

A Marketing and Industrial Relations Alliance to Generate Positive Brand Awareness for Gen Y: The Case of the National Tertiary Education Union

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Abstract

This paper examines issues relating to the brand image of unions overall, followed by an examination of the brand image of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). It utilises components of the service Gap Model (Parasuraman et al., 1985) and service quality conceptualisation. In total, 35 in-depth interviews were conducted; four with union officials, 21 Gen Y (non-member) and 10 Gen Y (member) staff at the University. The research found that there was a noticeable lack of workplace presence by the NTEU, which in itself lead to a weakened brand image. For the majority of Gen Y interviewees unions did not play an important role in their work life. The interviewees did not attribute important workplace conditions to the efforts of the NTEU and several interviewees reported poor service experiences leading to further poor perceptions of the brand. The majority of unions are facing substantial membership losses that for some have continued unabated for decades. It is not only the duration of decline, but also the exponential growth of the losses that makes this research timely and, it is hoped, a step in the direction of using marketing techniques to successfully stem the tide of losses.

Keywords: Branding; Brand Awareness; Gen Y; Trade Union; In-depth Interview

Introduction

Unions' sustainability hinges on their capacity to understand their consumers purchase journey and to respond with appropriate branding messages in a complex selling environment. The current decline in union membership is not a trivial issue since trade unions have traditionally fulfilled many important social and economic roles. A strengthening of union numbers translates into unions achieving their aims of lifting "the living standards and quality of working life of working people" (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2016) benefiting many in society. Heretofore, marketing techniques if applied, were used as an adjunct only to industrial relations actions to bolster membership numbers. However, this research seeks to lay the foundation for the future application of marketing to the problem of union membership decline, with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) representative of unions in general.

This study uses Gen Y as the consumer group because they are the generation entering the workforce and are a potential market of over 1.5 billion globally (Kacprzak & Dziewanowska, 2015) and are the largest generational group in size after the Baby Boomers (Smith, 2010). There were 3,233,410 Gen Y in Australia in 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010) with 70 million in the United States (Bergh & Behrer, 2011) making them a highly appealing market. Generation Y, which is variously called Gen Y, the Millennials, Echo Boomers and several other titles were born roughly in the early 1980s – 2000, and are described as a global generation (Gorman, 2014) because of their interconnectedness via social media (Smith, 2010). Given this fact, it is plausible that influences on Gen Y in one part of the planet, if exerted in another location would be likely to have a similar impact there (adjusting somewhat for local conditions) for this sizeable cohort. The globalisation process has created a "homogenisation of cultural values, attitudes and consumer behaviour" (Kacprzak & Dziewanowska, 2015).

The research questions are therefore, threefold:

- How relevant are unions generally to Gen Y, and do they perceive unions as a positive workplace influence?
- What is the perceived brand image of the NTEU in particular and is it generally a positive or negative image?
- Does the NTEU's have a strong workplace presence leading to strong brand awareness?

One of the main reasons of decline in union membership is related to the negative perceptions of trade unions from the general public (Burchielli, 2004). Since public perceptions can be influenced by marketing communications, the trade unions' administrators should seek for appropriate ways to communicate with the general public and try to understand their actual needs and wants (expectations) follow by fulfilling those needs and wants respectively.

This research draws upon Marketing as well as Industrial Relations disciplines to explore the sustainability of unions with a focus on Gen Y consumers. Part of the explanation for Gen Y's lower union participation rates in the tertiary education sector is that they tend to delay 'adulthood'. Gen Y often take 'gap-years', extend post-secondary studies and travel overseas funded by part-time or seasonal work, thereby postponing their entry into the full-time workforce (Martin, 2010).

Literature Review

The literature review section is organised as follows. Firstly, the authors review the notion and purpose of trade unions and present the important known factors contributing to overall membership decline. The paper however, suggests that there are additional hitherto unrevealed reasons not already explored in the literature, such as a lack of appealing to Gen Y's needs and an inability to communicate with that group in a way that appeals to them, using marketing techniques. Next, the service gaps' model is used to help explain the divergent view between management of the NTEU, and members and potential members amongst the complexity and peculiarities of the Higher Education sector in Australia. This is followed by a description of the importance of building a strong brand image and how a brand image forms consumers' expectations of service delivery and therefore the potential actualisation of value for the consumer.

The Nature of Unions and Membership Decline

Trade unions represent a key force in many well-developed countries such as Australia, in which organised action is central to the Australian democratic system. Unions foster this democratic ethos both philosophically and in practice and are widely viewed as playing an important role in society (Panagopoulos & Francia, 2008).

Trade unions are one of the few forms of protection offered workers and their presence in the work place can act as a deterrent to corporations, who otherwise may be tempted to impose unfair or harsh management decisions on workers. Protection of employment is stated by union members internationally as an important function of a trade union (Heery & Abbott, 2000). In this way unions offer protection to the weak and those without power or a voice (Bennett & Kaufman, 2008).

Just like all service providers of services unions seek to stay relevant to their existing customers and to grow by appealing to new markets in a changing environment. However, trade unions have been experiencing membership decline for the last several decades (Schmitt & Mitukiewicz, 2011). Investigation into this area is complex because of the multitude of factors that are involved. Previous studies focused on identifying the various economic (Western, 1996), structural (Milkman, 2006), legislative (Ferguson, 2009) and internal factors (Pocock, 1998) contributing to favourable or unfavourable conditions for union growth.

Focusing the discussion at a more local level the following factors have also contributed to membership decline; the centralised or decentralised nature of work locations, management's hostile or favourable attitude to employees (Griffin & Moors, 2004), legislative changes reducing unions' power to organise and employees' attitudes to unions. The list of issues continues and also includes; the nature of specific industries, the structure of the union (Ellem & Franks, 2008; Strauss, 1991), rates of pay (Galbraith, 1998), the growth of casualization (May, 2011), unemployment rates and industrial actions particularly strikes (Crosby, 2002). However this study adopts marketing principles with a focus on service quality, and generational marketing to investigate membership decline. Using marketing principles to make sense of membership decline offers a unique approach but also requires consideration of its own suite of issues.

Retirement and natural attrition of Baby Boomers from the workforce has in part explained the decline but the lack of recruitment from the younger Gen Y cohort has exacerbated the rate and intensity of the falling numbers. An exploration of the reasons for this decline is timely and much needed if unions in Australia and elsewhere wish to maintain their role in representing workers' interests through the provision of their services. Successful service provision requires ongoing evaluation of all aspects of the interactions between service provider and consumer. In the case of the NTEU, there is little to no evaluation or formal feedback mechanisms for members or even non-members to offer insights into their level of satisfaction. It is therefore suggested that the services Gap Model as developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) be adopted as a fitting tool to measure the degree of fit between the NTEU and their members.

Application of the Service Gap's Model

The latter part of this research utilises the service Gap's Model (Parasuraman et al., 1985) and its conceptualisation of service quality as consisting of five dimensions; reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility to help explain membership decline. The Gap's Model (Parasuraman et al., 1985) uses a consumer-centric, strategic approach to call attention to the main elements for delivering high quality service. In its application it helps to benchmark service delivery and helps to explain how to manage service failures (service gaps).

In more recent research (Chawla & Sharma, 2017) it was asserted that service quality is a major factor in organisational success, easily translatable to trade union organisational success. This case study explores not only service gaps and where applicable the corresponding five dimensions as it applies to members using NTEU services but also non-members perceptions of likely levels of service in the event that they were to join.

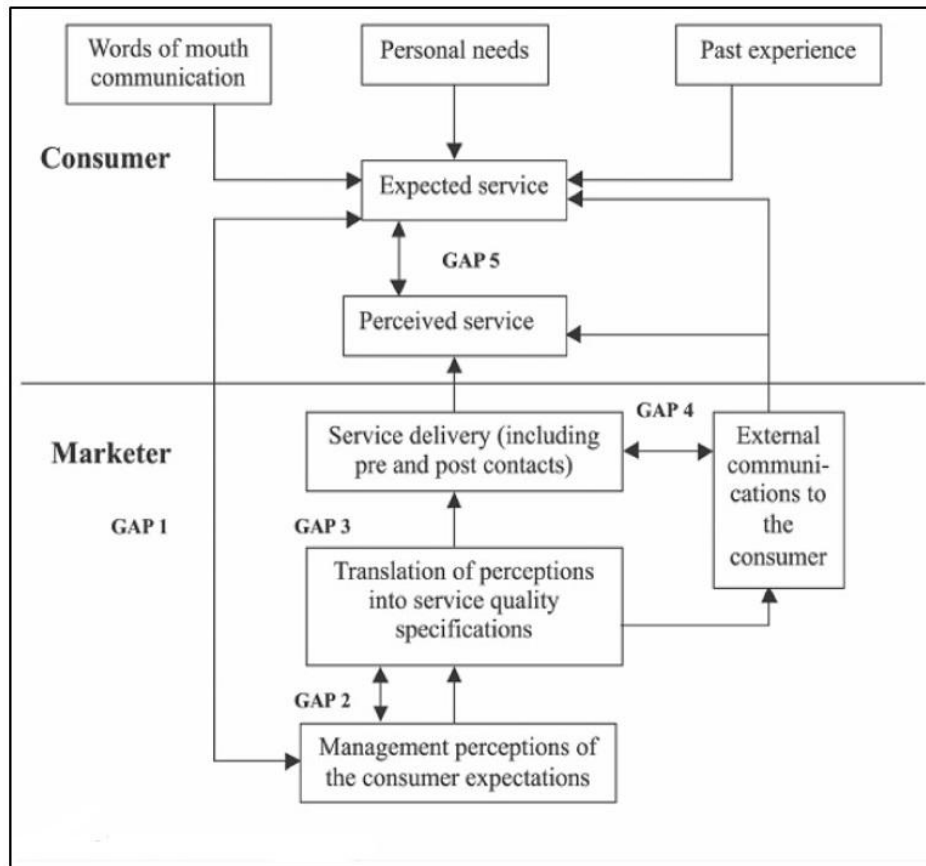


Figure 1: Gap Model of Service Quality

Source: Parasuraman et al. 1985

The model (see Figure 1) suggests a divergent view between management and consumers which translates, in the case under investigation, to a gap between NTEU service provision and university sector employees' expectations of service delivery. Consumer expectations are formed in part, from their knowledge of the brand. Such knowledge is formulated from marketing messages as well as prior association with the brand (such as membership) or observed service brand practices; consumers being seen receiving services. Observing service practice is particularly relevant in this case context because members and non-members work side by side in the same employment roles. The difficulty for the marketer is in establishing why one employee may choose to purchase membership whilst the other may not. Part of that investigation is to explore the topmost part of Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) model showing the gap within the service.

As noted by Untaru et al. (2015) some services go beyond the standard service parameters as developed by Kotler, Wong, Saunders and Armstrong (2004). In a similar vein to banking services as discussed by Untaru et al. (2015), membership of a trade union has its own peculiarities that need to be accounted for. Whilst the banking sector is characterised amongst other things by a high level of standardization, geographical dispersion, confidentiality issues and delayed benefit from spending (Untaru et al., 2015), the union in this case offers both standardization and personalization at various levels of service provision, geographical centralisation around each university, confidentiality at some points but the necessity for members

to come forward to further their case and delay or not ever activating the resources of the union. These additional levels of service complexity make the issue of reducing gaps within the service provision even more vital in order to create a positive brand image.

Building a Positive Brand Image

In today's competitive market, building a positive brand image is important for any organisations since brand image plays a critical role in creating customer satisfaction. As pointed out by Foxall et al. (1998) the perception of the customer about the characteristics of the product and service is influenced by their perceptions about the brand (Di Monaco et al., 2004) as it has been developed from branding techniques including public relations, social media, out of home advertising and so on. The provision of trade union membership is essentially the provision of a service, hence it is important to understand how to create effective service branding (Gray, 2006).

Services marketing places great importance on personnel as both the face and the core of a service brand; in essence personnel bring the brand to life. Additionally the heterogeneous nature of service delivery makes the realisation of a brand promise all that more difficult and again the solution is in professional, consistent and reliable customer service delivery (Wallace & de Chernatony, 2008). The service experience relies on its personnel and this is the case in the provision of union membership; firstly, it is an education experience (which involves people processing) in that often potential members require a substantial amount of information about the purpose and potential value of unions to society, organisations and to individuals, and secondly the service experience offers intangible actions toward possessions.

A strong brand association is an important consideration for progressive unions that are responding to membership decline and other internal union factors by shifting from a servicing model, in which industrial union staff are the main interface with members, to an organising model, in which ordinary members also become the face of the union. An important distinction between the Marketing and Industrial Relations disciplines must be drawn regarding the terms service and servicing. Marketing uses the language of 'service' to mean those products that are intangible, heterogeneous in nature (Wallace & de Chernatony, 2008), are inseparable in delivery from the consumer and are perishable (Loveloc et al., 2015). Industrial relations use 'servicing model' to mean the union through its staff, directly intervening on behalf of the employee at the work place. Industrial relations processes can be complicated as well as multi-tiered, which generate nuances to the definition of servicing model, such as when workplace intervention fails to resolve the issues and the matter is taken to an outside arbitration or ruling body (Jerrard & Le Queux, 2013). In such a scenario the employee is represented outside the workplace. A further approach to servicing, and one that is experiencing renewed interest by unions, is the provision to members of benefits such as price deals on mobile telephones and insurance policies. However, irrespective of the industrial approach (servicing or organising model) the full suite of marketing promotion tools such as advertising, public relations, and sales promotion (using a variety of media vehicles) are important, because as noted by Barnard and Ehrenberg (1990) familiarity leads to greater liking of the brand. While structural influences are of major importance (Griffin and Moors, 2004) it cannot be overlooked that marketing has the potential to be a powerful factor in influencing human attitudes

and behaviour, for example the forwarding of social justice issues and persuading potential members to join.

Despite considerable interest in the nature and role of unions there is limited research about branding as it relates to them, and even less research about Gen Ys perceptions of trade unions. Research to date tends to be quantitative rather than qualitative and typically explores structural factors precipitating membership decline and the degree of membership loss. This research goes part way in closing the gap by using qualitative methods to offer some explanation of membership loss, by exploring the viewpoint of Gen Y members and non-members who are eligible for membership.

Methodology

This research involves the Gen Y perceptions of trade unions. In order to examine a range of issues relating to the brand image of unions overall, followed by an examination of the brand image of NTEU, a qualitative approach to data collection is deemed the most appropriate.

A social research case study approach using applied thematic analysis was adopted as it is the most suitable design to provide comprehensive description and analysis to reveal complex meanings by using textual data sets (Guest et al., 2012). Aaker et al. (2007) stipulate that case study analysis is particularly suitable when the issues are contemporary as is this research. The themes were developed using inductive coding formed from the initial framework of the research which was followed by a close scrutiny of the interview transcripts to reveal emerging themes. The research was exploratory in nature and sought to build on the current sparse literature available that investigates the marketing of industrial unions. The case was based on a branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

The initial data were collected via in-depth interviews following Kvale's (2007) approach in which interviewer and interviewee 'constructs meaning as the conversation progresses'. The 'conversation' is described by Legard et al. (2003) as more structured than everyday dialogue with a pre-established purpose. A structured approach employing pre-established questions is suitable at the initial stages of an investigation in which an understanding of the deeper issues and their relationships is needed (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003).

Where possible all in-depth interviews were conducted in person and adhered to Creswell's (2009) suggested interview protocol which included a standardised interview template for interview time, location et cetera, with guidelines for the interviewer so that a similar pattern could be used for all interviews to ensure some standardisation. The interviews consisted of interviewees being asked a set of questions about their opinions and attitudes toward unions and the NTEU.

The participants of the interview were drawn from employees of a public institution located in Melbourne, Australia. The institution, a government funded university, had a total number of staff aged 20-30 years of 860 people, with 30 people who were members of the union in this case study, which represents 3.4% of that age bracket. In total 35 interviews were conducted, which comprised four interviews with union officials, 21 Gen Y staff at the University, who were non-members and 10 Gen Y

staff who were members. Further demographic details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Interviewees and Number of NTEU Officials

Academic/ general	Member/ non-member	Permanent/ casual or contract	Number of scoped items which have that particular attribute value combination
General	Non member	Permanent	7
Academic	Non member	Casual/contract	6
General	Non member	Casual/contract	6
NTEU Officials	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	4
Academic	Member	Permanent	3
Academic	Member	Casual/contract	3
General	Member	Permanent	3
Academic	Non member	Permanent	2
General	Member	Casual/contract	1

Interviews were conducted in office spaces on the university campuses and interviews were recorded to ensure accurate duplication of content. All interviewees were provided with information about confidentiality and ethics approvals in line with University policy.

Findings and Discussions

The following section explore interviewees' awareness of unions as a category, the NTEU as a brand as well as interviewees' attitudes to the NTEU brand name and its livery of artefacts. Interviewees were asked what they knew about unions overall followed by what they knew of the NTEU to establish awareness levels.

Unions', Including the NTEU's Brand Image

To ascertain the degree of external influence operating upon the brand image of unions overall and the NTEU in particular, interviewees were asked whether or not they felt unions were represented fairly by the media. The category of 'external communications to the consumer' in Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) paper suggests this to mean marketing communications by the company to the consumer, however unions also face often negative pressure and even hostility (Ellem & Franks, 2008) from mainstream media. It was therefore necessary to ascertain interviewees' views on union perception in the media overall.

Approximately 40% of interviewees commented that they either avoided mainstream media and so they were unaware of unions as a product category or that they were unaware of unions in the media. Such a view is not surprising given that Gen Y rely heavily on social media platforms such as Facebook for political news (Mitchell et al., 2015); a platform not well known for its industrial relations coverage of the workplace, and therefore unlikely to carry news items involving unions. FN (female, non-member) does not use mainstream media for news commenting that:

'I don't think I hear that much about them, but I do avoid the general media. Because it's just mainly made-up publicity, whatever's the fad thing of the month. If the unions do something wrong, they'll be in the media. If the unions are fighting for one person that people know about, they'll be in the media. So I don't actually pay that much attention to it.'

Little attention on media reporting about unions was also admitted by GB (male, non-member) who believed that what was reported focused on building sites, while another interviewee KU (female, member), had not noticed media commentary about unions unless there was some form of action to report. She believed that news coverage was evenly balanced by the press.

Other interviewees commented that unions were treated about the same as other organisations and several responded that the media coverage was entirely dependent on the publication with less favourable reports from publications such as the Herald-Sun. One such viewpoint was from UG (male, non-member), who commented:

'It depends on what type of media you look into, to determine if they get a fair run. ...if you read a newspaper which is fairly right wing, then they don't get a very nice write-up. Some are a bit more liberal, which might give them a better write-up. ...they're portrayed more on the negative side. You'd get more images coming through of the negative things associated with trade unions, such as strikes, workshop downs and delays, ...negative portrayal a lot more than what you would of potential positive things.'

Press coverage was explained more fully by interviewee TN (member, male), who stated that union involvement as trustees in superannuation, kept those funds, 'on the straight and narrow', and yet the union was portrayed poorly in particular media such as The Herald Sun and The Australian.

Member and non-member interviewees noted the correlation between union activity and media coverage as synonymous with strife and strikes. When just a child, EW (female, non-member), believed unions were involved in conflict because of the view presented by the media, but as an adult believes that union actions are portrayed in a simplistic fashion in the media.

Negative portrayals of unions in the media were also noted by KH (male, member) along the same theme that the coverage is about industrial conflict. He said:

'But always, the media always put that side. It is like coloured, it yellow sort of [sic] media because they always exaggerate things to make one side look bad and the other one look good, but it shouldn't be like that. But definitely the media's not, not a friend of the unions.'

Both negative and positive portrayals in the media were suggested by TI (female, non-member), who commented:

'Yeah, well I think sometimes the sound bites on the news can either make them look like heroes or villains.'

In most cases interviewees suggested that demonising, in particular, was in part because of the typically negative content of broadcast media, and when positive gains are made for members, it is unlikely to be deemed newsworthy by national broadcasters on the reasoning that good news does not make good ratings. Bad news, as a mainstay of news reporting, is described by UG (male, non-member). He said:

'What might be good news stories that are out there aren't really newsworthy. To be honest, we don't really hear about when things are going well. That it's not a newsworthy [story] – it's not drama. So, drama is when things are not so much going well.'

There were also reports of other unions' activity creating civil unrest, particularly the construction, police, nurses and teachers' unions. One interviewee explained that the situation between union action and employers could sometimes be very complicated, generating mixed emotions and mixed loyalties. This is evidenced by JE, (female, non-member), who said she was upset because her daughter did not receive an end of term school report because of union bans on writing reports even though her husband was a teacher and she often observed him working unpaid overtime to complete report cards. She stated:

'I guess when I think about the way the media portrays it, it kind of is more a negative thing on the employees' behalf for causing all this trouble.'

IN (female, non-member) also commented that the media were more likely to represent unions in a negative light, not only through the commentary, but because of their underlying tone. She said that:

'The idea that a union is presented, is often not from a positive it's a negative and so the general public sometimes see them as bad, rather than know they are meant to be there to support you. But because of the way the mass media talks about them it is always because of the unions again. And it's the tone that they use, and the language that they choose to use is that there is this kind of connotation that they are bad.'

'So it's not even what is said but the overlay and the attitude that gets aligned to unions. So it's not even about unions but it is more the idea, the ideal behind unions that people think they're bad but actually they are very positive things but it is about how certain people of the media moguls are able to, because they are quite anti them, so they then present their views so that's what the general public even sees.'

KH, (male, member), also commented on the anti-union bias in the media, noting that some people look at them like they scared of unions, which shouldn't be the case. Especially the tradies ones again [laughing]. Because they look very aggressive and then I have seen videos in YouTube and when they actually, some sort of protest and things like that, they always put the union as a bad sort of group. I don't know why, but I think it's some sort of psychological thing that they try to portray that the unions are bad so don't join with them. I don't think they have a fair sort of understanding in the media towards those people, no.

Many of the interviewees were able to differentiate between the way unions were presented in the media and the positive role taken by unions to respond to the problems faced by their members. Several interviewees, however, commented that unions were an organisational liability, because of their industrial demands on the organisation.

Marketing of union membership is fraught with peculiarities and an inverse relationship between 'bad press' because of union activity including industrial action, and membership growth is just one example. More likely the reason is that industrial action is often prompted by rounds of redundancies, restructures or a further intensification of staff workloads and overemployment (Peetz, 2015); all of which can make staff feel insecure and prompt them to join unions (Sverke et al., 2004; Heery & Abbott, 2000). A second possible explanation is that the perceived value of union membership increases as workers are exposed to union activity. Union action can be perceived by employees as creating an environment of conflict with employers in the process of exposing and resolving workplace injustice. However there is a seeming contradiction between industrial unrest (creating an undesirable image) and membership rates (membership increases) which is not easily explained. Given the negative portrayal of union action in the media, industrial unrest should trigger aversion behaviours in the marketplace, as it does with other service industries portrayed in a negative way. Hence, the result of union activity, which is so often portrayed negatively in the media should prompt a decline in membership, but membership figures often increase in these circumstances. At first it would seem that Gen Y's aversion to conflict would impact on their likelihood to join unions, but the low membership figures for Gen Y would make their response negligible, even if it was a factor in union growth. More likely, it is the response from other age brackets rather than the response of Gen Y, which would cause membership numbers to rise.

Industrial unrest is more likely to appeal to Baby Boomers. As a cohort they are not adverse to using disruptive group action to question the status quo and historically have done so to originate social, economic, environmental and workplace change. However, group action off-line and in the physical universe, is not the natural bent of Gen Y, who are described as risk-averse and sedentary (Buchholz & Buchholz, 2012). They are more inclined to voice disapproval or disagreement by posting comments on Facebook or Twitter rather than through confrontation or action. And whilst it must be acknowledged that Facebook and other popular social media are excellent at information dissemination, (of a particular type of information), no amount of Facebook comments about issues resolves them.

Gen Y are well known to be confrontation averse, so marketing strategies requiring member action would need to be tailored to Gen Y's comfort zone. Less traditional approaches with more emphasis on online commentary, crowd funding for particular campaigns (although there is some debate about their level of participation), online voting and signing of petitions and engagement via Twitter, Facebook and Instagram – all employed by the National office of the NTEU, are more effective and remain so if promises made are promises kept as per the Services Gap's Model (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Interviewee TD (female, non-member), felt that the NTEU was not genuine in its offers and her commentary indicated this:

'Because I don't even believe it. It – like, to me it just looks like campaigns of, 'Yes, I will promise you this, this, this,' but I don't think they follow through. Like, that's the perception – I have – With them [NTEU].'

Issues such as noted above can in part be resolved with a strong and ongoing workplace presence to reinforce the brand.

NTEU Workplace Presence as a Form of Communication

To maintain a brand in consumers' consideration set (refer to Kotler & Keller, 2006 for consideration set definition), the brand has to be seen and heard in an on-going way in the market. The brand has to be evident in the work environment and it has to be noticed, not passed over without consumer recognition. It is not an easy process to keep staff aware of the NTEU brand for the following reasons; university staff may or may not read emails from the union, a considerable proportion of staff are casually employed and often do not have a fixed work station (at least not from one semester to the next), organising staff are too heavily involved with industrial matters to engage in public relations exercises and local delegates are either too busy, not confident enough or in some other way constrained to also undertake public relations actions such as touring work areas and disseminating information about the union. As a result of these factors, interviewees in the main describe a workplace bereft of union materials, and seldom visited by union representatives. One interviewee IN (female, non-member) felt that the union was not engaging enough with the staff and that they were 'invisible'.

Another interviewee, EW, (female, non-member) referred to her limited knowledge about the NTEU and explained it as a lack of awareness, while FN, (female, non-member) responded that her exposure to the union in the workplace and was none.

The inability of the NTEU to make its brand sufficiently well-known was noticed by IN, (female, non-member) who stated:

'They are a great support service and advocacy body for staff and appropriate members but, all of that becomes void if nobody knows that they are there.'

At least she (IN, female, non-member) knew of the NTEU's work and regarded it in a positive light. However, this was not the case for several other interviewees whose responses to questioning about the union's presence in the workplace elicited either negative responses (had not heard or seen the union in their workplace) or provided a negative response with some additional qualifications. The straight 'no' type responses are provided from 4 interviewees when asked if they had seen any NTEU materials or staff in the workplace. The responses were all from non-members; 2 male and 2 female.

Finally TI, (female, non-member) suggested that her lack of information was caused by her not seeking the union out, and by other difficulties faced by the union in communicating to staff, noting that:

'I've also never had it promoted [to me] and maybe it is my own lack of investigation but I just don't feel like I hear about all the big things that the union probably does in this environment. You just don't, maybe it is just hard for them to get the word out.'

MD, (male, member), commented initially about not seeing a union representative. He went on to describe how he was asked to join and that, after he had signed the application forms, there was no further contact between himself and the NTEU for several years. He also mentioned that when a recruiter did visit several years later, it was only to ask for money. The potential existed to establish a deep, lasting, relational exchange, but instead the NTEU managed the recruitment process as a shallow, transactional relationship.

The service provider (NTEU) and customer relationship was established to operate as a straight transaction without the suggestion of developing a deeper customer/provider relationship, making for a relationship based on a very tenuous connection. Transactional exchanges create an uncaring brand image. A similar experience was also reported by UD, (male, member), who recounted that a union recruiter visited a rather empty office and spoke to the interviewee. The interviewee signed up, but has since noticed that there have been no further visits. Apart from the well-publicised pay rises he (UD, male, member), did not believe the NTEU was providing a service. He described the recruitment event and said that:

'I asked him [the NTEU recruiter] a few questions. And he took my details and that was it I suppose. But I haven't had any other contact.'

Posters, brochures, promotional give-aways and union delegates on site all offer the opportunity to build a caring and dynamic brand image. Accordingly interviewees were asked if there were any posters, brochures or other materials in view or available in their workplace or if any NTEU delegates had approached them: MC, (female, member) had seen very little promotional material in her building and commented that there was 'low visibility'.

In several of the interviews a more detailed discussion occurred about the use of posters in the workplace (to create a permanent brand reminder). In general the idea was favourably received if, for one interviewee, (MD, male, member), they were not too intrusive and if they contained accurate contact details of delegates. Indeed, the lack of delegates or other NTEU contact details means that the poster can only perform a perfunctory role at best, in garnering membership and again does not lend itself to building a caring brand.

University staff can, of course, be contacted through a variety of other means such as through social media (Email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs and internet sites such as The Conversation), print media such as the NTEU's publications, newspapers, magazines and broadcast media such TV and radio.

There was a notable exception to the sobering picture described earlier about recruitment and it refers to MC (female, member), who was actively involved with liaising between university management and the union about academic workloads and described the situation as one in which she felt that she was well represented by the NTEU and that there was a strong union presence.

The notion of localised effort has some merit even if it only meant putting up posters in the work environment. As QN (Male, non-member), said with regard to posters that:

'Okay you have posters around the building about NTEU meetings or whatever; you'd think they'd plaster those in the sessional' office more than anywhere. This information you just don't know.'

With local knowledge (for example where to affix posters and what to include in the posters' content), and local effort (the process of physically affixing the posters to walls and doors), the humble poster has the potential to act as an automated beacon directing potential members to information sources. If executed accurately, posters can continually act upon the viewer creating a desired brand image. As long as teaching and research is undertaken in a bricks and mortar environment, posters can contribute to communicating a caring brand attitude. Posters are also useable in an online environment, where their electronic forms are banner ads and pop ups. They function in a similar vein to traditional posters in the physical workplace.

At the time of the interviews the NTEU had incorporated promotional bridging (via a hash tag) on "the odd poster" (UG, male, non-member). The bridge connected into a Twitter topic and at the time of the interview the poster was still displayed in the work environment. UG (male, non-member), described how he had endeavoured to use the hash tag thread to join the twitter conversation about the content in the poster, but the connection did not function as it should.

Non-functioning communication vehicles do more harm than no attempt to communicate, because they violate the basics of good communication by creating 'noise' (Belch and Belch, 2001) that impedes the communication. It also presents the NTEU as an intuition that is not reliable on a simple level of organisation, which is a serious violation of a basic tenet of services marketing, because potential service customers have few indicators to predict the likely quality and reliability of a service (because of the intangibility of services) (Lovelock et al., 2015) and so those they do have carry a high reliability load. Tangible clues such as the appearance and quality of brand materials and personnel are used as substitutes to estimate service quality. It is therefore, very important to ensure all materials function as intended and reflect the quality of the service itself. The faulty mechanism on the poster implies, to an otherwise uninformed market, that the service itself will either be sub-standard or non-existent. It acts as a form of workplace invisibility in that it is a communication forum that is unworkable. The final example of workplace invisibility is from US (Male, member), who said:

'And all the means [sic] I was telling people to come in and you should join the union but nobody was really interested because they [the NTEU] were invisible. There wasn't an NTEU logo; nobody knew the name of an organiser or delegate.'

The sheer number of repetitions about various forms of invisibility can clearly identify this as a significant theme (Guest et al., 2012) that has emerged in the research and needs to be addressed by the NTEU. The most expedient solution is to organise workplace visits by official NTEU elected delegates with wearable NTEU visibility such as brand name tags and/or NTEU lanyards, to communicate with

members about current industrial relations campaigns. Taking a longer term focus, with an important emphasis on workplace delegate training (Peetz & Bailey, 2012) would achieve higher visibility of the brand, thereby strengthening brand image and increasing the likelihood of successful recruitment campaigns.

Brand attitude and experiences about unions

The unusual and unique nature of industrial unions combined with the high level of intangibility of their service product creates a major marketing challenge in developing a positive and distinct brand. It requires skilled development of the service offering to create functional value (for example, representation and job protection), expressive value (for example, to feel good about participation in a union) and cost or sacrifice value (for example, a cut down product offering, allowing members to increase their net value through less expenditure on membership fees) (Lovelock et al., 2015).

A negative view of unions was expressed by both members and non-members. Members' comments ranged from expressing disappointment more about specifics such as lack of service and lack of workplace presence, in particular from the NTEU. Non-members, while expressing negative views about unions overall, often qualified their comments when referring to the NTEU, and it was not unusual for them to make quite positive comments within a framework of negative opinions about unions. One of the most important viewpoints expressed by non-members was that unions have nothing to add to the management of the workplace. Further issues are that unions are not needed in representing workers (workers can do this themselves), they are not required to represent workers' position to management (management act in the best interests of the organisation and ideally workers should accept those decisions), and they have no relevance in the wider society. Unions' lack of social relevance is firstly because, they are apparently not involved in wider social issues such as university fees, women's issues, immigration et cetera and secondly because unions apparently have no power to make any impact, out of touch and impotent as they apparently are.

Unions: A Forgotten and Spent Force

Unpalatable as it may be for union officials and remaining members, in some quarters the NTEU is seen as antiquated, obsolete and forgotten, FN's, (female, non-member), comments reflected this view. She commented that:

'I think these days they're somewhat forgotten by the new employees coming through, like people of my age who are just coming in to the workforce. People know it [unions fighting for workers' rights] happens, but they don't know who organised it any more, or that it was the unions behind it.'

The NTEU's image of being out of touch is partly caused by Gen Y permanent staff within the tertiary sector already having reasonably good work conditions and career opportunities. Further, if they need industrial help, they do not need to look far to find alternative options to the NTEU for workplace assistance such as the State Ombudsman. Gen Y also has a conviction they have the skill to manage workplace problems by either using such resources as the Ombudsman or by solving workplace problems themselves.

The perception of unions as no longer relevant is tempered somewhat, by the understanding that without, what one interviewee feels is their shadow presence still pressuring employers and governments, workers would again face hardship. FN, (female, non-member) commented with regard to this issue that [Workers] would be ignored again, conditions would deteriorate and that there would be an increase in ridiculous overtime and safety issues.’

Those from overseas had a varied understanding of, and attitude to, unions. The Singaporean interviewee (GP, female, non-member), stated that she knew very, very little about unions in Australia and that in her home country unions have little power, as they are in a country in which there has historically only been one ruling party. She went on to state that in approximately the last five years, the union movement in Singapore started to voice concerns about worker rights, but in the main, the union in Singapore was considered more of a social club, hence her surprise upon learning that in Australia unions wield power. Her realisation created an internal, diametrically opposed struggle. She explained:

‘When I came here and found out how much power unions have, there were pros and cons because the unions guaranteed a lot of help in terms of objugating power of the people that would usually be dispersed but sense working against Australia in that you have very high wages over here so in that sense [is it as good as in Singapore] so I don't really have a fixed idea of whether it is good or bad, depending on which side of me we are talking about. There is a Right Wing side and then there is a Left Wing side.’

Unions’ efforts in creating high workplace standards in part, has led to worker complacency. Complacency coupled with the provision of systems such as the Fair Work Commission and the Fair Work Ombudsman, both governments created offices in line with long standing policy that these services are free. This has created an environment for a ‘do-it-yourself’ approach to industrial relations (but not necessarily a properly skilled approach that incorporates extensive understanding of relevant legislation and processes). This situation is explained well by NH (female, non-member), who stated that:

‘I can understand the historical importance that they have had, however today, I am not a member of any union and so I question, with the existence of Fair Work Ombudsman and things like that, about their ability to deliver things beyond what Fair Work can do so I'm a bit unsure of what their purpose is today.’

These comments by NH, (female, non-member), indicate that the NTEU has not explained its purpose and translated its purpose into clear member benefits, for this worker at least. The intangibility of services makes explanation difficult in part because, unlike a tangible product a service does not have features “which the consumer can readily identify and compare” (Payne, 1993). The other three main services characteristics that comprise intangibility and that apply to unions are ‘abstractness’, ‘non-searchability’ and ‘mental impalpability’ (Lovelock et al., 2015); all well-known in the marketing literature but little understood by a union organisation whose staff are mainly drawn from industrial relations backgrounds.

Service quality perceptions

The previous areas of investigation explored the lack of union presence in the workplace and unions' out-dated character as perceived by Gen Y interviewees. The research now examines NTEU's delivery of their services and identifies areas of poor service delivery as perceived by Gen Y, within a marketing framework. Exploration of the NTEU's service commences with the current five dimensional conceptualisation of service quality; reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangible, known as the Gap's Model (Lovelock et al., 2015). The importance of the dimensions is thought to vary from industry to industry. Interviewees were invited to provide their perceptions of service quality by discussing occasions where they had sought advice. The first example is from DF (female, member) who believed the service was unreliable and often unresponsive. She commented that:

'On the occasion that I have contacted them I did get a response once from someone that was quite efficient and helpful but the other times I either haven't heard back at all or it has taken quite some time to get a response and it is not that helpful, like by the time they get back to me it's not useful anymore.'

Clearly this member did not receive the level of service she had expected, and it has had a detrimental effect on the relationship between her and the union. The example was quite a tangled situation in which the member and 6-7 of her colleagues were accused of bullying by another union member. The accuser did not use university protocols but instead made their case solely to the union. The union official interceded and in the words of the interviewee DF (female, member):

'The union jumped straight in and, took us all to task etc., etc., and there was no proof, no evidence, and none of the processes had been followed so I thought, actually I'm a union member as well so where's the support...it all got sorted out but it didn't necessarily leave me thinking I'm really glad I'm paying you my money!'

This part of the incident was a clear failure in delivery of the assurance and empathy dimensions in the Gaps' Model (Lovelock et al., 2015).

In the following example the interviewee's experience (US, male, member) demonstrates the type of sensitivities that can arise around workplace issues, which are of extreme importance to staff who expect the NTEU to be responsive, the second most important in the Gaps' Model, and also provide both assurance and empathy; the remaining elements. He explained this by commenting that:

'And during the kind of turmoil of last year with the whole ORP process [Organisation Reform Process]. During the process I asked the union to come and talk to us, and, they said, 'I don't know if there are many union members here. It might be a good time to recruit.' I was really disappointed with the response I got from the organiser at this campus; he basically said 'We don't think there should be casual positions anyway. We have got no good news for you. We are not going to come and talk.' And I wrote to a senior official and he said 'Sorry you had a bad experience but there are no members there so you can't expect us to come and talk to you'.

The outcome for the member was that he resigned his membership, which is particularly significant in this case, because he had never been without union membership up to that point in his career.

In the preceding case, the member (US, male, member), makes a clear causal connection between the NTEU's actions and his membership resignation. He has since re-joined, now that he is working in a permanent position and feels that he is now the type of worker that the NTEU is able and willing to represent. The repetition of these types of incidents, recalled in the interviews and the causal relationship between service provider's actions and the corresponding resulting client reaction suggests that this is an important theme (Guest et al., 2012) which is that the pattern of behaviour by the NTEU clearly violates the principles of the Gaps' Model (Lovelock et al., 2015). A partial explanation for its violation is twofold. Firstly it may be that there is a lack of NTEU resources (especially personnel) and secondly, it may be because NTEU representatives may not know about its importance in service provision coming as they often do from an economics or industrial relations background. Nevertheless failures as described in the interviews have occurred, and their repetition indicates in itself that this is an important theme. It is also an important element generally, because service quality is the fundamental of service delivery, and a successful long term relationship between service provider and customer rests squarely on this dimension.

Unions' as a Positive Product Category – 'NTEU' as a Positive Brand

The positive views about unions came from members and paradoxically from many non-members, with both groups expressing the importance of being represented in the workplace, being made aware of their rights, and knowing that the union was there to help if it was needed. Both groups also expressed the importance of having a 'voice' in the workplace (as provided by the NTEU), the union stopping the organisation from 'getting away with' unfair behaviour and the union being an alternative source of information from management. DF (female, member) commented on the number of workplace restructures and the union's protective role. She commented:

'They [unions] express discontent, which can be difficult to express and you probably know [name of institution] has had a lot of changes recently, in the time that I've been here, there have been four restructures, I've been here five years and so it is good to know that the union has our back and that they don't just let the university get away with whatever they want.'

Interviewees may have a positive view of unions, but there may also be other reasons for non-membership such as the free-rider phenomenon, (in which employees receive benefits but do not contribute financially to the union), or that members' circumstances are not appropriate for them to join (such as leaving the industry), and conversely members may not have a strong connection with the union's ethos and may join only for some service elements that are of value.

Limitations and Contributions of the Research

The research was undertaken at only one NTEU Branch due to resource constraints, which presents a limitation in the study with the data drawn from one sample. Possible inherent biases within the sample may limit the usefulness of the findings when applying those findings to other branches, especially those located in older and more established universities. Further confirmatory research would alleviate this issue.

Although this research was able to effectively explore the area of declining union membership and that of the NTEU in particular and offer insights into possible solutions it was limited in its capacity to explore all possible themes relating to Gen Y's attitudes and opinions about unions and the NTEU. In addition this research does not claim to be applicable to all types of universities (for example older, well-established, research intensive universities) nor does it apply in certain situations where for example, the NTEU does not have complete union coverage of all staff because the Community and Public Sector Union shares coverage non-academic staff in New South Wales. This research was a service industry example of professional people within a particular industry.

The importance of casual employment also deserved a more detailed investigation but the length restrictions of this type of enquiry meant that a decision needed to be made as to what themes were more important and therefore should be included and what themes could be omitted whilst retaining the integrity of the project.

This research brought together two very sizeable disciplines; marketing and industrial relations. The joining of these two disparate areas ostensibly for the first time necessitated the long and detailed exploration of marketing basics: What do the consumers know about the brand? What do consumers like about the brand? Exploration of these questions, and their associated sub-topics were the building blocks for further investigation and so could not be under developed or shortened for fear of missing important factors upon which later ideas relied. Unfortunately it meant that later themes that emerged such as the international union context as experienced by several interviewees was not able to be explored. The major themes that were revealed provided valuable insights into union membership by Gen Y for stakeholders.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Gen Y consumers' perceptions of trade unions as a product category are that unions are often perceived as an important element in society because they keep a rein on managements' excesses. Gen Y interviewees believed that without unions' influence wages and conditions would deteriorate. Nevertheless, they also perceived unions as trouble makers and the cause of reduced economic prosperity for universities.

Their opinions showed a paradoxical viewpoint about unions and the NTEU, sometimes stating that the union asked for too much from the organisation, but also stating that they enjoyed the benefits of the union's efforts (many without contributing financially to the union).

Many non-members were confident they could negotiate with management and achieve successful outcomes to improve their work conditions. On this basis they also believed that unions were therefore no longer a necessary part of the employment landscape. The prevailing response was stated as a question; 'what can the NTEU do for me?' Many non-members believed that the NTEU was inactive and provided no value for workers based, in part, upon their capacity to represent themselves and hence to not need a union.

Many non-members believed that the union had nothing to offer to assist employees in the workplace because in part, they were completely unaware of NTEU negotiations and discussions with University governing boards and State Governments to influence policy and regulation of the sector. The NTEU's perceived lack of purpose was because non-members and members either did not require any improvements in conditions, or they had no workplace problems and also believed that they could resolve workplace issues themselves, if any arose.

In answering the first research question 'How relevant are unions generally to Gen Y, and do they perceive unions as a positive workplace influence?' it must be concluded that Gen Y are not wholly in agreement on their opinion of unions' role in the workplace, with some respondents in agreement while for the majority of Gen Y interviewees they believed that unions did not play an important role in their work life and nor did they attribute important workplace conditions to the efforts of the NTEU.

The research found that there was a noticeable lack of workplace presence by the NTEU, which in itself lead to a weakened brand image. The brand image was sustained only by the small point of interface between members and union staff in many instances, leaving their predominant and most important activities unknown. The NTEU was described as being invisible in the workplace by interviewees. They commented on the brief appearance of an occasional recruiter, but noted that otherwise much of the workplace was bereft of NTEU materials and personnel, such as union delegates. In response to the research question 'Does the NTEU's have a strong workplace presence leading to strong brand awareness?' the answer is clearly that the NTEU is poorly represented in the workplace leading to interviewees not wholly aware of the brand and a poorly communicated brand meaning.

Several interviewees reported poor service experiences that is, various service failures in the Gaps' Model (Lovelock et al., 2015), that resulted in a serious loss of trust with the NTEU leading to further poor perceptions of the brand. Few of the service failures were rectified by the NTEU and in one case this resulted in the loss of what had been a loyal member. There were no systems in place to measure service expectations or service delivery levels and no systems designed to repair damaged relationships with customers. In response to the research question: 'What is the perceived brand image of the NTEU in particular and is it generally a positive or negative image?' again there was no clear response negatively or positively however, the research revealed areas in which service provision was lacking and therefore damaging to the brand.

In conclusion interviewees that had some perception of the NTEU in the main, considered it to be a rational and professional organisation. Members of the NTEU, who had had more exposure to the organisation, had a range of opinions. Some had a strong sense of being looked after by the industrial staff, and believed the NTEU to be a good service provider. In some instances they reported receiving higher than expected service. Interviewees, both members and non-members, reported on the positive role of the NTEU in providing staff with a 'voice' to management and providing an independent viewpoint about workplace issues.

Overall, interviewees recognised the often complicated relationships between unions, employers, news reporters, and the community and their views (including non-members) were not unsympathetic to unions. Future research exploring the relationship between union category awareness, specific union brand image and Gen Y consumers is planned. To strengthen the current qualitative findings it is envisaged future research will be predominantly quantitative with data collection via an online questionnaire to reach a markedly larger cohort of Gen Y respondents and more fully explore the areas of union membership and brand image.

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