

MAXIMIZING THE VALUE OF LINKEDIN FOR EMPLOYER BRANDING AND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT OF SMALL BUSINESSES

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Abstract: *This paper explores the importance of employer branding and reputation management for businesses. It focuses on small business owners' perceptions of LinkedIn as a tool for building and managing their employer brand and reputation. To highlight this, the authors conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews to identify the challenges small business owners face in using LinkedIn effectively for employer branding and reputation management, to explore best practices and strategies for leveraging LinkedIn, to enhance employer brand and reputation and last but not least, to identify the benefits of employee advocacy on LinkedIn for small businesses.*

Key words: *employer branding, employee advocacy, social media, LinkedIn, small businesses*

1. Introduction

In today's competitive business world, managing an employer's branding and reputation is more important than ever. In the age of social media and digital communications, businesses need to create a positive image and reputation to attract top talent, retain customers, and maintain the trust of their stakeholders.

Social media platforms have become integral to a company's marketing and branding strategy. Among popular platforms, with over 875 million users worldwide, more than 58 million companies, and 2.7 million daily active ones on this network (Macready H., 2023), LinkedIn allows businesses to build their brand and connect with their audience and manage their reputation.

The platform's features, such as company pages, content creation, employee advocacy, and community engagement, make it an ideal tool for employer branding and reputation management (Jenifer et al., 2023).

Small businesses often face unique challenges when it comes to employer branding.

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Building a great employer brand that draws top personnel and earns a good reputation can be difficult with constrained resources and smaller teams. However, there are several methods that small firms can use to create a successful employer branding plan.

Employer branding is essential for small businesses to attract top people, keep them on board, establish a solid reputation, and become the employer of choice. A great employer brand may set small businesses apart from rivals and make them stand out to potential applicants in today's fiercely competitive job market.

This paper aims to develop a better understanding of the role that employer branding plays in attracting human capital to small businesses, focusing on LinkedIn as a primary channel to attain such a purpose.

To achieve this, the paper is organized as follows: first, we present a literature review regarding the specifications and benefits offered by LinkedIn for businesses and explore concepts like employer branding and reputation management. Next, we discuss our research approach and present the findings of preliminary qualitative research. Finally, we conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications of our study and directions for further research.

2. Literature Review

To gain a clearer perspective on the potential that LinkedIn usage can bring to a company, the following paragraphs exploit several notions such as network specifications, employer branding, retention and employee advocacy.

LinkedIn is a social media platform designed for professional networking that allows users to create professional profiles that characterize their work history, education, skills, and achievements. LinkedIn's networking features make it easy to create a trusted professional profile and connect with others in the same or similar field.

LinkedIn allows businesses to build brand awareness, become thought leaders, and generate leads. The features available for businesses include creating pages, posting jobs, and connecting with potential customers and partners. Companies can make new connections by joining relevant groups, participating in discussions with like-minded people, and nurturing potential business opportunities. LinkedIn's network features and benefits make it an essential tool for professionals and businesses looking to grow and develop.

2.1. Benefits of LinkedIn for businesses

One of the main benefits is the ability to create a Company Page on LinkedIn. Businesses can showcase their products and services on this page, share company updates, and post job openings. This way, they can attract potential customers, partners, and employees.

Another benefit of LinkedIn is the opportunity to build thought leadership. Businesses can share articles, blog posts, and other content related to their industry or niche to establish themselves as experts in their field. All these actions can increase visibility, credibility, influence, and ultimately more business opportunities.

LinkedIn also provides a platform for networking and connecting with potential customers and partners. Businesses can build relationships with like-minded people by participating in relevant groups, engaging in discussions, and forming new partnerships and collaborations.

LinkedIn's advertising capabilities are also very effective for businesses seeking to reach their target audience. LinkedIn's targeted advertising options allow businesses to reach specific demographics based on factors such as job title, industry, and location to ensure the right people see their ads.

2.2. Employer branding for LinkedIn

Employer branding relates to a company's reputation and ability to attract, retain and engage top talent (Singh, 2021). As Monteiro, et al. (2020) state, "employer branding is the concept used to define an entity's reputation as an employer and the value that employees can derive from it. It is essential that organizations stand out from competitors, and for this, it is necessary that they can retain and attract the desired talents."

Employer branding might be challenging for SMEs with scarce resources operating in a highly competitive environment, yet the literature still needs to be improved.

According to Chiu, et al. (2020), employer branding is a strategy many businesses employ to retain their current workforce and recruit new employees. According to practitioner and academic research, creating vital employer branding initiatives can give a company a strategic edge by creating engaged workers who are devoted to the company and strive to accomplish its higher-level goals (Wilden, et al., 2010).

Employer brands can be evaluated as one of the most valuable assets in the company portfolio. Therefore, brand management is one of the main fields of activity for successful companies. The employer brand is crucial in creating and supporting the customer brand to attract the right employees and reveal high performance (Aldousari, et al., 2017).

Nowadays, businesses successfully combine traditional recruitment methods with social media to market their employer brand. A positive employer brand can improve retention, engagement, and employee happiness. The organization will become more appealing to potential employees by promoting its brand externally.

To implement a targeted recruitment strategy, additional internet-based recruitment tools, including the potential of social media, can be used thanks to the digitalization of HRM practices (Tanwar and Kumar, 2019). Statistics show that social media has a future in employer branding, but more research is still needed (Sivertzen, A.M., et al., 2013; Bondarouk, T., et al. 2014; Kucherov and Zhiltsova, 2021). The use of social media as a unique communication channel allows messages to reach to as many audiences as fast as possible. How employer brands adapt their communication style may be crucial to the relationships they hope to build with their audiences, such as employees and candidates.

Employer branding is a critical aspect of brand management, and social media provides an excellent platform for building and managing an organization's employer

brand. Social media offers a range of features that can help businesses to establish their brand, showcase their culture and values, and attract top talent.

On LinkedIn, companies can use employer branding strategies to showcase their corporate culture, values, and benefits to potential employees. By creating a strong employer brand on LinkedIn, businesses can differentiate themselves from their competitors and attract top industry talent.

Companies can give potential employees an insight into their culture and what it is like to work for them. Companies build employer brands on LinkedIn by creating company pages that reflect the company's culture and values. This page may contain information about the company's mission and vision, employee testimonials, and details of employee benefits.

Another way companies can use LinkedIn for employer branding is by sharing relevant content that showcases their expertise in an industry or niche. By sharing valuable insights, tips, and thought leadership, companies can establish themselves as industry leaders and attract potential employees interested in working for a knowledgeable and innovative company.

LinkedIn is a powerful platform for businesses to build their employer brand and attract top talent. By establishing a solid presence on LinkedIn and adopting employer branding strategies, companies can establish themselves as desirable employers and ultimately build a talented and engaged workforce.

2.3. Reputation management on LinkedIn

Reputation management is the process of monitoring and influencing public perception of a brand or company. Reputation management is one of the essential facets of public relations (Şirzad, 2022).

LinkedIn allows businesses to create a strong presence and manage their reputation by connecting with their audience. Businesses can gain recognition on LinkedIn by regularly sharing valuable content, replying to comments and messages, and showcasing their expertise.

One of the benefits of LinkedIn for reputation management is the ability to showcase employee achievements and company news. By highlighting employee achievements and sharing company news, companies can demonstrate their success and highlight their strengths. This can increase brand awareness and create a positive atmosphere among potential customers and partners. LinkedIn also allows businesses to participate to relevant groups and discuss with like-minded people. Companies can demonstrate their expertise by attending industry-related talks and establishing themselves as leaders. This increases the company's credibility and influence within the industry and its reputation.

LinkedIn provides businesses a powerful platform to manage their reputation and build a positive brand image. By leveraging its capabilities and interacting with audiences, businesses can demonstrate their expertise, showcase their accomplishments, and ultimately establish themselves as respected and successful brands.

2.4. Employee advocacy on LinkedIn

The readiness of employees to share corporate principles and brand communications with their social networking sites refers to as employee advocacy (Thomas, 2020). To put it briefly, employee advocacy is a recent development in digital marketing strategy where businesses give their staff the authority to distribute brand information on social media to build trust with the target audience.

Employee Advocacy on LinkedIn is a powerful tool for small businesses looking to improve their branding and reputation management efforts. It empowers employees to share the company's updates, news, and content on their personal LinkedIn profiles, amplifies their brand message, and expands reach. By encouraging the employees to become brand ambassadors, the company can leverage its employee network and increase its visibility on the platform.

In addition to increasing brand awareness, employee advocacy can help build trust with potential customers by showing the company's human side and highlighting the team's expertise and thought leadership. To maximize the value of employee advocacy on LinkedIn, companies should provide clear policies and training to their employees and encourage and recognize their efforts.

In today's digital age, social media platforms have become integral to employer branding and business reputation management. One of the most popular platforms in this regard is LinkedIn, with its extensive network of professionals and businesses. However, to maximize the value of LinkedIn for employer branding and reputation management, it is essential to understand how businesses can effectively utilize the platform.

The study will provide insights into using LinkedIn effectively for employer branding and reputation management. They may help businesses leverage this platform for branding and reputation management.

3. Research Methodology

In order to attain the primary goal of the research, which was to explore the perspectives of small business owners on the use of LinkedIn for employer branding and reputation management of businesses, qualitative research was performed using semi-structured in-depth interviews as a method.

The objectives of the research derived from the main purpose were as follows:

O1: To understand the importance of employer branding and reputation management for businesses.

This objective aims to provide an understanding of the importance of employer branding and reputation management for businesses.

O2: To examine how small business owners perceive the value of LinkedIn in building and managing their employer brand and reputation.

This objective focuses on examining the perceptions of small business owners regarding the value of LinkedIn in building and managing their employer brand and reputation.

O3: To identify the challenges small business owners face in utilizing LinkedIn effectively for employer branding and reputation management and how they overcome them.

This objective aims to identify small business owners' challenges when using LinkedIn for employer branding and reputation management and how they overcome them. Through research and analysis, the objective seeks to provide insights into small business owners' barriers when utilizing LinkedIn and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges.

O4: To explore the best practices and strategies that small business owners can use to leverage LinkedIn to enhance their employer brand and reputation, including how to create engaging content, develop a strong LinkedIn presence, and encourage employee participation.

This objective explores the best practices and strategies that small business owners can use to leverage LinkedIn to enhance their employer brand and reputation. Through research and analysis, the objective seeks to provide insights into how small business owners can create engaging content, develop a strong LinkedIn presence, and encourage employee participation to enhance their employer brand and reputation.

O5: To explore the opinions on the benefits of employee advocacy on LinkedIn for small businesses.

This objective aims to explore the opinions on the benefits of employee advocacy on LinkedIn for small businesses. Through research and analysis, the objective seeks to understand how small business owners perceive employee advocacy on LinkedIn and the benefits that they attribute to it for their employer brand and reputation.

These five objectives aim to provide insights into how small businesses can use LinkedIn to build and manage their employer brand and reputation effectively. Through research and analysis, the objectives seek to identify the challenges and opportunities of leveraging LinkedIn and provide guidance for small business owners looking to enhance their online presence. The research was performed in February 2023, online, using the Zoom platform, on a sample of 10 entrepreneurs from Braşov, owners of small businesses with a number of employees above 3.

The projection and development of the research included:

- *Research design and recruitment of participants:* determination of the research question and objectives that guided the study, including the establishment of preselection conditions of participants and actual selection. The method chosen for conducting the research was in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted based on a theory-derived interview guide in a semi-structured format.

Respondents were not given predetermined categories of responses to minimize interviewer bias and maximize information regarding the empirical relevance of the constructs included in the study. Next, the data collection methods and data analysis techniques were established.

- *Data Collection*: semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform with each participant. The researchers ensured that ethical considerations were addressed, including informed consent from participants, confidentiality and anonymity of data, and ethical data handling procedures. A set of interview questions guided the discussion. However, the participants were allowed to share their perspectives in their own words.
- *Data Analysis*: revision of the notes taken during the interviews and the answers provided by the respondents. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify themes and patterns in the data, which was organized according to the research questions and objectives.
- *Interpretation and reporting*: this final step provided a report containing the main results based on the findings.

4. Results

To facilitate a better understanding of the results, the main findings are structured around each objective as follows:

O1: To understand the importance of employer branding and reputation management for businesses.

Most respondents recognized the importance of employer branding and reputation management for their small businesses, but few had a clear strategy or dedicated resources for these efforts. Small business owners saw LinkedIn as a valuable platform for establishing their professional brand, showcasing their expertise, and connecting with potential employees and partners. However, some respondents faced challenges in using LinkedIn effectively, such as lack of time, knowledge, or budget, as well as difficulty in measuring the impact of their efforts. Respondents also saw the value of integrating LinkedIn with other social media and marketing channels and leveraging their employees and customers as brand ambassadors.

Overall, small business owners expressed a need for more guidance, resources, and best practices on how to use LinkedIn for employer branding and reputation management.

O2: To examine how small business owners perceive the value of LinkedIn in building and managing their employer brand and reputation.

Respondents perceive LinkedIn as a valuable tool for building and managing their employer's brand and reputation. LinkedIn allows them to showcase their company culture and values, connect with potential candidates, and share their expertise with a broad audience.

LinkedIn was considered more effective for employer branding and reputation management than other social media platforms because it is specifically designed for professional networking. The research found that LinkedIn plays an important role in shaping a small business's reputation in the eyes of customers and partners.

O3: To identify the challenges small business owners face in utilizing LinkedIn effectively for employer branding and reputation management and how they overcome them.

Based on the responses, the main findings suggest that small business owners face several challenges when utilizing LinkedIn effectively for employer branding and reputation management. These challenges include limited resources or time to manage their LinkedIn presence, limited audience reach compared to larger businesses and difficulty standing out in a crowded marketplace.

O4: To explore the best practices and strategies that small business owners can use to leverage LinkedIn to enhance their employer brand and reputation, including how to create engaging content, develop a strong LinkedIn presence, and encourage employee participation.

Based on the responses, several practical strategies for creating engaging content on LinkedIn were identified, such as showcasing company culture and values through visuals, encouraging employee advocacy, and engaging with followers through comments. Other practices included: the development of a strong LinkedIn presence, a complete and optimized company page was also frequently mentioned, consistently posting high-quality content, engaging with other users, utilizing LinkedIn groups, encouraging employee content creation and using LinkedIn ads.

O5: To explore the opinions on the benefits of employee advocacy on LinkedIn for small businesses.

Most respondents said that employee advocacy on LinkedIn provides significant benefits for small businesses, including increased visibility and reach, building a strong employer brand, and establishing employees as thought leaders in their industry. Respondents noted that employee advocacy could help small businesses compete with larger companies, attract new talent, and improve employee engagement and loyalty. However, a few respondents said that employee advocacy on LinkedIn can also come with risks, such as employees sharing inappropriate content or negatively impacting the company's reputation through their actions on the platform. Respondents emphasized the importance of clear guidelines and policies around employee advocacy, as well as training and support to ensure that employees represent the company positively and professionally.

Overall, respondents agreed that small businesses could benefit significantly from employee advocacy on LinkedIn and that a well-executed employee advocacy program can significantly impact the company's success.

5. Conclusions

As social media continues to play an increasingly important role in talent management, businesses must develop a social media strategy supporting their employment objectives.

Successful use of LinkedIn for employer branding and reputation management requires small businesses to have a clear target audience, consistent messaging, engaging content, and active participation in relevant groups and conversations. By leveraging LinkedIn's large and engaged audience of professionals, small businesses can recruit top talent and network with industry peers.

Encouraging employee participation on LinkedIn can showcase company culture and values, attract new talent, and improve the overall employer brand and reputation. Steps to encourage participation include providing training and resources, encouraging content creation, sharing and reposting employee content, and recognizing and rewarding employees who actively participate.

In conclusion, small businesses face particular challenges regarding employer branding. Small businesses may position themselves as the employers of choice in their industry and lay a solid basis for future growth and success by employing a targeted and planned approach to employer branding. However, by defining the company culture, concentrating on candidate experience, emphasizing employee development, and measuring results, small businesses can develop an efficient employer branding strategy that draws in top talent and establishes a good reputation.

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