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Introduction/Literature Review

The Florida Forest Service (FFS) began in 1927 "to gather and disseminate information on forests, their care and management, to prevent and extinguish forest fires, and to enforce all laws pertaining to forests and woodlands" and was organized by the Florida Board of Forestry to protect and develop forests in Florida (Florida Forestry Association, n.d., para. 5). FFS's activities include suppression and prevention of wildfires, managing state forests, and providing assistance to landowners (Florida Forest Service, n.d.).

Branding

"A brand is a complex, interrelated system of management decisions and consumer reactions that identifies a product (goods, services, or ideas), builds awareness of it, and creates meaning for it" (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 6). While they are not tangible entities, brands are social constructs that have increased in importance over the past 100 years (Loken et al., 2010). A specific product

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or service exists temporarily until it is replaced or upgraded, but a strong brand continues beyond the lifespan of an individual product or service (Goodson, 2012). Branding does not happen by accident; communication professionals work to strengthen the brand and continue to demonstrate its value over time. Branding is "psychology and science brought together as a promise mark as opposed to a trademark" (Goodson, 2012, para. 1). Successful branding occurs when a brand has the ability to endure over time by continually providing a quality product or service (Ehrenberg, Barnard, & Scriven, 1997).

Branding & Employees

While the external components of brands, such as logos and names, are the most visible, it is the members of the organization and their actions that create the largest component of the organization's brand (de Chernatony, 2001; Veloutsou, 2008). Through their interactions with members of the public, employees act as the face of an organization and affect the public's overall perceptions of the organization (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Branding of service organizations and businesses is an even more unique process in which the employees contribute significantly to the brand. Literature on service marketing indicates employees' exchanges and views of brand components can instill brand values and affect the overall brand while creating special meaning of the brand in the minds of the public (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Due to the need of a service-oriented brand to provide continued interactions with the public, branding models often include internal and external perceptions of the brand in an effort to strengthen the brand from the viewpoint of all stakeholder groups (de Chernatony & Harris, 2000; Schneider & Bowen, 1993).

Brand Differentiation

For an individual to make a choice of one brand over another, the brand must have differentiating characteristics. Brand differentiation is the extent to which a brand can separate itself from other brands in the perceptions of the public (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Differentiation can be physical or functional in that a product or service is distinctly different in form or what it delivers. The differences also may be smaller between two brands, such as one brand of bread differentiating itself by claiming it is made with more wholesome flour than another brand. These differences may be emotional or even inconsequential to the actual product like packaging differences (Ehrenberg et al., 1997). A goal of communication professionals is to differentiate through increased knowledge about the brand while eliminating confusion with similar brands (Baker, 2003). One strategy for increased differentiation is brand imprinting, which is the idea of strengthening memory and recall of a brand name through exposure of the brand name. Research indicates exposure to a brand name prior to learning of a product or service offered by the brand aids in the public remembering the brand and the product or service provided (Baker, 2003). Thus, brand name and prominence can be a differentiating characteristic.

With service organizations and business, the employees play an important role in differentiation. Differentiating characteristics of a brand can be the employees' attitudes and behaviors (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). Thus, it is imperative that employees understand the brand and its value and they are committed to its success through every interaction with the public. In service organizations, the brand is built internally with the employees as a foundation, so if brand differentiation is not clear to the employees, it will not be clear to the public (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010), and the public will not be able to clearly identify one brand choice from another.

In differentiating a service-oriented brand, trust is another essential component. The public needs

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to feel it can trust the brand to deliver the same quality experience time and time again (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). In addition to the employees, organizations can differentiate through their values and culture, their programs, and their assets and skills (Aaker, 1996).

Brand Salience

Salience refers to the overall accessibility of a brand in the minds of the public (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). If a brand is salient in the minds of the public, the public can recall the brand easily and name products or services provided by the brand (Ehrenberg et al., 1997). If a brand reaches salience with an individual, the individual chooses the brand over another and has positive associations with the brand including the desire to use the brand again (Ehrenberg et al., 1997). Brand salience provides a sense of assurance for members of the public, reducing their uncertainty (de Chernatony, 2001; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Romaniuk & Sharp, 2006; Tybout & Cornelius, 2006). Success of a brand is determined by how many people have positive regard for the brand or see it as salient (Ehrenberg et al., 1997). When brands are extremely similar, communication efforts may be all that distinguish the brand and establish salience (Ehrenberg et al., 1997), making communication about the brand's attributes, products, and services essential in increasing brand salience.

Salience and differentiation are related to each other. By improving its differentiation and standing apart from others, a brand can improve its salience with the public (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). At the same time, characteristics that help improve differentiation from other brands are often the same characteristics that are salient with members of the public (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009).

In service-oriented brands, relationships between employees and the public become important in brand salience (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). For individuals who have a strong relationship with the brand through salience, trust is the most important factor for determining continued commitment (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999) and employees are often the driving factor in ensuring continued trust (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). For relationships to be strong, it is imperative that trust be built over time and partnerships established (Fournier, Dobscha, & Mick, 1998). It has been argued that services must market themselves differently because the public has a need for increased trust and are prone to loyalty and brand salience if successful relationships have been established (Leonard, 1995). The connection of relationships to brand salience indicates employees are a key factor in increasing brand salience in the long and short term.

Public Organizations

Public organizations are funded by the public and mandated through governmental and political processes (Moore, 1995). Public organizations increasingly use marketing techniques due to increases in consumerism and competition in the public sector (Walsh, 1994). For public organizations to remain viable, they must have public value, which occurs when a public organization provides a service or product that cannot or is not reasonably met by private organizations and satisfies both the general citizenry and those who immediately benefit from the service or product (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995). The importance of public value is amplified when public organizations face funding decreases because of public debt and budget deficits (Chernew, Baicker, & Hsu, 2010). Economic downturns, such as the Great Recession that began in late 2007, have effects that last more than five years because of decreasing tax revenues due to unemployment and declining housing prices (Reinhart & Rogoff, 2009). Funding increases are unlikely to become available in the near future because of this.

Branding offers the opportunity for public organizations to go beyond just having public value to a point of fostering relationships with the public, which can improve public satisfaction with the

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brand (Whelan, Davies, Walsh, & Bourke, 2010). The employees of the organization foster these relationships with members of the public, shaping the public's perceptions of the organization and its brand (Bitner et al., 1994; Bitner et al., 1990; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Part of improving the brand's success through its employees is improving the sense of shared identity within the organization (de Chernatony, 2001).

While marketing in the public sector has received attention in recent decades, there is a lack of branding literature for public organizations (Wæraas, 2008). In general, the application of private-sector strategies, such as branding, is not well understood for public organizations (Butler & Collins, 1995; Laing, 2003; Moore, 1995; Walsh, 1994). Part of the reason application of private-sector strategies is not well understood is that public organizations are typically more complicated than private organizations. They must have approval from the general public, not just individuals who receive the service or product (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995). Public organizations also have multiple roles and identities that need to represented to avoid hurting the brand's credibility (Hoggett, 2006; Wæraas, 2008, 2010).

Settle (2012) addressed public perceptions of the Florida Forest Service (FFS), which is the organization being addressed in this study. The results showed the FFS brand lacked salience and differentiation with the public. While the brand lacked salience, there were characteristics of the brand that were salient, particularly wildfire activities. While wildfire-related activities were particularly salient, the public wanted to know the full scope off FFS's activities because it is a public organization and depends on public funds. The public also wanted to be sure that FFS's activities and functions were distinct from those of other public organizations to avoid the misappropriation of public funds.

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of this study was to assess FFS employees' perceptions of the organization's different activities and functions and their importance for the FFS brand. To address the purpose of this study, the following objectives were used:

1. Determine employee perceptions of FFS activities and functions related to salience and the FFS brand.
2. Determine employee perceptions of FFS activities and functions related to differentiation and the FFS brand.

Methods

A survey was used to assess the perceptions of all full-time employees of the organization ($N = 1,175$), which was the target population for the study. To solicit participation in the study, the director of FFS sent the employees an e-mail asking employees to participate, with a reminder e-mail being sent four days later. There were 593 responses (50.4%), which does not include incomplete responses. Because the e-mails soliciting participation were sent from the director of the organization, it was not possible to ensure contacts completely adhered to the recommendations of Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009) to send successive e-mail waves until the number of new responses was no longer great enough to warrant further contacts.

Early respondents were compared to late respondents to address the potential for non-response error (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001). Operationally, early respondents were those who completed the questionnaire before the reminder e-mail was sent, and late respondents were those who completed the questionnaire after the reminder e-mail was sent. There was not a statistically significant difference between responses of early and late respondents, indicating the results can be generalized

beyond the respondents to the entire population, which included all full-time employees of the organization.

The questionnaire was researcher-developed to address the purpose and objectives of the study. The instrument was tailored to meet the needs of understanding employees' perceptions of FFS, so the expert panel served as the source of information for developing the instrument. The expert panel consisted of individuals familiar with branding, survey design, and FFS. The results in this paper were part of a larger questionnaire that also addressed morale, internal communications, and external communications.

Seven sections were addressed: (1) employees' perceptions of the importance of FFS activities, (2) employees' perceptions of the importance of differentiation of FFS from similar organizations, (3) employees' perceptions of the importance of FFS activities for differentiation, (4) employees' perceptions of FFS's primary function, (5) employees' beliefs of what the public perceived to be FFS's primary function, (6) employees' beliefs of the public's perceptions the importance of FFS activities for differentiation, and (7) employees' beliefs of how informed the public is of FFS's functions. With the exception of the section addressing the importance of FFS differentiating itself from similar organizations, each section had six items. The six-item sections used five-point scales for each item, except for the section addressing perceptions of the main function FFS where respondents selected one item. The section for the importance of FFS differentiating itself from similar organizations had two items that used five-point scales: one for the employees' perceptions of the importance of differentiation and one for the employees' beliefs of the public's perceptions of the importance of differentiation. Frequencies were used to report all results.

The instrument was evaluated by the expert panel for face and content validity. Because of the specificity of the questions to this organization, a pilot test of the instrument was not practical. Reliability was assessed post hoc using Cronbach's alpha. Reliability scores were as follows: .77 for employees' perceptions of the importance of FFS activities, .86 for employees' perceptions of the importance of FFS activities for differentiation, .92 for employees' beliefs of the public's perceptions the importance of FFS activities for differentiation, and .87 for employees' beliefs of how informed the public is of FFS's functions. A .80 reliability score is more ideal (Norcini, 1999), but .70 is considered acceptable (Kline, 1998).

Results

Objective 1: Determine employee perceptions of FFS activities and functions related to salience and the FFS brand.

The majority of employees perceived all of the listed FFS activities as being important (see Table 1). The activities the highest number of employees perceived as important were wildfire protection and multiuse management of state forests. Personalized urban and rural landowner assistance was considered important by the fewest employees.

FFS employees had mixed responses of how informed they believed the public to be for FFS's various functions (see Table 2). The highest number of employees believed the public was informed about wildfire prevention and suppression, while the fewest employees believed the public was informed about non-wildfire emergency response.

The majority of employees' believed wildfire prevention and suppression (70.9%) was the primary function of FFS and the majority believed the public (59.6%) perceived it as the main function also (see Table 3). Forest management of state forests was the second-highest response for employees (15.1%) and employees' beliefs of public perceptions of FFS's main function (18.7%).

Table 1

Employees' perceptions of the importance of FFS activities to the state.

	Unimportant	Slightly Unimportant	Neither Unimportant nor Important	Slightly Important	Important
Wildfire Protection	0.7	0.3	1.9	4.8	**92.3**
Multiuse Management of State Forests	1.4	0.9	3.8	13.7	**80.4**
Revenue Generation	2.7	2.6	6.0	21.6	**67.1**
Forest Management for Private Landowners	2.7	3.2	6.1	20.8	**67.1**
Opportunities for Recreation	2.4	2.4	5.8	23.2	**66.3**
Personalized Urban and Rural Landowner Assistance	2.1	5.0	7.9	24.1	**60.9**

Table 2

Employee perceptions of how informed the public is of FFS's functions.

	Uninformed	Slightly Uninformed	Neither Uninformed nor Informed	Slightly Informed	Informed
Wildfire Prevention and Suppression	7.0	11.0	6.0	34.5	**41.4**
Forest Management of State Forests	11.5	16.8	16.3	**41.6**	13.7
Provide Outdoor Recreation Opportunities	12.2	18.4	17.5	**41.6**	10.3
Forest Management for Private Landowners	16.5	20.6	11.0	**43.6**	8.4
Laws and Regulations	19.1	21.9	20.7	**30.8**	7.6
Non-wildfire Emergency Response	**39.3**	18.9	19.8	18.2	3.8

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Table 3

Comparison between what employees believe to be the main function of FFS and what the employees' believe the public views as the main function of FFS.

	Employees		Public	
	%	Rank	%	Rank
Wildfire Prevention and Suppression	70.9	1	59.6	1
Forest Management of State Forests	15.1	2	18.7	2
Forest Management for Private Landowners	2.2	3	3.7	4
Provide Outdoor Recreation Opportunities	0.9	4	6.3	3
Laws and Regulations	0.2	5	2.9	5
Non-wildfire Emergency Response	0.2	5	0.5	6

For the other FFS functions, the employees' beliefs and the employees' perceptions of public beliefs were similar, except for providing outdoor recreation opportunities. While low in both categories, employees were more likely to believe the public (6.3%) perceived it as the main function of FFS than the employees (0.9%) were to perceive it as the main function.

Objective 2: Determine employee perceptions of FFS activities and functions related to differentiation and the FFS brand.

The majority of employees believed it was important for FFS to differentiate itself from similar organizations (see Table 4). The employees' beliefs for the public's perception of the importance of differentiation for FFS resulted in a majority of responses ranging from unimportant to neither important nor unimportant.

Table 4

Comparison between employee's perception of the importance of FFS differentiating itself from similar organizations and the employees' perceptions of the public's perceptions.

	Unimportant	Slightly Unimportant	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Slightly Important	Important
Employees	3.6	2.2	8.1	18.9	**67.2**
Public	14.4	6.8	**35.9**	18.2	24.8

Table 5 shows employees' beliefs of the importance of various FFS activities for differentiation.

Table 5

Employees' perceptions of the importance of FFS activities for differentiation

	Unimportant	Slightly Unimportant	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Slightly Important	Important
Wildfire Protection	3.0	0.5	3.0	7.9	**85.6**
Multiuse Management of State Forests	4.4	1.6	7.0	23.0	**64.0**
Forest Management for Private Landowners	5.2	2.4	8.6	22.7	**61.0**
Revenue Generation	5.3	2.6	11.2	25.0	**55.9**
Personalized Urban and Rural Landowner Assistance	5.3	4.9	9.6	27.0	**53.2**
Opportunities for Recreation	6.2	3.2	12.9	27.6	**50.2**

Table 6 shows employees' beliefs of public perceptions of the various activities for differentiation. A higher number of employees believed each activity was important compared to the number of employees who believed the public perceived the activities as important for differentiation. The majority of employees of believed all of the activities were important for differentiation. The only activity employees' believed the public perceived as important for differentiation was wildfire protection. For the remaining activities, fewer than 40% of employees believed the public perceived the activities as important for differentiation.

Table 6

Employees' perceptions of the public's beliefs of the importance of FFS activities for differentiation.

	Unimportant	Slightly Unimportant	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Slightly Important	Important
Wildfire Protection	6.2	3.0	12.4	17.5	**60.9**
Forest Management for Private Landowners	11.6	4.2	23.6	24.5	**36.0**
Opportunities for Recreation	11.0	5.0	25.3	23.3	**35.4**
Multiuse Management of State Forests	10.9	4.6	24.6	26.0	**34.0**
Personalized Urban and Rural Landowner Assistance	11.5	5.0	25.5	26.4	**31.7**
Revenue Generation	13.3	5.3	27.7	22.2	**31.4**

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Conclusions

As indicated by the results of this study, wildfire activities of FFS were the most salient and considered most important for differentiation by the FFS employees, who also believed the same was true for the public's perceptions. These results are consistent with the results of Settle (2012) that showed that the wildfire functions of FFS were salient and aided FFS's differentiation for members of the Florida public. The next highest function in terms of salience and differentiation for the employees was for FFS's role in the management of forest land. This function was also something valued by members of the Florida public (Settle, 2012). While wildfire and forest management were important for salience and differentiation, the organization's other activities and functions were not perceived as highly. Because FFS has a variety of functions and activities and it is a public organization, FFS's credibility is at risk if it is not able to successfully represent its full scope to the public (Wæraas, 2008).

While the wildfire and forest management functions of FFS were perceived as salient and important for differentiation, the other functions were not considered as salient or important to the employees, who believed the public was uninformed of the other FFS functions and therefore would not view the other functions as important for differentiation. This lack of public awareness of FFS's other functions is reflective of results from Settle (2012), but the members of the public did want to be informed of the other functions of FFS, indicating disparity between the employees' beliefs of public perception and the public's actual perceptions.

It is important for a public organization to represent all of its varying functions to avoid negative public perceptions, specifically a loss of credibility (Wæraas, 2008). If the organization is unable to create salience and differentiation based on all of its activities and functions, FFS risks losing support overall or losing support for those individual functions, which could negatively impact the organization. As it relates to the overall brand of the organization, while the employees believed all of the functions of FFS are important, there was a marked difference between their perceptions of the organization's functions, particularly the elevated importance of wildfire activities for salience and differentiation. The results of this study indicate FFS employees in their shared identity are emphasizing the wildfire function and not focusing on its other functions, which are important and need to be represented as a component of the organization's identity to maintain credibility (Settle, 2012; Wæraas, 2008).

Employees perceived differentiation as more important than they believed the public perceived differentiation of FFS to be. Their belief that they perceived differentiation as more important than the public did also extended to their perceptions of the importance of different FFS activities for differentiation. These perceptions contradict the findings of Settle (2012) that showed Florida residents wanted public organizations to have differentiated purposes, including FFS. While employees' beliefs of public perceptions may not be reflective of the public's actual perceptions, both groups believe differentiation to be important. In a time of cuts in public spending, FFS can use differentiation to ensure its viability when there is increased competition between public organizations (Chernew et al., 2010; Reinhart & Rogoff, 2009; Walsh, 1994).

Brands are important for public organizations to foster long-term relationships with the public (Goodson, 2012; Whelan et al., 2010). Employees are important for this process because they form the base of the brand through their choices and interactions with the public (Bitner et al., 1994; Bitner et al., 1990; de Chernatony, 2001). Their importance extends to salience and differentiation for the brand. For differentiation to occur with members of the public, it needs to be clear to employees in service-oriented organizations like FFS (Kimpakorn & Toucquer, 2010). As for salience, positive interactions between employees and the public are needed to establish trust, which is necessary for

a service-oriented brand to attain salience (Garbarino & Jones, 1999; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; Leonard, 1995). Because the employees are emphasizing wildfire activities, it will only make sense for the public to have similar perceptions at the expense of FFS's other functions and activities, potentially harming FFS's brand credibility (Wæraas, 2008). This loss of credibility is particularly perilous because FFS depends on public support (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995) and there is a decrease in the availability of public funds that is unlikely to return to previous levels in the near future (Chernew et al., 2010; Reinhart & Rogoff, 2009).

Recommendations

For Practice

The broad recommendation is to make salience and differentiation a priority for the FFS brand. Because of the interrelated nature of salience and differentiation, it is difficult to improve one without also improving the other (Carpenter et al., 1994; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). The wildfire functions and activities of FFS were considered more salient and important for differentiation to the employees. The employees expected a similar emphasis from the public's perspective. While results have shown that the public is not well informed of FFS's non-wildfire functions and therefore used wildfire functions as one of the means of differentiation from similar organization, the public did want to be informed of all of the organization's activities, particularly forest management (Settle, 2012).

If the brand is not salient with members of the Florida public, they will be less likely to value the organization and support it during a time when public spending is declining (Chernew et al., 2010; Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995). As for differentiation, the employees perceived it as important for the FFS brand but did not believe the public perceived differentiation as being important for FFS, which contradicts results by Settle et al. (2012) that indicated the public believes differentiation is important for public organizations. These perceptions of differentiation are especially important for FFS because it is a public organization that depends on public support (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995).

A specific means of accomplishing the emphasis on differentiation and salience is by increasing the public's exposure to the FFS brand, such as imprinting by increasing exposure to the brand name (Baker, 2003). One of the means FFS can use is increasing the interactions between the public and FFS employees. Because FFS is a service-oriented organization, these interactions will be the major source of perceptions of the brand, including establishing its salient and differentiating characteristics (Aaker, 1996; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; Leonard, 1995).

During times of interaction with the public or visibility in the media, FFS and its employees need to represent the full scope of FFS's activities and functions. This is necessary to satisfy the public's desire to understand the full functions of public organizations and to maintain brand credibility (Settle, 2012; Wæraas, 2008). To accomplish the full and accurate representation of FFS and its functions, employees need to represent all of FFS's functions, not just wildfire activities, because the employees are the representatives of the brand with which the public interacts, shaping the public's perceptions of the brand and what brand characteristics are salient and differentiated (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). Having all of the employees on the same page in their perceptions of the organization's functions and activities is also important because it can strengthen the brand by building a shared identity among employees, who are the basis of the brand (de Chernatony, 2001).

For Research

The first recommendation for future research is to assess tactics for effecting change in employees' perceptions of an organization's activities and functions. Because public perceptions are likely to be

affected by interactions with employees (de Chernatony, 2001; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Veloutsou, 2008) and the functions of public organizations are dictated by public and political mandates (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995), it is important to understand how to affect employee perceptions' of the importance of all activities, including their importance for the brand's salience and differentiation (Wæraas, 2008). Aside from the direct effect of changing employee perceptions, it is also likely to alter public perceptions through their interactions with employees.

The second recommendation is to assess tactics for effecting change in employees' perceptions of public opinion. This study indicated employees do not always have accurate perceptions of public opinion. The importance of accurate perceptions stems from the potential that misperceptions could adversely affect employee interactions with the public. More specifically, brands are basically the relationship between the public and organizations (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009), and these relationships are primarily managed by employees, particularly in service-oriented organizations (Bitner et al., 1994; Bitner et al., 1990; de Chernatony & Harris, 2000; Schneider & Bowen, 1993). If employees' perceptions of public opinion are not accurate, they may not engage with the public in a manner that is beneficial for aiding the organization's brand.

About the Authors

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