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## Guest Editorial

# Corporate brand management – A leadership perspective

**Articles from and inspired by the 13th International Corporate Identity Group (ICIG) Symposium theme ‘Corporate brand management - a leadership perspective’**

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## INTRODUCTION

The origins of this special edition are to be found in the 13th International Corporate Identity Group (ICIG) symposium held at St. Gallen University, Switzerland in September 2010, which was jointly organised by the guest editors. The articles forming this special edition were either originally presented at the conference or speak, in whole or part, to the theme of this special edition.

Established by John Balmer and dating back to 1994, the ICIG symposium has an impeccable provenance in attracting cutting-edge papers relating to corporate identity, corporate brand management and corporate marketing. Papers from these symposia, typically, form the bases of special editions of academic journals that include the *California Management Review*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *International Studies of Management and Organization*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *Management Decision*, *The International Journal of Bank Marketing*, *Corporate Reputation Review* and, of course, *the Journal of Brand Management*. Over the years many prominent scholars along with captains of industry, government ministers and corporate identity/brand consultants have delivered presentations at ICIG symposia. Originally, ICIG symposia were based in

the United Kingdom but, in recent years, the international dimension of the group has been emphasised with symposia taking place in Slovenia, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark and, more recently, in 2013, Malaysia.

This special edition – with its focus on corporate brands – is timely since we are fast approaching the 20th anniversary, in 2015, of, arguably, the first academic article devoted to corporate brands which appeared in the *Journal of General Management* (Balmer, 1995) and which arguably is the first article that makes explicit reference to corporate brands in its title. Almost 20 years on since its publication, we note the exponential growth of interest in corporate brands and their management within the academic literature. This being noted, we are mindful of the growing importance accorded to corporate brands by marketing and other scholars and, moreover, its enduring concern at a senior management level.

All three guest editors are mindful of the work of the celebrated English advertising guru King (1991) whose *Journal of Marketing Management* article presaged a distinct school of branding thought relating to corporate brands. King, as readers of this journal may recall, (See Balmer, 2010), advanced the view that brand management in the 1990s had to change and, moreover, he

promulgated the view that marketing scholars and practitioners should take account of the growing importance of and differences in terms of management of services-orientated company brands.

King's work was broadened by Balmer (1995, 2001a) to corporate-level brands *per se* and this led to the formal introduction of the corporate brand notion. Balmer's work along with that of Ind (1997, 1998), Gregory and Wiechmann (1997) Bickerton (2000) and Hatch and Schultz (2001), among other published output, propelled the corporate brand construct into the mainstream of marketing and general management thought from the mid-1990s onwards: this can be witnessed in the plethora of special issues, articles and chapters devoted to the corporate branding domain and the introduction of bespoke masters degrees in corporate brand management (Brunel University being a case in point) and the appointment of the first chair/s in corporate brand management at Bradford University, England.

The above being noted, the corporate branding literature on is, today, broad in scope and, sometimes, there is a lack of clarity within the canon. For instance, some authors – along with some managers and consultants – regard corporate identity and corporate brands as analogous terms while many others fail to make a distinction between product brands and corporate brands.

All three guest editors are mindful that almost 13 years ago, Balmer (2001) in his *European Journal of Marketing* article 'Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing: Seeing through the fog' outlined 15 explanations why "corporate-level marketing" have appeared to be fuzzy and was obscured by fog.

Curiously, many of the factors contributing to the fog have endured. More have come to the fore including – to repeat an earlier point – the failure of scholars to discriminate between corporate brands, corporate identity (and organisational

identity too). Another problem characterising the corporate branding domain, is the privileged position accorded to articles that have appeared *post* 2000 while neglecting the seminal writing on the area, which date from the 1990s. Unfortunately, some post 2000 "insights" relating to the importance of personnel in corporate brand formation, the fact that corporate brands are multidisciplinary in scope and the stakeholder focus of corporate brands *simply rehearse* earlier contributions within the literature. This is unhelpful. Moreover, it denigrates the marketing inheritance of the domain.

Developing the above observations, from our scrutiny of the recent corporate brand canon, we have noted that a number of scholars have noted the fragmented nature of the corporate brand management literature (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012). Other concerns voiced by scholars in relation to corporate brands include the tensions that exist *vis-à-vis* normative versus social constructionist approaches, organisational versus individual level research and static versus dynamic perspectives (Melewar *et al*, 2012).

To us, the intertwined relationship between the corporate level and the product/service level of brands merits further conceptual work and empirical investigation. This being noted, we do recognise the significant work that has taken place with regard to product brand extensions/brand architecture (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Keller and Aaker, 1998).

More generally, within the canon, it has been averred that there is a need for further empirical work on corporate brands and for the domain to have stronger theoretical bases (Mukherjee and Balmer, 2006). Moreover, as noted by Melewar *et al*, (2012) there is also merit in undertaking longitudinal studies in the field. The guest editors concur with the above observations.

## SYMBIOSIS

Although there are a plethora of perspectives, which inform the corporate brand domain, we also note a symbiosis of thought and this can be found in some of the foundational articles on the area.

For instance, and following on from King (1991), both Balmer (1995, 2001a) and Hatch and Schultz (2001) reach the conclusion that corporate brands are meaningful not only to customers but stakeholders. The multidisciplinary nature of services-orientated company brands (King, 1991) also characterises corporate brands (Balmer, 1995, 2001a) and the importance of corporate identity *vis-à-vis* corporate brands has been highlighted by Balmer (1995, 2001a, 2001b).

The above being noted, the marketing literature (as represented in the work of King and Balmer) and the organisational behaviour perspectives on the territory (as reflected in the work of Hatch and Schultz) can, unfortunately, appear to be parallel and distinct areas of scholarship but this is only because of the failure, by some, to take account of extant published work and a reluctance to take account of insights from other management disciplines.

## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN CORPORATE BRAND MANAGEMENT

As the economic and commercial benefits of global corporate brands become more apparent, questions about the nature of corporate brand management have intensified. Of course, the formative literature on the domain advanced the view that a strong corporate brand *is* a strategic management issue and *is* a senior management concern (Balmer, 1995, 2001a; King, 1991). At the same time, the formative literature also acknowledged the *critical role of employees* in corporate brand building, delivery and maintenance and also, therefore, concluded that it was *not only* a marketing concern but

of importance to strategists and HR managers. In short, the foundational literature asserted that corporate brands are multidisciplinary in scope (Balmer, 1995).

Although the above perspectives have informed the territory since its outset, recent work relating to brand co-creation (Hatch and Schultz, 2010), which is gaining wide currency within certain quarters, for some, appears to challenge the role of senior managers *vis-à-vis* corporate brand management and, seemingly, disregards the importance of an entity's corporate identity in corporate brand formation, maintenance and saliency. This, of course, is a fascinating, but for some, contentious development.

From orthodox marketing and strategic perspectives, the notion that senior managers should regard themselves as *observers* rather than as *initiators* of the corporate brand covenant is likely, for some, to be contentious. Although some will conclude that the co-creation perspective needs to be taken account of by senior managers, the issue of corporate governance may lead them to conclude that senior managers have no option other than to be prominent players in managing and maintaining the saliency of their firm's corporate brand. It is not our ambition to reach a conclusion regarding the above but, simply, to observe there are powerful arguments, which inhabit both sides of the divide.

What is clear is the question of the degree of involvement of stakeholders in the co-creation and development of a corporate brand remains open and inchoate but may well be an important development. This being said, there are problems. Major global corporate brands have literally millions of stakeholders and there are likely to be a bewildering variety of corporate brand images held by stakeholders. How are these multiple co-creation perspectives to be accommodated and managed? What are the implications for corporate brand communications? How are stakeholder groups to be prioritised? What are

the implications for other zones of management? Finally, is the notion of corporate brand leadership dead?

Of course, some traditional marketing academics might argue that a core precept of marketing *does* take account of customers (and in corporate marketing terms stakeholders) wants, needs and desires so that they are mutually profitable for both stakeholders and the company. Some marketing scholars might also advance the view that marketing has *always* taken account of multiple images and impressions of companies, and their corporate and product brands.

The co-creation perspective is just one of many interesting debates within the corporate branding domain and although it is beyond the scope of this guest editorial to reach a conclusion or a firm position relating to the above, it is clear that it is a debate that is likely to continue for some time to come.

What *is* clear is that the role of senior management *vis-à-vis* corporate brand management *is* being reappraised. This being said, if bridges are to be destroyed then they must be replaced by bridges that are not just new but are stronger, durable and safer.

## SPECIAL EDITION ARTICLES

The guest editors wish to thank everyone who submitted papers for this special edition. All papers were subject to a double-blind reviewing process. The resultant articles are catholic in focus, in terms of the methodologies used and are, in terms of the authors' affiliations, international in scope.

The *first paper* – a commentary – (*Corporate brand orientation: What it is? What for it?*) by Balmer argues that a corporate brand orientation represents a logical *dénouement* of Urde's brand orientation approach and details the core precepts of corporate brand orientation from an explicit corporate marketing perspective. On the eve of the 20th anniversary of Urde's (1994) seminal work on the

territory, he argues that greater attention should be accorded to the brand orientation perspective and concludes that corporate brand orientation is of considerable utility for scholars and practitioners alike.

The *second paper* (*The corporate identity matrix*) by Urde presents a relevant framework that helps to define and align corporate brand identity. Illustrated with cases of three different companies, the corporate brand identity matrix aims to bridge the theory and practice divide. As a prominent Scandinavian brand consultant and academic, Urde's work is likely to attract considerable interest.

The *third paper* (*Sustainable brand based innovation: The role of corporate brands in driving sustainable innovation*) of Nedergaard and Gyrd-Jones applies the concept of design thinking in the form of a framework for sustainable brand based innovation. The authors highlight the important interdependency between the corporate brand and innovation and underline the relevance of the corporate brand as an important part to innovation. The paper illustrates the framework by analysing the processes behind new business development and innovation of the luxury consumer electronics brand Bang & Olufsen.

The *fourth paper* (*Managing employer brand attributes to attract potential future leaders*) by Bonaiuto, de Dominicis, Illia, Rodríguez-Cánovas and Lizzani contributes to the field of employer branding by identifying employer brand attributes that highly talented potential employees perceive as particularly relevant in order to be attracted by a company. Three studies are conducted with a sample of new graduates in Italian Universities. Results shows that the most idealised brand attributes are related to the future employers' ability to innovate, commitment to social responsibility, openness for freedom of opinion, valuing capabilities and knowledge, and offering different career paths.

The *fifth paper* (*Positioning the corporate brand as sustainable: Leadership de rigueur*) by Stuart examines the importance of the organisational leader in the development and maintenance of a sustainable corporate brand. The paper underlines that the nature of sustainability requires that managers act as transformational leaders that are more personally and deeply involved in the process of developing the sustainable corporate brand.

In the *sixth paper* (*Doing good by increasing the social benefits from a company's core activities*) by van Rekom, Berens and van Halderen, a very broad comprehensive and new view is given to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities of a corporation. This article adopts a distinct position *vis-à-vis* mainstream CSR research and aims to contribute to the general debate relating to CSR and argue that CSR should be a core corporate brand leadership concern.

The *seventh paper* (*Impact of organisational climate on ethical empowerment and engagement with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)*) by Powell, Davis and Norton explores the management, involvement and engagement of employees in relation to Corporate Marketing/CSR drawing on two case studies from the Oil industry. This article provides a conceptual framework that indicates connections between perceptions of ethical climate in the work place and levels of ethical empowerment on employee commitment, and its effects, in turn, on CSR beliefs and intentions.

## FINALLY

The guest editors would like to thank the authors who contributed to this special issue and are indebted to the reviewers for their valuable input. We believe this special edition contains significant work, which is highly meaningful for the corporate branding field. *Read on and enjoy!*

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