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The six conventions of corporate branding

Simon Knox and David Bickerton

Cranfield Centre for Advanced Research in Marketing, Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield, UK

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Abstract *This paper considers the emerging focus in both academic and practitioner literature on the concept of the corporate brand and argues that the underlying generative mechanisms and processes that enable successful corporate brand management are not clearly understood. Based on the findings of recent fieldwork, the authors outline six new conventions for understanding the processes of nurturing and managing a corporate brand and discuss the implications of these conventions for the emergent theory of corporate brand management. Evidence from this work has also led the authors to propose a more holistic definition of the corporate brand, "the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organisation's unique business model".*

Introduction

The concept of the corporate brand has recently risen to prominence in both academic and practitioner fields, with a number of authors pointing to the potential economic value inherent in managing and developing the brand at the level of the organisation (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997; Greyser, 1999; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 1999).

Much of this work has been conceptual and, to date, there has been only limited empirical investigation of the processes that enable an organisation to engage successfully in corporate brand management. Establishing successful corporate brand management practices relies on the identification of two factors. First, the mix of variables that comprise the corporate brand, and second, the development of a brand management system for understanding this process of direction and control.

This paper addresses these two issues and proposes six conventions of corporate branding developed from pilot empirical work with a UK law firm and subsequent action research programmes conducted with a European not-for-profit organisation and a UK-based management consultancy. These conventions build on the existing literature, offer some new perspectives and provide a set of guiding principles and practices.

The contribution of this paper, therefore, is to use the authors' empirical findings developed from existing models of corporate branding and, through an action research approach, to challenge their construction and adapt them – where appropriate – to provide a practical process for corporate brand management and development. In doing so, the authors also contribute to the convergence discussion that unfolds as the paper develops. Before explaining



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the basis for the study and our main findings, it is important to consider the evolving definition of the brand concept.

The concept of the product brand

The concept of the brand can be traced back to product marketing where the role of branding and brand management has been primarily to create differentiation and preference for a product or service in the mind of the customer.

Within this field, there are a number of generally accepted definitions. These variously refer to the brand as “a product or service, which a customer perceives to have distinctive benefits beyond price and functional performance” (Knox, 2000) or “a symbol serving to distinguish the products and services of one company from another” (Kapferer, 1997).

The development of product branding over the past 30 years is characterised by layers of added value built around the core functionality of the product or service to create and maintain distinction in a particular market. The increasing sophistication of product brand management techniques developed can be tracked over this period by the emergence of metrics such as brand image (Boulding, 1956; Balmer, 1998) and brand positioning (Ries and Trout, 1982), through to brand identity (Kapferer, 1997). These refinements reflect both responses to changes in the business environment and the development of deeper insights into the nature and influence of the organisation as an intangible element in the marketing mix.

A further stage in this evolutionary development of traditional product brand management has been the increasing influence of the organisation behind the brand and an increasing acceptance of its role in the creation of economic value. Worcester (1986) provides evidence of a strong correlation between company familiarity and favourability, and research by Lane Keller and Aaker (1992) highlights the positive impact of the corporate brand on new product introductions and product brand extensions.

The concept of the corporate brand

Corporate branding draws on the traditions of product branding in that it shares the same objective of creating differentiation and preference. However, this activity is rendered more complex by managers conducting these practices at the level of the organisation, rather than the individual product or service, and the requirement to manage interactions with multiple stakeholder audiences.

There is support in recent literature for an increasing focus on the role of the organisation as a strategic element in the branding process (Abratt and Mofokeng, 2001; Cheney and Christiansen, 1999). It also highlights some of the problems inherent in managing a wider set of variables associated with the organisation.

King (1991) points to the fact that audiences for the corporate brand go beyond customers to include all stakeholders, and that these audiences exercise a wider range of discriminators, including both intangible and accepted tangible product/service elements. Ind (1997) supports the concepts of intangibility and complexity, highlighting the variety of points of contact, or interfaces, between an organisation and its stakeholder audiences. Ind (1997) also introduces the idea of responsibility, stating that a corporate brand has a broader social responsibility or “ethical imperative”.

These differing characteristics find further support from Balmer (2001a), who highlights five key elements under the C²ITE acronym. He states that corporate brands are cultural, as they reflect the organisation’s sub-cultures, intricate in that they are both multidimensional and multidisciplinary and tangible, as they encompass elements such as business scope and architecture. Balmer (2001a) also points to the ethereal characteristic of corporate brands as they evince emotional responses from stakeholder groups and the need for total commitment across the organisation to manage a corporate brand successfully.

In summary, it is clear that during the last 30 years there has been a series of refinements to the definition of the brand, resulting in a dramatic extension of the applications and scope of branding. Branding has begun to move up the corporate agenda and is increasingly recognised as a strategic tool that can generate and support value creation (Urde, 1999; Balmer, 1999; Macrae, 1999).

Confusion, convergence and conflict

Despite a growing consensus about the benefits of corporate brand management (Fombrun and Rindova, 1998; Greyser, 1999), there remains considerable uncertainty over what this means in terms of management practices and the study of this emerging phenomenon. Lane Keller (1999) comments that many organisations are unsure what they should do to manage their corporate brand, while Ind (1998a) and Balmer (1998, 2001b) both highlight the current confusion in the field and stress the need to understand the disciplines involved in managing and developing a corporate brand. Davidson (1999), in turn, calls for the macro management of the brand by senior management.

This suggests that there is a clear need to establish a new agenda and set of practices for brand management at an organisation level. Our stimulus to explore these practices was further encouraged by two convergence trends. The first of these is the convergence between product and corporate branding.

Over the past few years there has been increasing external demand for transparency and accountability of the organisation’s policies and practices behind the product brands they market (Mitchell, 1999). During this period there have been a number of high profile examples (e.g. Nike, Shell, Monsanto) where adverse publicity surrounding the actions of an organisation has had an immediate and dramatic effect on the brand at a product level and the short

term ability of the corporate brand to deliver economic value. The stronger links between product and corporate brand are also reflected in the latest survey of the world's most valuable brands (Clifton and Maughan, 2000) where 19 of the top 20 companies listed share the same corporate and product brand name. This trend shows signs of accelerating with the recent emergence of new Internet "dot.com" brands where the corporate entity is very often the product or service.

The second area of convergence linked to corporate branding relates to the academic literature. In a previous paper (Bickerton, 2000), it is argued that developments in organisation theory, starting from corporate image (Abratt, 1989) through to the current focus on corporate reputation and corporate branding, have mirrored developments of the brand concept in the marketing literature.

Figure 1 traces the development of these concepts from a starting point of corporate image through successive organisational constructs, which reflect growing insights into the nature of organisational branding. Each of these stages represented a widening of the impact of the organisation brand from corporate image and the customer (Abratt, 1989; Grunig, 1993) to the broader definition of corporate personality and its relationship to the employee (Olins, 1978; Barney, 1986). The next stage of this development was the recognition of the need to create favourable perceptions beyond customers and employees to include all stakeholder audiences with the introduction of corporate identity (Birkigt and Stader, 1986; Olins, 1995; Balmer, 1997).

More recent work in the organisational field focuses on corporate reputation (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997; Rindova, 1997) and the need to satisfy the commitment of multiple stakeholders through the management of the corporate brand (Balmer, 2001a; Hatch and Schultz, 2001).

In contrast, the marketing perspective (also shown in Figure 1) has evolved from the principle of the primacy of customer demand. This views the brand as a strategic resource, which can be used to guide the business processes that generate brand value for customers (Macrae, 1999; Urde, 1999).

Much of the debate in the marketing field over the last 40 years has been on the mix of elements that not only delineate marketing as a discipline, but also help to operationalise the role and function of marketing. The goal of branding as it has evolved over this period has been to explore ways to add value to the basic product or service and thus create brand preference and loyalty.

Early attempts at brand management concentrated on creating a positive brand image (Boulding, 1956) in the mind of the consumer. This relatively simplistic idea was superseded by the development of brand positioning (Ries and Trout, 1982). This recognised the fact that consumer choices are made on the basis of comparison and led branding practitioners to concentrate on creating a unique positioning of their brand in the minds of existing and potential customers (Lane Keller, 1999).

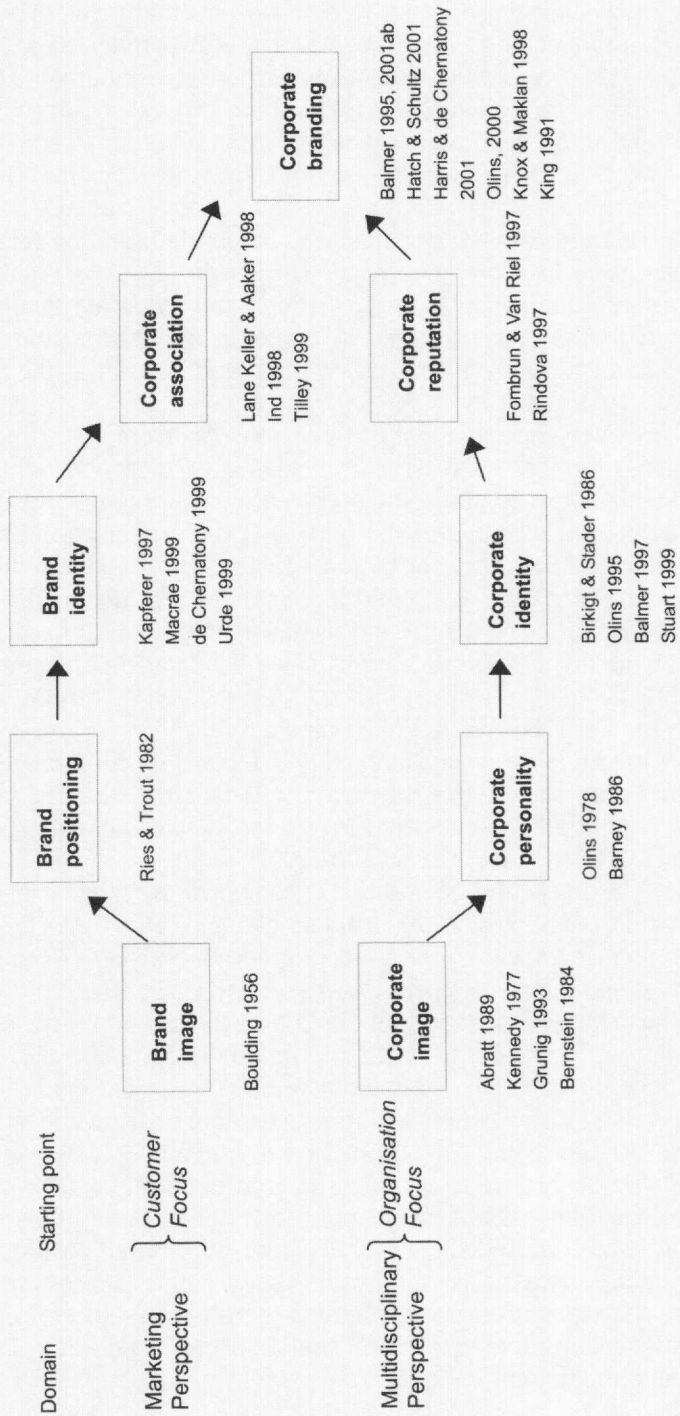


Figure 1.
Convergence of academic thinking towards corporate branding

This concept of positioning also linked with the term “unique selling proposition”, and together with the 4Ps, have been the main building blocks of product brand marketing practice since the early 1960s.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of work which points to the inability of these positioning tools to cope with the substantially changed environment that organisations now face (Christopher, 1995; Mitchell, 1999). This created a need to deepen the marketing view of the brand to encompass organisational attributes (King, 1991) and to shift focus from the integrity of the product brand to the organisation and people behind the brand.

In response to these views, Kapferer (1997) claims that we have now entered a new age of brand identity, which can be viewed as comprising six variables:

- (1) physique;
- (2) personality;
- (3) culture;
- (4) relationship;
- (5) reflection; and
- (6) self image.

These variables define the brand and delineate the boundaries within which it can change and develop. Support for this wider mix of variables also comes from Ind (1998b) and empirical work by Lane Keller and Aaker (1992) which points to the increasing importance of corporate associations. This highlights the fact that future marketing success rests on the development of skills in brand building that harness all organisational assets and competencies to create unique products and services (Tilley, 1999).

The key to convergence of these two domains is, therefore, to recognise the legitimacy of both an “outside in” customer focus and an “inside out” organisation focus. However, we also argue that the main constraint to further convergence between marketing and organisation theory in this field is essentially the difference in starting point. So, there is a need to conjoin some of these ideas and models to help resolve the divergence in theory development. To do this, the authors first review the key models which describe corporate branding and corporate brand management practices before discussing them in the context of their empirical studies.

Existing models of corporate brand management

The development of models that describe the process of corporate brand management has mirrored the evolution of descriptive terms and ideas within the field and reflects the inherent complexity of the phenomenon.

A number of excellent reviews of these models already exist in the literature (e.g. Stuart, 1999; Balmer, 2001a). Both these authors identify that models of corporate branding can be split into two distinct types: the macro models of the

1980s and early 1990s and the more recent micro models from the organisation and marketing fields.

Macro models were developed by Abratt (1989) and Dowling (1993) and their major contribution has been to incorporate the various constructs, such as corporate personality, identity and image, into their models. Dowling takes a further step by incorporating constructs such as culture from the organisational domain. While these macro models do seem to have triggered the development of more multi-disciplinary interest, most appear to be limited in terms of the insights they offer in explaining and connecting the constructs.

In response to these acknowledged limitations, a number of authors have recently developed micro models of the corporate brand which are more accessible for diagnostic purposes. For instance, Hatch and Schultz (1997, 2001) highlight three key aspects of corporate branding (vision, culture, image) and point to the need for managers to check for alignment between these three elements. Rindova (1997) concentrates on the image formation process and defines four distinct types of image that are created by the organisation, third parties and individuals. This cascade process offers further depth of insight into the process of managing corporate image. Rindova's (1997) work has recently been extended by Balmer (2000), who deconstructs the key components of corporate identity. Balmer (2000) distinguishes five separate components of identity (actual, communicated, conceived, ideal, desired) and suggests that all five should be explored by management as part of the corporate brand management process.

In summary, the recent micro models of corporate brand management seem to capture more readily the challenges faced by organisations in managing and aligning multiple identities and images across differing stakeholder groups. However, even these models still tend to be rather conceptual at heart and, in our view, still present major challenges to researchers engaging in empirical studies of this emerging management phenomenon.

Development of our research study

As we discussed earlier, our review of the literature indicates that part of the tension in developing this domain stems from the disparate and sometimes conflicting viewpoints of contributing authors from different academic disciplines. A second contributory factor, undoubtedly, is that the corporate brand is an inherently complex phenomenon to understand. Balmer (2001a), in his recent critique of the corporate branding literature, identifies 15 underlying reasons behind this "fog" of complexity which surrounds the subject area. Mindful of these complex issues ourselves, we have designed a study, which, coincidentally, seems to address four of the main criticisms levelled by Balmer (2001a). The first of these criticisms relates to the problems caused by different paradigmatic views (Goia, 1998). In particular, a number of authors have

pointed to the inappropriateness of the positivistic paradigm for studying this field (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Balmer, 1998).

Connected to this, we believe, are two further criticisms raised by Balmer (2001a), namely the failure to identify elements of the corporate brand mix and how these elements are managed. Both stem directly from limitations of studying the field within a positivistic paradigm.

Finally, Balmer (2001a) also points to a lack of empirical research, which the authors believe can be attributed mainly to the challenges in operationalising predominantly conceptual models, and to the difficulties of gaining privileged access to study the phenomenon within organisations.

In response, our methodological approach has been to use an action-oriented form of inquiry to gain the necessary access to organisations and to study the processes of corporate brand management at first hand. This methodology is outlined in the next section.

Methodology

The study conducted was qualitative in nature and involved three phases. The first phase was a detailed review of the literature to establish the current body of knowledge on corporate brand management processes. Given the shortfall in empirical work and the complexity of the phenomenon under study (see Balmer's (2001a) paper for a full and comprehensive analysis), the authors developed an action research approach based on intervention theory (Argyris, 1973). This method of inquiry attempts to integrate reflection and action within cycles of intervention during the study. This intervention cycle was tested in a pilot study during the second phase of study, which enabled the authors to develop suitable processes for the collection and analysis of data. The study was conducted with a leading UK law firm over a period of three months and involved a cycle of interventions with senior partners, including workshops and face-to-face interviews, a total of 25 separate interventions. These interventions were all recorded and transcribed and supplemented with project journals to capture all researcher reflection between each intervention stage.

During the third phase, which was conducted as two consecutive studies over a period of six months each, over 50 interventions with the senior management teams of the two organisations were carried out. All cycles of intervention, which were conducted as face-to-face interviews or small group sessions, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. These transcriptions were again supplemented by intervention journals, which were kept throughout the studies to capture the researchers' reflections on the process and outputs at each stage. At the end of each cycle of intervention, all transcripts and journal notes were analysed using qualitative software and emerging themes were generated from conceptually-ordered matrix data displays (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

This methodology should be contrasted with conventional qualitative approaches, such as the recent study by Abratt and Mofokeng (2001) where

research was conducted at a distance in the past tense by generating data with respondents on how corporate image was managed within a sample of organisations. In contrast, our study attempts to investigate the management of the corporate brand in the present tense by active involvement in the process of research with the participating research subjects. The benefits of our approach stems from the opportunity to generate diagnostic insights and corrective actions, as opposed to the more conventional, third person detached-observer study. Our main research findings are discussed next under the heading of the six conventions of corporate branding.

Six “conventions” of corporate branding

In characterising the process of corporate brand management across the organisations we studied, we have been able to identify a number of distinct practices. These emerging practices are explained in the following sections and we have termed them “conventions” of corporate brand management. A convention is defined as the “prevalence of certain accepted practices, which offer a constraining influence”. It becomes evident that these six conventions link both to aspects of existing models and frameworks as well as providing new, practical guidelines for managing the corporate brand.

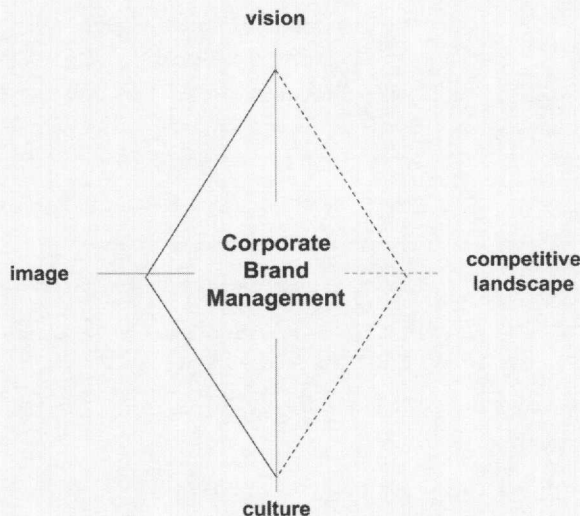
First convention: brand context – setting the co-ordinates

King (1991) and Balmer (1995) both identified the need for corporate branding practices to be multidisciplinary, combining elements of strategy, corporate communications and culture. This view has been further refined by Hatch and Schultz (1997, 2001), who point to the interplay of three variables – vision, culture and image – as a context for corporate branding. Evidence from all three of our studies suggests that these variables do, indeed, form part of the strategic setting which organisations use to review the current strengths and weaknesses of their corporate brand. However, initial cross-case analysis of the data suggests that a fourth variable should also be introduced to make the context more complete. This is the competitive landscape for the organisation.

Much of the evidence gathered through interviews and focus groups from each organisation studied identifies the need to consider the future competitive landscape (even in the case of the not-for-profit organisation which, while not selling conventional products, was competing for attention and funds). This suggests the development of a competitive context for the corporate brand, which builds understanding across two temporal dimensions:

- (1) the current image of the organisation and its future competition; and
- (2) the current culture of the organisation and its vision for the future.

Application of this model (Figure 2) should help managers within an organisation “fix the co-ordinates” of their current situation by reference to these contextual factors. In addition, it can help guide thinking on future



Source: Adapted from Hatch and Schultz (1997)

Figure 2.
The context of corporate
brand management

scenarios for the organisation with reference to its vision and competitive strategy.

Second convention: brand construction – the corporate brand positioning framework

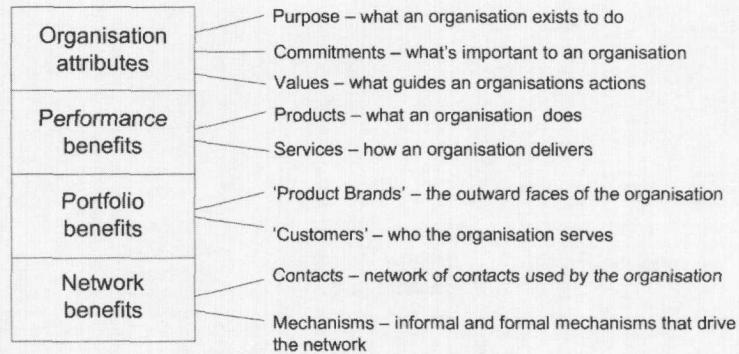
The authors' literature review and interpretation of existing conceptual models stresses the need to create a brand framework that combines "inside out" and "outside in" elements from common starting points (Van Riel, 1995).

Van Riel (1995) defines the concept of common starting points (CSPs) as the central values of an organisation which form the foundation for all corporate communication. As discussed earlier, Ries and Trout (1982) refer to these values as brand positioning. Thus, there is a need for management to address two important questions: what CSPs make up the corporate brand framework and how can they be used to position the brand?

For the pilot phase of our study, we used a framework for organisation brand positioning introduced by Knox and Maklan (1998) from the marketing domain to explore these questions. According to Sealey (1999), their positioning approach or "unique organisation value proposition" applies at a corporate level in the way that the "unique selling proposition" has been used in the past to position products through advertising (Kapferer, 2001). The results of the pilot study point to an evolved, four-stage positioning that comprises organisational attributes and its performance, portfolio and network benefits. These definitions are outlined in Figure 3.

Evidence from the two subsequent studies highlights the fact that the research subjects were comfortable in identifying the tangible performance

Figure 3.
Corporate brand
positioning framework:
definitions



Source: Adapted from Knox and Maklan (1998)

and portfolio benefits of the organisation, but require a process to identify the key elements of their intangible organisational attributes. Further, the network or relationship benefits were not considered at first by each set of subjects to be a part of the corporate brand positioning. However, as part of the ongoing intervention process, the potential of the network as defined emerged as a strong and even differentiating element in the corporate brand.

To aid the development of a shared viewpoint of this framework, we worked with the research subjects to identify a common starting point. Evidence from the studies points toward the adoption of customer value drivers as an effective means to create group dialogue and alignment. These data were generated from both existing external customer research, and the views of the research group based on informal feedback from customers and other third parties.

Using customer value as a common starting point, the research subjects were able to construct a corporate brand positioning working from an understanding of the organisation's current brand strengths and desired future position. This use of customer value drivers as a common starting point seems to provide a better basis for achieving consensus rather than the more subjective and intangible starting point of corporate values (Van Riel, 1995) or, indeed, other CSPs that may arise as a result of feedback from key stakeholders other than customers. It also seemed to help managers from cross-disciplinary backgrounds focus on common, unifying issues and to develop a shared understanding of the main considerations in positioning their corporate brand. This approach was also endorsed in our post-study exit interviews as it was seen as helping overcome some of the inhibiting beliefs and behaviours associated with the functional boundaries that exist in each of the organisations studied.

Third convention: brand confirmation – articulating the corporate brand proposition

The corporate brand positioning developed during the brand construction phase needs to be consolidated and articulated to the rest of the organisation and external audiences. This calls for the development of a series of agreed statements that describe the corporate brand proposition.

Evidence from our fieldwork suggests that this process must be inclusive for the senior management team involved and is best conducted in an iterative style, via a series of small working groups. Such an approach ensures management buy-in and begins the process of developing an agreed corporate language for all organisation communications. Adoption of an agreed corporate brand positioning (Figure 3) and common starting point, based on customer value, gave the management team in each organisation a process for the development of these corporate brand statements and, ultimately, the brand proposition.

Analysis of our post-study exit interviews also points to broad agreement that the development of a series of brand statements enabled the management teams to create a fuller definition of the corporate brand, helping to resolve the complexity issues raised in the literature (Balmer, 2001a).

The indications emerging from our project journals (maintained throughout the research period) suggest that the engagement and reflection of this senior management team is vital in securing the commitment and ownership necessary to enable corporate brand change and renewal. Indeed, the authors believe that failure to enlist their enthusiasm and support seriously jeopardises the development of corporate brand consistency and continuity, which are explained next.

Fourth convention: brand consistency – developing consistent corporate communications

Consistency has been widely acknowledged as a core principle of successful brand development (Olins, 1995). Further, the literature also acknowledges the pivotal role of communication in creating this consistency (Van Riel, 1995) and concentrates on this aspect of corporate brand management (Birkigt and Stader, 1986).

Evidence from our study indicates that an organisation needs to divide its channels of stakeholder communications according to their levels of formality, by identifying both key formal communication channels and other informal mechanisms commonly found in organisations (e.g. e-mail, bulletin boards). This was seen as a necessary first stage in conducting a more rigorous audit of stakeholder communications. As an integral part of our study, content analysis (Krippendorf, 1980) was applied to measure the consistency of formal corporate brand communications. This approach, which relies on quantified data

analysis techniques, enables managers to measure and monitor the output of all corporate brand communications against the brand statements created in the preceding brand confirmation stage.

Results from our time series analysis of the European not-for-profit organisation identify a significant improvement in brand consistency over a nine-month period. Evidence of this improvement was the increase from 40 per cent to 62 per cent in the proportion of core brand communications and a reduction in the fragmentation of communications regarding the core organisation attributes identified during the brand positioning stage (Figure 3).

The adoption of a measurement tool (based on content analysis) for all formal corporate brand communications was considered to be of significant benefit to the management team in helping to control and measure the consistency of formal communications. What began in the study as an objective measure of output became recognised as a management tool offering considerable potential to the corporate brand team.

Fifth convention: brand continuity – driving the brand deeper into the organisation

While the main focus of the study conducted was on corporate brand communication, data gathered in all three organisations highlighted the importance of aligning the relevant business processes with the corporate brand. This called for an examination of these business processes in order to review how they should be modified and developed to ensure continuity with the corporate brand proposition (Knox and Maklan, 1998; Knox *et al.*, 2000).

In the case of the European, not-for-profit organisation this involved a series of workshop sessions with senior management to identify which business processes impacted on the corporate brand and how these processes contributed to the delivery of customer value. The processes identified (communication, operations, knowledge management and strategic development: Figure 4) were then discussed in the context of their current level of alignment with the corporate brand to identify areas where these processes required adjustment or improvement. In Figure 4, communications and knowledge management are marginally better aligned than operations and strategic development, although all four have some way to go to achieve organisation-wide consistency and continuity.

One of the main conclusions from each study is that managers need to adopt a more holistic approach to corporate branding, which also encompasses the business processes associated with value delivery. In this way, brand confirmation is reinforced throughout the organisation by broadening the corporate brand managers' remit to include both changes in communications and the business processes engaged in value delivery.

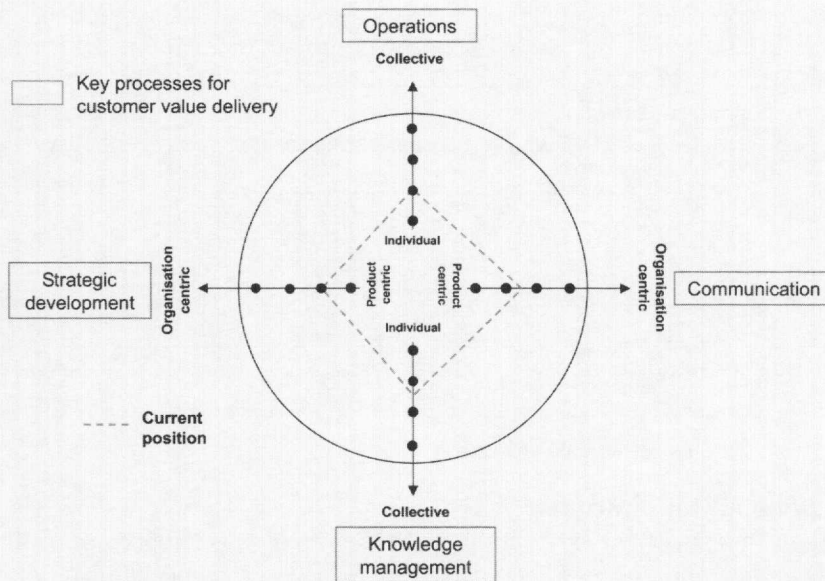


Figure 4. Corporate brand continuity: the not-for-profit case study

Sixth convention: brand conditioning – monitoring for relevance and distinctiveness

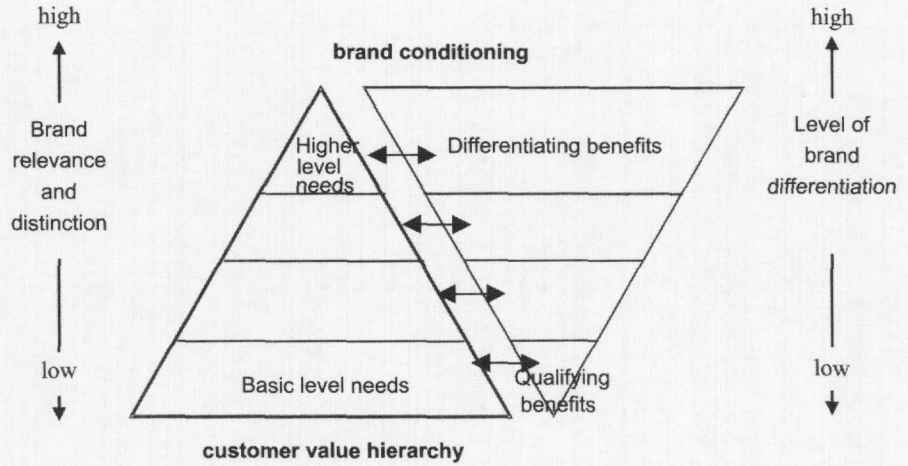
A final stage of corporate brand management identified in the study centres on the ability of an organisation to review its corporate brand on a continuous basis. Evidence from each of the organisations studied points to the need for regular auditing through its cycle of development and renewal. This finding, which supports the view of Abratt and Mofokeng (2001) that corporate brand management is a continuous process rather than a series of one-off events, highlights the need for management to check on the brand's condition for relevance and distinctiveness at regular intervals.

Data gathered from the study suggest that brand conditioning involves creating a hierarchy of customer value and ensuring that the corporate brand model delivers against these needs on a continuous basis. The main benefits of the corporate brand are managed as the inverse of the customer value hierarchy to ensure relevance and distinctiveness (Figure 5).

By constructing, articulating and communicating the corporate brand proposition (Figure 3), managers can ensure that the brand retains relevance and distinctiveness with respect to this hierarchy of customer value. This creates a dynamic situation where corporate brand benefits are actively managed to align with the customer value hierarchy (Figure 5).

The main implication for managers here is the need not only to communicate clearly the key aspects of the corporate brand proposition, but also to ensure that these communications are reinforced by organisation behaviours and supported by the processes which deliver customer value.

Figure 5.
Aligning brand benefits
against customer needs
– brand conditioning



Conclusions and limitations

Throughout this paper, we have highlighted the increasing importance of the corporate brand and the need for a clearer focus on the mechanisms and processes that enable the senior management team to develop their brand more effectively. The identification of the six conventions from our data sets can best be viewed together as a whole – as a set of guiding principles and practices which offer a new diagnostic approach to the management and development of the corporate brand (Figure 6).

The progressive nature of these diagnostic stages, from setting the co-ordinates to monitoring for relevance and distinctiveness, helps to bridge the gap between conceptual modelling and operational interpretation. Along the way, we have had to make adaptations and reductions to engage managers through action research. However, we hope their contribution can also provide

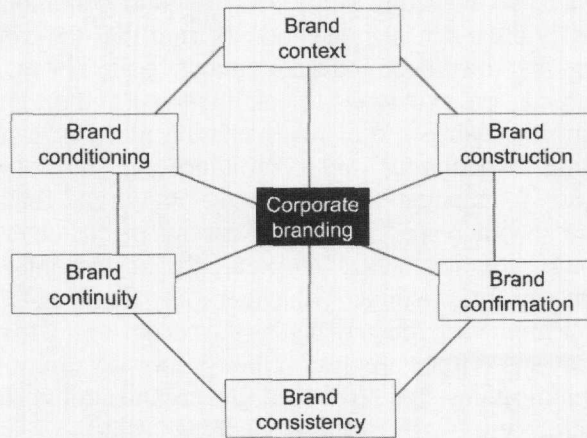


Figure 6.
The six conventions of
corporate brand
management

the academic community with material that contributes to the convergence debate discussed earlier in the paper.

Evidence from our work has also led us to propose a more holistic definition for the corporate brand as follows: "A corporate brand is the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organisation's unique business model".

While the development of the six conventions is based on empirical evidence, the authors readily acknowledge that there are limitations to the scope of the work conducted to date. Given the nature of the project and intervention methodology chosen for the study, our work has concentrated on organisations where the senior management team can more readily engage in the process of inquiry. This has led to the selection of partnership-style organisations as the most suitable for preliminary study. Suggestions for further work, therefore, are to test and develop the framework in the context of larger holding companies.

For reasons of access, our studies to date have consisted of organisations in the process of change. The perceived need to re-examine the corporate brand has enabled access and facilitated the commitment of the senior management team over time by offering a mutual benefit to both the organisation and researchers in studying the processes of managing their brand. We recommend that further work should be conducted within organisations which are not undergoing radical change, for comparative purposes. However, we anticipate that this recommendation may create significant research challenges in gaining sufficient access to and participation of a senior management team through several cycles of intervention, reflection and action.

Implications for managers and academics

Our emerging definition of the corporate brand builds on the views of Ind (1997) and Balmer (2001b) who regard the corporate brand as a unique entity which must take account of the specific structure and culture of the organisation. Ind (1997) also identifies that there are no universal approaches to corporate branding. Evidence from our study supports this work as the senior management teams in the organisations studied did not have formalised structures or processes for managing the brand at an organisation level. Empirical evidence points towards the need for these six conventions to be addressed by corporate brand management. Arguably, these conventions combine to give a further evolutionary step towards a more structured approach to the management of the corporate brand. Further, our study suggests that the role of corporate brand management is not a peripheral activity that can be delegated to a marketing or single communication function.

Based on the results of our action research, we would suggest the following steps to senior management engaged in building their corporate brand:

- (1) Allocate responsibility and authority for corporate branding to one director or partner.

- (2) Establish a senior corporate brand management team.
- (3) Use the six conventions individually to audit the corporate brand and, together, as a “checks and balance” mechanism to ensure relevance and distinctiveness to stakeholders over time.

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