

## **Appropriating the brand: union organising in front-line service work**

### ***Abstract***

Much has been written about the structural shift towards service work and the management of front-line service workers (Frenkel et al 1999, Taylor et al 2002, Batt 2000 amongst many others). There is also extensive academic analysis relating to the efforts made by unions to re-establish their influence in the contemporary labour market (see, amongst many others, the edited collections by Gall 2003 and Gall 2006 for extensive discussion). With some notable exceptions however (Heery 1993, Eaton 1996, Bain and Taylor 2002), relatively little academic work examines the intersection of these two bodies of literature; and even less focuses on the micro-politics of union organising efforts amongst front-line service workers. This presents a preliminary effort to address this gap. Developing writings from the US over a decade ago (Eaton 1996, Hurd 1993, Cobble 1996), this paper draws on evidence from case studies of successful union organising campaigns amongst front line service workers to examine the complex processes involved in developing collective workplace trade unionism. The particular challenge for both workers and unions in this context is to develop and establish collective interests and solidarities, without compromising the customer service role which is often extremely important to these workers.

## ***Introduction***

Branding is increasingly important in contemporary life; to consumers and to corporations. The notion that branding is conveyed or 'lived' through the employees of an organisation is a well-established one and one that is receiving increasing attention in academic literature (Pettinger 2004). At the same time as this growing interest in the involvement of employees in promoting particular brand values, we have seen a remarkable decline of the influence of the trade union movement in people's day to day working lives. 30 years ago, the vast majority of workers worked in workplaces that had some union presence. Now that figure is only around one-third (Kersley et al 2006). The causes of this decline have been well-rehearsed elsewhere and it is not the intention of this paper to revisit these analyses in detail (Blyton and Turnbull 2004). In summary, however, the interaction between restructuring of the UK economy away from manufacturing work towards service industries, an active attack from the State during the Conservative governments of 1979 to 1997, declining income into the unions which means there is less to invest in expansionist activity, and changing social attitudes, have present unions with very serious challenges to overcome if they are to (re) establish their relevance in the contemporary labour market.

The conundrum of expanding into the service sector presents trade unions with very specific challenges and demands further examination. It is certainly untrue to argue that unions find it inherently difficult to organise in service sector workplaces; banking is now more heavily unionised than manufacturing, for example. But existing studies suggest that the root of these challenges lies in a combination of both structural factors and the tensions inherent in nature of front-line service work (FLSW). Specifically, service sector workplaces tend to be significantly smaller than manufacturing workplaces and unions certainly find it more difficult to establish and maintain a presence in smaller workplaces (Kersley et al 2006). Workplace size presents

challenges to unions in gaining access, investing sufficient resources to go into workplaces to recruit and organise members, and broader issues of economies of scale relating to whether or not it is judged to be 'worth' investing in a risky and resource-intensive campaign if the result is a handful of members. In the context of declining membership income, and increased pressure on scarce resources, union officers responsible for making decisions about how to focus resources effectively are particularly attentive to these considerations (Heery et al 2003).

Further, the largest proportions of service workplaces include occupations such as retail, hospitality and catering where work is often relatively routine and, in the UK, tends to be dominated by relatively low-skill work. Profit margins in these sectors are often tight, with labour costs dominating managerial cost decisions. Thus, there is both a strong managerial incentive to avoid unionisation – which may well push up labour costs – and difficulties for unions in recruiting members in workplaces with a relatively high labour turnover and highly transferable skills. An oft-quoted illustrative example is Usdaw (the union representing retail workers) where they have to recruit around one-third of their 350,000 members each year just to maintain membership figures. This is because Usdaw is only recognised as the representative trade union in around 10% of retail workplaces and members in, say, Tesco often leave to work elsewhere in the un-unionised sections of the retail sector. Usdaw invests hundreds of thousands of pounds annual simply in attending briefings for newly recruited Tesco workers in a (usually very successful) attempt to recruit them to the union.

These structural challenges are compounded by tensions that are, to some degree, inherent in the nature of front-line service work. Previous research has emphasised the importance of acknowledging that the involvement of the customer in the day-to-day work of front-line service workers is both a source of considerable pleasure and satisfaction, but also the root of much discontent (Sturdy et al 2001). Whilst workers may well enjoy the sociability of such work, and the opportunity to engage with customers, reports of abuse, of the challenge of engaging in emotional labour, and of the often humiliating interactions that are sometimes encountered are well-explored by previous researchers (Cobble 1996). Similarly, emerging from the literature on call centres, we see that there are frequently tensions in the ways that managers attempt to manage low-skill front-line service work. The identification of 'mass customised bureaucracies' (Korczynski et al 2000) is helpful here. In some low-skill front-line service work, managers attempt to routinise the customer interaction in an effort to exert control. But the demands of individual customers, and of the imperative to provide a *service* require some degree of customisation of interactions on the part of FLSWs. Similar tensions are visible in some areas of routinised hospitality work, retail, and catering. It is not uncommon, for example, for restaurants or shops to script customer interactions. Whether or not FLSWs stick to these scripts is a different matter. But the fact of scripting is, in itself, an effort to exert a degree of managerial control the customer-worker interaction. Challenging this control is raises important issues for unions as it is a direct intervention into those efforts at managerial control. As we shall see, the empirical evidence in relation to this raises complexities that are often not envisaged by unions, by managers or by workers.

So the nature of front-line service work, and the ways that managers can attempt to exert some degree of control over the customer-worker interaction presents unions with specific issues that are not visible in, say, manufacturing work. But there is a further, extremely important, way in which managers attempt to exert some control over front-line service work; branding. Without understanding how managers seek to use notions of branding in the customer-worker interaction, we cannot properly understand the dynamics of those interactions.

The ways in which employees are being expected to 'live' the brand and the tensions that this brings both to managers and to workers is increasingly attracting attention of academics (Pettinger 2004), but overall it is a rather under-explored area. Even in the most routinised front-line work, employees are regularly encouraged to see themselves as the 'face of the brand'. Work in call centres has drawn our attention to the ways in which employees are selected, trained and monitored to ensure compliance with particular brand values (Korczynski 2003). Some authors have identified the ways in which different brands hosted within the same call centre often use different employees to front those brands in order to differentiate between different brand images ('bubbly', 'professional' or 'informal' for example) (Kinnie et al 2000). There is a strong managerial perception in these circumstances that particular employees are 'more suited' to particular brands and vice versa. Indeed, in some cases, routinisation can itself be seen as an effort to promote particular brand values; think, for example, of the scripting involved in much front-line service work in fast-food restaurants. Thus, we might reasonably expect the ways in which employers and managers seek to promote particular brand values to cause tensions for workers and for the customer-worker interaction.

It is the central argument of this paper that all of these tensions inherent in front-line service work present trade unions with opportunities as well as challenges in their engagements with service sector workplaces. In order to reflect on this more conceptually, it is important to restate what unions are seeking to do when they recruit and organise in a workplace. In essence, they are seeking to identify common, collective interests amongst workers which are differentiable from the interests of managers (Kelly 1997, 1998). The identification of these interests is a complex, socially constructed process. In other words, during the process of deciding which interests the union should represent (and in rejecting others) the union gives legitimacy to the chosen interests; which, in turn, reinforces those interests as being legitimate expressions of the collective will (see Hyman 1999, Simms 2007b for further discussion).

Mobilisation theory (Kelly 1998) suggests that not only must those interests be seen to be opposed to a powerful group, but some form of 'blame' must be able to be apportioned. In other words, for example, if workers are resentful of a wage freeze, but attribute that to the difficult economic conditions in which the organisation is operating, then it is unlikely that they will mobilise against management because they do not attribute the cause of their situation to managerial decisions. Finally, mobilisation theory indicates that there is an - often implicit - cost-benefit analysis to be made about the respective 'costs' of mobilisation (risk of losing a job, risk of the company going bankrupt, risk of managerial retaliation etc.) and 'benefits' of mobilisation (improvement of terms and conditions of work, better working environment etc.)

At its core, a union is trying to mobilise a collective group (workers) around shared interests. And important conceptual and empirical questions emerge in the setting of FLSW. How does the involvement of customers affect the process of mobilising against managers? Can customers and customers' interests be used to support the process of mobilisation? How does the process of managing FLSW through routinisation, branding etc. present opportunities and challenges for unions to mobilise workers? This paper presents empirical evidence that the ways in which managers seek to exert some degree of control over the customer-worker interaction (largely through routinisation and branding) presents unions with opportunities to collectivise and mobilise workers in favour of unionisation. Indeed, in certain circumstances, unions and workers are able to appropriate brand values (customer service, quality etc.) to challenge managerial decisions very explicitly.

### ***The research***

The evidence for this paper is drawn from four longitudinal (1998-2005), ethnographic case studies of successful union organising campaigns where unions have targeted relatively low-skill front-line service workers in workplaces that had not previously been unionised. The unit of analysis is the union campaign because this gives the most rounded insight into the social processes involved. So-called 'greenfield' organising campaigns (i.e. workplaces with no previous history of trade unionism) were chosen because this is where a union is seeking to establish itself in a workplace for the first time. Again, this allows insight into the relevant processes of mobilisation as the legitimacy of the union as the representative body of workers is not yet established. Finally, successful campaigns were chosen

(despite the high attrition rate) because this allowed insight into the factors that contribute to those outcomes.

The workplaces were identified because they are all in sectors where unions have targeted resources in an effort to expand since the late-1990s. Four employers were targeted: Scope, Typetalk, Ethel Austin, and Maxim's casinos.

**1) Scope** is a large charity employing around 4000 staff and representing the interests of people with cerebral palsy. It is a well-known charity which re-branded itself from being the Spastics Society in 1994 because the term 'spastic' had become a term of abuse. In 2006, the charity was rated as having the 48<sup>th</sup> most valuable UK charity brand – notably lower than its ranking of 29<sup>th</sup> largest measured by income. The rebranding has largely been successful with a growth in donations and a rising profile, particularly amongst corporate donors who had previously steered clear of the organisation because of its unfavourable previous brand and associations. Lomax and Mador (2006) explore the dynamics of this rebranding in substantial detail but here it is sufficient to highlight that the central value of the rebranded organisation is equality. Primarily, this is conceptualised as equality between disabled and able-bodied people, but central to all of Scope's branding is the notion of equality: examples include their *Time to Get Equal* campaign, and their slogan *For disabled people achieving equality*.

**2) Typetalk** is a smaller joint venture between BT and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) employing just over 400 staff. It is a telephone relay service that allows deaf telephone users to interact with hearing people. Text typed by the deaf user is spoken by a call centre operator and any spoken message in return is typed by the operator and sent to the deaf user's screen. Typetalk itself is a relatively unknown brand outside the target user groups, but both BT and the RNID are well-established and well-known. In 2003, BT introduced new core brand



values: trustworthy, helpful, inspiring, straightforward, heart. In 2005 (when much of the research took place) the Chief Executive's statement in the Annual Report argued that the brand 'stands for excellent networking<sup>1</sup> skills and a genuine commitment to finding innovative ways of delivering what our customers want.' The RNID by contrast uses the core notion of 'changing the world for deaf and hard of hearing people' to underline their commitment to campaigning, championing and winning improvements for those who are hard of hearing.

**3)** In contrast to the charitable brand values of Typetalk and Scope, **Ethel Austin** is a low-cost clothes retailer mainly based in the North of England and employing over 1500 staff. Although by 2008 it had hit significant financial difficulties and is currently undergoing a significant restructuring and brand relaunch, during the research period it was still a brand with strong links to its past. Unsurprisingly for a low-cost retailer, 'value' was a core brand value but always allied to notions of quality – particularly service quality. Equally important was the long tradition of paternalism and loyalty both amongst staff and customers. Treating staff and customers well in comparison to competitor low-cost retailers was central to efforts to build that loyalty.

**4)** The final research site is also a commercial organisation; **Gala casinos**. The casino business is one arm of a larger Gala Coral Group, and is in the middle of the casino market. Although Gala Casinos do target the low-stakes end of the market, it has a lower stake business in Gala Bingo and largely stays out of the high-roller top-end market of the casino sector. The core values of the company relate to hospitality and responsibility; providing a welcoming environment for customers whilst also complying with the extensive regulation in the gaming industry and promoting gambling as a socially acceptable pastime.

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<sup>1</sup> Networking in this context refers to IT infrastructure, rather than interpersonal skills.

The four research sites allow opportunity for insightful comparison. The fact that two are charitable organisations and two are commercial organisations is deliberate as it allows analysis of the very different brand values of these organisations. The researcher spent extensive periods with union organisers, activists and workers within the target workplaces. This was supplemented with over 100 formal interviews. Company reports, documentation and websites were analysed as supplementary material.

### ***Brand value awareness by employees***

The first notable finding is that employees are very aware of their organisation's brand values. Even those who had worked in the organisation for relatively short amounts of time were keen to explain how they understood the brand values. Often these were explicitly addressed in induction training, but even where they were not (e.g. Ethel Austin) much of the training about customer service underlined managerial expectations about what kinds of behaviours, attitudes and values were expected. Although the methodological approach made it very difficult to interview managers directly, employees in all of the organisations strongly believed that they had been recruited because they exhibited particular characteristics (comment was frequently passed about the need to be 'friendly' or 'welcoming'), attitudes and behaviours.

Interestingly, the employees working in the two charitable organisations (Scope and Typetalk) were generally extremely articulate about the ways in which their own personal values were reflected in the values of the organisation for which they worked. Thus, for example, one employee commented that "I work here because I like it. But I also believe in it. I believe in fighting for better rights [for disabled people]...I wouldn't do it if I didn't believe in it." (Scope employee, interview). This kind of attitude was prevalent and emerged in many of the interviews with workers. Even relatively low-paid workers in

Scope doing care work in residential homes or driving vans for collecting second-hand goods donated to the charity shops expressed a close association with the values of the organisation. “It’s important that I’m doing something that’s doing some good.” (Scope driver, interview). “It’s hard work, but I know it makes a difference.” (Scope care worker, meeting). Typetalk is essentially a call centre based service, so alternative employment for these workers might often be in a commercial call centre. This was an important point of comparison to many of these workers: “It’s better than working for [insurance company]. Here, it’s harder, you have to type quicker, but at least I know I’m doing something worthwhile.” (Typetalk operator, interview).

By contrast, the employees in the commercial organisation often spoke more dismissively of the values of their employers. One Ethel Austin employee laughed “We’re just a cheap knicker shop really!” (Ethel Austin worker, interview). Nonetheless, she identified the value of loyalty and frequently expressed pride in the paternalism of the senior management team. “Old Mr Austin used to come around and give us all chocolates at Christmas until he retired. I know it’s silly, but that kind of thing is important.” (Ethel Austin admin worker, interview). When prompted, employees in both Ethel Austin and in the casinos recognised that quality of service was important to them, to their employers and to the customers. “Oh yes! It’s important to be polite and all that. Even when they [customers] are buggers – complaining and everything.” (Ethel Austin worker, interview). “Managers come down hard on us if they think we’ve been arsey. Even if you’ve been provoked [by the customer]. It’s important that our attitude’s right.” (Gala casino bar staff, interview).

Arguably, brand awareness is more important within the charity sector which relies heavily on donations (both individual and corporate) for income. Having a ‘bankable’ and recognisable brand is often central to securing continued support and investment. Equally, there may well be an issue of self-selection

whereby workers with particular values are more likely actively to seek out employment in the not-for-profit sector. But it is nonetheless notable that, when prompted, Ethel Austin employees did identify value and quality service as core values of the organisation, and Gala Casino interviewees identified hospitality as a core part of the values of their employer. This is important because, as we shall see in a moment, there was a widespread perception that the employers were not upholding these brand values in the management of staff.

### ***Vulnerability of brand values during a union organising campaign***

Without exception, an important issue in each of the four union organising campaigns in these organisations revolved around identifying discrepancies between the espoused brand values of the employers and the ways they treated their staff. The extent to which this formed a core narrative of the campaign varies, but in all of the campaigns this phenomenon was visible nonetheless visible. So, for example, in Scope the issue was initially identified by employees themselves. One key activist was at pains to point out that “Scope is all about equality and fairness. All we want is some of that for us [employees].” (Scope activist, interview). The unions involved in the campaign often used the language and values of the charity to make the case for union membership and organisation. Leaflets frequently and deliberately featured the words equality and fairness. One of the unions involved was, at the time, known as MSF<sup>2</sup> and the union regularly used the slogan Making Society Fairer to promote itself in the charity. MSF in fact stood for Manufacturing, Science and Finance union. This was a deliberate strategy on the part of the specialist union organisers. In interviews and discussions they were keen to point out that this was an important way of engaging these workers. “They [Scope employees] often do it because they want to help or improve society. We need to acknowledge that when we present them with the idea of the union.” (MSF organiser, interview).

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<sup>2</sup> It has subsequently merged to form Unite the union.

Similarly, in Typetalk, the union organiser was keen to emphasise that although this work did share many features of more conventional call centre work, the motivation for staying with the organisation despite some challenging working conditions were often very different. “These women could go and work in a bank. But they often *want* to be working here. So we need to understand that. Not be too confrontational.” (CWU union organiser, interview). In this case, the union also played on the potential discrepancies between the espoused brand values of the organisations involved and the ways in which staff were being managed. Here, however, the approach was focused much more on directly engaging with management. At one point in the campaign, concern emerged about the content of the calls that operators were being asked to engage with; some were alleged to have sexually explicit content or be related to potentially unlawful activities. A profound tension emerged between those who believed that deaf telephone users have the right to use the telephone for any purpose that an equivalent hearing user would, and those (including the union) who argued that operators should be protected from having to engage with those calls. In this case, the brand values of BT (one of the joint venture partners) were extremely helpful. With discussions with Typetalk management making little progress, the union threatened to go public with the story in the local newspaper. This was directly framed as a threat to bring BT into disrepute and to challenge its core values of trustworthiness and of being a reasonable employer. Unsurprisingly, even though BT were not directly involved in the day-to-day management of the service, this prompted sufficient concern to ensure that some progress was made on this issue.

These examples show how both charitable organisations and commercial organisations can be vulnerable to poor publicity (either internally or externally) framed around their own brand values. Of course, any union organising campaign is about building collective interests amongst employees and such activity is, on one level, unsurprising. However, in the two commercial workplaces (Ethel Austin

and Gala Casinos) the comparative lack of awareness of brand values amongst employees meant that this dynamic played out slightly differently.

In Ethel Austin the tensions in brand values and HR management were mainly seen in the ways that particular services (e.g. returns of faulty or unwanted goods) were dealt with in a very routinised way. Rules set by managers dictated what could and could not be returned and some workers felt that the lack of discretion in making this judgment meant that the quality of service was sometimes undermined. Unlike in the two charitable organisations, this was a minor issue and never fully developed as a campaigning or mobilising issue by the union but it was, nonetheless, observed. In the casinos, these tensions in managerial control over front-line service work were much more problematic and gave the union one of its central organising issues. Specifically, the issue of customer abuse and what employees were or were not allowed to do if they were abused by customers was an issue of very major concern. Customer emotions often run very high in a casino environment; it is an environment in which money is made and lost, alcohol is consumed, and the casino tries to create an atmosphere in which the customer genuinely is king or queen in an effort to get them to spend more money both on hospitality but also at the tables. In this context, it is relatively frequent that staff have to deal with negative situations (threats, abuse, violence) as well as positive situations. Prior to the involvement of the union, the rule of thumb – at least as practiced on the floor on a day-to-day basis – was that staff had very few rights to walk away from an abusive customer. Security staff would eventually remove a customer if he or she became too abusive, but staff were generally expected to deal with the situation unless or until it actually turned violent.

This seemed largely to be driven by a desire to accommodate all of the requests of the customer; especially the higher spending ones. There was good observational and interview evidence that this was

a formal policy promoted by management, although the research never revealed written evidence on this point. Here, the commitment to promoting a hospitable environment for customers came into very direct conflict with the interests of workers. The union was able to campaign around this with some reasonable degree of success and agreed guidelines with managers about what staff could do if they were confronted with such behaviour. In short, these guidelines emphasised that workers did have the right to walk away from such a situation, and to request support from managers and security staff. Again, this is an example where the tensions and contradictions of the ways in which brand values are conveyed to staff can not only create unintended consequences for workers, but also be used as a lever to identify mobilising issues.

### ***Discussion and conclusion***

In short, we see in all of these examples, how the brand values can be vulnerable if they are not transmitted consistently through the HR values of the organisation. Many studies of workplace sociology show the ways in which workers identify tensions and contradictions inherent within managerial strategies and, unsurprisingly, branding is no different. What matters here is that the financial value attached to the brand means that organisations may well feel financially vulnerable to an attack framed around their brand values. Union organisers are extremely skilled at reframing the brand loyalties of front-line service workers and the values of the brands they embody. As the 'embodiment of the brand' (Pettinger 2004) customer-facing workers frequently report very positive attitudes towards the brand(s) they promote and live through their work. This is a potential challenge to unions as it could constrain their ability to construct ideological frameworks in which the interests of workers and managers may conflict (Kelly 1997).

In practice, however, union organisers are highly skilled in identifying ways in which the values of the brand can be used to promote workers interests; echoing the famous US organising campaign amongst Harvard University clerical workers where the union adopted the slogan 'It's not anti-Harvard to be pro-union' (Hurd 1993). In these cases, managerial failure to organise work in such a way that allows workers to promote values of customer service, brand loyalty and service quality is used to develop narratives to support unionisation. In this regard, union organisers are extremely skilled in appropriating the brand values and using them to construct a logic that favours the development of collective interests amongst workers and, eventually, unionisation.

The conceptual importance of this argument lies in the fact that the notion of 'communities of coping' relates specifically to the ways in which workers cope with the contradictions inherent in mass customised bureaucracies; particularly the contradictions between promoting a value of 'quality service' whilst simultaneously pursuing managerial control strategies that can impede service quality (Korczynski 2003). The case studies presented in this paper strongly suggest that unions are also attentive to these contradictions and are able to frame some of them in ways that facilitate the development and expression of collective interests. These narratives are presented to both workers and managers with considerable effect. This approach allows workers to build complex and overlapping loyalties to their work, customers, union, and the brand, whilst simultaneously challenging managers. A typical example is the way in which unions use the problems confronting both workers and customers generated by over-standardised work to show managers that the brand values are not being upheld in the work, thus legitimising the role of the union and, ideally, negotiating improvements in work that allow greater focus on service quality.



What is also important here is that unions do this very deliberately. Union organisers are trained to do it (Simms 2007a) and are highly skilled in developing and presenting these alternative brand narratives in such a way that facilitates, expresses and mobilises ideological resources in favour of collectivisation (Kelly 1997). A further noteworthy point is that this argument presents an interesting empirical extension of Rosenthal's view (2004) that managerial control mechanisms can be appropriated by workers (and here, importantly, unions) to further their own control. This stands as a counterpoint to (but not rejection of) the argument of Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) about the ability of capitalism to appropriate the values of resistance movements. Here, unions have become adept at appropriating the values of, arguably the most striking expression of capitalism, the brand, to further their efforts to gain some collective influence over work.

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