



# Can employees influence customer behaviour? An Exploratory Study among Indian Brick & Mortar Stores

Dr. Shameem Shagirbasha<sup>1</sup>  
Angeline Vilma<sup>2</sup>  
Booshnam Dinakaran<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

In recent years, employees have become influencers to the brand. Influencer marketing makes people to spread positive news about their brands though they were paid or not for doing the same. In many cases, most knowledgeable people about a brand and the industry in which it operates, will be its own employees. Employees as influencer has always been a fantastic way to build brand recognition, boost word of mouth and in still trust in the business development. Even organisations encourage their employee as influencers to build and strengthen the brand trust. Southwest airlines, Ford, Dominos, Bank of America, General electric features employees as an influencer for advertising campaigns because these employees are perceived by the audience as credible and help to build trust about the brand. Employee advocacy is cost effective scalable form of influencer marketing. In this study we explore the role of influencer especially the employees who deals with customers in Brick and Mortars stores as we want to understand the direct role of employee as influencer is impacting consumer behaviour.

**Keywords:** Influencer marketing, Employee advocacy, Brand influence, Purchase intention, Consumer behaviour

## 1. Introduction

Influencer marketing is an emerging branch of marketing which uses different influencers through different channels to attract the target customers. There are different brand influencers who impact the purchase decision of customers – micro influencers, blog influencers, celebrity influencers, social media influencers etc. Often brand influencer is confused with brand ambassador – the latter being hired to improve brand awareness and former being a person who constantly engages with customers to improve purchase decision. While this topic has been studied a lot in the context of businesses having online presence – Social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc., this study is unique in itself as we want to explore the role of influencers especially, the employees who deal with customers in Brick and Mortar stores. We choose Brick and Mortar stores, as we want to understand the direct role of employees as influencers in impacting customer behaviour

*“Brands have been using digital and social media to distance themselves from the consumer, asking them to sign up to email lists and to do things that are very programmatic and distant from the consumer. It is very hard to build trust in that way of doing business. But, brands can now use digital if they empower employees and influencers correctly to shrink that distance back and regain that trust” (Brian Franzo, Founder and CEO, Isocial fanz)*

## 2. Literature Review

Influencer marketing is applied when companies target key individual named influencer, who align with the brand values and operate in favour of the companies to find potential customers (More & Lingam 2017) However, there are lot of factors that needs to be taken into consideration in order to create a successful marketing collaboration between influencer and the business. (De Vries, Gensher, Leeflang, 2012)

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Great Lakes Institute of Management [shameem.s@greatlakes.edu.in](mailto:shameem.s@greatlakes.edu.in)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Great Lakes Institute of Management [angelin.g@greatlakes.edu.in](mailto:angelin.g@greatlakes.edu.in)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Great Lakes Institute of Management [booshnam.d@greatlakes.edu.in](mailto:booshnam.d@greatlakes.edu.in)

Furthermore, influencers often contribute new information and have the ability to affect the attitude and behaviours of the consumer. (Liu, Jiang, Lin, Ding, Duan & Xu, 2015). An influencer must be trustful otherwise the brand risk to lose its credibility (Gerardo, 2017). Previous research has shown that employees as influencers are more likely to be seen as credible and trustworthy source compared to the paid advertisements (Abidin, 2016).

We first examine the notion of congruency between purchase type (i.e. service or product) and retail store type (i.e. online versus bricks and mortar). The notion of congruence between retail store image and product image has been investigated in the retailing literature (Semeijn et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2002; Garton, 1995; Hite and Bellizzi, 1985; Samli, 1989, to name just a few). These studies suggest that consumers' perception of store image and product image are closely related to one another, and this relationship or congruence is positively associated with their self-image and brand loyalty towards the brick and mortar store. A similar thought capturing the notion of harmony between our self-image and everything we own has been suggested in consumer behaviour literature and is called the Diderot effect or Diderot unity (cf. Diderot, 1964; McCracken, 1988).

Given the above literature, the researchers have two primary research questions to answer through this exploratory study

### **2.1 Research questions:**

RQ1: Do employees act as influencer in determining consumer behaviour?

RQ2: If yes, what are the different consumer behaviour, employees influence on?

### **3. Research Methodology**

Particularly in Indian Brick & Mortar stores, the researchers conducted an exploratory study. Based on the purpose of the study and to answer the above two research questions, we selected the respondents by employing convenient sampling. Interview questions and relevant guide was designed to administer the same to the respondents. Some of the key questions are listed below:

Will you consider the reviews/words given by the people working in the store about the product?

Instead of salesperson, if someone working in a company in the backend says about the product, do you trust their review?

Will your trust be the same for the employees irrespective of the designation say lower level or higher level?

Out of the 30 employees who are working in various sectors who went through telephonic interviews, among them 10 employees were selected as the participants for the in-depth interviews. The participants included employees exposed to employee as an influencer towards brands for a period of six months to 2 years.

The respondents' age ranged from 22 to 55 years and out of the 10, 5 participants were married. Out of the 10 participants, seven were from educational sectors, two were Senior Software Engineers, and one of them was testing Engineer, with work experience ranging from 1.5 to 23 years.

### **4. Results of In-depth interviews**

Employees as influencers represent an opportunity for business development. With the increased personal use of social networking sites and word of mouth, every employee has the potent to develop relationships with key stakeholders. It is desirable for employees to interact in positive and productive ways with their employer's brand (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017).

"If I am having idea about the product, irrespective of the brand, I will buy it since I would have studied already. If I am not having knowledge about the product, I will ask for the details with the employees working in the brand and choose accordingly, I feel more reliable after hearing the information from the employee who is not profitable by his suggestion"

Employee advocacy is where employees internalise the company brand image and project that image to customers, and other stakeholders (Miles & Mangold, 2004). If employee using social media or WOM content is perceived as valid, the message receivers will develop a positive approach towards the products/services related to these reviews. By understanding the effectiveness and impact of persuasive WOM messages, employees can create more effective marketing campaigns (Fulgoni & Lipsman, 2017).

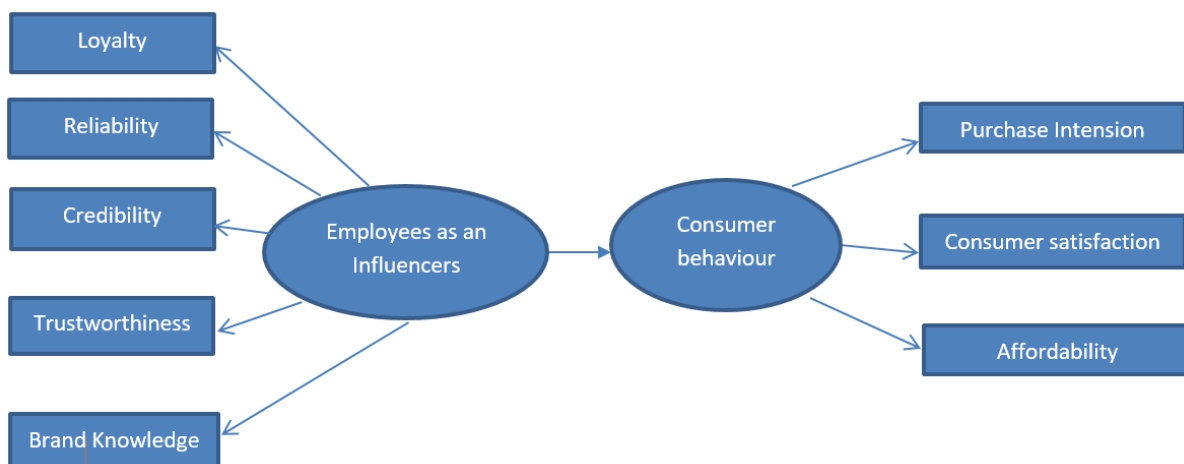
When employees share messages positively, firms not only expand the business, they also achieve measurably better results in consumer behaviour towards brand recognition and brand knowledge (Holmes, 2015).

“I will ask and take information from the employee working in that organisation because I can able to get clear idea about the brand and get knowledge about the brand from the person who is more likely to be influence “

Employee as an influencers are more likely to be seen a credible and trustworthy compared to a paid advertisement, due to that it fits with the other content on the platform(Abidin,2016). The authenticity leads to lower resistance towards the message communicated (Devries et al, 2012)

“Employees will know more about the products, but I don’t believe the sales persons who will push the product for their personal development, so I won’t trust them. But I will trust the people who are working in the place who doesn’t have any benefits of our purchase. If they suggest, I feel trustworthy, credible, reliable to get the information from them. It leads to my purchase decision.

## 5. Conceptual Model



## 6. Plan for Data Analysis

From the interviews conducted, we have done the initial qualitative study. The interview transcripts were coded and emerging themes from the interview transcripts were identified. Constructs from the themes were identified to frame the conceptual model. To validate the model, we will proceed with further exploratory study.

## 7. Conclusion

In this study employees are considered as influencers to brand the product where they are working. We conducted in-depth interviews and found the following results.

Firstly, most of the customers (respondents) trust the employees’ suggestion for buying the product because they feel, employees are not benefited for the purchase directly. Employees’ genuine suggestions act as an influencing factor for purchase intention. However, customers are less likely to trust the frontline salesperson, because customers are more aware that frontline staff sell certain products/services just to attain their sales target. Results also indicate that customers are more likely to perceive the brands positively after their experience dealing with the same. This in turn also makes them feel more loyal and employees are perceived more reliable and credible. Also, customers are happier with employees’ suggestion. This in fact is because of their satisfaction with the product. Customers also trust based on their experience that employees possess brand knowledge. They feel employees are better brand ambassadors. We also got some interesting contradictory results. Some of the customers are less likely to trust the employees, as they believe only user experience can be considered to buy the products. Our study is an attempt to understand employees as influencers in brick and mortar stores. Exploratory study reveals certain themes based on which we framed our conceptual model. We intend to collect data from customers using survey method to better understand our research questions. The researchers also want to collect more support from literature and empirically test the hypothesised relationships among the study variables.

---

## 8. Major References:

1. Adamson, A. P. (2008). *Branddigital: simple ways top brands succeed in the digital world*. St. Martin's Press.
2. Cassell, C., & Symon, G. (Eds.). (2004). *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research*. Sage.
3. Frank, J. (2015). From engagement to empowerment—employee advocacy in the social economy. *Strategic HR Review*.
4. Ind, N. (2007). *Living the brand: How to transform every member of your organization into a brand champion*. Kogan Page Publishers.
5. Jacobs, R. (2003). Turn employees into brand ambassadors. *ABA Bank Marketing*, 35(3), 22-22.
6. Kimpakorn, N., & Tocquer, G. (2009). Employees' commitment to brands in the service sector: Luxury hotel chains in Thailand. *Journal of brand management*, 16(8), 532-544.
7. King, C., & Grace, D. (2012). Examining the antecedents of positive employee brand-related attitudes and behaviours. *European Journal of Marketing*.
8. Löhndorf, B., & Diamantopoulos, A. (2014). Internal branding: Social identity and social exchange perspectives on turning employees into brand champions. *Journal of Service Research*, 17(3), 310-325.
9. Miles, S. J., & Mangold, G. (2004). A conceptualization of the employee branding process. *Journal of relationship marketing*, 3(2-3), 65-87.
10. Ngai, E. W., Tao, S. S., & Moon, K. K. (2015). Social media research: Theories, constructs, and conceptual frameworks. *International Journal of Information Management*, 35(1), 33-44.