Exploring the Employees' Perspective on Service Branding

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A dissertation submitted to
Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master in Business (MBus)

March, 2011
Faculty of Business
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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge those who have supported me throughout the process of this Dissertation. My deep gratitude goes to my research supervisor Dr. Mark Glynn for the support and invaluable expertise and experiences to the process, and allowing me to build on his theory model. Thank you.

Special thanks to my parents for their love, encouragement and support. It has been a long journey far away from home. Special thanks also to my siblings for your patience and support through this journey. To my friends who helped me through this journey, as always, you were all there for me. Thank you.

I would also like to thank HRH King Abdullah Al Saud and the King Abdullah Scholarship Program for giving me the opportunity to come to New Zealand and peruse a Masters Degree. The experience has been amazing and I will forever cherish the memories at AUT and in New Zealand.

Finally, I would like to thank the gym employees who participated in this study. My sincerest appreciation, without your participation this study would not be possible; may this research add to your lives.

Abstract

This dissertation investigates how employees can help their organisation build service brands. For service brands, employees play a big role in communicating the brand meaning and the brand values to the customers. Based on the employee-customer interaction, customers form attitudes about the brand and thus decide to choose the company and remain loyal. Many organisations train employees to interact with customers, but often never specify how they want employees to deliver the brand promise. This study aims to uncover how employees deliver the brand's values to customers. The research question is *"How do service employees facilitate the creation of successful service brands for an organisation?"*

The research question is answered using semi-structured interviews of 12 employees of a fitness centre in Auckland City Centre. These interviews are then examined using content analysis which provides answers as to how employees convey brand values to customers and create brand equity. The categories of content analysis are achieved by a series of coding and grouping words found in the interview answers.

The analysis found five categories by which the employees created brand equity. These categories are: 'Employee Behaviour', 'Social Connection', Customer Satisfaction', 'Branding', and 'Employee Commitment'. The findings suggest that employees believed they had significant influence on customers when it came to communicating the brand values to customers. The approaches they employed were focused on the customer as a priority. Customer loyalty and brand retention are achieved through customer satisfaction and establishing social connections with the customers. Superior interpersonal skills were also seen as an important way to gain customers respect and ensure brand loyalty. The employees also felt it was necessary for the management to empower them with training and support, and create a positive working environment for them to commit to building brand equity. Employees expressed reasonable knowledge on branding, and believed they created brand equity by providing customers with the best gym experience and reaching their fitness and health goals.

It was interesting to note that while the three interviewed branches, operating under the parent brand, shared the same brand guidelines, exercise programs and brand philosophy, they

demonstrated obvious differences in branches' culture, way of doing things and approach to customer service.

This dissertation provides the marketing discipline with evidence on the perspectives of service brand employees, and their significant role towards branding and creating brand equity for a fitness company. While these insights are not exhaustive by themselves, they also provide knowledge on the delivery of brand promise, marketing programs and employee recruitment for the fitness industry in specific and for the service sector in general.

Chapter One: Introduction

"You'll never have a product or price advantage again.
They can be easily duplicated, but a strong customer service culture can't be copied".
JERRY FRITZ

1.1 Background

Despite gaining interest over the last ten years, both service brands and service marketing are still considered emerging topics. The literature available on service brand management and achieving service brand equity is broad. A number of researchers and marketers have addressed various issues concerning service branding, in which some common categories and similar criteria on successfully branding services have emerged and are the focus of this study (Berry, 2000; Brodie, Glynn, & Little, 2006; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999; deChernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). These issues include: service brand strategies (internal branding and employer branding), influencing employees behaviour to live the brand, managing service brand employees, and the roles of internal and external relationships pertaining to services branding (Berry, 2000; Brodie, Glynn, & Little, 2006; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999; deChernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Research on the critical role of employees has been approached, where studies on characteristics, importance and role of employees can be found throughout the literature (King, 2010; King & Grace, 2009). These stakeholders are of extreme importance to the service brand, however, the research had been conducted from the perspective of either the organisation, CEOs, managers or employers (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999; King & Grace, 2005).

In service branding, everything seems to start with employees because they are perhaps the only tangible aspect customers can interact with when experiencing the service brand. While some empirical studies can be found on the perspective of employees, (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2008; King & Grace, 2009; Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009), the number of these studies are

insufficient. The literature seems to fall short when it comes to empirically researching the employees' perspective on their role in building a strong service brand.

1.2 Research Problem

The previous section has outlined the role of employees in building a successful service brand. While literature provides many guidelines towards the management of service employees from a managerial perspective, it does not provide sufficient information from the employees' perspective. The literature also falls short in defining what the employees' perspectives could be with regards to brand building. This is the research gap that this study aims to close. When investigating employees' perspective, this research attempts to first identify and then define the perspectives of these employees. The literature review made numerous attempts to emphasise employee behaviour and its influence on the brand (Wallace & De Chernatony, 2009). The employees' perspective on how they deliver the brand's values to customers was noticeably insufficient in the literature. There is an opportunity for researchers to explore the perspectives of service brand employees and gain knowledge on how they create brand equity.

1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

A service brand is different from a tangible (goods) brand because it cannot be seen or touched, that is why it is more difficult to convince a customer to buy it. Service employees may influence the service brand's success and their efforts may keep customers loyal. It is the aim of the proposed research to identify the employees' perspective on brand building at a specific fitness company in the Auckland City Centre. The service employees' perspective can be explored by drawing on accounts of their work experience as well as how their efforts influence the brand. This knowledge will provide more insight into what employees believe add to the success of the service brand. Employees are often the only physical contact customers have when experiencing a service, and at times will influence customer's decision to make the invisible purchase i.e. an intangible service purchase. The service employee perspective in turn will provide an answer to the research question:

"How do service employees facilitate the creation of successful service brands for an organisation?"

In order to answer this research question three sub-research questions need to be answered to gain more perspective on a company, its employees and its customers which creates a triangle of value for the core service brand (Brodie, et al., 2006). These sub-research questions are:

- **Sub-research question 1:** How do employees interact with customers in order to co-create brand value?
- **Sub-research question 2**: How does the company communicate brand value and promise to customers? (From an employee's perspective)
- **Sub-research question 3:** How does the company enable employees to create brand value? (From an employee's perspective)

The answers to these questions may benefit businesses in maximising their employees' potential, create training and support programs that enable employees to fully enhance the brand's values and improve brand equity.

1.4 Research Approach

In order to answer the proposed research questions, it would be necessary to take a qualitative approach when collecting and analysing the data. Qualitative research tends to be concerned with words rather than numbers; it takes an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Two main features of qualitative research are: first, an epistemological position in examining the data and second, is a constructionist ontological position when regarding the outcomes of the interactions between the service employees and the brand based on the perspectives of service employees (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Both these features are discussed in detail in the following chapter on methodology. This research seeks to evoke the participants' feelings, stories and experiences whether they be with the company, customers or the brand itself. This means that the employees' input would hopefully render words, descriptions and phrases that could carry rich significant meanings that would inevitably require interpretive understanding.

This research uses semi-structured in-depth interviews as a method to collect data. The interview consists of 17 questions for which answers are given verbally, recorded and transcribed. The interview questions are based on the "Service Brand-Relationship-Value (SBRV) Triangle" (Brodie, Glynn & Little, 2006). This theory model highlights the service brand in the centre of a cycle network that creates value for the company. The triangle demonstrates the continuous value co-creating process taking place between a network consisting of company, employees and customers. The value creating interaction between company and employees, as well as the interaction between employees and customers, are the focus of this research.

Analysis of the data is carried out by following a four step procedure. The first is a discussion of the content analysis technique used within the research. The second step illustrates the interview procedure used to gather the data. The third step identifies and explains the codes and categories that arose from the data. The fourth and final step focuses on the relationship between the research findings and the theory within the service brand literature.

Following the collection of data, transcriptions of the interviews are made by a professional transcriber. In accordance with the AUTEC the University Ethics Committee, the transcriber is asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. The confidentiality agreement ensures that transcripts are not copied and third parties do not have any access to them.

1.5 Research Boundaries

This is a qualitative study, where the research focus is to take the perspective of employees on what builds a brand. The research sites are three franchised branches of a fitness company in Auckland City Centre. The franchised gym branches all follow the same marketing and branding activities that are directed by the CEO of the parent company. Researching three franchised branches highlights the differences pertaining to work structure, internal communications and team work. The small and specific choice of location is subject to the researcher's resources and travel limitations. Also, the researcher has been a member at one of the gym's franchised branches since 2008. As a member, the researcher is able to personally observe and interact with employees and gain more depth on their perspectives about brand building. There is a possibility

of employee objectivity or bias when it comes to interviewing staff members at the gym branch where the researcher is a member. Researcher bias is also a possibility as that the same researcher conducted all the qualitative interviews. It is conceivable that a non-member researcher may have attracted answers of a different mix or slant. Qualitative research is naturally vulnerable to this criticism. There are limitations in using a small sample size of twelve, as the findings of the research cannot be generalized.

The findings produced, intend to reflect only employees' perspectives on brand building at the three branches of a specific fitness company. They are not meant to represent all employees of all the gym branches, nor are they meant to reflect the perspectives on brand building of other gym's employees. Furthermore, due to the restricted sample size the study is not intended to be exhaustive, rather it would be adding to the existing literature.

1.6 Definitions of Key Terms

Before demonstrating the criteria for successful service brands and analysing the issues of managing and branding services, several definitions must be made clear. What is a brand? What are the components surrounding its existence? Different researchers have defined the "brand" according to their context, field of study and research focus. The study herein is focused solely on the service brand. In general, brands have been regarded as promises, made by the company to customers, communicated through advertising. In the services context, these promises are also communicated through the interactions between customers and staff. Vallaster and De Cernatony (2005) view brands as "clusters of functional and emotional values". De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) have explained that whether the brand is a set of values or promises, the brand should not be distinguished by a precise definition because of the intangible nature of service brands and the associated values and promises it carries. Instead, the strategy the company uses to transfer these promises and values to customers is a more appropriate way to differentiate a successful brand. De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003, p. 1098) explain that whether a product or service brand, the success lies in a company "capitalising on the physical vehicle for communicating values". Vehicles refer to means or channels in communicating values in a company. The vehicles are various but in the service context, and in this study, the employees

are that "physical vehicle" through which brand values and promises are communicated to customers.

Nonetheless, there are other terms surrounding the brand in the services context; brand meaning, image and awareness are the most significant. All of these terms could, and will, be used herein under the umbrella of brand equity and it is necessary to explain each of their meanings. Brand awareness according to Berry (2000) refers to the customers' ability to recognise the brand when given cues. Brand meaning is the customers' overall perception of the brand. It encompasses the first thing customers think of when bringing up a certain brand. Brand meaning could be positive or negative, depending on the experience that a customer has had with the brand. In services, it is important to establish favourable brand associations with customers in order to secure good brand image. In the business-to-business context, Davis et al. (2009) tested a model that provided insights on how brand image influences customer choice and strengthens service brands. Brand image must be communicated to the maximum to attract both individual and business customers, as this has implications. Davis et al. (2009) explain if an organisation has a gap between what they say they do and what they actually do, the brand would fail miserably.

Brand awareness and meaning create brand equity for the company. Brand equity is what Berry (2000, p.130) calls "the differential effect of brand awareness and meaning combined on customer response to the marketing of the brand". This explanation of brand equity will be used throughout the study. This is because brand equity has been created by the brand awareness customers have with the brand (external factors), and by the brand meaning the customers have associated with the brand, gained by their experience with the company (internal factors). A service brand is not considered to have successful brand equity unless it is viewed so from the customers' perspective. This means that employees' perception of the brand's image, meaning and awareness should all be in accordance with the brand.

1.7 Dissertation Outline

The outline of the presented dissertation comprises of six chapters. Following this introduction chapter, the literature review in chapter two summarizes the arguments and different schools of

thought relevant to the service brand literature, and the influence of employees in building brand success. Chapter three outlines the methodology and methods utilised to address the research question. Semi-structure interviews were used in this study. After the collection of data, content analysis was used to extract concepts and categories of the employees' perspectives on branding. Chapter four presents the result of the qualitative research design and provides the outcome of the content analysis. Chapter five presents a discussion of the findings in conjunction with the relevant literature reviewed, to gain insight into service employees' perspectives on branding. Finally, chapter six draws conclusions from the findings by addressing how these findings answer the research questions and the identified research problems. Following this, the section outlines the implications and limitations of the research, as well as identifying areas of further research that have arisen.

The following chapter two analyses the literature relating to service brands and more specifically to their employees, thus leading the reader to be more informed on the dissertation's topic.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

This chapter begins with a discussion on service brands and the corresponding branding strategies. It touches upon corporate branding, internal and employer branding and the concept of "living the brand". It then reviews the theory of Service-dominant logic and introduces the Service Brand Relationship Value (SBRV) triangle. The SBRV triangle has great significance in this research in formulating the research questions along with the interview questions. Finally, the chapter reviews the role of employees and the customers influence on service brands.

2.1 The Service Brand

Services are not easily copied by competitors nor can they be patented. This makes services more firm-specific, and depends on the culture of the firm and the attitude of the employees involved in delivering this service to the customer. McDonald, de Chernatony and Harris (2001, p. 339), define a service as "an activity which has some element of intangibility associated with it. It involves some interaction with consumers or property in their possession, and does not result in a transfer of ownership". Vargo and Lusch (2004, p.2) define services as "the application of specialised competencies (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself". The above definitions cover the importance of intangibility, customer interaction and specialized competencies while describing services. Both theses definitions contribute to the research because of its focus on service brands, which are intangible in nature, its objective to uncover the perspectives of employees on brand building and customer-employee interaction.

Berry (2000) describes service brands in particular as being difficult for a customer to choose from, because they lack the tangibility that product brands enjoy. He examines the role of branding in services and explains that a strong brand "increases consumers' trust of the invisible purchase". The service brand is not only communicated through advertising and marketing, but also from the interaction that takes place between the employees and customers. Vallaster and de Chernatony (2005) emphasise the emotional bond customers have with service brands and explain that this bond is created from the relationships customers build with employees.

According to de Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) the service encounter or the "moment of truth" is the defining issue in service management. This interaction between the customer and firm is the "moment of truth". This demonstrates the importance of training employees well in order for them to best understand their customers. Firms must also instil motivation and responsibility in their employees. These well trained employees are hard to replace and become a company's competitive advantage over others in the industry.

Researchers have studied the criteria for successful service brands and maintain that there is more to the issue of branding than merely distinguishing services from tangible products. A common concern found in the literature raises the question of how to adjust branding theories and models to comply with specific service characteristics such as intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability (O'Loughlin & Szmigin, 2007). The literature on service branding contains a number of service branding models and principles. However, not all models are empirically tested. The majority of these studies are based on the perspective of managers and branding practitioners rather than the employees. This is an important issue, since in services the brand acts as a relationship link between consumers and the service organisation (Devlin & Azhar, 2004).

De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) argue that the service component of a brand could be its "most sustainable differential advantage". A good service brand starts with the culture of the organisation, De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) believe that a service brand is more likely to succeed when the organisation is internally and externally aligned with the values of the brand.

McDonald et al. (2001) stress brand building from the bottom up and profoundly involving the employee by having a focus on their interaction with consumers as key factors to success. De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) also support this view through the "upside down organisation pyramid". They argue that service brands are more effective when using reverse hierarchies, highlighting the importance of customer contact employees in achieving customer satisfaction. The literature review shows that employees are important in the service sector, it is necessary to support them by supplying advanced systems in order to better communicate with customers. In this regards, De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) encourage firms to upgrade systems and

procedures which enhance employee effectiveness. They also found that some management consultants emphasised the role of information technology in service brands while others regarded them as "hygiene factors" to remain competitive.

De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) urge organisations to find a "focused position". That is managing the brand in the minds of consumers. Securing a favourable position is necessary so consumers can differentiate their brand from others and associate it with specific attributes that mirror the brand image. For example, customers associate DHL as a fast and reliable delivery service, and Disney as the "best entertainment on earth" (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003). They also argue that clarity of the branding message is necessary in order to achieve this "focused position". The service brand must enjoy a level of clarity and consistency to attract customers and this same clarity must also be communicated to employees. Consumers experience the service brand through their interactions with front-line employees, who represent what the brand stands for. It is then important for an organisation to establish brand consistency by aligning the employee behaviour to the brand values because employees are crucial stakeholders when it comes to influencing customer brand perceptions.

Brand values are mentioned throughout the service branding literature. The literature review emphasised the importance of aligning corporate values with the brand. As mentioned earlier the success of a service brand begins with good management. It is the responsibility of marketing managers to create a clear and consistent brand image and then communicate that image to the customers. It is also the organisations responsibility to make sure the brand image is understood by their employees, particularly front-line employees who have direct contact with customers. Because customers mostly regard service organisation attributes as functional, McDonald, De Chernatony, and Harris (2001) propose that marketing managers should also focus on emotional attributes in order to gain consumer trust and loyalty. Corporate culture also acts as a means of differentiating the service brand from competitors since it is difficult for companies to copy other specific company cultures.

2.2 Service Branding Strategies

The literature provides marketing managers with several service branding strategies, some of which had been adapted from product branding principles to be effective for services, while others have been specifically designed for services (Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Punjaisri, et al., 2009; Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010). This literature review presents three specific service branding strategies that focus on managing the service brand in the minds of employees in order to achieve optimal success. These three branding strategies are corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding. These branding strategies focus on the service brand employee as a starting point in terms of the service branding process and will now be discussed.

2.2.1 Corporate Branding

Corporate branding constitutes a promise made from the organisations to all its stakeholders. More specifically, corporate branding "concerns the systematic planned management of behaviour, communication and symbolism in order to attain a favourable and positive reputation with target audiences of an organisation" (Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010, p. 402). Foster et al. (2010) explain that the behaviour aspect of the corporate as a whole lies in the behaviour of employees who communicate the brand promise to its customers. Corporate branding requires the company to clearly share its culture and corporate identity with employees. Research emphasises corporate identity because this identity is "a company's ethos, aims and values and presents a sense of individuality that can help differentiate the organisation within its competitive environment" (McDonald, et al., 2001, p. 336). Corporate identity also forms as the link between company and customers. It also acts as the distinction point of the firm, separating it from competitors.

It is necessary for an organisation to determine whether to market its service as an individual or corporate brand. In the context of a corporate service brand, McDonald et al (2001) suggest adding six Ps to the traditional four. They are: philosophy, personality, people, performance, perception and positioning. Researchers focused on the many advantages gained from linking the brand name with the corporate name, but also noticed the challenges in doing so. McDonald et al (2001, p. 339) state that: "corporate image was the most effective form of differentiation in

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financial services" and in doing so, an important advantage is created with the customers. When an organisation links its brand to the company name, the customer's trust increases, especially so when they have to deal face-to-face with employees. The trust increase comes from customers' perceptions of the brand created by individual interactions with employees, so emphasis needs to be on employees' consistency in delivering the service. In the financial service sector, McDonald et al. (2001, pp.339) explain that the brand is based on "the way the company does things" and its culture.

In order for a service brand to achieve a clear competitive position, it could use the corporate strategy. This requires the involvement of the whole company by communicating the brand's position and benefit to the employees and consumers (McDonald, et al., 2001). Employees have been regarded as being the "make or break" of a corporate brand. Therefore, close alignment of employees values and the corporate brand values provide the organisation with a sustainable competitive advantage (Foster, et al., 2010). Foster et al. (2010) encourage companies to have a clear and consistent vision and align it with the values of their employees. In turn, the employees are able to create a positive brand image for customers.

In order for employees to be effective in delivering the organisation's corporate brand they must first truly understand the brand. Hardaker and Fill (2005) explain the potential that employees have for a company's success. Hardaker & Fill (2005, p. 374) also advise companies to adapt a corporate branding strategy to intellectually and emotionally engage their employees in the brand. It is suggested that companies should develop internal communication strategies that focus on the understanding of the "informational processing style of their internal audience". Thus it is important to clarify and devise a brand message that employees and consumers can process and engage in. Of course, these brand messages can be transferred through diverse media. Most importantly, when communicating the brand message to employees, organisations need to engage them effectively so that employees can absorb the brand message and transfer the same to the customers (Hardaker & Fill, 2005).

Corporate brand identity is another important factor when adapting a corporate branding strategy. This factor entails the differential qualities of a product or service, which in turn help

an organisation improve their shareholder value (Wheeler, Richey, Tokkman, & Sablynski, 2006). Wheeler et al. (2006) researched corporate brand identity and linked it to customers and found that it had effect on employee retention. This study concluded that employees would stay with an organisation that had a clear brand identity and those same employees did a good job at communicating the brand to customers. In this instance the service brand company could gain two word of mouth advertisers, thus adding to the success and equity of the brand.

In order for companies to effectively communicate their brand to customers, they need to invest into nurturing their internal brand (Sartain, 2005). This is important as a company can overlook the effect their employees have on customers. Sartain (2005, pp. 89) explains that "the company that overlooks its internal brand significantly reduces the potential impact of their external brand". Internal Branding strategy is discussed in the following section.

2.2.2 Internal Branding and Employer Branding

Internal branding is a means to create a powerful corporate brand (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2005). The concept of internal branding includes the need for companies to have a shared understanding of the service brand's values. It also attempts to extract strong commitment from employees along with encouraging brand supporting behaviour (Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2005).

Sartain (2005) studied how Yahoo! was able to create such a successful brand through internal branding. The role of human resources (HR) was credited to having a significant influence at Yahoo! Sartain's (2005) study summarised the steps Yahoo! took to create a successful internal brand. These steps included: working in tandem with all the constituencies because internal branding would fail if it was one dimensional and not all the employees shared the value creation process. Second, having a clear brand promise - when the internal message is clear to all employees then the external message is clear enough for consumers to grasp. Third, engage employees to ensure the brand message sustains its meaning and credibility. Fourth, if possible, market the internal brand externally. This will let all stakeholders know what it is like to work and breathe the brand. In turn, this will generate increased loyalty and trust in the service brand. The last step is to create internal brand standards. Employees should be monitored and their

performance measured, this will allow organisations to understand the mind set of employees in regards of the brand (Sartain, 2005). These specific steps towards internal branding help to understand the concepts surrounding the branding technique. These steps allowed Yahoo! to create a strong internal brand. Thus, making Yahoo! a preferred place of work.

The objective of internal branding is to ensure employees transform brand messages into brand reality and experience for customers and other stakeholders (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). It is anticipated that successful internal branding will produce employees' commitment to the brand and that they would also be able to identify with its message and consequently become loyal to it. In addition, when employees internalise the brand values, they would become keener to consistently deliver on the brand promise across their interactions with customers.

Internal communication plays a significant role in internal branding as it influences employees' brand knowledge, attitudes and behaviour (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). When the internal communication of the brand is done well, the outcomes could include employee commitment, shared vision, loyalty and satisfaction all together with a service minded approach. Brand managers should be aware that while internal communication influences employees who are already with the organisation, it is the HR department's responsibility to recruit those who are the right prospects for employment. Punjaisri and Wilson (2007, p.60) explain that "HR should be led by marketing and incorporate the brand concept into all employee development stages." In the Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) study, customer-facing employees perceived themselves as significant in delivering the service brand promise. Punjaisri's and Wilson's study is important because it has taken into account the perspective of the employees. Employees believed that internal branding was able to ensure their behaviour was favourable towards the brand. The study also shows that it took the whole company to deliver on the brand's promise to employees and customers, because customer facing employees expressed they were supported by back-end employees, even though they did not have direct contact with customers, in delivering the brand promise.

Another study which took the view point of employees was that of King and Grace (2007). They researched internal branding with a focus on how employees viewed and understood the ethos of

the brand within services contexts. The researchers found that an internal marketing orientation was able to manifest into employee commitment and align employees' behaviour and attitudes for the benefit of the brand. King and Grace (2007) also noted that when adapting an internal marketing or branding orientation, things may not go as planned or intended. Employees may exhibit resistance or express negative attitudes and this could transfer to the consumers during their interaction. Therefore managers need to be aware of such downfalls and guide employees towards the brand values by conducting regular training and support programs for the employees. King and Grace (2007) presented "The Employee Brand Commitment Pyramid" (EBCP) which depicts the building blocks required in creating employee brand commitment. The EBCP is based on the premise that employees receive a minimum of brand information in order to perform their job. After which the employee will be able to progress to a higher level in the EBCP Pyramid rather than just committing to the job. If the company fails to communicate the brand at this level the employee will stop progressing towards committing to the brand and remain loyal to the job only. For a service brand, employees that focus solely on just doing the job correctly may affect the brand negatively. Because they would only view the brand as a place of work and not be motivated to enhance or build the brand. Accordingly, providing employees with brand specific information is vital for creating employee commitment to the service brand (King & Grace, 2007).

Punjaisri, Wilson and Evanschitzky (2008) also explored the influence of internal branding on employees' brand promise delivery and presented implications for strengthening the customer-brand relationship. Their findings presented a proposed framework of the internal branding process. This framework demonstrates key mechanisms of internal branding which explain the importance of internal communication techniques and tools, HR practices and training programs. The researchers credited internal communication and training as being the most important and relevant mechanisms in internal branding. In turn, when performed correctly, internal branding can supply a service brand with abundant outcomes. These outcomes include employee attitudinal effects such as brand identification, brand commitment and brand loyalty. Another outcome of internal branding is the behavioural effect which, if achieved, can help increase the brand's equity (Punjaisri, et al., 2009; Punjaisri, Wilson, & Evanschitzky, 2008).

A later study by Punjaisri, Evanschitzky and Wilson (2009) examined how internal branding could enable employees' brand-supporting behaviours. This study was done after the implementation of internal branding and considered the process from the perspective of employees. The study also suggested that internal branding methods must be coordinated with internal communication and training programs. In this case, internal branding can be a driver of employees' brand identification, brand commitment and brand loyalty (Punjaisri, et al., 2009).

The internal branding literature guides organisations on how to adapt internal branding so that employees deliver on the brand's promise. However, in order to achieve such an outcome from employees, firms must acknowledge the "importance of recruiting employees whose values fit with the organisation" (Foster, et al., 2010, p. 403). This could be achieved through 'employer branding'.

Developing an employer brand depends on creating the perception of the company as "a desirable place to work within the external labour market" (Foster, et al., 2010, p. 403). An employer brand also suggests a firm's characteristics as an employer which set them apart from their competitors. It also highlights the exclusive aspects of the firm's employment offerings and environment (Edwards, 2010). More specifically, when a company wishes to attract and retain employees, it should be aware of the perceptions of their company both internally and externally. The positive word of mouth references from existing employees and the company's ability to engage new professionals from competitive pools is part of the employment branding process (Mitchell, 2008).

When an organisation decides to adopt an employment brand strategy it should present a value proposition to attract employees. This value proposition focuses on the relationship between employer and employee and also relationships amongst employees. It is important that employee satisfaction and productivity be aligned to an organisation's values and goals in order to attract employees. What each organisation offers will differ according to industry, however there are some similarities. Economic and financial rewards are examples of the first level of basic offerings. However the focus in employment branding is differentiating the company's provision of built-in rewards and the degree of their fulfilment of socio-emotional needs (Edwards, 2010).

According to Mitchell (2008, p.129), "the overall financial value of the organisation tends to increase if a strong employment brand exists".

Human capital is regarded as an important asset for any organisation and therefore it is an important task to develop these assets. The employees have significant influence on customers' perception of the organisation and the brand. The mission to find and recruit people who would fit ideally with the organisation's values starts from the organisation itself. According to Knox and Freeman (2006), there are several marketing inputs and outputs that contribute to the formulation of the employer brand. These include inputs such as the development of the employee value proposition, recruitment marketing plans and outputs like advertising practices, word of mouth and contact with current employees. Knox and Freeman (2006) measured the effect of employer brand image in the service industry and noted a correlation between an attractive employer brand image and the likelihood of applying for a job. Their finding also concluded that employee brand commitment was affected by both, internal and external brand images. Once an employee is attracted to the company by observing their branding they will express their commitment when the same image is presented at the work place. In the long term, these committed employees will transfer the brand's image on to the customers.

2.2.3 Living the Brand

The notion of "living the brand" can be found in the literature about employer branding (Boyd & Sutherland, 2006; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). This concept indicates that an employee must behave in a way that is representative of the company's brand, values and culture (Boyd & Sutherland, 2006). Living the brand denotes a company to consider their employees as their living brand and devote time and energy towards training and developing them to mirror the brand's values. Emotional connections are required in order to achieve such a level of brand commitment from employees. When an organisation makes emotional connections with employees "the brand comes alive for them" and they are persuaded to align their own values and behaviours with that of the company's brand (Boyd & Sutherland, 2006, p. 10).

Boyd and Sutherland (2006) postulated a framework for managers who want their employees to live the brand. Their "Employee branding model: A self reinforcing cycle" presented six key

components companies should concentrate upon in order to obtain employees' commitment to live the brand (Figure 1).

Figure 1: "Employee branding model: A self reinforcing cycle"

1. Make living the brand a key business objective

- A brand must be seen as valuable
- Communicate a clear set of values
- Senior management must 'walk the talk'
- The benefits must be understood by employees
- Employees must understand how they contribute to the overall success of the company

6. Measure

- Every employee must be measured according to how they live the brand of the organisation
- Employee commitment must be measured as part of employees overall performance appraisal
- Recognition and reward should be part of the organisation's culture

2. Multi-dimensional approach

- Spend a great deal of effort and energy encouraging employee commitment to living the brand of the organisation
- Internal and external marketing must be linked
- Make the brand come alive & create an emotional link

3. Communication

- Use an array of communication material
- Try various methods and channels
- Communicate the theme at every opportunity
- Top down approach

5. Create a sense of belonging through loyalty, pride and commitment

- Employees must have freedom to perform
- Employees must be self motivated
- The company must hold events or functions
- Loyalty motivators must be evident

4. Create a culture & value set where employees are valued

- Training & development must be central to the culture
- Employees must feel that their values are similar to those of the organisation
- Organisational culture must be kept relevant and actively managed

Source: Boyd & Sutherland (2006)

The employee branding model implies that the firm needs to address all six components together and not ignore any single component since they are all interdependent. It is important that the

company makes employee branding a main business objective in order to completely leverage the potential of employees.

Leadership was repeatedly mentioned in the services branding literature as a mechanism of motivating employees to "live the brand" (Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2005; Wallace & De Chernatony, 2009). Employees need to be informed, motivated and energised in order for their behaviour to be aligned with the service brand values. Wallace and De Chernatony (2009) focused more on leadership rather than management. In this study leadership was explained as dealing more with the production of change, building vision, creating alignment and inspiring emotions. Management on the other hand was considered to be more about the order, organisation and control of employees (Wallace & De Chernatony, 2009).

Corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding should be used in an integrated manner so that the synergies existing between them can be appreciated, and the advantages of each strategy are leveraged. Foster et al (2010) argued the benefits of integrating these branding strategies. They constructed a model that exposes areas where internal branding could be supported by employer branding and vice versa. Employer branding acts as a management promise to future employees, such a promise could be supported by the implications of internal branding and corporate branding. The above discussion holds true even for the fitness industry, as gyms cannot risk employing people who express no brand commitment and loyalty, and behave against the brand's values.

2.3 Service-Dominant Logic

In 2004, Stephen Vargo and Robert Lusch challenged the dominant logic of marketing which, at that time, viewed marketing as a continuous process that highlighted operant resources (specialised skills, knowledge and processes). A company's value perception was measured by financials and the marketplace itself was the main entity where companies learned how to improve their customer service and financial performance (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Vargo and Lusch believed the marketing sector needed to fragment its logic and theories. A paradigm shift was considered reasonable in order to account for relationships among marketing players. The new "dominant logic" was also required in order to answer particular questions about services

marketing. The available tangible or manufactured goods theories and marketing activities were no longer fit to also account for the "exchange of intangibles, specialised skills and knowledge and processes" (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). For these reasons, a shift was called for to focus more on the (product/service) utilisation and customer perspective.

Vargo and Lusch (2004, p.2) aimed to "illuminate the evolution of marketing thought toward a new dominant logic". In order to do this they reviewed the literature and traced the evolving logic of marketing. Vargo and Lusch's (2004) literature review shows the dominant logic for marketing shifted from "goods centred" to "services centred" models of exchange; from concepts surrounding tangibles, statistic and operand resources (acts to produce effects) to concepts that focused more on intangibles, competencies, relationships and operant resources (used to act on operand resources like skills and knowledge). The emerging paradigm viewed marketing as a social and economic process emphasising services, relationship and network marketing processes. The focus has also moved from the producer towards the customer, similar to the way this research shifts the focus from the company to the brand and from the traditional marketing processes to the use of employees' skills as a means of marketing.

There are specific characteristics of the service-dominant logic that can be summarised as follows. First, a service-centred view of marketing perceives tangibility as an obstruction to marketability (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), which emphasises intangibility. This is because tangible products cost more to market and the service-dominant logic aims to shift the marketers focus from marketing of the product to creating a service within the tangible product.

Second, a service-centred dominant logic encourages firms to manage their network relationships in order to outsource necessary knowledge and skills if needed. Building strong relationships with their own employees is the focus of this study. This is because it is believed that service employees add value to the brand and a company may utilise their employees' customer service skills to increase brand equity. Third, the marketing purpose of a service-centred dominant logic is to provide customised services rather than make and sell units of output (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, P.13).

Fourth, tangible goods are a medium for service provision, rather than means to an end. For example, purchasing an air conditioning unit provides a cooling service to the customer. People who buy pharmaceuticals to get rid of a headache do not want to just own the goods but obtain the service benefit from them. This explains why customers do not buy goods just to possess them, as the service-dominant logic explains tangible goods are a means of providing a service. What the service-centred dominant logic achieves is to "increase the service flow of value" and views the market as a basis for strategic opportunities where there is a flow of processes and services rather than output of units (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, P.13). Fifth, the service-centred view of marketing is built around the customer and has labelled him/her as co-producer with the aim of involving customers in maximising their input to customise offerings. The customer is also viewed as a means to expand the market and create value.

Sixth, "operant resources" such as core competencies are viewed as sources of competitive advantages. This concept challenges organisations to label marketing as a core competence, rather than just a function at the firm. Also, these core competencies could be used as the basis for creating long term relationships with loyal customers who stay with organisations that "can provide them with an entire host of related services over an extended period (Vargo & Lusch, 2004. P.13). The literature reviewed above closely related to this study which proposes that a gym's employees' core competencies such as their attitudes, enthusiasm, empathy and friendliness allow members to sometimes sign long term contracts with the gym because they have developed close relationships with the employees.

2.4 Service Brand-Relationship-Value Triangle

The Service brand-relationship-value triangle (SBRV triangle) has great significance in this research. It is important to explain, in brief, how it was constructed. Its importance lies in the methodology of this study due to the fact that the research and sub-research questions were based on the SBRV triangle's theories. The research method of data collection –interviews - was also formed around the SBRV triangle. Therefore the two stages of the model's construction will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

First, the history of the SBRV Triangle started in 2003, when Van Durme, Brodie and Redmore studied the process of cooperative business networks and how brand equity could be transferred between them. Intrigued by the newly evolved service dominant logic and its advocating for services, intangibility and operant resources, Van Durme et al. (2003) developed a conceptual model highlighting business relationships. Already acknowledging the brand and customer's relationship they found it was important to include the company and the employees in their construction of the Brand Relationship Pyramid. This Brand Relationship Pyramid illustrated the consumer in the centre of the triangle and placed the company, brand and employees as a network, who work together to create brand trust and reputation for the consumer.

Figure 2: The Brand Relationship Pyramid
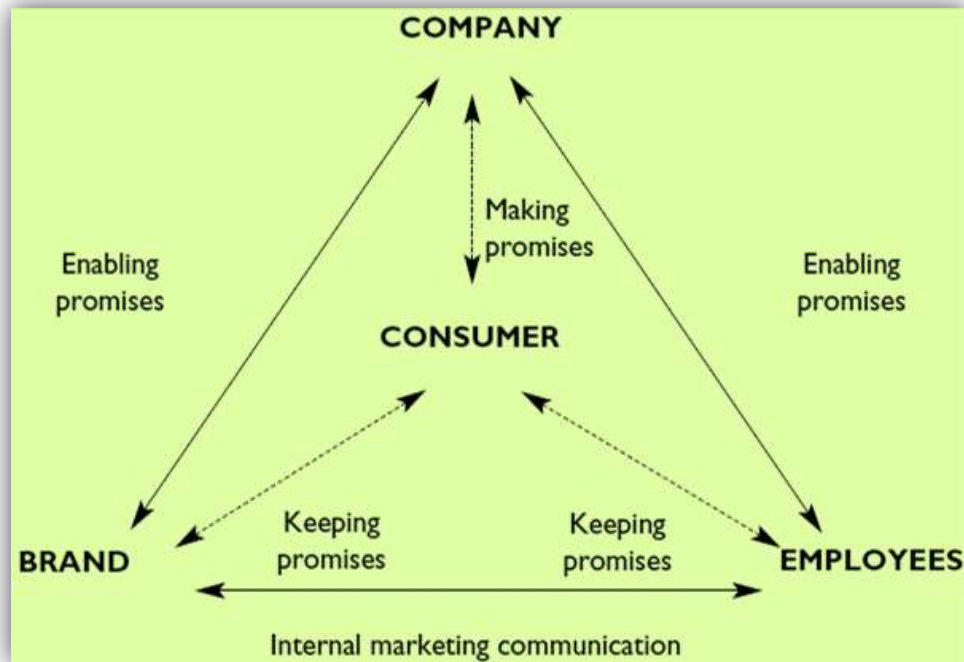
Van Durme, et al, (2003) explained that in cooperative business any perceptions a customer may have for a brand/company's trust and reputation, positive or negative, will spill over to the cooperative brand/company. They also believed that brand equity was not only derived from customers but also from the relationships within the marketing system. A focal point of their research was that brand equity was obtained from these relationships in tandem with the

relationship customers themselves have with that brand. Also the Van Durme, et al, (2003) emphasised brand trust and reputation as key success factors of this relationship. They explain that "in creating meaningful relationships, trust, commitment and reputation of the organisation provide an umbrella for the brand" (Van Durme, Brodie & Redmore, 2003, p.38).

The relationship between the consumer and the brand is an important aspect in this research because the brand herein is a corporate brand which seeks to gain long term relationships with members/customers and in order to do so must achieve positive brand experience and service for the customers.

In order to create their model, Van Durme, et al, (2003) examined a firm's economic actors, including employees (the focus in this research), and examined them against two dominant theoretical perspectives (resource based view and network perspective) and a relational perspective. The role of employees was seen as following; first, the resource based view saw employees as actors in the firm with purpose of maximising resources and building sustainable competitive advantage for the firm. Second, the network perspective gave employees the role of an actor with a network of stakeholders "with objective to build business relationships and build sustainable competitive advantage for network". Third, the relational perspective viewed employees as "co-creators and re-creator of dynamic and unique value proposition" (Van Durme, Brodie, & Redmore, 2003).

The research presented herein also views the employee as a co-creator of brand equity and a significant contributor in the process of keeping the promises the company and brand makes to the customers. The work of Van Durme et al. (2003) provides important insights for the presented research as it shows the different roles the employees have that make them necessary for the creation of brand equity. The brand relationship pyramid is also the basis for the work of Brodie, Glynn and Little (2006) titled the Service Brand-Relationship-Value Triangle.

The "Service Brand-Relationship-Value (SBRV) Triangle" (Brodie, Glynn & Little, 2006) is a theory model that highlights the service brand in the centre of a cycle network which creates

value for the brand/company. The triangle demonstrates the continuous value that is co-created for a brand within a network consisting of company, employees and customers.

Figure 3: "Service Brand-Relationship-Value (SBRV) Triangle"
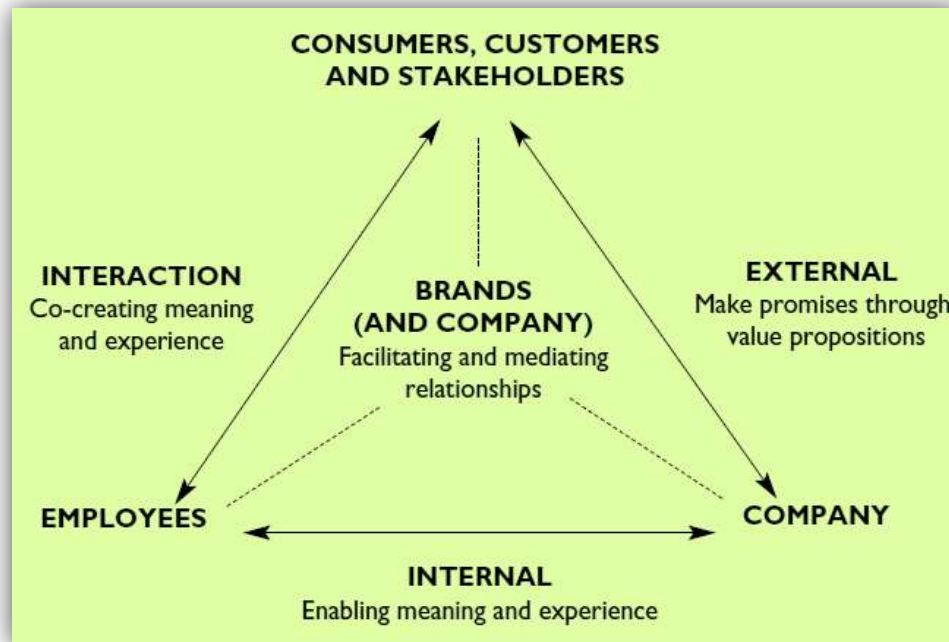
<div align="right">Source: Brodie, Glynn & Little (2006)</div>

However, in order to fully grasp the brand value co-creating process between employees and customers, the interactions between first, company and employees; and second, between company and customers will be studied from the employees' point of view. In order to do so, three sub-research questions were constructed to answer the main research question (Refer sec1.3, p.11).

2.5 The Service Brand Employee

The most valuable contributor in the delivery of the service brand are the employees who act as ambassadors for the brand communicating its values and meaning from the organisation to customers. Service organizations focus a lot of their resources on staff training programs to

communicate the corporate values to employees who in turn can transfer these values to consumers.

Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2009, p. 533), define employee brand commitment as "the degree to which employees identify and are involved with their service brand, are willing to exert additional efforts to achieve the goals of the brand and are interested in remaining with the service organization". In the luxury hotel sector, Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2009) researched employer brand theory, which is the brand as viewed by employees. They found that employees experience with the employer brand is an important mechanism in developing employees' brand commitment. This is because when employees have good experiences with the employer brand they will react positively in the organization, and commit to build the brand because they feel supported and appreciated. Understanding the emotional side of employees steers the employees away from seeing the brand as just a set of functional, economic, and psychological benefits (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009).

Wallace and De Chernatony (2009), studied service employee performance in the retail banking sector and discovered that when employees' behaviour supports the brand they can be regarded as brand champions. Conversely, they can have the ability to sabotage the brand when their behaviour steers away from the brand. When an organisation has successfully communicated the brand to the employees they are more likely to become committed to the brand, this commitment drives employees to be more cooperative, interact well with co-workers, and are more willing to give themselves for the company's well-being (Wallace & De Chernatony, 2009). Employees' behaviour has effect on customers' perception of the company and its brand as well as customer satisfaction. Employees need to reinforce the promise of the brand as they could govern customers' decisions to buy, stay or leave the service (Harris, 2007).

There is emphasis on "the moment of truth" in the services literature. This indicated the employee- customer contact during service encounters. During this encounter employees have the power to either create satisfied and eventually loyal customers or they can create angry customers who could spread negative word of mouth about the brand and company (Specht, Fichtel, & Meyer, 2007). Specht, Fitchel and Meyer (2007) studied employees' impact on

customer satisfaction and found that during the service encounter, employee behaviour influenced customers satisfaction of the employee, company and brand all together.

Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright and Khan (1999) provided the literature with the "buy-in benchmark". Employees are regarded to "buy-in" to the brand when they understand and believe what the brand stands for and communicate this to the customers. This indicated that employees need to buy-in to the brand intellectually (brand understanding), and buy-in to the brand emotionally (brand commitment). The authors believed that these two types of buying into the brand would increase and sustain employees' brand performance and good will. Thomson et al (1999) attributed communication to be the most appropriate tool to increase this employee 'buy-in'. As mentioned earlier brand communication between employer and staff is necessary to instil brand promise in the minds and hearts of employees.

It is crucial to stay in touch with employees and understand their needs; more important is to meet these needs. Training programs ensure the brand values are truly communicated to employees. This is necessary in order for employees to fully grasp the brand's values, believe in them and become brand advocates who passionately commit to the organization and give customers the best brand experience. Maxwell and Knox (2009) and Boyd and Sutherland (2006) have emphasized the importance of motivating current employees to behave in a way that is representative of a company's brand, values and culture i.e. "living the brand." This way, employees will serve the brand more dedicatedly, and become human capital non-expendable to organizations.

There are few studies on the role of employees in creating successful service brands however the majority of these studies are from a management or employers perspective. The proposed research herein investigates these stakeholders and draws on their experience to eventually understand their perspective on why they feel they are important and serve as competitive advantages to the service brand and organisation. The study done by King and Grace (2008), on "Employee's Perspective on Internal Branding" presented how to encourage employee brand commitment in the service industry. However, King and Grace (2009) also proposed a third

perspective of brand equity - the perspective of employees. This is better understood through their "Employee Based Brand Equity" model which will be discussed in the following section.

2.5.1 Employee Based Brand Equity

Figure 4: Dimensions of employee based brand equity
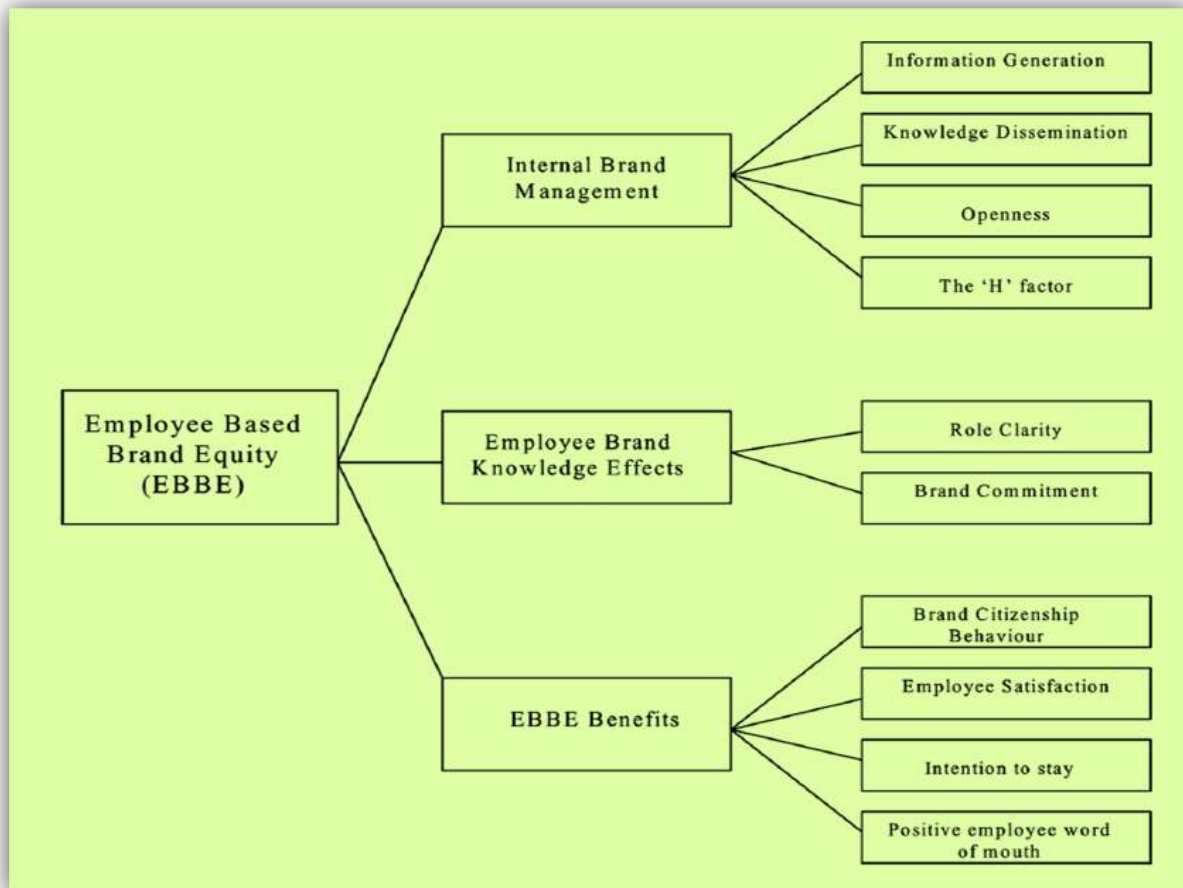
Employee Based Brand Equity (EBBE) is relevant to this research because it draws on a similar notion of employees adding to the brand. They explain that measuring brand equity from an employee perspective enables managers' accountability and responsibility for internal brand management. They theorise "the introduction of an employee perspective of brand equity" and "provide another means by which to model brand equity and seek to expand on existing theory" (King & Grace, 2004, p. 143).

The EBBE model builds upon the discussions covered in the previous sections. The importance of internal branding in an organisation, along with good employee brand behaviour, have the ability to create brand equity in any given service context. The framework presented by King and Grace (2009) provided benefits that can be related to customer satisfaction and financial performance enhancement.

The EBBE model not only expresses the desirable outcomes of branding, it also expresses a need to address employee satisfaction. When an employee is satisfied they are more willing to stay with an organisation, thus staff retention increases. Also employees who are happy at their work place express loyalty and communicate positive word of mouth about the company and its brand.

2.6 Customers' influence on service brand success

McDonald et al (2001) believe that customers contribute to the development of a corporate service brand. This is true when the service requires a high level of customer participation like joining a gym. For example, customer involvement in Weightwatchers requires true commitment to the brand. If the customer yields great results they become advocates for the service brand and engage in positive word of mouth. In some services, customers may be regarded as partial employees and have input to the service. Their assessments can easily influence potential consumers and add to the brand's equity. In this case, it is important for marketers to define the role of consumers, as well as creating education and reward systems (McDonald et al, 2001).

O'Loughlin and Szmigin (2009) study customer perceptions in the financial service sector and found that consumers felt detached from the equation and based many of their choices on convenience. The notion is that many bank employees are being replaced by technology, leaving the service lacking a personal touch.

Sierra and McQuitty (2005) researched the relationship between service provider and customers and noted that social exchange was a driver of service loyalty. Social exchange theory views "social units as a source of emotions that are contingent on the degree of shared responsibility in an exchange task" (Sierra & McQuitty, 2005, p. 392). The nature of services makes the

consumption and production inseparable, therefore a natural social exchange between customers and employees will likely happen. This interaction is believed to render some kind of relationship, which in turn develops emotions. Once customers have emotional ties with a service provider, it is assumed that customers would become loyal to that provider (Sierra & McQuitty, 2005).

In the context of business-to-business (B2B), customers hold a crucial role in the success of service brands. Davis et al (2009) researched brand perceptions in the logistics services industry when the customer is an organisation. They found that in the B2B context, customers who associate superior performance with a service brand become loyal customers and view leaving the brand as highly risky. To customers, brand image is more influential than brand awareness. If the brand has a good image and is known for cultivating long term relationships, customers will be drawn in immediately. Davis et al (2009, p. 216) explain that customers have the sole capability to "increase or diminish a firm's brand equity".

Table 1: Summary of Key Literature Review Findings

Researcher(s) & Year	Study	Findings	Opportunity For Further Research
Hardaker & Fill (2005)	Case study of employee-targeted communication strategy at an UK corporate services organisation	• The importance of employee involvement in organizational identity and services brand development • The intellectual and emotional engagement of employees is critical for brand development • The need for service brands to be embodie through the actions and behaviours of all staff	• How employees view their involvement in organizational identity development of services brand • What employees require from company/employer in order to express positive actions and behaviours towards the brand • What are the specific behaviours employees are expected to express
Sartain (2005)	Observation of internal branding at Yahoo!	Relationships with employees are vital for successful service brands and can be established by aligning the employee experience with the customer experience and the brand promise	• Relating service brand success with the relationships between employees and employer as well as employees and customers • Exploring employees' perspective on their relationships with customers in regards to the success of the brand
Wheeler et al. (2006)	135 Surveys to marketing and supply chain managers on the role of corporate brand identity	• Organisational culture and corporate brand are interdependent in a marketing context • A strong organisational culture increases marketing employees' intent to remain with the firm	• How does the corporate brand identity influence customer facing staff in a service organisation? • Can a corporate brand increase service employees' retention?

Researcher(s) & Year	Study	Findings	Opportunity For Further Research
Boyd and Sutherland (2006)	Four empirical tested studies in organisations where employees acknowledged "living the brand"	The Employee Branding Model: A self Reinforcing cycle which highlighted the importance for companies to encourage their staff to "live the brand" in order to obtain employee brand commitment	• Is it necessary for employees to "live the brand" in order to gain brand equity for the service organisation? • How does "living the brand" influence employees brand commitment from their perspective?
Knox and Freeman (2006)	Empirical study measuring the aspects of employer brand image during employee recruitment	There is a correlation between an attractive employer brand image and the likelihood to apply for a job	It would an opportunity to explore employees perspectives after they were recruited and research if the employer brand image is still upholding in their minds and has it affected their commitment to the brand
Brodie, Glynn & Little (2006)	The development of a theory that integrated the concepts of brand, customer, and network equities into the service-dominant logic	The construction of The Service Brand-Relationship-Value Triangle which highlights the tri-lateral relationships between company, customer and employees which co-create brand value	• Empirically test the model in a service brand company and study the tri-lateral relationships that create brand value for an organisation • Investigate how service brand employees view these relationships in regards to brand success
Punjaisri and Wilson (2007)	Empirical tested the customer facing employees' perspective on internal branding	• Employees are in agreement with management in relation to their crucial role in living the brand to deliver brand promise to customers • Employees emphasizing the importance of cooperation of front and back of the house employees in delivering brand promise	Researching the employees' perspectives on how they live the brand, what they do to deliver brand promise to customers, and how they influence customers' perceptions of the brand's image

Researcher(s) & Year	Study	Findings	Opportunity For Further Research
King and Grace (2007)	In-depth interviews with employees across a range of service industries on internal branding	• The construction of The Employee Brand Commitment Pyramid which encapsulates the progress of internally obtaining employee brand commitment. • Employee brand commitment begins with job commitment then progresses through the emphasising of brand related information.	This presents an opportunity to investigate whether employees differentiate between committing to the job, company, employer or brand
Punjaisri et al. (2009)	699 Quantitative surveys with customer interfacing employees in the hotel industry	• Internal branding has a positive impact on the attitude and behaviour of employees in their delivery of brand promise • Brand identification is a driver of brand commitment and thus brand loyalty of employees	• What are the specific attitudes and behaviours that are considered positive and aid in the delivery of brand promise? • Is brand identification enough to drive brand commitment?
Foster et al. (2010)	Review of the corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding bodies of literature in order to postulate a framework combining these concepts.	• Employer branding and internal branding are found to be important strategies that support the corporate brand building initiatives • Sheds light on the inter-relationships among the three branding strategies	• Exploring the employees' perspective on corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding and their role in each concept • Researching employees' view point on the relationship between their roles and the success of the service brand

The literature review highlighted the strategies for successfully branding a service brand. Employees were viewed to have a significant part in the communication of brand values to customers. In addition the literature demonstrated the importance of service brand employees, and the need for them to be nurtured and educated by the organisation, on the values of the brand in order for them to maintain a positive attitude towards the brand. The characteristics of these employees were also illustrated in the literature. However, the review of the literature found little research on what these employees specifically do to help the service brand gain equity from the perspective of the employees themselves. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to gain more in-depth knowledge on the actions taken by the service employee towards building brand equity for the organisation from their view point. This aim can be explored by drawing on employees' accounts of their work experience, as well as their perspective on how their efforts influence the brand. This knowledge will provide more insight into the traits employees believe add to the success of the service brand. In doing so, the researcher aims to address the gap, in the existing literature, between practitioner studies and employees' perceptions. This in turn will provide an answer to the research question:

"How do service employees facilitate the creation of successful service brands for an organisation?"

To find the answer to this research question, three sub-research questions needed to be answered in order to gain more perspective on service employees' relationship with the company and customers which make up the triangle of value for the core service brand (Brodie, et al., 2006). These sub-research questions are:

- **Sub-research question 1:** How do employees interact with customers in order to co-create brand value?
- **Sub-research question 2**: How does the company communicate brand value and promise to customers? (From an employee's perspective)
- **Sub-research question 3:** How does the company enable employees to create brand value? (From an employee's perspective)

These three sub-research questions were formed around the basic concepts surrounding the "Service Brand-Relationship-Value (SBRV) Triangle" (Brodie, et al., 2006). The sub-research questions were constructed in a manner which highlights the three key network relationships that create value for the service brand. These relationships are important to investigate as a means to gain a greater understanding of the environment surrounding service brand employees. In addition, these interactions between company and customer, customer and employees, and company and employees have all been stressed upon in the literature and have showed to have some effect on the relationship between the service employee and the service brand. Furthermore, these network interactions are assumed to have some effect on how the employees communicate the brand to customers. All these issues are the focus in this research (Brodie, et al., 2006; King & Grace, 2005). This is illustrated as follows:

Figure 5: Research Questions
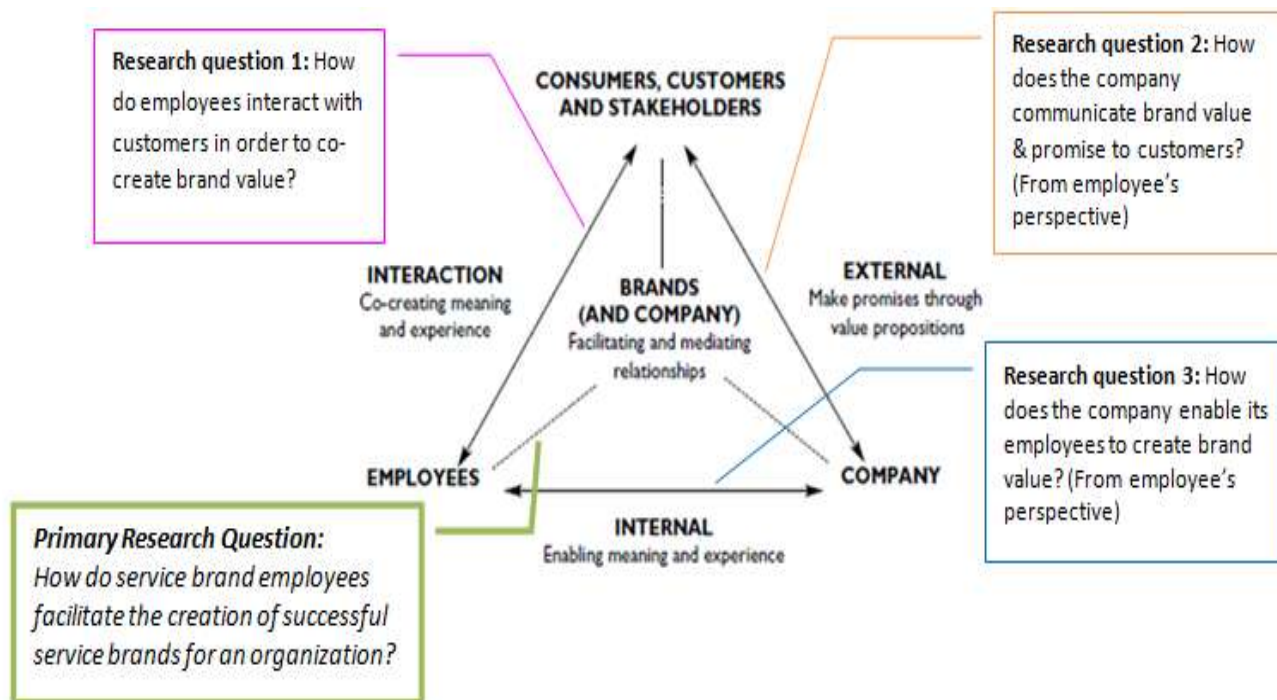
2.7 Conclusion

This literature review has investigated the characteristics of services, service brands, service branding and how service employees add to the brand equity of service brands. While context and perspective may vary, the literature shows that many of the service branding studies share a common root. Employees' role in the delivery of the service brand's promise to customers is confirmed to be vital. The service branding literature provided three distinct and complementary strategies to ensure the alignment of employees' values with those of the company and brand. The behaviour of employees seems to have an influence on customers' brand perceptions and consequently has effect on customer satisfaction. Customers themselves appear to have some input when it comes to creating successful service brands.

This paper presents a starting point for the investigation of successful service branding leveraging the efforts of employees towards building brand equity. The following methodology outlines the methodological procedure used to address the identified gaps in the literature to see which tactics employees utilise when communicating brand promise to customers.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This section outlines the methodology that addresses the main research question. In addition, it discusses the justification of the methodology and the methods utilised in of this research. The procedure to fulfil ethical requirements has also been addressed in this section.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this research is to investigate the role of employees in the success of a service brand. In order to answer the proposed research questions, it is necessary to take a qualitative approach when collecting and analysing the data. Qualitative research is more concerned with words rather than numbers as in quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This approach has been favoured as the research requires that the social world be understood from the perspective of service brand employees. It means that the employees' input would render words, descriptions and phrases that carry rich significant meanings. This approach would inevitably require interpretive understanding. Qualitative research is more appropriate than quantitative research because first, an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research applies to this research problem. Second, an epistemological interpretive position is taken when examining the data given by the participants. And third, a constructionist ontological position is chosen regarding the outcomes of the interactions between the employees and the service brand described by those same employees (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This research seeks to investigate the participants' feelings, stories and experiences, with respect to the company, customers or the brand itself. The aim of the research is to assess what specific efforts employees utilise by drawing on their own accounts of their work experience and insight of their prospects to add to the brand, and how their efforts influence the brand's success and add to its equity.

In utilising a qualitative research approach in this study, the researcher also adapts a naturalist style of thinking. This approach aims to understand the social reality within its own context (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This tradition aims to understand how people interact within, and also interpret, a given social context. It is an appropriate tradition given that the literature review acknowledged repeatedly that various network relationships (e.g. company and customer, customer and employees, and company and employees) have significant influence on the relationship between employees and the service brand.

To investigate employees' role in creating successful service brands, this research takes an inductive approach to building theory. There is no need to hypothesise the importance of employees because the literature review already established that these employees are important and have the ability to create either a good or bad brand experience for customers. An inductive research methodology is applied so that categories emerge from the answers given by the employees. This way, empirically based knowledge provides more insight, into the behaviour employees believe are the reason they are able to contribute to the success of the service brand. In addition, the classic steps of inductively creating theory will apply as follows:

Figure 6: Inductive Theory Approach
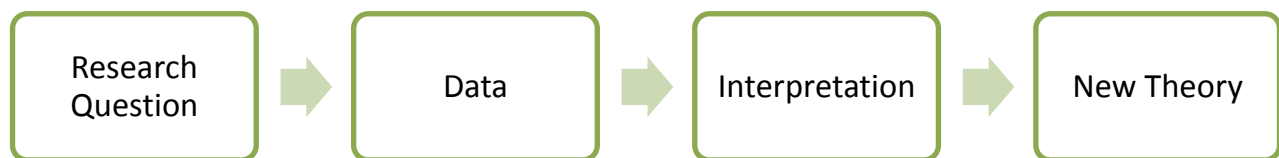
Although the main approach is inductive, there is some deductive element to the theory building process. The codes and categories that emerge from the data will be classified to fit as an answer to the sub-research question, thus introducing the deductive approach into the study. The research and sub-research questions have been previously based on the SBRV triangle (Brodie, et al., 2006) and therefore it is fair to say that the deductive approach was also used to analyse the data because of the use of a prior existing framework model.

Moreover, an epistemological interpretive position will be taken when examining the data given by the participants. This position takes into account the subjective meaning of the social action; which means that the research would need to take into account the participants' definition of what is real, and how their definitions of reality affect their actions. In other words, to uncover the employees' perspectives on what they believe are brand building techniques. Also, the interpretivist position dictates that the researcher must acknowledge that there are several social realities. The research findings would be an interpretation of the employees' perspective and may not be a true reflection of other service employees.

Furthermore, a constructionist ontological position is selected when regarding the social world. This entails that social reality is constructed by the perceptions of the participants in this research. Also, the participants' reality is constructed by how they respond to their perceptions and that their social interactions are in a constant state of revision. In other words, a gym is known to be in a constant state of change as new members join and existing members may discontinue and new fitness programs may be presented seasonally. In addition, a constructionist ontological position allows the researcher to express what they believe is occurring in the social world described by the participants.

3.1 Research Method

Within qualitative research, two main methods are available for gathering new data from sampled populations. These are focus groups and individual in-depth interviewing. This research uses semi-structured in-depth interviews as a method to collect data. This method is chosen because firstly, there is a desire to minimise the cross influence between participants in a group setting. Naturally it is easier in a category like gyms to isolate employees to gain specifics of their work ethic and brand building efforts irrespective of the attitudes and behaviours of the other employees. Secondly, the research requires around 30 minutes or more participation from each respondent. In focus groups, it is not likely that 30 minutes contribution time would be obtained from each respondent since this would extend the duration of the group unreasonably. The interview questions are in a semi-structured format. This consists of 17 semi-structured questions perhaps better described as probes. Answers are given verbally, recorded and transcribed. Analysis is done by grouping concepts, which shall be discussed in the analysis chapter of this paper. A semi-structured interview method provides a framework with a set of categories to be tested from the literature, similar to a structured interview, but it allowed the interviewer to be flexible and give the respondent opportunities and flexibility with their response. The questions are prepared to stimulate the employees to give back information on what they do that might enhance and differentiate the brand. This is guided by the issue of "service branding" in order to serve as a motivation to bring forth service specific categories and to channel and narrow down the otherwise large exploration, and to have a reference point for respondents from which their feedback could later be compared. Focusing on the intangible

nature of services, each interviewee is asked what attempts they make to create good brand experiences for consumers. Again, the SBRV triangle is used as a reference for the creation of the interview questions (Fig.7) This time, all the 17 interview questions are set to answer the 3 research questions. This is illustrated as follows:

Figure 7: Formulation of Interview Questions around "Service Brand-Relationship-Value (SBRV) Triangle"
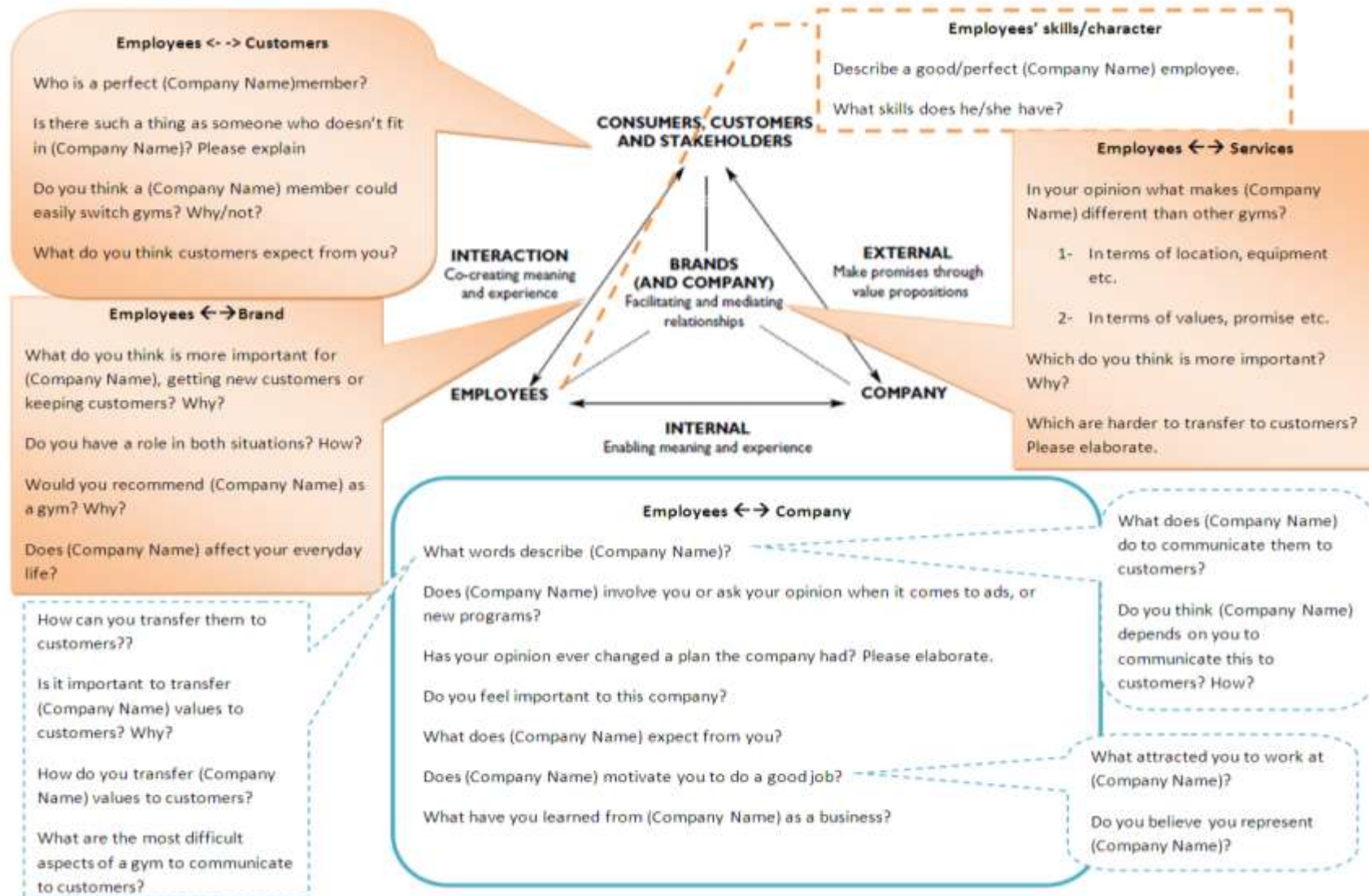
Table 2: Interview questions that provide answers for research questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
How do employees interact with customers in order to co-create brand value?	4-How do you transfer (Company Name) values to customers? 6-Which aspects are harder to communicate to customers? Please elaborate. 16- Who is a perfect (Company Name) member? 17- What do you think customers expect from you?

Research Question	Interview Questions
How does the company communicate brand value and promise to customers? (From an employee's perspective)	2-What does (Company Name) do to communicate its philosophy (values, promise, and way of life) to customers? 5-In our opinion what makes (Company Name) different from other gyms? a. In terms of location, equipment, exercise programs, etc. b. In terms of values, promise, philosophy, etc. 7-What do you think is more important for (Company Name), getting customers or keeping customers? Please elaborate 14- What have you learned from (Company Name) as a business?

Research Question	Interview Questions
How does the company enable employees to create brand value? (From an employee's perspective)	1-What words describe (Company Name)? 3-Do you think (Company Name) depends on you to communicate this to customers also? 8- Do you have a role in both situations? How? 9- Does (Company Name) involve you or ask your opinion when it comes to ads or new programs? 10-Has your opinion ever changed a plan the company had? Please elaborate. 11-Do you feel important to this company? Why? 12-In your opinion, what does (Company Name) expect from you? 13-Does (Company Name) motivate you to do a good job? 15- Does (Company Name) affect your everyday life? In what way?

It is anticipated that the participants' answers would generate issues and themes relevant to the branding and marketing of services. The semi-structured questions are expected to produce rich insight to particular domains of the service brand and eventually the collected data would form the foundation of the theory development phase. The theory would eventually pertain to the importance of employees in creating successful service brands. It would also draw on specific implications that may be meaningful to the service brand itself. This could include issues on creating, branding, managing and marketing of services.

It is also anticipated that this inductive qualitative research method, as along with the semi-structured interview technique would produce responses that would enable the researcher to generate themes. This would be useful since the data would be analysed using the method of content analysis. Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 62) explain that this type of research design is "concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the case in question". The participants' answers would then be transcribed and then inductively coded. Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 259) explain that the answers to open-ended questions "have to be coded" which "entails reading through answers, deriving categories that can be employed to form the basis for codes, and then going through the answers again so that the answers can be coded for entry into a computer spreadsheet." In this research, the content analysis will be done manually by the researcher due to the small size of the sample.

This method is chosen so that the researcher does not affect the answers nor steer the participant in any direction. In keeping with this theme, this research would stay clear of creating a survey because it does not intend to seek out percentages or large numbers of employees who agree or disagree with certain sentences. The research would also prefer to avoid making any suggestions or show any biases in the choice of words or even in the way it formulates a question.
The opening question would be along the lines of the following:*"What words describe this organisation to you?"*

Eventually the responses will help generate the flow of the next question and if not, there would be additional questions prepared in advance to stimulate the employees' thoughts to open up and

give back useful information. Since the service organisation in question is familiar to the researcher, it is anticipated that the employees would be objective and forward in their responses.

3.2 Research Site – Company Brief

The research site or unit chosen for this study is a New Zealand fitness organisation. This company is chosen because it has been a successful fitness club for 29 years with over 300 employees - some who have been a part of the company from since inception. The selected organisation has high brand awareness levels with 14 branches in New Zealand, 10 of which are in Auckland. Although eight branches are franchised, they all operate under the same brand name and maintain the same philosophy (vision, mission and goals), logo, slogan, website, sponsorships, and exercise programs. For the purpose of this research, three Auckland City Centre branches will be approached for the interviewing process; this is due to their focal locations in the hub of Auckland City where it is anticipated to have a diverse mix of gym users.

While the three interviewed branches, operating under the parent brand, shared the same brand guidelines, exercise programs and brand philosophy, they demonstrated obvious differences in branches' culture, way of doing things and approach to customer service. Each branch had a focused target market; this will help to code the gym branch in this research without compromising any ethical risk of disclosure. The three gym branches are characterised as follows:

- Women
- Corporate
- Young fit city dweller (Y&F)

3.3 Sample recruitment

In order to recruit participants for interviews, the owner of each gym branch was approached with a company cover letter explaining the research thoroughly in a simple and friendly way that encouraged participation in the study. This participation constitutes the company giving permission to interview its employees. The owner was also asked to provide a list or pool of employees to choose from. In terms of the sample size, 6-12 employees were intended to be

interviewed. The participants consist of gym managers, fitness trainers and front desk receptionists. This selection of participants is based on the criteria that these employees are assumed to have the most interaction with consumers and perhaps represent the face of the brand and its values. Other sampling variables such as age and gender were overlooked in this research due to the fact that they would have brought no significance into the range of answers and created risk of identifying participants.

Recruitment was by direct approach by the researcher after consent was given by the owner of each branch to interview their employees. This way, a purposive sampling technique was employed. This type of sampling is appropriate given the use of qualitative procedures for interviewing, and the student scale of the project. Methods of non-probability sampling used in this research were convenience sampling, as well as snowball sampling. Convenience and snowball sampling carry the risk that the respondents recruited by the researcher may differ in some way from the norm. The convenience sample came from the list given to the researcher from each gym branch owner. The snowball sampling was used in the form of asking the interviewee at the end to nominate another keen employee. The employees recruited for interviewing were to be presented with a Participation Information Sheet (Appendix 1) explaining the research and the role they will play in the study. A Consent Form (Appendix 3) was presented at the start of the interview to the participants, assuring their privacy will be protected and acted as a signed record of their agreement to the interview.

3.4 Interviews

In order to gather the data for the study, the owners of the branches were personally approached, along with a cover letter explaining the study. All company owners were approached by the researcher, and all the interviews were conducted by the researcher.

The first owner (gym women) was approached on October 14th; the second owner (gym corporate) was approached on October 15th and the third branch owner was approached on October 18th (gym Y&F). Two out of three agreed immediately while one owner (approached on October 15th) asked to set an appointment for October 27th. At the meeting the owner showed

concerns about the research and brought up issues including, the employees pay and not being able to have access to the interview recordings. She also added that she had showed the cover letter to her staff and only one person wanted to participate in the interview. In order to ease the owner's doubts, an explanation of the research goals was offered. Furthermore, it was emphasised that the research was interested in the employees' efforts that may influence service brands. Also, the scope of the study excluded information on the company finances or strategies. It was also important to stress that the research focus is service brands. It was highlighted that the information employees provide is confidential along with the name of the company and its owner. The interview questions were offered for the owner to revise, however this notion was met with a decline stating that "maybe it is better I don't see them". The owner eventually agreed to allow one employee to be interviewed; however this was not a desired outcome, because according to the University's research ethics, the employer is not to identify who has been interviewed. The owner also added that if I was to interview the keen employee, I could ask if they would help to convince the others to participate. The one employee that had been keen on the research was interviewed and gave another employee's name that would possibly agree to be interviewed. Consecuently, this particular branch's employees were interviewed through staff "snow-balling" each other.

As mentioned earlier, the SBRV triangle has had significant influence on this research and has formed as the basis for the interview question. Working around the network relationships that create value for the brand, the interview questions were constructed with focus on the brand and the employees. The formulation of interview questions around the SBRV triangle is outlined in (Fig. 7).

The interview questions took on a semi-structured form. According to Bryman and Bell (2007), using this type of interview is flexible. This allows the researcher to set an interview guide of issues and topics to be covered while allowing the participant to freely answer. The interview questions were prepared to stimulate the employees to open up and give back good information on what they do that might enhance and differentiate the brand.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

In order to perform this research it is important to be ethical when conducting the semi-structured interviews. This ensures that the dignity and safety of the selected sample of employees is intact. Participants were given a 'Participant Information Sheet' (Appendix 2), which outlined that the research process was commonplace and safe. It informed the respondents of potential discomfort with regard to answering questions and being recorded. Further, it let respondents know that no personal identity information is recorded to ensure their confidentiality. All forms and recordings of the individual interviews are kept in a secure locked cabinet at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) with limited access.

Following the collection of data, transcriptions of the interviews were made by a professional transcriber. In accordance with the University Ethical Committee, the transcriber was asked to sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure that the transcriber understood that all the material is confidential, and that the contents of the recordings can only be discussed with the researcher. In addition, the confidentiality agreement ensured neither those transcripts were copied nor that third parties had any access to them. Transcription of the interviews took place between 8 November 2010 and 11 November 2010.

This research is considered to have low ethical risk. With a reference to the ethics knowledge base located on the AUT website, ethical issues were low, largely due to a vigorous ethical approval assessment done by the researcher's university. This concerned itself with the research process, and the interviewing of the respondents. According to the Auckland University of Technology Ethical Committee (AUTEC), the researcher had to testify that the gathered data will not be used to harm participants, and those who do agree to be interviewed will be informed of the research and its goals and their role within the research. Also, this research was considered of minimal risk because there will be no deception involved and would only be conducted after being awarded approval from the University's Ethical Committee and the consent of the participants.

The Auckland University of Technology Ethical Committee granted the researcher ethical approval of the interviews on 12 October 2010, outlined in (Appendix 1).

3.6 Analytical Method

Content analysis has been defined as an "approach to the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and reliable manner" (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 304). It is also a technique used for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specific text characteristics (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Qualitative content analysis is also used by researchers as a framework to empirically and methodologically control the analysis of texts. This is why researchers view the method of analysis as flexible and highly used in the context of business within the analysis of text data. Also content analysis follows certain analytical rules and step by step models, without the need for rash quantification (Mayring, 2000). In general, qualitative content analysis deals with interpreting the content of text data through a process of coding and identifying themes or categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The text data in qualitative research can be in many forms, such as verbal, print or electronic; it could have been obtained from surveys, focus groups, observations or, as is the case in this study, from in-depth interviews. It is important to note that the researcher has chosen qualitative content analysis for its focus on examining language intensively and going beyond just counting words. The purpose of content analysis is to classify large amounts of text into an efficient number of themes that share similar meaning (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Another specification of content analysis is a quantifying element. This characteristic distinguishes content analysis from thematic analysis which only focuses on creating themes from the data. Basically, if the researcher is performing qualitative content analysis and the research question suggests quantitative aspects the researcher would then follow the same steps as thematic analysis but adding the feature of counting certain words. Bryman and Bell (2007) explain that in content analysis, after categories are extracted from the data, the words that make up the category are counted in order to make comparisons. On the other hand, when performing qualitative content analysis "if the research question suggests quantitative aspects (e.g.

frequencies of coded categories) can be analysed" (Mayring, 2000, p. 108). This indicates that there is a choice in content analysis to either provide frequencies of the coded categories or opting to disregard them.

The two most important characteristics of content analysis are objectivity and being systematic. The objectivity lies in the inferences made by the researcher and the categories he/she assigns to the data (the responses in this case) should maintain a transparency and be free of any biases. The systematic quality of content analysis constitutes that the text units, or responses in this case, be simplified into short organised segments (codes). Content analysis applies when the research intends to uncover the apparent content of the item in question (the response data), i.e. the meanings that may lie within the actual data. This is the exact intention of semi-structured questions. Hopefully, the findings of the analysis would have implications on managers and shed light on ways employees can help companies build a successful service brand.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), there are three approaches to qualitative content analysis. They are: conventional, directed or summative. This research has approached qualitative content analysis with the conventional method. The reasoning for this is that the direct method involves previously generating theory or hypotheses and predetermining codes from this theory before gathering the data. The proposed research has chosen to inductively create codes after the data gathering process because it wishes to extract theory from the data. On the other hand, the summative method detects the researcher to identify and quantify keywords before or during data gathering. The idea here is not to explore meaning but to explore word usage. In the case of service brand employees, the aim is to extract what they believe is true when it comes to branding services. The research has not previously generated theory nor has it set some keywords to find out how many times they were mentioned. For these reasons, the conventional method of coding is used. This choice encompasses defining codes during the analysis process and extracting meaning and theory from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The conventional content analysis method states that "categories are derived from the data during data analysis and the researcher is able to gain a richer understanding of a phenomenon with this approach" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1286).

All three approaches are associated with the analysis of text from a naturalistic paradigm. Also, all three types have a similar analytical process of classic steps. Starting with formulating research questions to sample selection and then to the coding process. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the coding process differs according to the three types of content analysis and is the determining success factor of the whole analysis process. They explain that the basic coding process constitutes organising the large amount of text into fewer categories of content. These categories express what has been derived from the text through analysis. The next step would be to identify each category and explain the relationships between the codes that had formed them.

In content analysis it is important to determine what the unit of analysis is in order to simplify the procedure. According to Bryman and Bell (2007) the unit could be a word, phrase or sentence. Due to the large amount of text in this research (99 pages), words and phrases are too small of a unit, therefore sentences were determined as the unit of analysis in this study. There was no use of any computer or electronic based assistance in the content analysis and all the sentences were analysed manually by the researcher and research supervisor. It is necessary to mention that the use of content analysis gives the researcher the flexibility to use specific words for the codes, concepts and categories. The words used herein are context specific to service branding and have the potential to reveal the interpretive frameworks used by service branding, managing and marketing academics. At the same time, the words used will be simple enough for the average reader to grasp and make sense of. All the codes, concepts and categories will be defined and explained later in the coding scheme.

There are a number of advantages and disadvantages associated with qualitative content analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The advantages are fivefold as follows: first, content analysis is considered a transparent research method where replications and follow-up studies can be feasible. Second, it allows longitude analysis with relative ease. This means the research has space to track changes over time. Third, content analysis is considered an unobtrusive method. This means that the participants in the study do not need to take the researcher into account and there is no reactive effect. Fourth, as mentioned earlier, it is a highly flexible method and can be applied to a number of contexts, not only business research. Fifth, content analysis permits the production of information about social groups otherwise hard to access (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

For example, the knowledge of what service employees do to create successful service brands and what they think helps gain brand equity.

Like all research techniques, content analysis has some disadvantages and limitations, these are summarised as follows: first, content analysis is highly dependent on the documents which are analysed. Therefore they must display authenticity, credibility and representativeness. These considerations are more applicable to texts such as newspapers, however in this research the texts are the interviews gathered from service brand employees and therefore are of high authenticity, credibility and representativeness. The second disadvantage is that codes are highly dependent on the research and how they regard the social world. Thus, a codes scheme must be devised in order to explain their interpretation. Third, some problems arise when the aim is to present hidden rather than obvious content. Again, the problem here concerns researcher specific inferences made to the data. Fourth, when using content analysis it is difficult to find answers to "why?" questions (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This is not the case in this research given that the research question asks "What employees do to create successful service brands". Fifth, content analysis can become very labour intensive. Despite the obvious disadvantages of content analysis, as a technique, the advantages as discussed earlier make it the desired choice for the purpose of this study. Furthermore, the researcher has addressed some of the disadvantages to prove that content analysis remains an appropriate method of analysis for this study and the data obtained.

3.6.1 Validity and Credibility

As stated in the methodology chapter, content analysis of 12 semi structured interviews was conducted. Validation of results was carried out through talking to these employees directly about their experiences. In relation to reliability, the coding process was done by the researcher and the research supervisor. When the codes where later compared and found similar, validity and reliability of that code was achieved (Boyatzis, 1998). It should be noted that the trustworthiness of the answers from all respondents could not be assured as personal bias and point of view are expected to influence the responses. For instance, one respondent who worked at the gym and also had their own fitness related business repeatedly changed the subject and

mentioned what the company was doing wrong. Many of this particular respondent's answers were not used. Following each interview, areas of ambiguity were identified and clarifications sought for the same. Audio recording of all face-to-face interviews was undertaken. Recording accuracy was checked at the conclusion of the interviews.

Credibility of the study was strengthened through triangulation, which verified data through various sources, such as services brands literature, personal observation at the three gym branches, and supervisory support. For instance, verification was conducted through being a member at one gym branch and being able to enter the other branches. This allowed the researcher to get a first hand view of the behaviour of some employees and their ways of communicating the brand's image and ethos.

3.7 Summary

The present research employs a qualitative design to collect data, on the techniques service brand employees use to create successful brand equity. The research draws on semi-structured interviews which are then analysed using content analysis method. The subsequent chapter discusses the analysis of the qualitative methods approach.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Findings

This chapter begins with a discussion on the content analysis technique, and the interview procedure used to gather data. It then identifies and explains the codes, concepts, and categories that arose from the data, supported by a discussion of the findings in relation to each sub-research question.

4.1 Approach to Interview Data Analysis

Content analysis uses a step-by-step process outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) in order to create codes, concepts and categories related to services branding. Thus the repetition of certain words, phrases and scenarios by the respondents were important factors of coding. This means the greater number of the times a word is given, the more a category is confirmed. This method focuses on the identification of categories, which makes it an appropriate analysis method for searching for employee brand building techniques. Each employee's interview is analysed and coded individually in order to create specific categories. The steps of content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005); are as follows:

1. Data is read to derive codes. This is done by highlighting exact words from the text that appear to capture a key concept.
2. A second attempt is made to derive any codes that were overlooked.
3. Regarding the derived codes, the researcher can now seek to find appropriate labels for the concepts from his/her own reasoning and analysis.
4. This step initiates the categories creation by grouping together one or more concept that share similar meanings.
5. The final step is to produce a report of the data's analysis. This includes a log of content occurrences in order to make comparisons.

These steps will be followed in order to analyse the data and derive the necessary categories for data interpretation. Analysing the data inductively allows the researcher to arrange the data into concepts and derive elements that tie them together. In turn, breaking down the data will give

way to contextualise the understanding of the data and explain the emerging patterns. Then the researcher will be able to piece together bits of theory from the interpretation of these patterns. The final categories that emerge from the content analysis will constitute as answers for the research and sub-research questions. This means that the inductive categories will be deductively fit to answer the research questions.

4.2 Interview Procedure

Data gathering commenced on October 19th 2010 and carried on for 15 days ending on November 2nd 2010. Twelve employees were interviewed from three City Centre branches in the company of interest. Fifteen employees were approached to participate in the study. These employees were either personally approached or invited to join via email or call/voice mail. The employee contacts were obtained from the company website. The participant information sheet (Appendix 2) was presented to the participants while being approached to join the interview. From the 15 employees approached 13 agreed to be interviewed, while 2 declined. All 13 employees set an appointment which placed the day, time and place of the interview and from the 13 employees, only 1 failed to come to the meeting resulting 12 completed interviews. The quiet and professional nature of the interview setting allowed the respondent to feel safe, and for a friendly social atmosphere to be created between researcher and respondent. Those who did participate in the study were treated to a beverage and snack of their choice and a location they preferred. This is outlined in (Table 3) below. In the table the respondents were given codes according to the branch they worked for, for both ethical approval reasons and respondent comfort.

Table 3: Respondent and Interview Particulars

	Date	Respondent code	Time	Location
October	**19th**	W1	9:30 am	Gloria Jeans, Victoria St
		W2	2:30 pm	Eves Pantry, Elliott St
	20th	W3	1:00 pm	Eves Pantry, Elliott St
	22nd	W4	12:00 pm	Café, Market Pl
	23rd	Y1	2:30 pm	St Pierre's Sushi, K Rd
	26th	Y2	1:30 pm	Esquires café, K Rd
	27th	C1	11:00 am	Private room at gym branch
	31st	C2	10:00 am	Court Jester Café, Albert St
		Y3	12:30 pm	Starbucks, K Rd
November	**1st**	Y4	8:45 am	Starbucks, K Rd
		C3	2:30 pm	Esquires Café, Quay St
	2nd	C4	3:30 pm	Private room at gym

The main protocols of the interview process were: pre-interview conversation, ordering beverage/snack, giving the information sheet (Appendix 2) to the respondent, discussing the information sheet, signing of the consent form (Appendix 3) by the respondent, starting the recorder, commencing and completing the interview, asking the respondent if they had any questions for the researcher, thanking the respondent and stopping the recorder.

The interviews were audio recorded and a total of 220 minutes were recorded. The shortest interview was 11 minutes while the longest interview lasted 42 minutes. After calculating the

interview durations the mean or average interview lasted for 20 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded for reference purposes. This enabled the researcher to have an original verification and not to deviate too far from the original responses when processing the data. The naturalistic style of qualitative research supports this because the researcher can refer back to original data, rather than use interpretation in ambiguous situations. One-on-one interviews were conducted, resulting in less biased data being gathered. As mentioned earlier, focus groups would have created an uncomfortable situation for employees and could have affected their answers. The data from each employee was also analysed separately. This allowed specifics to arise. Comparing the data together early on would create less accurate themes, as analysing the data sets together would lack the fundamental perspective that these employees are different at their brand building techniques.

In terms of gender demographics, 5 women and 7 men were interviewed. Name and age were not obtained to guarantee confidentiality and also had no significance in the study. The reason for including certain demographics such as, position at gym, having a business background and duration of employment at gym, were used in this research as they had relevance to the employees' characteristics and were used in the cross referencing of the employees' answers and characteristics. These demographics are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Profile of Respondents by Demographics

Position at gym	Number of interviewees	Business Background	Number of interviewees	Employment Duration	Number of interviewees
Receptionist/Sales consultant	4	*Has business background*	2	*Less than 6 months*	3
Trainer	8	*Some business background*	4	*Less than 1 year*	2
Other[1]	1	*No business background*	6	*Between 1-2 years*	3
		Owns a business[2]	5	*More than 2 years*	4

*1 this employee was a nutritionist as well as a trainer. *2 these employees were once employees at the company but now are contract trainers working out of company branches.

All participants answered all the 17 interview questions. Some questions needed clarification by the researcher. For example, question number 14: *"What have you learned from the company as a business?"* The explanation of this question prompted the researcher to create a new question of *"what are the dos and don'ts you have learned from the company and would follow if you were to open your own gym?"* However, interjection was only used by the researcher when an interviewee's answer created an opportunity for another question or a need for the participant's answer to be explained or elaborated upon.

At the end of each interview the participants were offered the chance to ask any further questions about the research or anything else they would like to add. A number of 4 participants asked what the purpose of the research was and what it aimed to accomplish. A satisfied answer to participants' inquiries was given. Only one interviewee asked to be sent the interview transcript while 9 requested a summary of the final research be sent to them.

After the data was collected, the interview audio recordings were sent to a third party in order to be transcribed from an audio recording into a word processed document. The transcribing

process began on Monday November 8th 2010 and was completed on Thursday November 11th 2010. The transcribed data resulted in 99 pages of written data.

4.3 Coding Process

After the interviews were conducted, the researcher arranged the data into separate documents reflecting each employee interviewed. The documents were in table format with columns containing the interview question, followed by respondent answers and lastly the code. From this, the researcher used content analysis to refine the data. This technique allows common themes to be identified from the text which emerge from the repetition of words and ideas (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

In this research, the content analysis that took place identified 'codes' initially where fragments of words within the transcripts containing information were highlighted and coded. After codes had emerged, the researcher grouped similar codes together to create 'concepts'. These concepts were tested against the transcripts to ensure fidelity with the data was maintained. Following this, 'themes' were created by grouping similar concepts together (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

The following steps explain in detail how the codes, concepts and categories were formulated. First, the analysis process began with a thorough reading of the 12 provided transcribed interview answers to the 17 semi-structured questions. The idea was to focus on locating key words or phrases in the answers and then use them as a code for that specific answer. When it was felt that these initial codes accurately reflected the data, a coding schedule was created, where codes were given open and flexible definitions (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In order to make this process simpler, the researcher approached each sub-research question one at time.

The second step involved giving the data a second thorough reading in order to generate new codes that could have been overlooked. This was a repeat of step one; focusing on locating key words or phrases in the participants' responses and then use it as a code for that specific answer. This in turn allowed for the refinement of codes to create more distinct concepts (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The data was then re-analysed according to the definitions conveyed in the coding

schedule. This allowed codes to be grouped and reviewed to fit into concepts that accurately represented the data. Once data was regrouped and reviewed, codes were made more specific, resulting in a more detailed replacement for the coding scheme (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

The third step involved the categorisation of similar concepts to create 'themes' (Bryman and Bell, 2007) for service brand employee brand building techniques. From these, the researcher was able to reflect on the different techniques conveyed in the coding process, and group techniques which appear to have a linkage - thereby creating groups of techniques that have a common root. In turn, the codes and concepts were generated, as shown in table 5.

The fourth step in content analysis would normally contain the quantification of the frequency of codes. In relevance to this research, the researcher will not attempt to present the frequency of use of each specific code due to a small sample size. Each and every category would have a 100% frequency mention; therefore the quantifying of categories would be redundant. Instead of presenting a frequency table of codes, the researcher will provide graphs illustrating the frequency of each concept that was derived from the content analysis of the data. The graphs will show how many employees named a concept in their interview. This is not to be confused by the number of times each employee repeated each concept. The objective is to calculate how many employees repeated a specific concept, when delivering the brand promise to customers.

The last step of content analysis involved the creation of categories. These collate the concepts according to the central concerns. The categories identified are: 'Employee Behaviour', 'Customer Satisfaction', 'Social Connection', 'Branding' and 'Employee Commitment'. The findings portray major categories which are significant and created from valid concepts cited by six or more participants.

4.4 Findings

The data has provided a number of categories derived from the employees' perspective, on brand building. This is illustrated as a data table for each research question. The following section presents the findings of the content analysis performed on the interview data. Each category

would be explained in-depth along with excerpts from the data to illustrate the employees' answers when it came to brand building.

4.4.1 Research Question 1: How do employees interact with customers in order to co-create brand value?

Employees' interaction with customers in order to co-create brand value can be seen as governed by the categories. These categories act as fundamental influences which are central to the ways in which employees interact with customers at the gym. Favourable behaviour, creating relationships and focusing on customer satisfaction are the means by which the employees meet customer expectations and communicate the brand values. This is illustrated in the table below, followed by a discussion.

Table 5: Derivation of Codes, Concepts and Categories

Step 1: Codes		Step 2: Concepts	Step 3: Categories
Acknowledgment Friendly Knowledgeable Positive Provide tools Set goals	Comfortable Empathy Punctual Responsibility Support Trust	1. Professionalism: Employees displaying qualities of professional conduct with customers. 2. Common courtesies: Behaviours of respect and consideration towards customers.	**Employee Behaviour**
Relationships Friendships Social skills Community	Communication Shared values Communication Family	3. Building Relationships: Friendships and any personal or social relationships employees form with gym members. 4. Impartial friend: Employees form 'tough love' friendships that constitute being direct about exercise and achieving goals	**Social Connection**
Consistency After purchase service Follow up Adapt to customer needs	Atmosphere Fun Variety Easy process Achieve goals	5. Customer service: Employees commitment to providing value services to customers, and meeting customers' wants and needs. 6. Good Gym Atmosphere: Employees creating a positive and user-friendly gym atmosphere for customers.	**Customer Satisfaction**

Table 6: Focus on Concepts and Categories Related to Research Question 1

Category	Concept & Definition	Sample Quotes
Employee Behaviour: The code of conduct that the employees display when interacting with gym members.		
	Professionalism: Employees displaying qualities of professional conduct with customers.	C3 "They expect me to be professional, to keep up to date with my knowledge" Y4 "I don't miss appointments. I'm always on time, being punctual, just building that kind of respect that the client takes me seriously."
	Common courtesies: Behaviours of respect and consideration towards customers.	Y1 "They expect a smiley face, they expect a lending hand, they expect me to be there, they expect me to pick them up when things are down." Y4 "get a person to know them, know their name, call them by their name, ask them how they are, what they're getting up to for the weekend...know something of interest like it's their kid's birthday"
Social Connections: Social ties employees create with customers that involve expressing the brand meaning.		
	Building relationships: Friendships and any personal and social relationships employees form with gym customers.	W3 "The customer more rely on the personal relationship so the staff will have to understand that and have the bond with clients." Y3 " One of the most important aspects is that you need to form a community as well"
	Impartial friend: Employees form friendships that constitute being direct about exercise and achieving goals.	W1 "A lot more straight up then their best friend would be, but at the end people start to think you're mean, but really after towards the end they realize that you're doing it for their own good" Y4 "I don't sugar coat anything. I take a hard line and I say this is what you need to do."
Customer Satisfaction: Taking care of customers, their needs and desires.		
	Customer service: Employees' commitment to providing value services to customers, and meeting customers' wants and needs.	C1 "Member is king" C3 "The good thing I like about "company" is that there is always going to be at least one member of staff that knows your name"
	Good gym atmosphere: Employees creating a positive and user-friendly gym atmosphere for customers.	Y2 "As soon as they come in the door it's the way of life there, or the family is how to communicate" C4 " Make it a little more of a fun environment cause they are stressed, they work very long hours and then they come to the gym it's a stress reliever, mostly in this specific branch"

First: Employee Behaviour

The first category - 'Employee Behaviour'- focuses upon the relationship between employees and customers which in turn affects how customers perceive the service brand. This category conveys the code of conduct employees display at the gym while interacting with the gym members. This category explains how employees behave in both a professional and courteous manner.

When the employees were asked how they conveyed the company's values to customers, two main issues arose. These were professionalism and expressing common courtesy towards customers. The interviewees used specific words to explain how they would present the gym brand to their clients. These words include 'comfortable', 'positive attitude', 'acknowledgment', 'care', 'make happy', 'professional', and 'knowledgeable'.

Professional conduct was mentioned by 8 of the 12 employees interviewed. The aspects of professionalism, as expressed by the employees, had to do with up to date fitness knowledge, variety of exercise programs, punctuality, providing tools, a knowhow of exercise equipment and setting the benchmark when it came to fitness. This notion of professionalism was seen to affect the customers' perceptions of the brand. The employees believe that if they conducted themselves in such a way the customers would appreciate the effort and connect it to the company and brand; this is expressed in the following examples:

> Y4 "I don't miss appointments, I'm always on time, being punctual, just building that kind of respect that the client takes me seriously".
>
> Y3 "Basically, if anyone trains with me then I give them advise on nutrition, new way of training that I feel is the best way of training to achieve results that they want. But also the main one is getting them to write down what they want then I can convey the values that I think are important to the training to help achieve those goals".
>
> C2 "I'm always positive, I try to set the benchmark. When I'm there I try to keep a professional and positive attitude".

C3 "They (Clients) expect me to be professional, to keep up to date with my knowledge so that when I'm working with people that they're safe".

Being nice, smiling, expressing empathy and politeness were all mentioned by 10 of the 12 employees interviewed. These manners were summed up as expressing common courtesy to the gym members. The gym's employees all acknowledged the importance of behaving well with customers and felt if they were 'stiff' or 'unfriendly' customers may never come back. Those who mentioned common courtesy as a means to convey the brands values also noted that in the gym business having 'people's skills' was a must for employees. Those who worked at the front desk acknowledged to being the 'face of the company and they were the 'first contact' of customers when they entered the gym, so they felt the need to be a friendly face. The emphasis on good manners was evident when employees were asked to list the expectations of customers. This can be better understood in the following responses:

Y1 "They (customers) expect a smiley face, they expect a lending hand, they expect me to be there, they expect me to pick them up when things are down. They expect a shoulder to cry on, they expect ears, someone to listen to their problems and happy things". "At the end of the day, just to be next to them whether it's one person or 21 people".

C1 "I believe my skills, my person skills would weigh higher than whether I can clean a machine or work the till and things good or do the paperwork behind the scenes, because to me they're secondary".

W1 "some days to help them pick off the ground cause not everyone walks through the door all smiley and happy".

W2 "For me probably a lot of understanding from where they come from, like their background, because I deal with their accounts as well".

Although most of the employees expressed the need to be nice and friendly to customers, some employees expected that the customers also treated them the same way. For example:

C3 "I always tell my clients that I'm human first and a person second and I expect them to live by the philosophy".

C4 "When I do have an off day they are very quick to point that out, you know what's wrong? Are you sick or what's up? So they know my face, they know my personality by now and they do expect my friendliness and for me to be myself".

Employees also felt it was necessary to acknowledge the gym members as people first and paying customers last. Greeting customers when they came in the gym and saying good bye when they left the gym were mentioned heavily in the interviews. Also knowing the customers by their first name was also seen to have positive impact on the customers' perception of the brand. This is reflected in the following examples of responses:

C1 "I would yell out hello whoever it may be or goodbye cause I think that's important so they know that you give them recognition and acknowledgment that they have attended your place of work".

C3 "The good thing I like about (Company Name) is that there is always going to be at least one member of staff that knows your name so you come into reception and it's like hello, how are you and you use the name".

Second: Social Connections

The second category - 'Social Connections' - conveys the social ties service brand employees create with customers that involve expressing the brand's meaning. This indicates all the relationships, friendships and any personal ties employees have with the gym's customers. This category also presents the 'impartial friend' (refer table 5, p.65). This concept depicts employees that express 'tough love' (refer table 5, p.65) while dealing with customers to achieve their goals and gain results. The focus here is also upon the the relationship between employees and customers.

'Social Connections' is a category that deals with the social ties that were created by the employees with the customers. All but one employee credited friendships and personal relationships as the key to the success of the gym and reasons for customer retention and satisfaction. Employees also used words such as 'family', 'community', 'club' and 'social skills' to describe how the company wanted its brand image. Building relationships with clients was

noted necessary in order for those clients to maintain loyalty towards the brand, especially in such a competitive industry. Relationships were also seen as a means to engage customers and convince them to join the gym; this is illustrated in the following responses:

W2 "It's more family orientated really, not family orientated but more, it's not like a numbers game really. I reckon it's not a numbers game, you're more treated as a person instead of a person coming in and how much you're earning".

Y2 "I find a lot of the members who have been training at (Branch Name) for a long time, they love it. So they feel like it's a bit of a family and they like the way that they can speak to everybody, they know all the members and all that sort of thing. And that's people that have been there for longer than I have, a couple of years and things like that".

Y3 "The main thing, one of the most important aspects is that you need to form a community as well whereas a lot of people just come in and train, leave and if you have the community aspect there, then the clients or members are going to feel valued more as well".

In contrast the interviews revealed that the relationships that the gym members build with staff - especially trainers - could work against the brand because then the customer becomes loyal to the individual employee and may choose to leave the gym when the employee moves on. In turn, the trainer's commitment could be to the client away from the company and brand. This has negative effects on customer loyalty and retention at the gym. This is shown in the following answers:

Y4 "I only lose people when they usually go overseas, so most of my clients when they leave the country, they leave me, they follow me wherever I go and that's again because of the relationship I've built with a client. Retention is about establishing long term/short term goals and keeping it interesting as you're trying to achieve those short term goals. It's always results based, that's important but a result is not as important as the relationship".

C2 "That personal touch with clients is very important. Like how you're meeting me here, meeting for coffees, when I first meet my first client it's usually like because that's

personal, it's the experience, it's not, sometimes people want to train their body but first you've got to see where their mind's at".

When it came to establishing these relationships three employees noted that it was important not to forget the reason clients joined the gym. Achieving members' fitness goals was important to the trainers and they felt an emotional obligation to help them reach thier goals. As a result, the 'Impartial Friend' concept was developed within the social connections category. This concept was defined as the 'tough-love' trainers showed customers in order to achieve fitness and health results. The employees' believed this approach was honest and customers bought into the emotion and connected to the brand promise. Examples of responses include:

> C1 "The only way to get success is for them to actually understand that there is going to be effort involved, and maybe the association of pain, because sometimes those that want to lose weight, get healthy, but don't want that attachment of pain with it, or effort with it. Or over zealousness, I need to lose weight within a month, and you make them look realistically".
>
> Y4 "The other thing is making sure the person is responsible and they're not making me responsible for their results. So it's established early on".
>
> W1 "The friend but not a friend that helps them achieve their goals, pushes them, a little bit harder than they would ever push themselves, probably being a lot more straight up than their best friend would be, but at the end people start thinking you're mean, but really after, towards the end, they realise that you're doing it for their own benefit, and they know that you actually care about them more than they probably care about themselves. So helping them see the potential in them before they can see it in themselves".

Third: Customer satisfaction

The third category - 'Customer Satisfaction' - conveys employees' ability to focus solely on the customer and fulfilling their needs and wants while conveying the message of the brand. This category also represents how service brand employees create a positive atmosphere at the gym

for customers. The focus here is upon employees conveying the service brand's message while meeting customer expectation.

While all the employees of the researched branches showed a great deal of motivation when it came to meeting the expectations of gym members, it was seen, the fitness trainers were highly inclined to meet and exceed customer expectations. The trainers seemed to have more love, compassion and understanding for the customers, saying that their clients were the source of motivation and satisfaction with the job. They also expressed deep emotions and dedication when their clients were mentioned. The company's employees whether trainers or front desk or sales felt obligated to adapt to the customers' needs. "Service the customers well" was mentioned by 8 of the 12 employees interviewed. Words used to express customer service were 'consistency', 'after purchase service' 'adapt to customer', and 'easy process' to name a few. Customers were viewed to be of great significance to the employees and sometimes more important than the company or employer. The gym employees seemed to understand the need to satisfy customers' expectations and fulfil their needs and wants. In turn employees believed that once a customer was satisfied with the employees' dedication towards them they would become loyal to the gym and thus loyal to the brand. This is expressed in the following examples:

> Y3 "They (Company) are definitely more customer oriented so they definitely focus a lot on their clients and members".
> Y4 "I could probably sell a gym membership without showing them the gym. That's just because making a person feel comfortable and making them feel like when they get there they're going to be looked after properly".
> C1 "Personalized feeling for the members, which is quite important to the company, is that the member is king".

Customer service was seen as important and some employees expressed how they wished the gym they worked at provided better customer service. One gym branch in particular seemed to have issues with their customer service. Two trainers expressed how they wished the receptionist expressed more common courtesy to the members. These two trainers felt that the receptionist needed to improve their social skills and mentioned many times that since this person was the

face of the gym they were negatively affecting the members and also damaging the brand image. This is showed in the following excerpts:

C3 "There would be some aspect of customer service that I would change and improve".

C2 "Definitely the customer service should be a lot better, the frontline, definitely in this industry you have to be in it to help others but sometimes the people down there just come down because it's a job and they just have to be there to sort of pay bills but you need a bit more especially when you're helping people so it definitely could be better in the customer service. Because that's something you can control. You can't control anything else but you can control people at the front desk and how they relate to people and the lasting impression they leave and because we're all about changing people's behaviours and so if you can't do it on the front desk".

Sometimes customer service continued after hours. Employees expressed that the brand affected their everyday lives since they still represented the brand. For example:

W1 "So let's say if I'm going grocery shopping I'm still at work, cause people will come up and ask you questions. If I'm in the mall you still have to be nice and polite and say hello, can't be disgruntled or angry. Even if let's say I go to one of the other (Company Name) to work out, I still have to help people out, you can't walk around and be rude, especially if I've previously worked there. Somebody says oh would you mind help moving the weights, I can't do the legs press, so you have to take them off or you know, you can't turn around and be rude, people will still want your advice even though you're not physically on the clock".

Another important concept in the employees' responses was creating a good gym atmosphere for customers. Again 8 out of the 12 employees interviewed, emphasized the importance of creating and presenting a good gym atmosphere. Creating this gym atmosphere also included aspects such as the look and feel of the gym, availability of the latest equipment, clean and modern facilities. The words the employees used to describe this concept included 'fun', 'comfortable', 'clean', 'not intimidating' etc. Staff was seen to be part of the atmosphere and at times they were viewed

responsible for the gym atmosphere whether good or bad. A good gym atmosphere was credited by employees to be part of the branding package and a task to be completed by them. Examples of this include:

> C2 "Definitely good experiences, happy place, definitely where people can come for a good experience, good gym environment. I don't know, positive atmosphere". "Definitely the people, the experience, what the atmosphere provides so when you come in you're not just coming in to push a bit of metal around and run on a machine that just stays on the spot, you're there for the experience and what provides that is definitely the people there so the staff, management, trainers, receptionists, the consultants, it all comes together".

Respondents also noted that in order to create a good gym atmosphere there needs to be change and variety. This in turn would help eliminate routine and boredom. This is explained by the following respondent:

> Y4 "The worst thing that can happen is seeing a gym get set up and it sits the same, same colour, same everything for five years. People get tired of seeing the same colours. It doesn't have to be equipment; it doesn't have to be anything like that. I mean that's always maintained and upgraded anyway but just changing the colour of a wall, doing something different in a change room".

Figure 8: Content Analysis Frequency of Concepts for Research Question 1
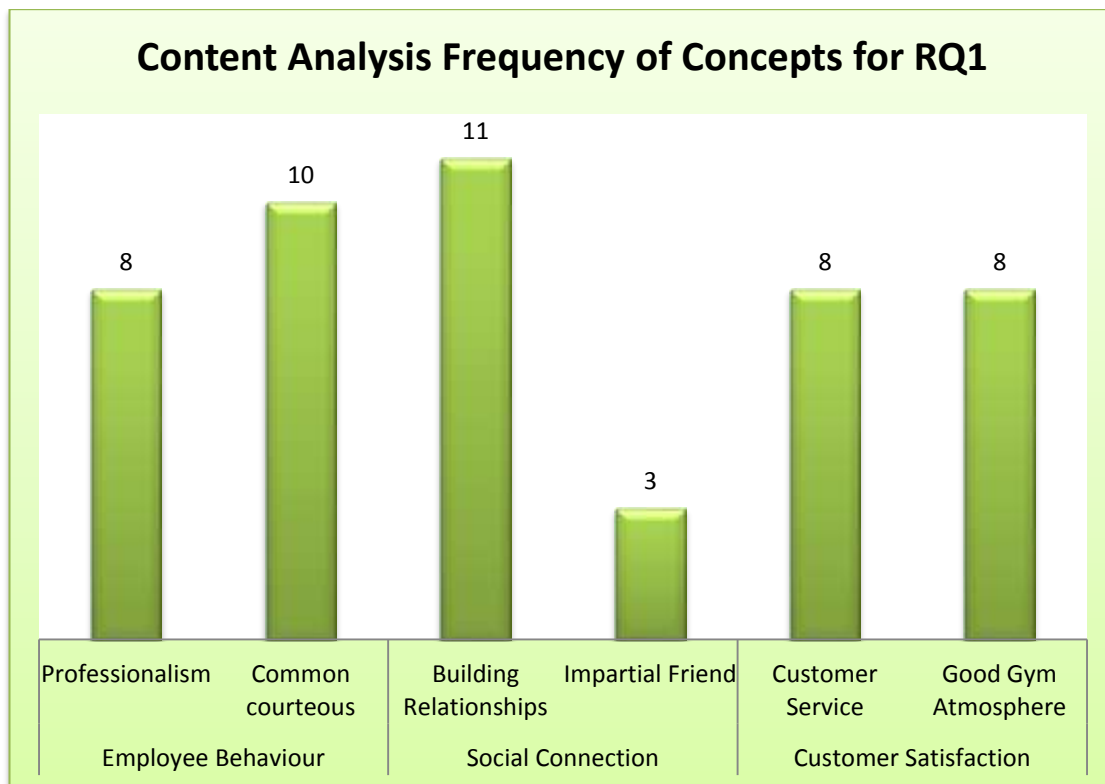
4.4.2 Research Question 2: How does the company communicate brand value and promise to customers? (From an employee's perspective)

From the interviews, employees' perspectives on how the company communicates its brand value and promise to customers were uncovered.The processed data implies that through traditional branding activities such as advertising, and through good employer branding, the company reaches its customers. Also, the data revealed that the company strives to clarify the meaning of the brand to its employees in order for them to pass the same brand meaning on to the customers. This can be evidenced by the codes and concepts of the data identified during analysis. The same is illustrated in the table below.

Table 7: Derivation of Codes, Concepts and Categories

Step 1: Codes		Step 2: Concepts	Step 3: Categories
Experience	Systems	1. Brand Delivery (Internal Branding): Employees possessing brand identification, brand commitment and brand loyalty to communicate to customers.	**Branding**
Marketing	Interdependence		
Customer orientation	Staff selectiveness		
Brand awareness	Accountability	2. Persuasiveness: Employees' guiding power toward the adoption/embracing of fitness and health at gym	
Update gym look	Convey values		
Brand awareness	Locations		
Value	Sales targets	3. Brand clarity: Employees truly understanding the ethos of the service brand along with the commodity and business side of it.	

Table 8: Focus on Concepts and Categories Related to Research Question 2

Category	Concept & Definition	Sample Quotes
Branding: Employees behaving in a way that is representative of the company's brand, values and culture.		
	Brand delivery (Internal branding): Branding activities such as advertising and marketing which employees are aware of and sometimes participate.	Y2 "We used to have a very easy and welcoming approach to everything, not after hard sales or pushing people into things" C1 "I suppose it's a key performance indicator as well that we have to you know achieve or ensure that we are upholding those values"
	Brand clarity: Employees truly understanding the ethos of the service brand along with the commodity and business side of it.	W4 "Their values are similar that they want their customers to feel welcome and comfortable and get their results" W2 "Friendly, quite open, about money"
	Persuasiveness: Employees' guiding power toward the adoption/embracing of fitness and health at gym.	W2 "I call up people that didn't sign up first time and I just follow up with them or any of our members" C1 "Making member see what their need is, that our ability to provide the key to achieving their need is important."

Branding

The category - 'Branding' - conveys the employees' representation of the company's brand, values and culture. In this category, the branding effect on employees themselves is evident in how they approach the act of creating a successful service brand while dealing with customers. The focus here is how service brand employees present themselves to customers while using branding techniques for the company. This sometimes occurs subconsciously to both the employees and customers. The 'Branding' category entails how the employees view the company communicating its brand image to customers, and how they communicate the same image to the customers. Here the focus is on the relationship between service brand employees and customers.

This category was derived from three concepts of 'brand delivery', brand clarity', and persuasiveness'. When answering questions relevant to branding, a number of employees used terms like 'retention', 'word of mouth', and 'target market' even though they did not have a previous background in marketing or branding.

The employees illustrated their understanding of the brand by listing the words they felt better described the brand. This question aimed to achieve the employees' level of brand clarity. Also the employees were asked what made the brand different than other gym brands. This question was used to investigate their awareness of the brand. Employees felt they could perform their job better if they knew more about the brand, hence 9 out of 12 employees mentioned it in their interview. Employees expressed their gym's brand knowledge as following:

> Y4 "(Company Name) has an attitude towards helping everyone from the athlete right down through to the person who is on the couch".
>
> Y3 "Well I have to say the first thing I think about it is it's a business, so that's the first word that comes to mind when I think about (Company Name), it's a business".

'Brand delivery' was another concept that was brought forward from the data. This indicated how much the employees participated in the branding of their organisation. It was also an indication of how well the company had internally instilled the brand's promise into the minds of

their employees. Nine of the twelve respondents who were interviewed mentioned brand delivery; they felt that if they performed well with customers they would achieve favourable word of mouth and customer retention. This is evident in the following responses:

W1 "One of the best marketing tools that we have are actually our members, they're probably the biggest marketing tool. If you're happy with the product, you're more than happy to refer to all your friends, if somebody says to you hey, you look like you've lost weight, how did you do that? You'd go well I went to (Company Name) and I did X, Y and Z, and I got fit and fantastic. Why don't you try it yourself?"

W4 "Yeah we had to go out and do a mystery shopper to all the other gyms in the city and compare it to how we compare to them".

C1 "I believe that as a core value within the owners of this (Company Name) is that they really push it a lot because it comes, everything, all the paperwork that we get, so it's always there, all the time to remind us". "They've probably brainwashed me and I'm inherent with everything that they were teaching that it's duplicated every day".

Y4 "I think all staff are extremely important to what (Company Name) is doing because if the staff are not actually productive at communicating to the members, then obviously no-one is going to stay".

Some employees said that they were aware of the brand promise but were not sure how to convey its message to customers. Some of the respondents mentioned that they were not clear on how the company wanted their values to be conveyed while some respondents thought it was conveyed through them. This is illustrated in the following answers:

C1 "An organisation doesn't send a member I would assume that they wouldn't, the core values and things, or how one should behave, so the only way they could reflect that is through the staff".

C3 "I'm not sure how they do it to their members. I guess they probably do it through their advertising and marketing it's obviously aimed at being fit and healthy and they try and encourage a club environment".

Y1 "Well through advertising they always mention that it's fun and a friendly surrounding and I know through the staff that I've worked with that everyone has that sort of approach. Everyone is sort of pushing that everyone has got to have a laugh. Everyone makes working out fun and yeah so I think both the staff also push that it's pretty relaxing but have fun as well while you work out pretty hard".

A number of employees disliked the marketing material that is sent from headquarters and when branding was mentioned, the word "dated" was used a lot. They also showed concerns that customers might feel deceived or hurt by some of the ads and billboards. For example employees mentioned the word 'fat' being used in print advertisements or the people in the billboards did not represent the company's target market. Employees wished they had more input on the marketing since they felt they knew the members well. Other employees gave branding suggestions for the company and felt that they could be of good help to the branding of the company. These issues were present in the following responses:

Y2 "Sometimes the material that they give you is, doesn't inspire me to go and give it to people. I think that I received that I would just throw it away and laugh".

C2 "So sometimes if I'm honest (Company Name) they don't deliver on what they promise, all these hopes and dreams people want to do all this stuff and sometimes they don't deliver".

C1 "Yes, well I've sort of disagreed with some of the campaigns, or maybe the pictures of the campaign as well rather than the campaign itself, and sort of wondering why would you put them in. Or even if I see a, I saw a poster, just (Company Name), and all these beautiful people on there with beautiful big white teeth, and they weren't, it wasn't our population, it wasn't New Zealand population, it looked like American. And I sort of disagreed with that. I didn't make no objection to anybody, but just to myself. I thought I would have chosen a New Zealand population because it doesn't look like us, beautiful people with beautiful big teeth. You know it's not distinct to the population, and I thought well they should of selected other people to do it, to be in the pictures".

Persuasiveness was also relevant to how the employees built a successful service brand. Five employees had mentioned this in their interview. Since the context of services is highly competitive, employees have appreciated the need to be persuasive in trying to sway customers' decisions to join their company. The respondents understood that it was a business and financial gain was the goal. Employees also felt it was necessary to be aggressive with following up on their existing clients to maintain the brand in the minds of the members and maintain the company's prosperity. This is shown in the following examples:

> C4 "I get the phone calls about people wanting to cancel and then I have to find out in a subtle way why they want to cancel. If it's any other reason other than they are leaving Auckland or they are going overseas, I need to find out why they want to cancel and see if I can't fix it, you know, see if there's not an alternative to give them. So yeah I play a very important role in all of that".
>
> C1 "Whether they pay one dollar or a hundred dollars a week, your life it more important than that hundred dollars or that one dollar. And then sometimes when you think life and health doesn't have a value, or has a cost, and its about letting them see that, and trying to make an option that actually suits their budget, is very, very important".
>
> W2 "Make sure they're okay, do my phone calls with them, make sure I talk to them, see if they've got anybody they want to come in with and I also do their sales. I call up people that didn't sign up first time and I just follow up with them or any of our members I just see if they have any referrals and I have to lead up with that".

Figure 9: Content Analysis Frequency of Concepts for Research Question 2
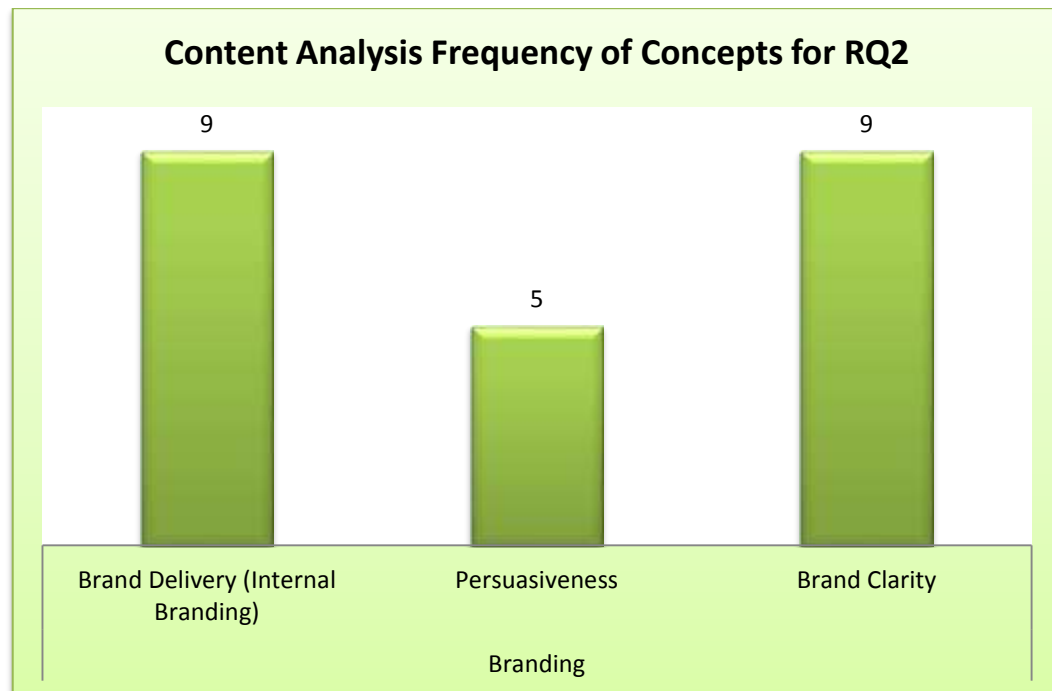
4.4.3 Research Question 3: How does the company enable employees to create brand value? (From an employee's perspective)

Also the employees' perspectives revealed what they felt the company does to enable them to create brand value. The category titled 'Employee Commitment' shows that employees perform their job better and are able to create brand value through specific concepts. These include employee empowerment, a thriving work environment that not only allows but encourages free flow of ideas and successful internal branding. The data analysis indicates that these concepts are important for employees to communicate the service brand to customers and create brand equity for the company.

Table 9: Derivation of Codes, Concepts and Categories

Step 1: Codes		Step 2: Concepts	Step 3: Categories
Support	Education	1. Employee Empowerment: Employees feeling the organisation has provided the support, training and management in order to perform their job.	**Employee Commitment**
Training	Work ethic		
Professional development	Motivation		
Inspiration	Feel of importance		
Uniform	Appreciation	2. Work environment: A positive and constructive work environment aids employees in delivering the brand to customers.	
Team work	Employee surveys		
Loyalty	Brand confidence		
Objectivity	Internal relationships		
communication			

Table 10: Focus on Concepts and Categories Related to Research Question 3

Category	Concept & Definition	Sample Quotes
Employee Commitment: Employees' 'happy, enthusiastic and dedicated attitude toward the brand and their job. Along with company support which aids them in creating brand equity while successfully conveying its message to customers.		
	Employee empowerment: Employees feeling the organisation has provided the support, training and management in order to perform their job.	W3 "(Employer Name) do really encourage me, like when I achieve something, she recognise that and it's really good also they support us." Y1 "I always voice my opinions to my boss and all that and if things ain't quite working then I let him know that and he's responsible enough to listen and make changes if needed."
	Work environment: A positive and constructive work environment aids employees delivering the brand to customers.	Y4 "It's a good environment to work in, so I'm quite happy working in that environment." C1 "Whether it was (company) or any other gym, to have a worker that loves their work, because then it reflects backs into your production at the end of the day, happy worker, good production output, happier employer."

Employee Commitment

The category - 'Employee Commitment' - focuses here is upon the relationship between employee and company/employer which in turn affects employees delivering successful brand image to customers. This category conveys employees' attitudes toward the brand and their job, along with company support, which aids them to create brand equity while successfully conveying its message to customers. This category constitutes how the work environment, along

with favourable staff management and empowerment, stimulates employees to communicate the brand to customers and thus creating brand equity.

This category was constructed from the 'Employee Empowerment and 'Positive Work Environment' concepts. Employees felt that when they were supported, trained, motivated and appreciated by the company they would have a positive disposition towards the brand. Ten out of twelve employees felt that when they were empowered by the company, the brand's values would become their own and they would transfer the same to the customers. Also employees would become more loyal to the company once appreciated. This empowerment included developing a sense of belonging to the company and their input was valued. Employees also acknowledged the need to select and recruit staff that where in tune with the brand's values. This is all expressed in the following responses:

> Y4 "If you can get trainers on board that are good they are going to keep the retention in the gym so it's just a matter of finding the right people so again, it's having that environment that trainers want to be in and do the work for you and pay you to be there. If you can establish that you'll have your retention and everything set up automatically".
>
> W3 "(Employer name) do really encourage me, like when I achieve something, she recognise that and it's really good and also they support us. They trying to see what we need and give us self training and they also listen to what we want. Sometimes I understand not everything we have done eventually but we do communicate, I think that's good".
>
> C1 "I love working here I suppose that their values are my values, and whether that is something that they try and find in terms of when they recruit, trying to identify that I believe you know when they do all those, what type of person are they, A, B, C or D and those types of things that they do, that is one measure of how they in terms of their recruitment".

On the other hand, some employees did not care to be appreciated by the company, employer or brand and preferred their motivation and value came from their clients. The reasoning for this was a devotion to the cause of health, fitness and well being; this is explained in the following responses:

C2 "I don't know if I feel important. To be honest I don't really care if I feel important to the company, I don't care what the CEO thinks of me but just want my clients, because they're the ones that pay my bills, give me a living so there's no point in having them care about me and having no clients, I'd rather have people, the lives I want to change, I want them to care. I could go unnoticed for years and I wouldn't mind as long as my clients enjoy, have a better life".

C1 "The company's value is really important that the staff are happy, cause if the staff are happy then they will always reflect and uphold the company's values as much as we, they are trying to impart it to us all the time and give that message of what the value of the company is, and say please, please, please, please do them all the time, at the end of the day it comes down to the person. And in terms of monitoring I suppose they have systems in place that ensure that they are being upheld".

Some employees when asked if they felt important to the company expressed that they were not valued enough. Trainers looked after themselves more than the company or brand. There were instances where employees felt more passionate to put their own values and motivation ahead of those of the company. More development and support was requested from the company by the employees. They also maintained that this affected their loyalty towards the company and acknowledged that their attitude could possibly hurt the brand. This is all expressed in the following responses:

C3 "I wouldn't say I feel unimportant but I wouldn't say I feel necessarily important. I would think, I mean it might be, you know reception, if I left it's not going to be the end of the world for them but I'm not saying they want me to or anything along those lines".

C4 "No and the reason I can say that is I've been in companies where they do motivate you to do a good job". "A lot of professional development so kind of education. They'd have meetings, touch base, see how you're going, feedback, communication, in a nutshell really. Constant communication".

Y4 "The gyms don't have to have a huge relationship with the trainers but they should. Yeah they should, but they don't develop that part of it very well".

Another concept necessary for employees was a positive working environment. Seven employees put across that 'team work', 'communication', 'good work ethic' and 'cooperation' was all essential for them to thrive and convey the brand's promise and values to customers. Also having a shared vision was important for internal relationships to grow in favour of the brand. Employee loyalty was viewed stronger when good internal relationships existed. This is expressed in the following examples:

> Y4 "I have a unique relationship with my boss and we're on the same wave length and he's probably one of the main reasons why I stayed where I was. I have obviously I got offers to go other places and again a gym is a gym so again it's the people that I'm working with that are important so he's one of the reasons why I actually stayed and continued where I was because his vision of how things should be going are very similar to my own".
>
> W3 "I feel proud working there and I do recommend it as good gym to enrol because I know the price is a little higher compared to other gyms but I do think it's a good gym compared to others. I feel it's at least the top three".
>
> C2 "Everyone is sort of dependent on each other to do their job. It's sort of good fun ideas, the receptionist to set the good mood and set the tone for people walking in it's going to be a bit harder for the trainers. The trainers help with the retention and the membership people get more people and the management oversee what everyone does, so definitely the staff is important".

Figure 10: Content Analysis Frequency of Concepts for Research Question 3
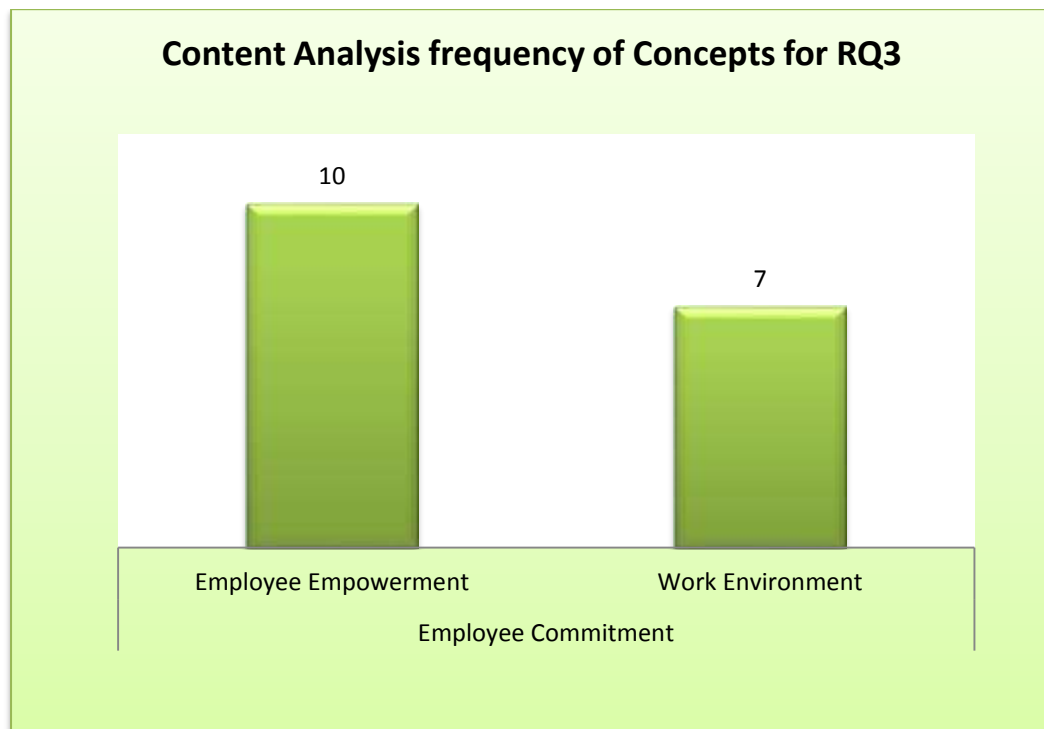
4.5 Conclusion

The content analysis of the data revealed eleven concepts and five main categories, that described how the gym employees' communicated the brand's promise to customers and created brand equity for the company. The results suggest that employees believed they were significant contributors when it came to communicating the brand's values to customers. A summing up of the number of times a concept was mentioned, showed what was more important to these employees. The concepts were grouped to form categories that answered the research questions. The three research questions support the primary research question: "How do service employees facilitate the creation of successful service brands for an organisation?" The content analysis of the data showed the employees' perspective on what they believe help create brand equity are evident in tables 5 & 6 & 7. The employees' perspective on brand building included: Superior interpersonal skills, establishing social connections with customers focusing on customer satisfaction, leading by example through living the brand, and displaying commitment and

loyalty to the company and its service brand. The employees also felt it was necessary for the management to empower them with training and support, and create a positive working environment for them to commit to building brand equity. Employees expressed reasonable knowledge on branding, and believed they created brand equity by providing customers with the best gym experience and achieving their fitness and health goals. Nevertheless, employees highlighted some negative forces that hindered their optimum performance at the gym and affected their attitude towards the company thus consequently affecting the brand.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

The previous chapter has presented the key concepts and categories which emerged from the research. This section discusses the findings from the interviews in conjunction with the relevant literature reviewed, to gain insight into the perspective of service employees'. In particular, the study aimed to understand how employees help build a successful gym brand and create brand equity. The findings raised several interesting issues relevant to services brands, gym owner/managers, and their staff. These are discussed below and aim to give some insight into the complex nature of services brands and employees.

The chapter also discusses these findings with relevance to the services brand literature. It goes on to outline the limitations of the study, and identify how the findings can be useful, and suggest further areas of research.

5.1 Discussion of Key Findings

The intention of the study was to investigate how service employees help build successful brands in a fitness context. The past literature on the employees in services branding was relevant to the perspectives of managers and business owners, the present study aimed to highlight how the employees viewed their role in the branding process.

The research revealed some significant findings. First, the findings showed several means by which employees can build a brand for customers. Second, management have a role in aligning the employees' work with the brand values as emphasized by the management. Third finding was that employees' were motivated to be more involved in the branding/marketing process. Fourth, the employees needed resources such as training and support, to achieve their objectives. Fifth, the findings showed that the company could leverage the employees' strengths when it came to marketing and brand building. Employees were found to be a competitive advantage, for a service brand, which is hard to replicate. Sixth, the employees were not motivated enough to "live the brand" (Boyd & Sutherland, 2006) outside the work place. Seventh, recruiting individuals with high interpersonal skills is essential given the high level of customer-employee

interaction in the fitness sector. Eighth, the findings show that clearly communicating brand knowledge and brand values to the employees help them communicate these to the customers. These findings are discussed in detail in relation to each research question in the following section.

5.1.1 Research Question 1: How do employees interact with customers in order to co-create brand value?

The literature review found numerous attempts by researchers to emphasize employee behavior and its influence on the service brand (King & Grace, 2005; Wallace & De Chernatony, 2009). Most of the literature looks at the employees and their influence on customers and the brand from a management perspective and showed little regard for the employees' outlook. The perspective of employees to communicate the brand values to customers was noticeably absent from the literature. To fill this gap, this research investigates the perspective of employees on brand building and creating brand equity for a service organization.

The findings suggest that the service employees at the gym were aware of their impact on the brand and its image when conveyed to customers. Since the nature of the fitness industry is very 'hands-on' when it comes to the interaction between employees and customers, employees are aware of their responsibilities. Employee attitude towards professionalism and common courtesy were strongly credited as ways the customers find value in the brand. Customers' feelings of being treated with compassion and respect were a priority for employees at the gym. Findings show that customers were deeply impacted by the employees' efforts. This is supportive of Specht's et al. (2007, p.548), conclusion on employee performance, they state that "perceived employee effort is more important for customer satisfaction than are perceived abilities".

It is however difficult to distinguish when an employee is communicating the brand promise as a result of his "buy-in" (Thomson et al., 1999) of the brand or as a way of just doing a good job. A number of the respondents explained that they acted in a way that was in alignment with their own values and ethics. On the other hand this finding does demonstrate the strong impact of the internal brand (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Sartain, 2005). Selecting and retaining employees that

fit naturally within the company's values, was found to be important to the success of the organisation. One employee in particular stated that "their values are my values".

An important finding was related to the social connections employees established with the customers. Friendships within the gym between trainers and their clients were noticeably strong and sometime were the main reason for those customers' loyalty and towards the brand. The employees also understood that these relationships were for the benefit of the brand. A number of trainers mentioned that they built the relationship by identifying the customer's fitness needs and goals and as a result the customers looked to them for the solutions to their fitness needs and goals. This suggests that while customers bought into the emotional ties of the relationship the employees appreciated the business aspect of it. The relationship between customer and employee has been extensively researched (Brodie, et al., 2006; Van Durme, et al., 2003; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and this study has highlighted the bonds that are formed at the gym. The findings show that the customer-employee relationships created happy customers who communicated positive word of mouth for the brand. Also the customers invested more trust and loyalty towards the brand and became brand advocates.

Findings also suggest that customer satisfaction was the ultimate priority for the employees at the gym. Customers were viewed by the employees as the basis for motivation, dedication, and value. Fitness trainers were very possesive when it came to the members, calling them 'my client'. This indicated the strong need to support customers in every way whether it was creating a great experience at the gym or just achieving their health goals. Creating the optimum customer experience has been advocated throughout the service brand management literature and researchers have advocated the role of the employees. Harris (2007) found that people within the service organisation were the key ingredient in a branding effort that focused around creating customer experiences. The findings included employees' responses on creating a positive gym experience for customers that helped to build brand equity also. For example:

> "Definitely good experiences, happy place, definitely where people can come for a good experience, good gym environment. I don't know, positive atmosphere".
> "Definitely the people, the experience, what the atmosphere provides so when you come in you're not just coming in to push a bit of metal around and run on a machine that just

stays on the spot, you're there for the experience and what provides that is definitely the people there so the staff, management, trainers, receptionists, the consultants, it all comes together".

"Make it a little more of a fun environment cause they are stressed, they work very long hours and then they come to the gym it's a stress reliever, mostly in this specific branch"

5.1.2 Research Question 2: How does the company communicate brand value and promise to customers? (From an employee's perspective)

The research found that employees' understanding of the brand promise was linked to how the company communicated the brand to customers, showing that external and internal communication of the brand were linked. Thomson et al. (1999) explained that when employees buy-into the brand, business performance will enhance. The findings revealed that employees performed a god job once they received brand knowledge. For example an employee stated:

"I believe that as a core value within the owners of (Company Name) is that they really push it a lot because it comes, everything, all the paperwork that we get, so it's always there, all the time to remind us". "They've probably brainwashed me and I'm inherent with everything that they were teaching that it's duplicated every day".

The importance of brand clarity in the literature is found in King and Grace (2009) EBBE model. Their work emphasized the need for organisations to provide their employees with brand knowledge in order to communicate it back correctly to customers. Brand clarity is considered an important finding in this study because it shows that the company has adequately invested in the training and brand orientation of its employees. Employees felt empowered by their brand knowledge and company's investment, which in turn aided them to willingly and happily deliver the brand promise to the customers. The outcome of employees living the brand was highly advocated by Boyd and Sutherland (2006). Their model of employee branding, reinforced the cycle of employee commitment with 'living the brand' being the starting point of the evolving cycle of achieving brand committed employees. This research has stressed the argument made by

studies related to 'living the brand'; however this study approached it from the view point of employees rather than managers.

Foster et al (2010) advocated for companies to create a desirable working place to attract the external labour market. An employer branding strategy was found in the literature to be a key method in creating a successful service brand. Edwards (2010) also emphasized employer branding and believed that when a company presents potential employees with a value proposition related to the job, employees will then be encouraged to join the firm. The findings of this research illustrate how employer branding helped employees, who expressed loyalty to the company and had a positive attitude towards the brand while interacting with customers. Based on the findings a positive brand attitude for employees included: being punctual, setting an example for health and fitness, having an objective outlook and being professional.

5.1.3 Research Question 3: How does the company enable employees to create brand value? (From an employee's perspective)

The role of the company at a management level, as emphasized by the employees, in the governing of employees' brand attitude was also a substantial finding in the study supported by the literature. This issue was presented in the category of brand commitment. The findings showed that when employees felt empowered by their employer and supported by a positive work environment, they were able to perform well at conveying the brand's values to customers. This finding is consistent with studies on employer branding (Edwards, 2010; Foster, et al., 2010; Mitchell, 2008). The employer's efforts in creating a strong employer brand, was evident in the researched branches due to the low employee turnover rate. This finding has significance on the correlations between having happy employees and obtaining brand equity (Punjaisri, et al., 2009).

The research also found that the company had been successful in creating a positive work environment with employees who enjoyed working together, cared for the success of the brand, and critiqued those who sabotaged the brand. The findings included employees suggesting the company to select and recruit their employees carefully in order to maintain a strong brand

image with customers. Such findings are reflective of the research by scholars such as Foster et al (2010) and King and Grace (2007). For example an employee said:

> "The customer service should be a lot better, the frontline, definitely in this industry you have to be in it to help others but sometimes the people down there just come down because it's a job and they just have to be there to sort of pay bills but you need a bit more especially when you're helping people so it definitely could be better in the customer service. Because that's something you can control. You can't control anything else but you can control people at the front desk and how they relate to people and the lasting impression they leave".

Internal branding was a major aspect in this study and the first step of service branding. Although internal branding is more related to management, employees recognised its power as a means for external branding. This has substantial regard for the intellectual level of employees and their ability to absorb marketing and branding knowledge. The results of the study indicated only two employees interviewed had a business background. However all of those interviewed were up to date with their marketing and branding vocabulary and knowledge, also many employees provided advice to the company when it came to marketing the gym brand. The employees believed their strong ties with the customers qualified them to know what would draw people into joining and remaining with the gym. This relates back to the strong influence of the social connections employees make with customers that have been extensively researched by (Brodie, et al., 2006; Specht, et al., 2007; Van Durme, et al., 2003).

Fyrberg and Jüriado (2008) studied the network interactions of service brands and stressed on the role of employee-customer interaction in driving brand value and equity. In the services context the interaction between customers and employees co-created meaning and experience (Brodie, et al., 2006), therefore strengthening the brand. The findings showed that employees at the gym established relationships with the members because they understood that the brand valued the family and community aspect of a gym. From the findings social connections played a big role in the loyalty, trust and positive word of mouth of customers. This is evident in the response:

"I find a lot of the members who have been training at (Branch Name) for a long time, they love it. So they feel like it's a bit of a family and they like the way that they can speak to everybody, they know all the members and all that sort of thing. And that's people that have been there for longer than I have, a couple of years and things like that".

5.2 Theoretical Implications of the Study

This research presents the perspective of employees on brand building, specific to a fitness centre or gym– as opposed to general service brand employees' perspectives on branding being adapted to fit these employees. Employees' perspective on brand building is not common in service brand literature, so the findings support the service employees' context-specific perspectives on how to create a successful brand, as well as contribute to the service brand literature as a whole by providing additional information.

Much of the literature regarding service employees' perspectives on branding was found to be valid and relevant to this study, as the findings of this research confirmed, these perspectives were also reflected by those interviewed. The theoretical implication is that while service employees' perspectives on branding are valid; their validity can be further improved when the definitions are expanded to take contextual factors into consideration.

Although the social connections and friendships that are established between customers and the employees at the researched gym, worked to create brand equity this may not be true at other gyms. The social aspects of this research could have detrimental effects on the retention of customers at other fitness centres where customers could easily direct their loyalty and commitment towards an employee rather than to the company or the brand.

5.3 Managerial Implications of the Study

On a practical and managerial level, the findings of this study show implications for fitness centre managers and owners. As noted in the analysis, the employees of the gym strived to gain

more support and training from the company and were also motivated to develop personal skills that would support their brand building efforts. Moreover the findings herein concluded that employees believed their input on the marketing aspect of the business could render supportive and rewarding outcomes to consumer attraction and retention. As such fitness centre managers and owners can benefit from the confidence employees have in building a successful brand and from the strong ties employees have with the customers.

Another managerial implication is recruiting employees that have similar values to match the brand. In the fitness industry the customer-employee interaction is high therefore recruiting people to advocate for the brand and communicate its promise is a key success factor. This study found that employees appreciated a team that shared the company's vision and mission for the brand and critiqued employees who did not convey the brand message clearly.

Managers need to set the benchmark of what is acceptable brand attitude for empoyees and how to convey brand messages and values to customers, to avoid confusion and disparity amongst employees. This has implication on the brand's image and word of mouth created by the customers. Since customers experience the brand through employees, what is communicated about the brand while interacting with employees could either create loyal customers or negative word of mouth about the brand.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

Any conclusions drawn from this study are limited by the nature of the sample. The sample itself was restricted to one fitness gym company's employees. It is therefore not possible to claim that the findings are representative of all those employees who work at gyms or fitness centres. It is also not possible to claim that all service company employees are representative in this study.

The researcher faced limitations in recruiting a group of volunteers for interviews which also contributed to the small sample size. The first limitation in recruiting interviewees was due to the hesitance of the employees to participate and also the small staff numbers at the chosen branches.

The second limitation was related to the time of work; since the interviews were held during work hours there was reluctance amongst the employees to participate.

Another limitation that surfaced during the analysis of data was the lack of elaboration from interviewees in their responses. These responses may have offered more information had the questions been different or at least worded differently. A possible change would be that the interview questions asked "What are the tools you use to communicate the brand to customers that have not been dictated to you by your employer?" During data collection things that may impact communicating the brand were not collected. Specifically respondents were not asked if they had problems at the work place or with colleagues or whether they would recommend the gym as a work place. Therefore, findings pertaining to staff-employer conflicts could not be discussed in depth.

The exclusion of the remaining seven Auckland gym branches of the company may have resulted in the exclusion of different sorts of respondents and as a consequence, limited the range of insights this study might have provided. As stated earlier, the sample consisted of only employees at three Auckland City Centre branch of the company.

5.5 Future Research

The results of this study highlight some important issues and questions which can be used as future research problems. As previously noted, future research is suggested for investigating the same company while covering all Auckland City branches in order to gain in-depth knowledge on this specific company so generalization of the responses may be achieved.

In future studies a quantitative approach may also be introduced to extract the numbers and frequencies that can add to the significance of service brand employees' role in building strong brands. Future similar studies could also usefully explore the following issues: First, research aimed at employees of gyms or fitness centres in more depth since the majority of the service brand studies involve the financial or hospitality and tourism sectors. Second, it would be worthwhile to conduct studies on the possible negative implications of the social connections

that are developed between service employees and customers on the brand. Third, future research could isolate trainers from sales representatives and receptionist to gain more insight on individual position related brand building techniques. Finally, future similar studies could explore in depth the following questions: Should service brand employees have an opinion in relation to marketing material and promotion of the brand? What specific tools do employers expect their staff to utilize when it came to communicating brand values to customers? Finally, the increasing focus on employees in the services industry has raised interest and amplified the importance of a new phenomenon that is - service brand employees role in achieving brand equity.

5.6 Conclusion

By conducting a literature review, it was evident that a gap existed in empirical research about service employees building brand equity. In particular the literature on service brands showed little regard for the gym employee especially research based information on their perspective towards building a successful service brand.

Using a qualitative approach of interviews, the researcher gathered service employee perspectives. While analysing the data using content analysis, concepts and categories emerged that directly relate to employee perspective on creating brand equity. Because the research focused on service employees' perspective on creating successful brands, it opens new possibilities for research on customer facing employees within the health club/fitness context.

The research revealed that 'Social Connections' between the employees and customers had impact on the success of the brand. These social connections are distinct in nature when compared to other service brands in that; in the fitness context the customers have an emotional connection with the employee first and experience the brand second, whereas in other service brands such as banks, or hotels the customers experience the brand first and are most likely to be oblivious of the human element.

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Appendices

Appendix One

M E M O R A N D U M

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

To: Mark Glynn
From: **Madeline Banda** Executive Secretary, AUTEC
Date: 18 October 2010
Subject: Ethics Application Number 10/225 **Exploring the employee's perspective on service branding.**

Dear Mark

Thank you for providing written evidence as requested. I am pleased to advise that it satisfies the points raised by a subcommittee of the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) at their meeting on 18 November 2010 and that on 12 October 2010, I approved your ethics application. This delegated approval is made in accordance with section 5.3.2.3 of AUTEC's *Applying for Ethics Approval: Guidelines and Procedures* and is subject to endorsement at AUTEC's meeting on 8 November 2010.

Your ethics application is approved for a period of three years until 12 October 2013.

I advise that as part of the ethics approval process, you are required to submit the following to AUTEC:

- A brief annual progress report using form EA2, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/research-ethics/ethics. When necessary this form may also be used to request an extension of the approval at least one month prior to its expiry on 12 October 2013;

- A brief report on the status of the project using form EA3, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/research-ethics/ethics. This report is to be submitted either when the approval expires on 12 October 2013 or on completion of the project, whichever comes sooner;

It is a condition of approval that AUTEC is notified of any adverse events or if the research does not commence. AUTEC approval needs to be sought for any alteration to the research, including any alteration of or addition to any documents that are provided to participants. You are reminded that, as applicant, you are responsible for ensuring that research undertaken under this approval occurs within the parameters outlined in the approved application.

Please note that AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval from an institution or organisation for your research, then you will need to make the arrangements necessary to obtain this.

When communicating with us about this application, we ask that you use the application number and study title to enable us to provide you with prompt service. Should you have any further enquiries regarding this matter, you are welcome to contact Charles Grinter, Ethics Coordinator, by email at ethics@aut.ac.nz or by telephone on 921 9999 at extension 8860.

On behalf of the AUTEC and myself, I wish you success with your research and look forward to reading about it in your reports.

Yours sincerely

Madeline Banda
Executive Secretary
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Appendix Two

Participant Information Sheet

AUT
UNIVERSITY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

31 October 2010

Project Title

Exploring The Employee's Perspective on Service Branding

An Invitation,

Hello, my name is Najla Al-Olayan, I am a student at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). I am inviting you to participate in a study that will assist me to complete the research component of my Master of Business Degree. The research is about exploring employee's brand building efforts. Please know that your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time (up to the completion of data collection) without any consequences of any kind.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

As an employee of a service providing company, you have been chosen from a list of employees identified by your employer as a potential respondent for this research. My research involves individual interviews to investigate the ways staff can help to build a service brand. Also, your position at a branch located in Auckland City Centre where a diverse mix of gym goers would have given you a lot of experience with customers that is key in this research.

What will happen in this research?

I will be interviewing you about how your efforts at work may influence service brand success and keep customers coming back for more. Since a service cannot be seen or touched, it takes extra effort to convince a customer to buy it, so questions asked during the interview will revolve around what you do at (Company Name) and how you view your efforts are helping the company. The interview will take place at a cafe in the city, so no need to worry about being interviewed at work, plus your coffee will be my treat.

What are the benefits?

The anticipated outcome of this research is to give service providing companies an understanding of how important employees are for building successful brands. Other benefits include ways companies can create training and support programs for employees to fully enhance the brand's values. This research also aims to gain knowledge on how the success of service brands can be driven by employees; I hope your participation would help me build theory around the importance of employees when it comes to service brands.

What are the discomforts? How will they be alleviated?

During the interview you may feel uncomfortable about answering questions relating to the company and your employer, please feel free to ask to skip a question or you may leave the interview at any

time. Be assured that any information you provide is confidential and your identity is concealed. Please be confident that neither the company nor your employer will be mentioned in the final report, everything and everyone will be confidential.

What are the costs and risks of participating in this research?

The only cost to you is the 30 minutes I would take to interview you. There are also no risks from participating in the interview relating to privacy and confidentiality.

How will my privacy be protected?

Be assured the information you provide is confidential and your name will not be used in any reports or recorded. The final Dissertation resulting from this data will be seen by my supervisor and external examiners and will be stored securely. The interview will take place privately and you have been selected from a list of employees in order to secure your privacy from the company and your employer, also they will not receive any details of the interview.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

The timeframe to consider is one week from receiving this document. I will contact you to find out what you have decided. I would like to assure you that participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection without any adverse consequences.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

This is done by signing a Consent Form which you can obtain from me before the interview.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You are welcome to ask for a summary of the findings of this research, and you will find my Dissertation at the AUT library and its website at www.aut.ac.nz/library/

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Mark Glynn, *mark.glynn@aut.ac.nz,* 921 9999 ext: 5813. Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEC, Madeline Banda, *madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz* , 921 9999 ext 8044.

Researcher Contact Details: **Project Supervisor Contact Details:**
Najla Khaled Al-Olayan   Dr. Mark Glynn
Email: *vyx4209@aut.ac.nz*   Email: *mark.glynn@aut.ac.nz*
Mobile: 0211717565

Appendix Three

Consent Form

Project title: Exploring the Employee's Perspective on Service Branding

Project Supervisor: Mark Glynn PhD

Researcher: Najla Khaled AL-Olayan

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 31 October 2010

- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.

- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.

- I agree to take part in this research.

- I wish to receive a summary of the research (please tick one):   Yes○   No○

Participant's name: ....

Participant's signature: ....
Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):
……………………………………………………………………………………..
……………………………………………………………………………………..
……………………………………………………………………………………..
Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 12 October 2010 AUTEC Reference number 10/225

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix Four

Confidentiality Agreement

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Project title: **Exploring the Employee's Perspective on Service Branding**

Project Supervisor: **Dr. Mark Glynn**

Researcher: **Najla Khaled Al-Olayan**

○ I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
○ I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
○ I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's Name :..……………………….…………………

Transcriber's Signature:

....……………………………………………

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

…………………………………………………………………………………………..

…………………………………………………………………………………………..

…………………………………………………………………………………………..

…………………………………………………………………………………………..

Date:

Project Supervisor's Contact Details:

Dr. Mark Glynn

E-mail: mark.glynn@aut.ac.nz

Phone: 9219999 ext: 5813

Note: the transcriber should take a copy of this form