

Branding and Customer Experience in the Wireless Telecommunication Industry

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Abstract—This research explores the relationship between customer experience, brand image and brand loyalty in the wireless telecommunication service industry in Thailand. The findings reveal that wireless service brands deliver different customer experiences and images, and that customer experiences influence the strength of a brand including brand image and customer loyalty. Contribution of the study to academic and practitioners’ perspectives, including recommendation of future research, are also provided.

Index Terms—Brand image, customer experience, customer loyalty, telecommunication services.

I. INTRODUCTION

An attentiveness in service branding in the last 2 decades seems to proliferate due to an increase of competitive service strategies adopted by both product and service firms in this service-dominated economy. In addition to traditional approach of using marketing communication tools, customer experience theory becomes of interest increasingly and continuously among practitioners and scholars in building strong service brand. Evidenced by numerous literatures in this aspect, the investigation of customer experience prevails especially after the publishing of well-known service brand equity framework proposed by Berry [1], which might be behind the study from practitioners like Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) experts. In order to differentiate their brands, service firms are strongly recommended to deliver a compelling customer experience and minimize the gap between the actual service delivery and messages from the traditional marketing approach. On the other hand, this compelling customer experience is the key driver of service brand equity. However, in order to affirm the influence of customer experience in cognitive and behavioral levels, this research explores the customer perception and loyalty resulted from the customer experience. The objective of this research, therefore, is to investigate the relationship between customer experience, brand image and customer loyalty. Telecommunication service in Thailand is selected as our case study since this service industry is intensely attached to Thai people’s daily lives, leading to more accurate results reflected from the data collection.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Service Branding

A shift from an economy dominated by the industrial sector to an economy dominated by services in the world leads academics to explore new ways of thinking regarding how to build powerful service brands. In fact, due to the inherent service characteristics, the notion of branding is more important to services than to physical goods [2], [3]. Berry [1] has developed a service brand equity model which depicts the relationships between six main components, namely brand equity, brand awareness, brand meaning, company’s presented brand, external brand communications and customer experience with company.

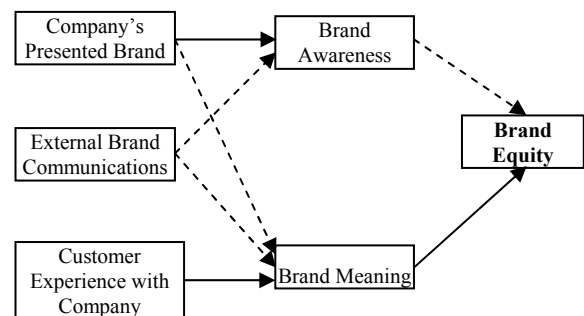


Fig. 1. Berry’s service brand equity model.

From the model, the bold line signifies more intense degree of relationship while the dotted line signifies lower degree of relationship. The customer experience and brand meaning, therefore, tend to be the central value of service brand equity. Although his model also includes the influences of the company’s presented brand and external communications on brand awareness, he implies that brand meaning is the major indicator of brand equity than brand awareness. In other words, it is obvious that customer experience with the company contributes the strongest influence to the brand equity. However, it seems to have no obvious evidence to support the degree of relationship in the model and the intensity degrees are not much displayed and discussed.

B. The Concept of Customer Experience

It is noteworthy that the concept of experience is not new and has been covered by many disciplines. In marketing, Holbrook & Hirschman, Arnould & Price and Ritchins [4]-[6] have theorized early that consumption has experiential effects. However in the past decade, an interest in the concept of customer experience has increased mainly from

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practitioners and consultants. Some brands like Google, Netflix, IKEA, Starbucks, or The Ritz-Carlton become powerful brands not only through the help of creative advertising campaigns, but more on the delivery of a compelling customer experience. Instead of focusing on the features and functional benefits of the service itself, they use customer experience as a source of their competitive advantage. In this new perspective, the customer experience is the driver of brand equity [7], [8]. Although there is a wide agreement on the relevance of customer experience, there are different views on how to define customer experience and to measure it [9]-[24].

These definitions mainly focus on the service delivery process and stress that customer experience is an individual interpretation of the service process and its interactions or touch-points, that influence customers' feelings [25]-[30]. Customer experience is considered as an outcome of interaction between service companies and customers.

In this research, customer experience is therefore defined as the outcome of customers' interactions with the firm, including the interaction with the staff, self-service technologies, and the service environment. These interactions influence not only what they think and feel about a brand but also the strength of their relationship with the brand [7], [21]-[23], [31]-[35].

C. Customer Experience in the Practitioners' Perspective

In the practitioners' view, customer experience is believed to be closely related to "user experience". This term is defined and studied by a group of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) theorists and designers, who are more in the computer-science field, not marketing. However, according to Kuniavsky [18], user experience is a set of broader considerations than HCI because it combines the concept of human-computer interaction with the concerns of both end users and organizations. In order to design the interactive experience effectively, the designers need to understand the concept of experience in the interactive ways. In the past decade, there are numerous studies that explore the theories of user experience [11], [14], [36], or to explore and categorize specific types of experiences relevant to the designed products [12], [37].

Some authors [38], [39] explain the customer experience from the view of the users (user-centered), while some authors [11] try to define the experience as it is connected to the product (product-centered). The third group tends to believe in the user experience through the interaction between user and product (interaction-centered) [12], [40].

The issue of customer experience measurement is also discussed in the practitioners' field. With the increasing recognition of customer experience concept, service companies still have to conduct an evaluation based on the customers' assessment. Nevertheless, the customer experience scale development is difficult and challenging to the marketers due to the complexity of context specific variables [23]. Recently, Forrester Research Inc., who is a leading independent research company in business and technology, has released the Forrester's Customer Experience Index 2010 (CXPI) to measure the customer experience based on evaluations from more than 4,600 U.S.

consumers about their interactions with a variety of companies accounted for 133 firms in 14 different industries. Forrester CXPI uses 3 components, which are usefulness, ease of use, and enjoyability, as its criteria.

III. OVERVIEW ON THAI TELECOMMUNICATION MARKET

Since telecommunication becomes one of basic factors for current daily lives of Thai people, the service providers, therefore, have invested huge amount of money attempting to develop their network coverage and service quality, contributing to a high-competitive market among leading players in Thailand. According to the research of The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission, telecommunication in Thailand is considered high rate of use but low rate of calling, implying that Thai telecommunication market has high price-sensitivity. The leading players in Thailand, consequently, tend to adopt various promotional campaigns to maintain existing users and to lure new customers.

Thailand's mobile market has grown substantially from approximately 7.9 million subscribers in 2001 to over 70 million subscribers by the end of 2010. Currently, there are 3 dominant telecommunication service providers in Thailand which are Advanced Info Service Public Company Limited ("AIS"), Total Access Communication Public Company Limited ("DTAC"), and TrueMove, which is a subsidiary of True Corporation Plc. ("True"). During 2010, these three dominant mobile operators added 5.7 million subscribers, higher than an increase of 3.5 million subscribers in 2009. The increased figure accounted for around 105% of mobile penetration rate in Thailand (based on population figures at 67.4 million from the National Statistical Office of Thailand as of 31 December 2010). This high penetration rate resulted from the increasing trend of mobile users to carry more than one mobile phone and/or having internet-ready devices such as tablets and netbooks. In addition, the mobile penetration rate is normally calculated based on the total number of SIM cards or mobile phones in customers' hands. Nevertheless, the current significant portion of subscribers is multi-SIM users who are carrying at least two mobile phones or two SIM cards. Therefore, this makes the human penetration rate (the number of individual mobile users over the population number) in Thailand soar up to 80% (Source: Annual Report 2010 of True). However, the penetration rate of mobile market in Thailand is still considered comparatively low compared to other countries with high mobile penetration in the Asia Pacific such as Hong Kong (171.2 percent; source: the Office of the Telecommunications Authority, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), and Singapore (137.4 percent; source: Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore - Statistics on Telecom services for 2009).

The figures in Table I show the mobile penetration rates in the last 3 years, implying that Thai mobile market still has the potential to grow further, especially for the post-paid service.

Currently, the launch of 3G services in Thailand has intensified the degree of competition between these 3 leading players. According to the report on telecommunication industry for Q2 2012 by Vertical Edge Limited, a market

research company, they estimate the mobile subscriber numbers to grow to 91.666 million and a penetration rate of 130.6% by 2016. Moreover, they have raised their forecast for 3G subscribers to be 19.007 million subscribers by the end of Q2 2012, accounted for 20.7% of the total mobile users.

TABLE I: SUMMARY OF MOBILE PENETRATION RATES FOR PREPAID AND POSTPAID SERVICES IN THAILAND

| Categories | Mobile Penetration Rates | | |
|------------|--------------------------|---------|---------|
| | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 |
| Prepaid | 88.04% | 95.10% | 100.77% |
| Postpaid | 10.54% | 10.75% | 11.03% |
| Total | 98.58% | 105.85% | 111.80% |

Source: The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission Thailand ICT Information updated as of 19 October 2011.

These figures showing high competition rate of telecommunication industry in Thailand rationally drive the service providers to seek for other competitive advantages, other than service quality and promotional campaigns, to capture new and existing customers.

IV. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND METHODOLOGY

Our research explores the key relationship between customer experience, brand image and customer loyalty. The research hypotheses are as follows;

H1: Telecommunication brands provide significant different customer experiences;

H2: Brand images of telecommunication services brands are significant different;

H3: Customer Experience significantly influences brand image;

H4: Customer Experience significantly influences the Customer Loyalty in terms of Propensity to switch the brand; and

H5: Brand Image significantly influences the Customer Loyalty in terms of Propensity to switch the brand.

The methodologies employed in this research are both qualitative and quantitative. In the qualitative approach, we arranged the interviews with telecommunication experts in order to understand the industry context and to investigate various concerned dimensions assessed by the business point of views. Then, we shifted to customer's point of view by establishing a small focus group in order to discuss about the problems they faced and different aspects they concerned from telecommunication service firms. The focus group was also used to check the similarities between the experts and customers perspectives and explore the words/language used by the customers when they are discussing about their mobile phone service brands. In the quantitative approach, after launching the pilot test with 10 students, we distributed our valid questionnaire to a convenient sample of 240 university students, from different 4 Thai leading universities, focusing only on the post-paid service customers. They were asked to evaluate their experiences with wireless telecommunication brands in Thailand, and to indicate their perception on brand image and their propensity to switch the brand they used.

After editing all the data, reliability of brand image scale was tested for internal consistency by using Cronbach's alpha. The result 0.821, which is above the acceptable level of 0.70 [41], indicates that the reliability of these 18 items (shown in Appendix, Brand Image) used for measuring brand image is acceptable.

An exploratory factor analysis was also performed to reduce the number of items and to reveal the underlying dimensions in the tested scale. Two items "signal quality is good" and "brand delivers good value" were consequently deleted. Out of the valid 16 items, five underlying components emerged, i.e., price and promotion (consisting of promotion is attractive, service package choices, call rate is attractive, and call rate for extra charge is reasonable), brand image (consisting of upgrade brand technology, brand is different from others, brand fits with lifestyle, and brand offers best choice), competence of staff and convenience of interaction (consisting of staff is friendly, staff is competent, ads are fun, and shops are convenient), billing system (consisting of SMS fee rate is acceptable, bill statement is easy to read, and bill statement is accurate), and reliability of call (consisting of Experience few drop call). The five factors explain 64.76% of the variance.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

After the data preparation, the hypothesis are tested by MANOVA (for testing H1), ANOVA (for testing H2), and Correlation (for testing H3-H5) methods.

Using MANOVA and ANOVA, the findings reveal that different telecommunication brands provide significant different customer experiences and have different image. The results of F Test of H1 equal 4.164 (according to Wilks' Lambda's Method) and of H2 equal 0.8435.

TABLE II: MANOVA TEST RESULT ENUMERATED BY VARIOUS ATTRIBUTES OF BRAND IMAGE

| Brand Image Attributes | F | Sig. |
|--|--------|------|
| Promotion is attractive | 4.752 | .010 |
| Experience few drop call | 8.624 | .000 |
| Service package choices | .127 | .881 |
| Call rate is attractive | 11.428 | .000 |
| Call rate for extra charge is reasonable | 1.207 | .301 |
| SMS fee rate is acceptable | 2.242 | .109 |
| Bill statement is easy to read | .387 | .680 |
| Bill statement is accurate | .276 | .759 |
| Upgrade brand technology | 9.330 | .000 |
| Brand is different from others | 8.536 | .000 |
| Staff is friendly | 3.081 | .048 |
| Staff is competent | .696 | .500 |
| Brand fits with lifestyle | 1.347 | .262 |
| Brand offers best choice | 9.050 | .000 |
| Ads are fun | 6.024 | .003 |
| Shops are convenient | .501 | .607 |

The tests of H1 and H2 affirm that customers perceive their experiences and brand images of various brands differently. This different perception leads to more accuracy of subsequent hypotheses verification.

Further test is implemented by using Bivariate Correlation to explore the relationship in H3-H5. The results show that customer experience has a positive relationship with brand image. It means that customer's perception of their interaction with brands can shape the brand image. Moreover, the customer experience also has a significant association on

customer loyalty in terms of propensity to switch the brand in the negative way. This implies that a good customer experience tends to reduce significantly the propensity to switch to another brand. In line with the last hypothesis, brand image also has a negative significance with customer loyalty in terms of propensity to switch the brand, showing that a positive perception of the brand can also reduce the propensity to switch the brand as well.

TABLE III below summarizes all the results of our hypothesis.

TABLE III: HYPOTHESIS TESTING RESULTS

| Hypothesis | Sig. | Direction | Hypothesis Supported |
|--|------|-----------|----------------------|
| H1: Telecommunication brands provides significant different customer experiences | .00 | Positive | Yes |
| H2: Brand image of telecommunication services brands are significant different | .00 | Positive | Yes |
| H3: Customer experience significantly influences brand image | .00 | Positive | Yes |
| H4: Customer experience significantly influences customer loyalty in terms of propensity to switch the brand | .00 | Negative | Yes |
| H5: Brand Image significantly influence customer loyalty in terms of Propensity to switch the brand | .00 | Negative | Yes |

VI. CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH

This research extends current service research by exploring the relationship between customer experience, brand image and customer loyalty. In other words, this study demonstrates that customer perception of their interaction with a service company and their loyalty to a service brand are strongly influenced by the delivered service experience. This research has also some managerial implications. The marketers of the service providers can use the research results to leverage their brand equity through the delivery of a compelling customer experience in many aspects.

By focusing on customer experience, service brands have a holistic view of what they deliver to customers. Indeed service is today defined by many scholars as an experience [42]-[44] and following this logic, we recognize that the customer experience is in fact the company "product". Therefore, all managerial functions and departments should

be aligned to deliver an overall compelling customer experience through interactions with customers.

In the same way with all researches, the present study has some limitations. The telecommunication industry is not representative of the service industry. There is usually a high switching cost. Most mobile phone operators have increased switching cost to reduce their churn rate. This concern limits the opportunity for customers to experience other brands. For the future, this research should encourage researchers to explore the link between customer experience and brand relationships in different service sectors such as, banking, hospital industry, hotel industry, or airline industry. Next, it would be interesting to compare the impact of both customer experience and marketing communications on brand knowledge and brand relationships. Such comparison will help demonstrate that service branding requires really a different approach.

APPENDIX VARIABLES MEASUREMENT

| Variables Description | Items for measurement | Scale | References |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------------|--|
| 1. Customer Experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall, would you say that your experience with this operator is... The signal quality is always good. The promotions are very attractive. I experience very few drop call (The line is cut during your talk). The services package gives me many choices. The call rate is attractive. The call rate for extra charge is reasonable. The SMS fee rate is acceptable for me. | 5-point Likert Scale | Adapted from Delgado et al. [45] |
| 2. Brand Image | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The bill statement is easy to read. The bill is always accurate. The brand always upgrades its technology to improve its services. This brand is really different from the other operators. The staff is friendly. The staff is competent. The brand fits very well with my lifestyle. Overall the brand delivers a good value for the price I pay. The brand offers the best choice of cell phones. | 5-point Likert Scale | Interview with Managers, Focus Group, Aaker, Keller [46], [47] |

| Variables Description | Items for measurement | Scale | References |
|-----------------------|---|----------------|---|
| 3. Customer Loyalty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its advertisements are very entertaining and fun. • The brand shops are very convenient. • How likely would you switch to another brand operator in the future? | 10-point Scale | Aaker, Gremler, Zeithaml et al., Aydin and Ozer [46]-[49] |

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- *Tourism Marketing (Marketing do turismo)*. With M. Zins and J.M Hazebrouck. Second Edition. Gaetan Morin Editor. Quebec, 1999
- *Service Asia. How the Tigers Can Keep Their Stripes*. With Chan Cudennec. Prentice-Hall. Simon & Schuster, Singapore, 1998