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Bringing the corporation into corporate branding

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Abstract *This paper describes corporate branding as an organisational tool whose successful application depends on attending to the strategic, organisational and communicational context in which it is used. A model to help managers analyse context in terms of the alignment between strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate image is presented. The model is based on a gap analysis, which enables managers to assess the coherence of their corporate brand. Use of the model is illustrated by examining the stages of development that British Airways passed through in the creation of its corporate brand. The paper concludes that corporate brand management is a dynamic process that involves keeping up with continuous adjustments of vision, culture and image. The model suggests an approach to corporate branding that is organisationally integrated and cross-functional, hence the thesis that it is important to bring the (whole) corporation into corporate branding.*

Among the changes that businesses make as they move toward globalisation is a shift in marketing emphasis from product brands to corporate branding (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Balmer, 1995, 2001a; de Chernatony, 1999; Dowling, 2001, 1993; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2001, Ind, 1997; Kapferer, 1992; Keller, 2000a, b; Knox *et al.*, 2000; Olins, 2000; Schmitt and Simonsen, 1997). This is usually ascribed to the difficulties of maintaining credible product differentiation in the face of imitation and homogenisation of products and services, and the fragmentation of traditional market segments that occurs as customers become more sophisticated and markets more complex. In an era when companies can no longer base their strategy on a predictable market or a stable preferential product range, the ground rules for competition change. Differentiation requires positioning, not products, but the whole corporation. Accordingly, the values and emotions symbolised by the organisation become key elements of differentiation strategies, and the corporation itself moves center stage.

Support for the shift to corporate branding often comes from within marketing. For example, some marketing researchers have claimed that a strong corporate brand has significant impact in creating positive consumer

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perceptions of existing products and new product extensions (e.g. Brown and Dacin, 1997; Ind, 1997). Others have addressed the special processes of creating corporate brands in the service area, emphasising the differences between services and fast-moving consumer goods as foundations for corporate branding processes (McDonald *et al.*, 2001). In either case, corporate branding brings to marketing the ability to use the vision and culture of the company explicitly as part of its unique selling proposition (Ackerman, 1998; Balmer, 1995, 2001a; de Chernatony, 1999, 2001; Ind, 1997) or as suggested by Knox *et al.* (2000) and Knox and Maklan (1998), as part of its unique organisational value proposition. In addition, Balmer (2001a) noted the importance of corporate branding to a multiplicity of stakeholders (i.e. customer attractiveness, investor confidence and staff motivation), a view that he claims is now widely recognised in the UK by practicing managers.

Parallel to this shift in the marketing area, scholars in corporate identity are moving in the direction of what Balmer and Soenen (1999) labeled a "vision driven approach" to management. The vision approach expands the concept of corporate identity into a much more comprehensive mix of "mind, soul and voice". In their review of this new approach, the authors show how identity management has been transformed from a dominating concern with visual manifestations into strategic change management (see also Balmer, 2001b; Van Riel, 1995). Similarly, de Chernatony (2001) argued for the importance of strategic vision to identity and branding, as a means to integrated brand building. Although these authors emphasise related arguments for creating a more comprehensive and coherent framework for analysing who the company is and what it stands for to multiple stakeholders, they do not relate these contributions specifically to the concept of corporate branding, which is what we will do in this article.

Within marketing, branding and corporate identity studies, we find a growing awareness that corporate brands can increase the company's visibility, recognition and reputation in ways not fully appreciated by product-brand thinking. The corporate brand contributes not only to customer-based images of the organisation, but to the images formed and held by all its stakeholders, including:

- employees;
- customers;
- investors;
- suppliers;
- partners;
- regulators;
- special interests; and
- local communities.

The importance of employees to corporate branding and the need to better understand their behaviour and thus the organisational culture of the corporation have received particular emphasis in recent work. de Chernatony (2001), Harris and de Chernatony (2001), Hatch and Schultz (2001), Wilson (2001) and Balmer and Soenen (1999) have all argued that employees are key to building relationships with all the company's stakeholders as well as contributing to the meaning of the brand (i.e. by expressing to others who we think we are as a company). In relation to external stakeholders, Duncan and Moriaty (1997, 1998) suggested that knowledge of communication processes can expand and improve brand relationships, making companies recognise their interactivity with stakeholders in everything they do – and do not do. Most recently, comparisons between the brand's foundation and aspirations for its future have inspired gap and interface analyses as vehicles for diagnosing and managing the brand and its identity. For example, de Chernatony (1999) stated that brand building involves reducing the gap between brand identity and brand reputation, whereas the ACID Test by Balmer and Soenen (1999) and further elaborated by Balmer (2001a, b) focused on the interfaces between five types of identity

(1) actual;
(2) communicated;
(3) conceived;
(4) ideal; and
(5) desired.

Finally, in the corporate brand tool kit developed by Hatch and Schultz (2001) the gaps between strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate image serve to identify key problem areas for corporate brands.

In spite of differences between the conceptual frameworks emerging from marketing, corporate and organisational identity studies as mentioned above, we argue that the involvement of multiple stakeholders and the recognition of gaps/interfaces between different dimensions of corporate brands all point to the relational nature of corporate branding. In this paper we build on this relational view by examining the interrelated processes of corporate branding. We are particularly concerned to emphasise the organisational implications of shifting from the product to the corporate level, which we believe are not being addressed adequately in the marketing literature.

To move toward rectifying this situation, we begin by examining how corporate branding differs from product branding and by identifying the main organisational implications of these differences. Then, building on the disciplines of management and organisation theory, we offer a conceptual framework for understanding corporate branding. Our model expands the domain of corporate branding to include a broader range of concepts than is normally found in the brand literature. That is, we believe that a strictly marketing-led corporate brand cannot be effectively managed. Our corporate branding model depicts a process that draws simultaneously on organisational culture, strategic vision and corporate images. We argue that this mix of underlying factors requires companies to address the organisational implications of shifting from product to corporate branding in an organisationally integrated, cross-functional way. Hence our thesis that it is important to bring the (whole) corporation into corporate branding, or at the very least, to make it the integrated effort of HR, communication and marketing departments led by top management. We illustrate our argument using the example of British Airways and conclude by discussing the key implications of our model for managers and their organisations.

From product brands to corporate branding

Corporate branding differs from product branding in several respects (see Table I). First, and most obviously, the focus of the branding effort shifts from the product to the corporation. Of course product and corporation are related in that corporate brands add economic value to the variety of products and services offered by the company (Fombrun, 1996; Ind, 1997; Keller, 2000b; Knox and Maklan, 1998; Knox *et al.*, 2000; Olins, 1989, 2000). But the broader scope of the corporate brand pushes brand thinking considerably beyond the product and its relationship to the consumer or customer. In particular, because it focuses attention on the corporation in ways even endorsed product brands never did, corporate branding exposes corporations and their members to far greater scrutiny. This means that organisational behaviour, even at the level of everyday employee interactions, becomes visible (and sometimes newsworthy) so that, for example, the organisation becomes more transparent than ever before. This, in turn, elevates the importance of a healthy (i.e. non-cynical, non-repressive) organisational culture. This difference between product and corporate branding is further emphasised by the shift in managerial responsibility, as product brands typically remain part of the middle

Table I. How corporate branding differs from product branding

	Product brands	Corporate brand
Focus attention on	The product	The company
Managed by [a]	Middle manager	CEO
Attract attention and gain support of	Customers	Multiple stakeholders
Delivered by	Marketing	Whole company
Communications mix [a]	Marketing communications	Total corporate communication
Time horizon	Short (life of product)	Long (life of company)
Importance to company	Functional	Strategic

Note: [a] These two differences between product brands and corporate brands were offered by Balmer (2001a) management marketing function, whereas corporate brands entail a strategic perspective, based in the executive office.

A third contrast between product and corporate branding is a difference in who the brand relates to in terms of both attraction and support. While product brands mainly target consumers or customers, corporate brands also contribute to the images formed and held by organisational and community members, investors, partners, suppliers and other interested parties (i.e. all company stakeholders). Instead of relating to consumers through a variety of individual products and services with distinct product brand names, the corporate brand relates all of the organisation's multiple stakeholders and its products and services to each other through their relationship with the corporation.

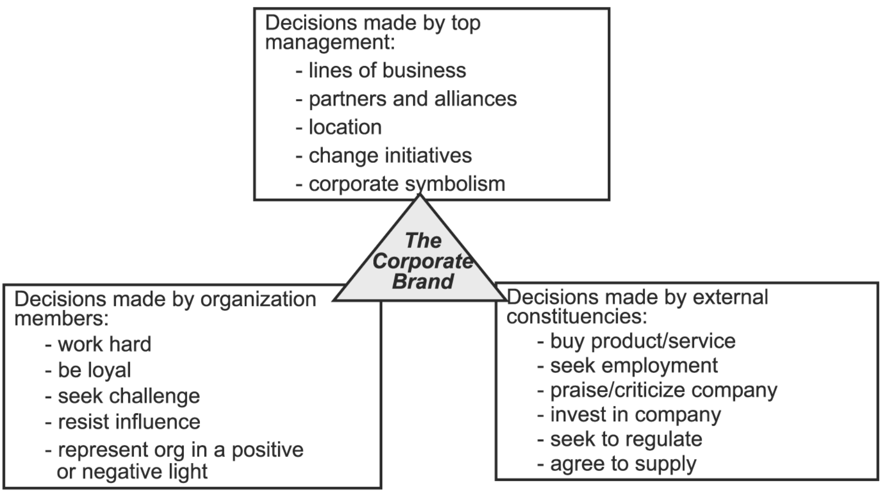
A fourth difference between product and corporate branding involves defining who is responsible for the branding effort. Corporate branding requires much more complicated and sophisticated organisational practices than did product branding (for related arguments see Balmer, 2001a; de Chernatony, 2001; Will *et al.*, 1999; Harkness, 1999; Van Riel, 1995). Whereas product branding could be handled within the marketing department of a company, corporate branding requires organisation-wide support. The whole organisation from top to bottom and across functional units is involved in realising the corporate brand, along with the audiences the brand is meant to attract and engage. As we will argue next, this is because a successful corporate brand is formed by the interplay between strategic vision, organisational culture and the corporate images held by its stakeholders. As this range of issues significantly overextends the expertise of the typical marketing department, we believe that successful corporate branding involves the integrated efforts of all organisational departments (e.g. operations, marketing, strategy, communication and human resources). For example, Balmer (2001a, b) argued that deliberate and orchestrated communication of corporate brands depends on the total corporate communication mix because corporate branding requires integration of internal and external communication, as well as creating coherence of expression across a multiplicity of channels and news media.

The temporal dimension constitutes another difference between product and corporate brands. Product brands live in the present. They are short term in their ambitions to attract potential customers and help deliver sales. When product brands have been around for some time, like Tide or Budweiser, marketers feel a strong need to "freshen" them with innovative ad campaigns and to update their iconography. Corporate brands, by contrast, live both in the past and the future for, as Olins (1989) indicated, corporate brands stimulate associations with heritage and articulate strategic visions of what is to come. As a symbol of the company's heritage and the vision of its leaders for the future, the corporate brand has a much broader temporal base than does a product brand.

Finally, because of the greater reach of corporate brands relative to product brands – in terms not only of relating past and future, but also of the number of stakeholder groups targeted and the use of the whole company to support the brand – we believe that corporate branding takes on strategic importance relative to the functional (marketing and sales) importance typically accorded a product brand. The strategic importance of corporate branding lies not only in its positioning of the company in its marketplace, but in creating internal arrangements (e.g. organisational structure, physical design and culture) that support the meaning of the corporate brand.

A framework for corporate branding

A strong corporate brand acts as a focal point for the attention, interest and activity stakeholders bring to a corporation. Like a beacon in the fog, a corporate brand attracts and orients relevant audiences, stakeholders and constituencies around the recognisable values and symbols that differentiate the organisation. But corporate branding is not only about differentiation, it is also about belonging. When corporate branding works, it is because it expresses the values and/or sources of desire that attract key stakeholders to the organisation and encourage them to feel a sense of belonging to it. It is this attraction and sense of belonging that affects the decisions and behaviours on which a company is built (see Figure 1). A strong corporate brand taps this attractive force and offers symbols that help stakeholders experience and express their values and thereby keep them active.



Note: The company is then built upon the key decisions these stakeholders make

Figure 1.
Successful corporate brands tap the attractive force that draws stakeholders to the organization

One example of a corporate brand which has had this attractive force is the UK-based company Virgin. This company has garnered a certain amount of respect in the UK as the result of its demonstrated ability to extend its brand identity as "challenging and cheeky" to such different products and services as music (Virgin), soft drinks (Virgin Cola), insurance (Virgin Direct), airline transportation (Virgin Atlantic and Virgin Express) and most recently, though not yet convincingly, rail travel (Virgin Trains). This corporate brand is associated with the consistent use of the Virgin name, the Virgin red and white colours and the Virgin graffiti-style typeface. Olins (2000) argues that this consistent association of a visual identity has allowed Virgin to transfer its brand values across business fields dominated by big, bureaucratic players, making it possible to create the experience of "I am on your side against the fat cats". Such a blending of corporate and cultural values with marketing practices is the hallmark of corporate branding, and it is this concern with values that brings corporate branding practice into direct contact with organisational culture, as well as with strategic vision and corporate images.

Figure 2 shows our framework for understanding corporate branding as underpinned by processes linking strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate images (see also Hatch and Schultz, 2001). These three elements form the foundation of corporate branding and are defined as:

(1) *Strategic vision* – the central idea behind the company that embodies and expresses top management's aspiration for what the company will achieve in the future.

(2) *Organisational culture* – the internal values, beliefs and basic assumptions that embody the heritage of the company and communicate its meanings to its members; culture manifests itself in

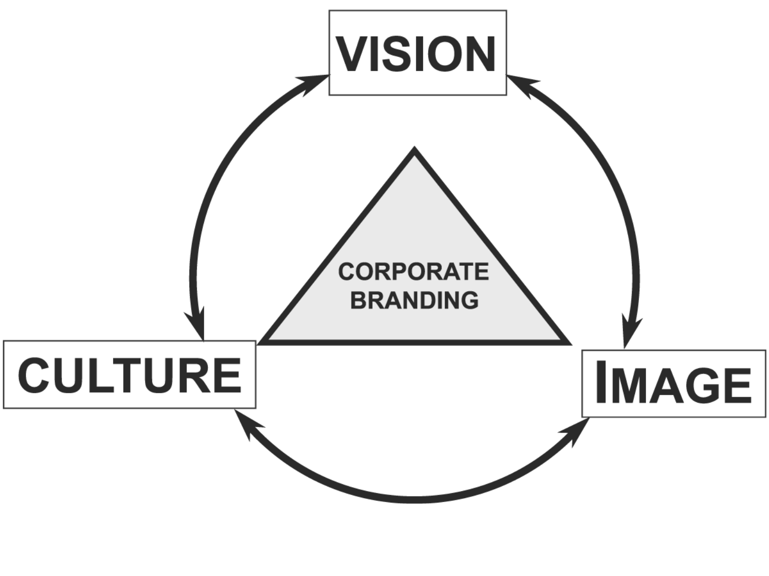


Figure 2.
Successful corporate branding rests on a foundation of interplay between strategic vision, organizational culture and corporate image

the ways employees all through the ranks feel about the company they are working for.

(3) *Corporate images* – views of the organisation developed by its stakeholders; the outside world's overall impression of the company including the views of customers, shareholders, the media, the general public, and so on.

How these elements interconnect in the corporate branding process is explained below.

Strategic vision and organisational culture

Collins and Porras (1994) defined vision as "what the organisation aspires to be in the future". However, the research conducted by these authors demonstrated that successful companies build their visions from redefinitions and reinventions of core values rather than revolutionary shifts from one value set to another. This suggests that although vision can stretch the company toward new goals and levels of achievement, it must also connect authentically with the heritage of the company. By implication, strategic vision and organisational culture are strongly linked and there is a need for perceived long-term mutual support between them. Balmer and Soenen's (1999) study of identity management practices among leading UK identity consultants confirms that attempts to manage corporate identity are driven by relating vision to changes in corporate strategy. However, in line with the concerns of Collins and Porras (1994), Balmer and Soenen (1999) also showed that most consultants have a rather simplistic understanding of the relations between vision and the values embedded in the organisational culture.

In the area of organisational culture and identity, scholars have long made distinctions between values based on normative versus behavioural contexts. For example, Schein's (1992, 1999) widely recognised culture concept originates in the distinction between espoused-values and values-in-use (i.e. basic assumptions). Within the field of organisational identity, scholars such as Dutton and Dukerich (1991), Hatch and Schultz (2000) and Dukerich and Carter (2000) have made similar distinctions between different perceptions of identity constructed by insiders and outsiders. Balmer and Soenen (1999) and later Balmer (2001b) have similarly generated a range of corporate identities from actual to ideal identity based on the recognition that how people act in organisations does not always correspond with their stated intentions or aspirations.

Based on these insights, we find that the concept of organisational culture held by most corporate branding practitioners is rather naive. For the most part they fail to distinguish between desired values (such as those contained in many vision statements), and the emergent or practiced values at work in the organisation (current organisational culture). Organisational culture may be a source of competitive advantage, but only when brand values are respectful of organisational culture and its core values. This requires careful reflection on the present organisational culture and an awareness of the tension between how this culture has been expressed historically, and strategic visions for its future. The stretch between vision and reality is in line with Senge's (1990, p. 155) notion of "creative tension", about which he stated: "An accurate, insightful view of current reality is as important as a clear vision".

We argue that if corporate branding is going to be more than romanticism about the organisation's future, the claimed values of the corporate brand must resonate with the tacit meanings and values that organisational members hold and use (i.e. their values-in-use or their actual identity). To create an authentic corporate brand, the company should build on the cultural values that produce the (often tacit) symbolic meaning of the organisation. Since culture is deeply embedded in organisational behaviour, brand values based on credible cultural expression will serve to create genuine coherence between the promise the brand makes and the performance the corporation delivers. This implies that organisational members are important contributors to the creation of corporate brand value. The corporate brand most likely to succeed is one that directly connects strategic vision and organisational culture. However, as Figure 2 suggests, there is a third context for corporate branding that must be linked to both culture and vision – corporate images.

Organisational culture and corporate images

Aaker (1996) argued that when brand values are consistent with organisational culture and company values they will create credibility in the eyes of key stakeholders (e.g. an innovative organisation, a trustworthy organisation, a liked and/or admired organisation). In the case of corporate branding, we take the argument even further, claiming that alignment between perceived corporate image and actual organisational culture magnifies awareness among all stakeholders about who the corporation is and what it stands for, and enhances organisational attractiveness and reputation (see also Barich and Kotler, 1991; de Chernatony, 2001; Dowling, 2001; Fombrun, 1996; Hatch and Schulz, 2001). At the root of this reasoning is the link between the corporate brand, the organisational culture and corporate images.

Corporate branding efforts generally involve projections of the company's distinctiveness by using the total corporate communication mix to impress external audiences, who are thereby encouraged to perceive and judge the company and its multiple offerings as attractive and desirable. Such images are expected to influence stakeholder behaviour in ways that generate brand equity at the corporate level (Keller, 2000a, b). We argue that successfully managing the corporate brand also involves reaching inside the corporation to better project and communicate organisational values to external stakeholders. While this is likely to connect desired organisational values to corporate images, it still may not be enough. Following Figure 2, successful corporate branding requires that corporate images also be related to the organisational culture and thus the values will be based in the everyday behaviour occurring within the company. Relations between image and culture can unfold in different ways.

First, and most importantly, the projected images must tap into the organisational culture of the company in order to create a brand promise that resonates with the actual brand experience offered by organisational members. The organisational culture is the context for the heritage of beliefs, meanings, stories and other rich symbolic resources that are expressed in sense-making and sense-giving patterns that are unique to the company (see Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). The ability of top managers to listen to their own culture puts them in a much better position to communicate the non-imitable intangibles of the company and provide the foundation for a distinct and credible corporate image (Barney, 1986)

Many organisations try to manage corporate images through a mix of corporate advertising, corporate storytelling, customer relations management and other marketing communication and PR techniques (e.g. press conferences, staged media events). However, some researchers have argued that the primary effect of these efforts is to be found among organisational members themselves. Broms and Gahmberg (1983) called this auto-communication (see also Christensen, 1997). In other words, when organisations communicate to the marketplace they first of all talk to themselves, sometimes confirming a self-image based on future aspirations rather than self-insight into the organisational culture. This can mean that external images of the corporation formed by stakeholders have little in common with the images projected by and held within the organisation. Those images may instead be based on interactions with the company, past reputation still sticking to the company (Schultz *et al.*, 2001), word-of-mouth etc. In any case, it leaves the company with an illusion of a desired image preventing adjustments to actual images held by external stakeholders

Thus, too sharp a focus on image management can create an uncomfortable gap between organisational culture (i.e. everyday life within the organisation and the values expressed by this behaviour) and the images held by other stakeholders. This gap can only be narrowed by listening to the views stakeholders offer on the corporation and confronting the culture with them, as Dutton and Dukerich (1991) showed in their study of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (see also Gioia et. al., 2000). Similarly, only when corporate aspirations about what image the corporation would like to have are confronted by actual images can the organisation develop an effective corporate brand, as we explain next.

Strategic vision and corporate images

Developing the corporate brand usually involves articulating a strategic vision. As in the relation between organisational culture and corporate images, the challenge in corporate brand building is also to align strategic vision with corporate image. Compared with product brand thinking, corporate branding puts stronger emphasis on the role of strategic vision as it requires top management's reflections on who the company is and what it wants to become. A corporate brand cannot be merely deduced from a desired market position or brand image, but must be grounded in core company values and the paths for the future unfolding from its heritage. This does not imply that strategic change or reinventing corporate brands is impossible, but such dramatic changes demand a comprehensive effort and risk loss of credibility. However, as shown in studies of relations between identity and image (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia *et al.*, 2000; Hatch and Schultz, 2000), corporate images feed into strategic vision serving as a mirror in which top managers can reflect on who they are. This implies that, instead of using stakeholder images as exact assessments of brand performance compared with strategic vision, images held by stakeholders of who the company is and what it stands for (e.g. by using metaphors, key words, personality comparisons) can become part of the strategic envisioning process.

Furthermore, strategic vision is interpreted in relation to images held by external stakeholders who will use information about the organisation that goes beyond what the corporation provides. Because of this outside influence, the branding process involves elements that lie outside the direct influence of management. However, one of these elements does lie within the influence range of the organisational culture – direct contact between organisational members and the stakeholders of the organisation, for example, through responses to requests for information or service. But other influences, such as those of the media, business analysts, competitors or special interest groups, may cause stakeholders to form opinions of the corporation that conflict with those desired or expressed by the strategic vision.

Managers who are sensitive to the images that others form of their organisations will be better at developing successful, sustainable corporate brands because they will benefit from recognising tensions or discrepancies that arise between strategic vision and the corporate images held by key stakeholders. When they also learn to bring organisational culture into this equation, they will be in a position to better manage their corporate brands.

Considering vision, culture and image simultaneously

We hypothesize that organisations whose managers attend to the dynamics of vision, culture and image will outperform those whose managers either ignore these issues or do not understand the interplay between them. Our conclusion will discuss the implications of our model for managers seeking to think about and act on their corporate brand within the framework of vision, culture and image presented in Figure 2. But first we will illustrate the model using a case example and consider how strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate images are linked in a process that underpins corporate branding and thereby influences its outcomes.

For this purpose we will consider developments within British Airways over the last two decades. We focus on events and strategic shifts that illustrate how the branding process at this company was deliberately related to vision, culture and image, knowing that other initiatives also were involved. We focus particularly on the strategic transformation of core symbols such as British Airways' slogan, logo and design style, and the continued use of more mundane symbols such as coffee pots, styles of dress and behaviour. Inspired by the culture school of organisational analysis, we find symbols lead us to the complex attitudes and behaviours that relate corporate branding to vision, culture and image. Studying how British Airways transformed some of its key symbols provides an illustration of our framework and helps us to better explain corporate branding practice.

Corporate branding in practice: the case of British Airways

British Airways' experience of driving culture change through the process of privatisation and downsizing, working intensively with issues of image and vision, means that they make a good case for analysing the interplay between vision, culture and image in relation to the matter of corporate branding. However, it was not all a bed of roses for British Airways, as we will show by first describing the case and then relating it to our model.

The early years

British Airways was privatised in early 1987. Before privatisation, and for a time afterwards, people in Britain said that BA stood for "bloody awful". They held images of British Airways as operationally incompetent and as indifferent to customers. However, by the early 1990s BA was in an enviable position. It had succeeded in privatising and through severe downsizing and corporate-wide customer service training turned a once stodgy, military-style bureaucracy into a profitable, respected and highly competitive corporation.

The change took shape after a lengthy preparation that included repositioning the company around the idea of "the world's favourite airline". The word "favourite" symbolised the new attention to customers that was to characterise the company's transition to private enterprise and, over the years, British Airways conducted dozens of change programmes aimed at developing a service-minded culture. These change programmes considerably improved BA's image with its customers, allowing the airline to overcome its former reputation for incompetence and indifference. However, this proved not to be enough for a demanding, globalising marketplace such as that served by the airline industry.

Ten years on

In the mid-1990s, BA faced several additional pressures for change. Marketing research showed that the airline's customer base was shifting. By this time only 40 per cent of its passengers were British, and the numbers were falling. Along with changes in its customer base, an alliance frenzy in the airline industry and incessant talk about globalisation throughout the business world put pressure on BA to globalise. Under the then new leadership of CEO Robert Ayling, BA decided to make its move.

The first step undertaken was to address BA's strategic vision of being "the world's favourite airline". Ayling and his managers did not see the need for an entirely new vision, but rather shifted the emphasis from being the "world's *favourite* airline" to being the "*world's* favourite airline". Although this in itself did not seem like a major change, implementing this transition caused the corporation to recognise the need to address its market in a less rigidly "national" tone of voice. To engage its global market more fully, British Airways decided to embody a diversity of national origins and styles in a bold new visual identity.

The most immediate and controversial aspect of the new corporate look was the tail fins of its fleet of airplanes decorated with patterns taken from contemporary, original folk art that British Airways commissioned artists around the world to create. A different design was planned for each airplane. The tailfins were to be visual celebrations of the world's diversity carried around the globe by BA's fleet of airplanes – a flying art gallery. In addition, to avoid nationalistic associations, the British flag used previously to mark the planes as the property of British Airways was replaced by a more contemporary symbol that retained the red and blue colours of the British flag without actually displaying the Union Jack. According to a company spokesperson at the time, the new tail fin designs were "a creative expression of a company, which, both in the letter and the spirit, regards the whole world as its customer".

Using work from artists in different countries to decorate the tail fins of an airline fleet was a radically new idea for expressing a strategic vision. In place of a single mark, style or colour palette, British Airways chose to embrace and emphasise diversity. This idea carried over into other areas of communication. For example, the annual report for 1996-1997 is illustrated both on the cover and throughout with photographs of British Airways staff from many ethnic backgrounds. The same message was implied in television commercials that showed people on different continents being reunited with family members from overseas.

Symbols of trouble

The new look of the repainted airplanes did not run very deep into the organisation nor even inside the airplanes where British accents, manners, styles of dress and other expressions of traditional British-ness continued to reign. For example, British Airways staff were expected to manipulate large, heavy and completely non-adapted traditional metal tea and coffee pots. This is awkward, clumsy and hazardous; but it conforms to a notion of old world style and correctness promoted by traditionalists as synonymous with being British. Thus, there was dissonance between the revamped exteriors of the airplanes, with their message of inclusive diversity, and the interior where an aggressively deferential service culture, along with the silver tea service, symbolically signaled the continued dominance of traditional British-ness within the company culture.

The culture of traditional British-ness presented some problems for the airline. For many who reside outside Britain, it was a reminder that Britain was once a formidable colonial power. In June 1997, CEO Bob Ayling acknowledged this, telling the *Yorkshire Post* (1997): "We want to show a modern Britain rather than an imperial Britain". But it was not necessarily associations with bygone days of colonisation that were objectionable. Apparently the British tone of the service was not appreciated by all passengers, which challenged the desired global image and reach. In July of 1997, the *Financial Times* (1997) reported Ayling telling shareholders that "there were elements of 'Britishness' that were standing in the way" and he was quoted as saying, "We are seen to be slightly aloof."

Meanwhile, at home, the new designs provoked anger and hostility in traditionalist quarters. Symbolising this reaction, to the delight of the news media that captured her gesture on video tape, Maggie Thatcher, former British Prime Minister and arch conservative, draped her handkerchief around a model of a repainted BA airplane sporting one of the new designs. This clip was seen repeatedly throughout Britain for many months and rallied conservative business class passengers around demands that the Union Jack not be removed from BA's planes. At the time, Britain was engaged in an extended political debate over the values of British-ness, and there was much interest shown by the New Labour Party and its Prime Minister Tony Blair in finding fresh ways of articulating those values. It is likely that this political discussion influenced strategic thinking in British Airways. However, while BA's vision seemed to lie with a new Britain, there continued to be considerable resistance by the old Britain.

Pressure to conform to traditional British style does not constitute a full description of the resistance to the changes within British Airways that the new look symbolised. Immediately following the launch of the new look the UK cabin crew union held a 72-hour strike over a new pay scheme and the outsourcing of catering services. Part of the British Airways effort to be globally competitive involved substantial cost reductions (to be competitive with their US rivals). But cost reductions are always difficult internally and the reaction of the cabin crews at the precise moment of the launch showed that employees were not positively engaged by the new vision nor fully involved in the campaign to promote it. The strikers emphasised the contradictions found between cutting costs internally and spending millions of pounds on corporate branding.

BA today

While the multi-racial and multi-cultural nature of British Airways has remained an important theme of its communications, the radicalism of its new look came to be regarded by the company as less than successful. This evaluation led to announcements in 1998 that the full series of tail fin designs would never be implemented. Although reasons for this decision were not spelled out clearly, Ayling suggested that resistance by the lucrative and conservative British business class passengers caused BA to curtail its tail fin programme. The media and many employees at the time believed that the costs of the programme were simply too high. Regardless of the logic used, British Airways, it seems, lost its corporate nerve. It also lost Robert Ayling, who in early 2000 was replaced as CEO by Rod Eddington.

Under Eddington's leadership, British Airways has remained concerned to communicate a sense of belonging to the world and to being made up of representatives from many different parts of it. The retreat from repainting the tail fins has not altered the corporation's resolve to have a global image, and still today the look of BA is caught between traditionalism and the global diversity of those planes whose tail fins still sport the colourful images of the curtailed programme. The half-repainted fleet of BA aircraft stands as testimony to the still unresolved issue of BA's commitment to globalisation.

Analysis using the vision, culture and image model

Surely at the time of the launch BA would have said it did everything right according to the model shown in Figure 2: its vision was global, its culture was service-oriented and its image as "the world's favourite airline" was ready for modification to "the undisputed leader in world travel", which would position BA for global brand extension. Yet, even though BA had all the pieces of vision, culture and image in place, its corporate branding programme lacked the integration of these elements.

First, BA's culture did not support its vision. Instead, employees, who were being subjected to another round of cost cutting at the time of launching the new brand, saw the expenditure of £60m on tailfin painting as a breach of faith. They expressed their anger with a strike timed to coincide with the launch of the new global vision campaign.

Second, the images key stakeholders associated with British Airways were not in line with the airline's new global vision. BA's move to implement its global vision was met with formidable resistance by British conservatives, many of whom constituted BA's lucrative business class passenger pool. For these passengers, on whom BA still depends for its revenue stream, BA was an icon of British culture – evidently they were not ready to share it with the world.

And finally, BA experienced a rift between its culture and image symbolised by the juxtaposition of its global ambition and the look of its planes and its service. As the tailfin programme proceeded it became obvious to passengers, if not to employees, that the airline might be global on the outside, but inside it was still terribly British. From the traditional silver tea service down to the properly stodgy uniforms of the cabin crew, little about the culture encountered inside the planes (or the company!) matched the global expectations encouraged by the proud display on the tailfins.

Following the reasoning of the vision, culture and image model led us to ask: if British Airways had been fully in touch with British traditionalism and its effect on its image would it have leapt so quickly to a new, global (non-British) look? Or, for that matter, if it had been fully committed to the global diversity of its vision, would it have been so quick to pull the plug on its tail fin programme? While the halted tail fin repainting may not at first blush seem like an important issue, its symbolic impact as a statement of BA's not yet realised global vision stands as a public reminder of the failure of this ambition. One must wonder if this testament precipitated Ayling's departure as CEO. These and other questions remain to be answered, and this case is not in any sense concluded, but the reasoning presented here does suggest that the vision, culture and image model is a useful diagnostic tool.

Our application of the model to BA's brand history reveals how corporate branding can go wrong. The British Airways case shows that managers may not always be able to handle thinking about vision, culture and image simultaneously, as implied by Figure 2. Instead, the BA managers appear to have used sequential attention, as is indicated by a redrawing of Figure 2 to incorporate the dimension of time (see Figure 3). Put simply, as soon as issues with regard to one element of the model were addressed, their dynamic interplay readjusted the other elements so that new issues in another area of the model arose. The BA managers were pulled from one side of the model to another as they followed, rather than anticipated, the dynamics of their corporate branding process.

Figure 3 shows how British Airways first addressed its poor image with its organisation-wide cultural retraining in customer service and its proclaimed desire to be seen as "the world's *favourite* airline". Following this, the company addressed the need to develop a global vision ("the *world's* favourite airline") in response to external pressures to globalise. These pressures resulted in attempts to encourage stakeholders to form a global image of the company using tail fin art. This in turn revealed a new problem – the disparity between its global outside and its British inside. This disparity seems to have derailed the new corporate look and suggests an urgent need for redirection if the vision

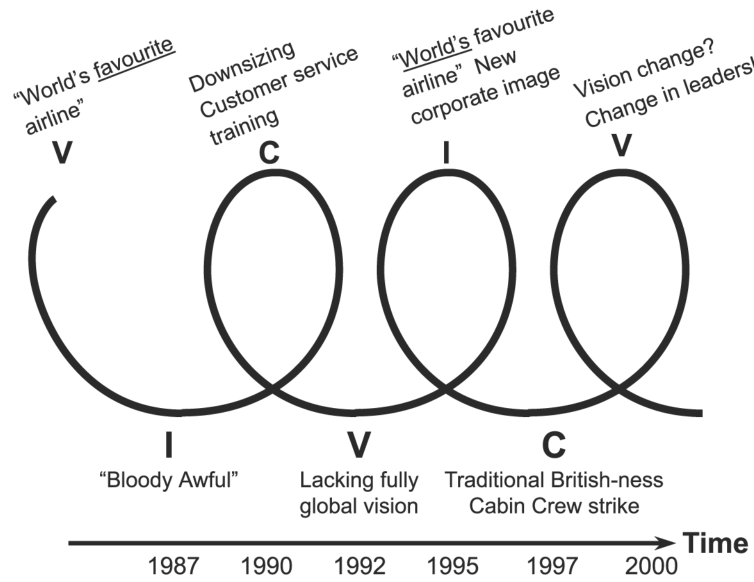


Figure 3.
The vision, culture and image model stretched over time and applied to British Airways

of a global future for the airline is not to be lost. The question now facing British Airways is this: as a symbol of strategic vision, what does the thwarted tail fin programme say about BA's strategy for globalisation? It is hard to see quite what direction British Airways may be planning to take in globalising its brand, but it seems clear that re-addressing its vision to better align with its corporate images and organisational culture is the next step. The lesson we learned from BA is that it is the relationships between vision, culture and images, not the elements themselves, that determine the success of corporate branding efforts.

Implications

In this paper we have argued that organisations that succeed in establishing a corporate brand based in the integration of their vision, culture and image are better equipped to compete in conditions of unsustainable product differentiation created by globalisation and fragmenting markets than are those that rely on product branding or conventional product-focused marketing. However, we have also argued that corporate branding is more complex than product branding in that it is simultaneously strategic (vision), has implications for organisational behaviour (culture) and must be far more attentive to and communicative with the ways it is seen by all of its external stakeholders (images). This complexity arises from the interplay of vision, culture and image, as was explained in this paper. Based on these insights we offer the following practical advice to managers; however, you should note that the definitive approach to a given corporate brand will depend on the particulars of the company and its situation. Here are some general guidelines that have proven helpful to a variety of companies, some of which are used illustratively below.

Assess the relationships between vision, culture and images

The British Airways case shows how dangerous it is to develop vision, culture and images in isolation from each other. Therefore, we recommend beginning the process of corporate branding with an honest assessment of both culture and image as a prelude to developing and communicating a strategic vision. We do not imply that the only vision possible is what the organisational culture will currently accept or what key stakeholders think you are right now. Rather we argue that management must be honest about where the culture and images presently sit so that the direction of desired change and strategic vision and their likely consequences for all involved can be acknowledged and communicated clearly and fairly.

Values imposed and sustained only by autocratic authority will not have the same credibility in the marketplace as expressions of genuine value and belief supported by a culture that stands behind and is a central part of the corporate brand. By the same token, corporate vision that overreaches cultural “reality” by too great a margin risks losing image points and inviting cynicism or outright resistance, as the British Airways case has clearly shown. Respect for values and beliefs supported by the existing culture invites perceived coherence and bestows authenticity.

For specific advice on how to assess the gaps between your vision, culture and images, we encourage you to look at the corporate branding tool kit published in Hatch and Schultz (2001). In that article we pose a series of diagnostic questions to help you evaluate your corporate brand.

Integrate your organisation behind the corporate brand

Gaps between vision, culture and images the size of those we found at British Airways suggest the presence of organisational walls between HRM, marketing and communication that we believe will have to be removed or reduced in order for BA’s corporate brand to be supported internally. Although our BA case analysis did not take us this far inside the company, subsequent work with LEGO Company confirms this belief. In the foundation for its new brand strategy LEGO Company explicitly states its perceived need for and commitment to a shift from product brand thinking towards a true corporate brand based on the company’s heritage and a reinvention (or re-assertion) of its core values. As part of this process top management is seeking to create closer alignment between both vision and culture, and vision and stakeholder images. Here, reorganising efforts and organisational development initiatives provide the foundation for closing present gaps as well as moving toward global coherence. For example, the responsibility for the brand image was previously separated between seven or eight global brand managers across different business segments, and an even larger number of regional brand managers based in five different regions. By creating a new unit – global brand communications (GBC) – directly related to the executive office that integrates marketing, branding and corporate communications, brand managers throughout the company are now all receiving coherent strategic guidance that is also supported by a new image campaign. Also, as part of closing the gap between vision and culture, HRM people are working with GBC to develop "brand schools" where hundreds of employees will be called on to transform the vision for the brand actual behaviour. LEGO Company is exploring the gap between vision and stakeholder images of who LEGO Company is, for example, by collecting stories about the company told by both internal and external stakeholders, called the LEGO heart initiative.

These examples show that a move to corporate branding may require an overall organisational restructuring. The core of the restructuring effort will involve closer cooperation between marketing, communication and HRM, but in the end will touch all aspects of the business since everyone is needed to support the corporate brand.

Know how your stakeholders interpret your corporate symbols

It is clear that British Airways underestimated the power of the Union Jack carried by its fleet of airplanes to symbolise national pride for its British passengers and the British public. Its removal constituted an insult delivered on a global stage. The fact that BA was unprepared for the backlash that followed the launch of its new tailfin symbolism indicates that BA was symbolically out of touch with a key group of people for whom its new symbols were supposed to have positive value.

BA missed the important point that a corporate brand is a set of symbols that allow stakeholders to make their own meanings in the context of their own lives. A powerful corporate brand delivers on its promise to be an experience with a certain style and attitude. What that experience is will be redefined by each individual who personally takes the brand into their own world. However, because symbols and meanings are so subjective, there is great difficulty in using rich symbolism to communicate the corporate brand. It is nonetheless important to do so because the emotional response provoked by symbols is a source of potency for the corporate brand.

For example, Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavour names such as Cherry Garcia and Rainforest Crunch offer the chance for ice cream lovers (at least in the USA where this brand was born) to freely associate their favourite flavours with memories or images of the Grateful Dead, the 1960s and the ecology movement. These associations help Ben & Jerry's US stakeholders form lasting relationships with the company. However, the company has faced difficulty translating this symbolism into foreign cultures because the meanings of these symbols are so heavily dependent on appreciation of American counter-culture.

What is required for success in corporate branding on a global scale is to either choose symbols that can work universally or to translate rich symbolism like Ben & Jerry's uses into terms to which members of target cultures respond. For instance, if Ben & Jerry's wants to maintain its unpretentious, community building, counter-cultural associations as it reaches out into the world, then it must find stakeholders with compatible attitudes and, either associate Ben & Jerry's symbols with their meanings, or integrate the new stakeholders' own symbols into Ben & Jerry's culture. In recent years the company has been doing just this. Attempts to connect new target audiences with its symbolism have led Ben & Jerry's to focus on ice cream in the UK and community mindedness in France, while maintaining its hippie image in the USA. But this strategy asks a lot of stakeholders who have to sort all this out, for instance, when they travel. It also adds complexity in the form of managing different sorts of Ben & Jerry's shops across national boundaries, a problem that now has transferred to Unilever as the new owner of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream.

Though managing symbols can be tricky, it is important to recognise that all corporate brands are symbolic expressions, and thus a poor use of corporate brand symbolism can limit the power of a corporate brand. Shell is an example of a company that is not effectively using a symbol that it has been careful to develop and protect over many years. The pectin (the shell shape in Shell's logo) is globally recognised and strongly associated with the company, yet at the present time they do very little to capitalise on its power to have meaning. By the same token, strong brand symbolism can magnify the power of a corporate brand. If you have any doubts, just think about how McDonald's has managed to seduce us into believing that its yellow arches are golden!

Tell a good story

A story is a very good device for creating emotional and aesthetic connections between diverse groups, such as stakeholders normally are. In fact, every corporate brand has its own story. Because stories are such potent communication tools, telling the story of the corporate brand can be an important – and meaningful – way to relate the company to its stakeholders. But it takes a good story to tell. BA's story is one about a successful privatisation followed by a setback as the company tried to make its brand more worldly. The nationalistic tone of the business over the British flag smacks of the stereotype of snobbery that BA was explicitly trying to overcome. Thus far, the BA brand story is one of failure, painfully symbolised by the half-painted fleet of airplanes.

By way of contrast, Virgin's is a story about tough fights with the establishments of the music and airline industries, most notably Virgin Atlantic's successful court battle against British Airways. This story has been told in numerous best-selling books about Virgin and has turned Virgin's founder Richard Branson into something of a folk hero, particularly among members of the younger generations in Europe. Virgin has transformed this company history into the story of its corporate brand. Although the initial struggle for survival is long over, the story of Virgin as the anti-authoritarian good guys challenging the well-established "fat cats" to be fair to the rest of us is repeated each time that Virgin moves into a new line of business. So far, the story does not seem to have lost any appeal for Virgin's growing number of fans who are continuing to join the ranks of devoted Virgin stakeholders.

A good story has the effect of causing people to want to share it with others. This means that the story needs to be engaging enough to be told and retold by stakeholders. But having a good story alone is not all there is to building a powerful corporate brand. It is acts of storytelling that bring benefits to the company. An example of what we mean is offered by GM's Saturn Group. The Saturn Group used storytelling to combine the launch of a new product with celebrating the people behind that product. Saturn's story of the rebirth of the values of rural America was told in the voices of the people who make the car, giving the story warmth, credibility and universal appeal. Similarly, telling stories about Branson and Virgin has become a pastime among the company's stakeholders. Storytelling engages these stakeholders in a way that few other acts can.

Have the courage of your convictions

Diagio's courageous renaming after the merger between Guinness and Grand Met offers a lesson in stick-to-itiveness. Once you have a corporate branding process underway and it has begun to connect your vision, culture and images you are likely to come up with reasons to rename, redesign or relaunch your corporate brand. This is especially true when mergers and acquisitions are undertaken. As was the case for Diagio, the company will often bear the brunt of negative publicity and hostile reactions from those not fully on board with the new vision or who still feel attached to the old days. Experience shows that it pays to hang tough. Many critics will quickly adapt to the changes and others will eventually be won over by them.

British Airways is an example of a company that lost its nerve in the middle of its corporate brand re-launch. While the company obviously suffered right from the start of its strategy formulation process from a lack of understanding of the relationship between vision, culture and images, once committed to rebranding through the tailfin repainting programme it would have been wise to see the campaign through. Some adjustments to advertising in response to stakeholder objections might well have saved the company considerable embarrassment. Instead, the costly interruption of the programme indicates only part of the price British Airways is paying for not having the courage of its convictions.

Conclusion

Corporate brands need to be managed in relation to the interplay between vision, culture and image. Achieving this, requires effective dialogue between top management, external stakeholders and members of the organisational culture. Effective corporate branding will come with dedication to honest self-assessment, responsive attitudes toward stakeholders, and respect for the values that attract all parties to the corporation. In particular what is needed is to draw on the rich resource that is the organisational culture and make it an integrated part of the effort to build a corporate brand. This will bring the corporation into the corporate branding process with all the competitive benefits that implies.

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