctiveness and by contributing to the positioning of the organisation in the marketplace. It is thus a key competitive and creative weapon at the disposal of the organisation. Therefore, as a result of the changing nature of the business environment, the organisational communication initiatives implemented by Absa Bank were reformulated. The integrated communication practices now implemented, as compared with those previously employed, are viewed as being more sophisticated, more measurable and more focused on the overall strategic goals. Communication is more open, transparent and more ‘real time’ (Prins, 2003). These specific communication practices are utilised so as to ensure that Absa Bank lives up to the Absa Bank core values. Thus, findings by Bruwer (2003) indicate an agreement between the latter beliefs owing to the fact that Absa Bank has implemented a holistic internal organisational communication campaign conveying Absa Bank's service-positioning strategy and points of distinctiveness from other banking service organisations. Kemp (2001:1) is of the opinion that the internal organisational communication strategies implemented by Absa Bank are a source of competitive advantage for the organisation because the focus on employee commitment and acceptance is upheld. Within the documentation study, *Workplay Training & Communications* (1998:43) concurred with the majority of the participants interviewed by indicating that the internal stakeholders at Absa Bank played a crucial part in the success of the new brand, and in the ultimate profitability of the organisation. It is for this reason that Absa Bank devised a communication plan that has been aimed specifically at Absa Bank's internal stakeholders. A majority of the findings from the documentation study and the participants interviewed, concluded that the internal employees were Absa Bank's most important target market, as Prins (2003) indicated that they interfaced with Absa Bank's external stakeholders, and they thus had the power, according to de Jager (2003), to

make the business-to-customer policy transformation possible. In essence, Colyer (2003:1) concluded that the success of transformation was entrenched in the employees' ability to align themselves with Absa Bank's business and communication strategies, as well as to render high service standards to customers.

3.2 Corporate identity

The second research aim focuses on the manner in which Absa Bank implements its business and branding strategies. Prins (2003) indicates that Absa Bank implemented its corporate brand in a planned process with the aim of creating a favourable reputation for the organisation. In essence, De Jager (2003) expands upon the revelations by Prins (2003) in stating: "Absa approached its corporate branding endeavour in a planned and systematic manner as it would approach any other business process. The corporate brand was communicated to the various stakeholder groups through a series of communication campaigns aimed at creating a favourable reputation for Absa." In this regard, Prins (2003) purports that the branding strategy implemented by Absa Bank acknowledged the merger of the four banking brands into one brand and thus conceptualised and implemented marketing strategies that communicated these changes to all of Absa Bank's stakeholders. Bruwer (2003) and De Jager (2003) indicate that Absa Bank's brand is characterised by a logo which aims to communicate the principles of service and organisational distinctiveness to all of its stakeholders. Moreover, Einwiller and Will (2001:3) indicate that in the hands of a trained leader a corporate brand has the ability to inspire the organisation as a whole to achieve the core organisational values that the brand reflects. The Conference Board (2002:3) maintain that a corporate brand is the foundation of leadership and distinctiveness, providing strategic direction, clarity of purpose and inspiration. The foundations, as laid out by both Einwiller and Will (2001:3) and the Conference Board (2002:3), are conceptualised within the context of Absa Bank because, as Spark (2002:1) and Wood (1999:3) both point out, Absa Bank's management figures were seen as actively supporting the brand promise – which emphasised the core organisational values – through their communications, and were moreover perceived to be living the brand through their daily interactions with all stakeholders. De Jager (2003) and Prins (2003) echo these sentiments by stating that Absa Bank aimed to continue to build, protect and nurture the Absa Bank brand, and further indicating that Absa Bank's corporate vision, that of being a customer-focused financial services group in specific market segments, was becoming a reality through employee training and innovative marketing that challenged the public to acknowledge the positive ways that Absa Bank had affected their lives. Moreover, Absa Bank's organisational goals, objectives and activities were impacted upon by the brand position because they were part of one strategy. This revealed the alignment of the Absa Bank brand, both internally and externally, to realise the corporate vision.

In this regard, Bruwer (2002:1) and Prins (2003) indicate that Absa Bank employees accepted the new Absa Bank brand because of the continuous communication campaigns, training sessions and brand road shows that were held surrounding the fact that the corporate brand was aligned with the strategic organisational values. Due to the single brand initiative, Absa

Bank was confronted with the need to adjust its service strategy so as to be appropriately aligned both internally and externally (De Jager, 2003). Moreover, Prins (2003) indicates that Absa Bank's organisational leverage is closely aligned to the internal service strategy, as the employees work together in teams with customer services, marketing, group communication, and people management, which is the alignment of Marketing and Human Resources functions so as to impact upon the quality of relationships with Absa Bank's internal and external stakeholders. According to Workplay Training & Communications (1998:60), all the employees within Absa Bank are considered to be real or potential brand ambassadors, who are essentially representatives of the brand and who can leave strong impressions of the brand wherever they go. Absa Bank's employees convey something about the brand's identity every time they communicate both with outsiders and with each other in any way that relates to the brand.

De Jager (2003) and Prins (2003) maintain that internal organisational alignment is extremely important to the successful functioning of Absa Bank. Consequently, the branding initiative can be attributed partly to Absa Bank's achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage and partly to the fact that internal branding is viewed as a successful tool for promoting internal organisational alignment. Building the organisation's brand is a part of the organisational positioning strategy within the environment. Brands enhance buyer confidence, help people to make decisions, differentiate the organisations, grow profitability and build enduring relationships. Because many organisations offer similar products and services, enhanced quality of service is regarded as a differentiating factor to keep customers satisfied and loyal to the organisation. Therefore, it is important that the internal employees are motivated and trained to live the brand and reflect its core values.

3.3 Organisational culture

The third research aim discussed the organisational culture aspect through finding that the clarification of individual and corporate visions, missions, values and needs was a crucial step that Absa Bank took towards organisational improvement, one that resulted in benefits attributed to the single brand strategy, namely: a new organisational culture, new values, and one cohesive goal and organisational vision (Prins, 2003). According to most sources from the documentation study, the Absa Bank organisational culture is regarded as appropriate, adaptive and attentive to the needs of all the stakeholder groups whilst also simultaneously communicating the core principle of the organisation: customer-centric brand focus. Such an organisational culture can be a source of competitive advantage for the organisation. Moreover, Bruwer (2003) purports that there is a matching process between the core communicated values of the Absa Bank brand – where the customer is seen as being in charge – and the focus on a customer-centric brand culture. In this regard, De Jager (2003) views the Absa Bank culture as one in which most of Absa Bank's employees have a strong customer-centric brand focus that is translated into everyday attitudes and behaviours.

In essence, the overall organisational culture of Absa Bank, according to De Jager (2003), was formulated by taking Absa Bank's various business strategies into account, and the business strategies, in turn, were developed and implemented in a manner that upheld the core principles of Absa Bank's culture. Moreover, Bruwer (2003) indicates that the organisational culture at Absa Bank comprises a set of unique characteristics that aim to communicate the core values of Absa Bank, whilst also emphasising the fact that, as a result of amalgamation Absa Bank is a banking service organisation that caters to each sector of the South African public. The organisational culture of Absa Bank is described as being "open, honest, progressive yet approachable" (Prins, 2003). An organisational culture that is considered a reflection of the external brand values is perceived as a source of employee pride, commitment and satisfaction. De Jager (2003) thus believes that Absa Bank's organisational culture impacts upon the ability of the organisation to learn and adapt to change. This organisational learning has an influence on the strategic and cultural aspects of organisational components, as well as on organisational reputation. Stakeholder value is impacted upon by organisational reputation, and has an influence on the performance results of the organisation.

Absa Bank has managed to develop a culture that is driven by sales performance, whilst putting the customers' interests first. The basic premise of this culture is the actual strength of the relationships established with new and existing customers. Trust, communication, commitment and understanding form the core of the brand campaign, thus there is an alignment between the brand promise and the principles of the culture. Once Absa Bank has implemented the strategies and applied the tools that create a service culture, the challenge of managing this process requires Absa Bank to assess the business factors that support service excellence.

4. CONCLUSION

According to Henderson and McAdam (2003:776) and Newstrom and Davis' (1997:49), organisational structure has an influence on the efficiency of internal communication processes, whilst external communication, on the other hand, is utilised to establish strong ties with members of the relevant environment by providing these external stakeholders with relevant information. Moreover, Van Riel (1997:289) and Alessandri (2001:173) indicate that corporate identity is perceived to be an endorsement of the brand and the corporate values and is evident in every aspect of the brand experience. As such, the stronger the employees' identify with their organisations, the more supportive and accepting they are of organisational promises, and the more they make decisions that are consistent with organisational objectives. Absa Bank's strategic repositioning required a communication plan that aligned all internal behaviour to concur with the newly defined corporate objectives. Furthermore, Absa Bank's structures and processes made it possible to implement the strategic objectives and intent in such a way that Absa Bank was able to deliver on its promise to be customer orientated (Prins, 2003). Kemp (2001:1) is thus of the opinion that the internal communication strategies implemented by Absa Bank are a source of competitive advantage for the organisation in that the focus on employee commitment is upheld, which reiterates the fundamental premise of research conducted by Dolphin and Fan (2000:101),

Eagle and Kitchen (2000:2), Kitchen and Daly (2002:51) and Skinner (1998:361) regarding the idea that employees, management and internal organisational communication are viewed as the cornerstones to competitive advantage for organisations.

To conclude: it is pertinent to include the recommendation for Absa Bank to implement the concept of integrated organisational communication (IOC) into their organisation, as IOC focuses specifically on the various communication strategies taking place within the organisation as well as on the external organisational communication to the relevant external organisational customers. From the above it can thus be deduced that the research problem has been achieved, whereby internal branding is one of the mechanisms that has an influence on an organisation's internal alignment of employees. Internal branding can successfully be used, in conjunction with organisational strategies and external marketing campaigns, as a tool for promoting, achieving and enhancing internal organisational alignment. The concepts of organisational culture, internal communication campaigns, employee satisfaction, and internal service quality, are key concepts towards the achievement of alignment between internal organisational functioning, internal brand perception and the external image the organisation projects.

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