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Corporate branding and brand architecture: a conceptual framework

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Abstract. *This paper examines the relationships between product and corporate brands with a view to clarifying the role and function of corporate branding in the context of different brand architectures. Through the prism of rebranding decisions, brand architecture is analysed as an evolutionary strategy decision. Two broad strategies are identified: an integration strategy which seeks to achieve image alignment between corporate and product brands; and a separation strategy which seeks to shape different images for different stakeholders. Implementing these strategies within the context of the brand architecture, we introduce the concept of 'ascending and descending brand extension', which leverages the strong image of the corporate brand to enhance the image and credibility of the product brand and vice versa. Based on this analysis, we propose three types of corporate branding strategy within the brand architecture framework: the 'trade name', which is a basic identity over a house of brands; the 'business brand', which is consciously nurtured and is aimed primarily at stakeholders other than consumers; and, finally, the 'holistic corporate brand' is a fully developed corporate brand, extending across all target audiences.* ***Key Words*** ● *brand architecture* ● *brand equity* ● *brand extension* ● *corporate brand* ● *rebranding*

Introduction

The relationship between brand architecture and corporate reputation has attracted increasing attention in recent years, with a Marketing Science Institute conference,[2] and a number of papers published on the topic (Laforet and Saunders, 2005; Dacin and Brown, 2006; Uggla, 2006). This interest has undoubt-

edly been magnified by the large number of high-profile corporate rebrandings that have occurred, as a result of the recent boom in mergers and acquisitions and the drive towards industry consolidation. This has highlighted the dynamic nature of brand architecture management and suggests the need for considerably more work in this area (Merrilees, 2005; Carson, 2007; Jackson, 2007).

Industry consolidation may sometimes affect the coherence of the brand portfolio to the point that a rebranding of all or some elements of the brand hierarchy becomes a managerial necessity (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006). As a result of changes in alignment between corporate and product brands, images (external perceptions) of the various brand elements of the hierarchy are modified (Berens et al., 2005). Another logical consequence of those changes concerns the evolution of the nature of corporate branding in the context of a changing brand architecture.

The concept of brand architecture is a useful diagnostic framework to help map the often complex collection of brands owned by large companies. However, it is essentially a static framework which provides a snapshot of a corporation's brand structure. It does not offer much understanding of the vertical interaction among levels within the brand hierarchy, nor does it capture the fundamental variations in the nature or strength of corporate brands emanating from those interactions. As a result, the term 'corporate brand' is often used loosely to describe both a corporation (Daimler-Benz, Procter and Gamble) and a product or a service (BMW, HSBC, H&M).

This ambiguity constitutes a gap in the literature that this paper seeks to address by revisiting the brand architecture literature through the prism of an evolutionary strategic decision, that of a rebranding exercise. Following from this analysis, the paper proposes a framework that disaggregates the relationships between product and corporate brands with a view to clarifying the role and function of corporate branding in the context of different brand architectures.

The paper starts by reviewing the brand architecture literature, focusing on the process of image transfer among the various constituents of the brand hierarchy. A model elaborating the possible vertical dynamics is then proposed. It considers the interactions among the various levels in the brand hierarchy, i.e. between corporate and product brands, and vice versa. Finally, the implications of this model for corporate branding are explored in various brand architecture contexts.

Corporate branding and brand architecture: the alignment between corporate and product brands

In recent years, multinational corporations (e.g. Altria, AT&T, Diageo, Novartis, Mastercard) have been managing their identity and image more proactively (Muzellec, 2005; Krebsbach, 2006; Carson, 2007). As a result the brand concept, which was traditionally focused on the product/service level, can now be applied to the entire corporation (Ind, 1998; Schultz et al., 2000; de Chernatony, 2002; Balmer and Greyser, 2003; Fombrun and van Riel, 2004; Dacin and Brown, 2006).

Arguably, however, corporate and product brands have different characteristics which are explored in the next few paragraphs.

Corporate brand vs product brand

The concept of brands emerged from the domain of consumer products and was originally considered more or less synonymous with that category. Over the years, however, marketing scholars have reappraised the traditional brand concept and widened its meaning to include corporate as well as product brands, and to recognize the fundamental differences between these levels (Balmer and Gray, 2003). In a seminal article, King (1991) referred to the 'company brand' and foresaw that it

> will become the main discriminator. That is, the consumers' choice of what they buy will depend less on an evaluation of the functional benefits to them of the product or a service, but rather more on the assessment of the people in the company behind it, their skills, attitudes, behaviour, design, altruism, modes of communication, speed of response, and so on, the whole company culture in fact. (King, 1991: 46)

While corporate and product brands are now recognized as distinct entities, they may sometimes be considered as equivalent because they are context independent (de Chernatony, 2002) and share the same objective of creating differentiation and preference (Knox and Bickerton, 2003). Yet the complexity of the corporate context has fundamental implications for the nature of the corporate brand. Corporate branding goes beyond product branding by ignoring product features and focusing on a well-defined set of values (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Hatch and Schultz, 2001). Balmer (2001) suggests that corporate brands differ from product brands in higher strategic focus, internal as well as external targets, and incorporation of corporate strategy. As a result, the role of employees – including senior management – is seen as crucially important in transmitting the brand values both internally and externally (Balmer and Gray, 2003).

Hatch and Schultz (1997) put forward a proposition where corporate brands gain full strength when vision, culture and image are aligned. They argue that corporations need to define their corporate identity as a bridge between the external position of the organization in its marketplace and other relevant environments, and internal meanings formed within the organizational culture (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Urde (1999, 2003) believes that brands can help the company to articulate its core values. Urde promotes the concept of a brand-oriented company, which would have the ability to 'generate value and meaning via its brand'. Successful corporate branding is claimed to imply a shared set of coherent statements about the company's values toward its external and internal stakeholders over time (Morsing and Kristensen, 2001; Brexendorf and Kernstock, 2007).

In sum, current conceptualizations have insisted on the holistic nature (involves the whole organization), the strategic value (shapes future direction for the company), and the relational nature (is founded in the web of internal–external stakeholder activities) of corporate brands (Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002).

Brand image transfer between product and corporate brand

Following the extension of the scope and applications of branding, interactions between the product, the company and the customer are becoming more closely scrutinized by marketing academics and practitioners (Dowling, 1993; Balmer, 1995; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999; de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Knox, 2004; Keller and Lehmann, 2006).

The degree of synergy between the corporate brand and the product brand depends on the brand architecture (Keller, 1998; Varadarajan et al., 2006). The various relations can be illustrated along a spectrum from the 'branded house' to the 'house of brands', including 'endorsed brands' and 'subbrands' (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). Most companies employ mixed strategies but it is useful to briefly characterize the two extremes for the sake of clarity. The 'house of brands', in which there is separation between the corporate and product brands avoids corporate brand associations that might adversely affect the image of the product brand. Reciprocally, at a corporate level, it allows the company to diversify into new product categories without running any risk of diluting its corporate brand equity. P&G is able to manage brands like Pampers diapers, Iams dog food and Tide laundry powder without affecting the brand equity of either product or its own corporate brand equity.

By contrast, in a branded house, where both corporation and products share the same name, the master brand is the primary driver for brand associations (Saunders and Guoqun, 1997). Reciprocally, corporate brands take on values from the product portfolio (Brown and Dacin, 1997) as well as from the corporation's culture and heritage (Aaker, 2004). The master brand becomes the umbrella for various products or services offered. Virgin provides a typical example: Virgin Cola, Virgin Music, Virgin Airlines, and Virgin Jeans. Other examples include Honda, Philips or Heinz. Corporate brands can be used to replace multiple, complex sub-brand structures to achieve cost efficiencies (Laforet and Saunders, 1999, 2005).

In a corporate dominant system, the reputation of the corporation critically influences consumers' perceptions of the services (Knox, 2004). Berens et al. (2005) have demonstrated the role of the corporate brand in consumer product responses. Equally, corporate images may be mainly the result of consumers' experience of the brand (Chun and Davies, 2006). In addition, perceptions of the product brand are also used to evaluate corporate reputation (Fombrun et al., 2000). Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) suggest that the synergies between product and corporate brands are stronger in a branded house situation, as the master brand contributes to the offering by adding associations that enhance the value proposition, reinforcing the credibility, as well increasing visibility and communication efficiencies.

Through successive rebrandings, brand architectures and corporate identities are evolving all the time to the extent that they modify the degree of synergy between the corporate brand and the product brand (Keller and Aaker, 1998;

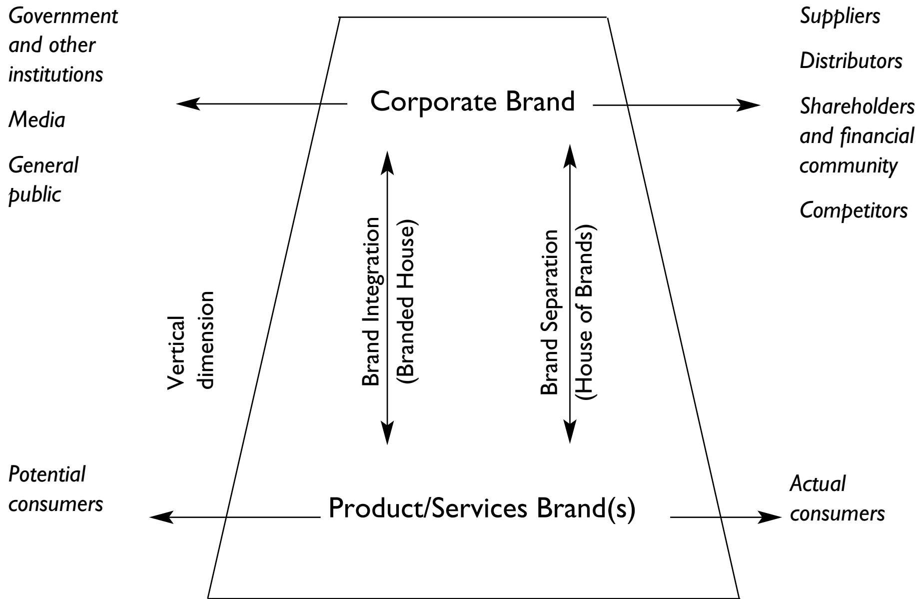

Figure 1

A dynamic model of brand architecture management

Berens et al., 2005). Two broad strategic approaches can be observed among companies going through a dynamic (re)branding process (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006). The first and most common is an integration strategy – to unite the corporation and its constituent businesses and products under a single name or master brand. Brand integration is a marketing strategy which leads towards a 'branded house' situation by leveraging the associations previously constrained at one level of the brand hierarchy. The second is the opposite of the first and might be described as a separation strategy, driven by a desire to distance the corporate brand from its constituent businesses and products. A model of Brand Architecture Management, shown in Figure 1, illustrates the interactions between corporate brands, product/services brands and their respective audiences.

This model illustrates the assumption that differences in image can be examined depending on the degree of synergy between the corporate and the product name. The vertical dimension refers to the interrelation between corporate images and product brand images, which is the principal focus of this paper, and which will be explored in the next section, first in a branded house context, then in a house of brands context.

Brand architecture management: synergies or asymmetries

In this section, rebranding that leads to a more integrated brand architecture with image transfers between product/services brand and the corporate brand, is first reviewed. The concept of 'ascending and descending brand extension' is then presented. Finally, brand separation strategies – where the images are further distanced over time – are examined.

Brand architecture synergies: Image transfer among the levels of the brand hierarchy

The role played by the name in transferring images from the corporate to the product level and vice versa is now considered. A rebranding is the opportunity to assess the potential image transfers between corporate and product images irrespective of whether the two share the same name or when the two share different names.

Integrating the brand hierarchy can be achieved through three alternative strategies. It can first be done by changing the corporate name entirely and aligning all the constituent levels of the brand hierarchy under the new name. Eircom, the Irish telecom company, provides a good example of this type of rebranding. As the national state-owned telecommunications company, Telecom Eireann carried some negative associations, and strategic business units gradually moved away from the main corporate brand by developing their own brands. This resulted in a plethora of different brands with individual identities. In 1999, a major rebranding exercise, carried out by Enterprise IG, aimed at rationalizing and unifying the brand portfolio under a single, new brand name: eircom.

Second, when a company is fortunate to own a popular product brand, it can attempt to extend the positive associations related to the product brand name throughout the entire corporation. For example the rather anonymous BSN Group rebranded itself as the Danone Group in an effort to build on the positive associations of its dairy products' family brand.

Third, integration can be achieved by aligning the business unit brands with the corporate – and very often global – brand. In this case, it is the brand name of the corporation (group) that is used to rebrand the business units. UBS and HSBC, for instance, gradually rebranded their national or local branches under the corporate name in an effort to promote a monolithic, global brand.

In essence, the principle that underpins the strategy used by Danone or HSBC is similar to that of brand extension, which is to leverage the strong image of one brand to enhance the image and credibility of others (Aaker and Keller, 1990)

The assumption that image can be transferred from one level of the hierarchy to another, particularly from corporate to product level, has been tested to a limited extent. An experiment conducted by Keller and Aaker showed that corporate-level marketing activities can improve the perceptions of brand extensions (Keller and Aaker, 1998). The notion that corporate associations, understood as a subset of brand associations, can influence purchasing behavior and customers' perceptions of the product has also been tested and found to occur (Brown and Dacin, 1997).

Uggla (2006) has gone a bit further by examining the source of brand associations. He introduced what he calls the corporate brand association base model which shows how brand equity is affected by institutional, partner and corporate brand associations. The model is a useful resource for brand managers to design brand-to-brand collaboration strategies by identifying potential transfer of image from sources of brand equity in the internal brand hierarchy and in the surrounding brand network.

The nature and strength of the image transfers within the brand hierarchy depends on the naming strategy used for the corporate brand, i.e. the same name for both product and corporation or not (Kapferer, 1995). Berens et al. (2005) have demonstrated the role of the corporate brand name in consumer product responses. Consumers were tested first in a branded house context where corporate ability (CA) associations were found to have a strong influence on customer product attitudes. However, when the corporate brand name is used simply as an endorser (i.e. endorsed brand or low corporate brand dominance context), the influence of CA is positively moderated by product involvement. In this case, consumers only use CA associations as means to increase the reliability of their product evaluation. This experiment provides support for the theoretical proposition that attitudes towards a product brand may change as a result of a corporate rebranding.

Ascending or descending brand extensions

The degree of association between the corporate brand and the product brand is determined by the extent to which both entities are connected. Therefore, we introduce the concept of 'vertical rebranding', which can be conceptualized as the extension of the corporate brand downwards to the business units (e.g. from HSBC Group to HSBC UK (replacing the Midland Bank Brand) or, conversely, an extension of the product brands upwards to the corporate level (e.g. from Danone products to Danone Group). We shall refer to the former as a 'descending brand extension' and the latter as an 'ascending brand extension'.

In the first case – a 'descending brand extension', for example HSBC or UBS, a group tries to build stronger corporate brand equity by extending its corporate brand downwards to all business units and products. The tight alignment between a business unit (HSBC UK, HSBC France, HSBC Mexico . . .) and the main corporation creates global synergies, which can be leveraged through a slogan ('HSBC, the world's local bank!'). The immediate consequence, however, is to destroy the (local) business unit brand equity. When UBS decided to scrap two well-known brands – S.G. Warburg and PaineWebber – in an effort to promote a global and unique UBS brand, the Swiss company had to take a non-cash charge of approximately $770 million, that being the value at which the two brands were carried in its balance sheet (Tomkins, 2002). Stronger brand equity is expected to accrue, however, through a mutually reinforcing effect between the corporate brand and sub-unit brands.

In the second case – that of an 'ascending brand extension', an attempt is made to leverage product brand attributes and extend those attributes to the upper levels

of the brand hierarchy. As with all brand extensions, this strategy presents many opportunities for the 'parent brand'[3] (Balachander and Ghose, 2003) but also some risks, including a dilution of the brand or an addition of undesirable associations to the 'parent brand' (Loken and Roedder John, 1993; Kirmani et al., 1999). Where the same name is now used for product and corporate brands, there is a reciprocal effect in that any corporate decisions might have a direct or indirect effect on the equity of the product brand. If the Danone Group now enjoys some attributes previously constrained to the product brand, the converse is that decisions made by the group Danone might have some collateral consequences on the equity of the family product brand. For example, a few years after the rebranding, Danone Corp. decided to close down two factories in France. This decision prompted a call for a consumer boycott on all products made by the Danone Group, which probably had a greater resonance now that the products and the corporate names were identical (Klein, 2004).

Brand architecture asymmetries: Shaping different images for different stakeholders

It is a natural follow-on from the separation strategy that once the corporate brand has been separated from its product (via a change of name of the corporation), the images of product and corporation should become independent from each other. The images of the corporation will not be derived from the product and vice versa. This can be explained by the necessity to project a certain identity towards corporate stakeholders, which might not represent a positive reinforcement of consumers' images.

Research has shown that a sub-branding strategy can protect the parent brand from negative feedback (Milberg et al., 1997; Janiszewski et al., 2000). Consumers' emotional attachment may in fact be a valuable asset at the product level (Fournier, 1998), yet at the corporate level it can be a burden (Klein, 2004). The case of Danone, mentioned above, illustrates how consumers' carefully contrived perceptions of a product brand can dramatically conflict with a corporate decision such as the close-down of an unproductive site. Equally, a brand separation strategy has allowed Philip Morris Corp. (now called Altria) to 'disassociate' its business unit brand (Kraft Foods) and its multiple food product brands (Jacobs, Jello, LU, Oscar Meyer, Oreo, Ritz, etc.) from the negative aspects of belonging to what is primarily a tobacco group.

In fact, many companies have reinvented themselves to become authentic business brands. Altria (ex-Philip Morris), Diageo (ex-GuinnessUDV), Novartis (ex-Sandoz), or Vivendi (ex-General des Eaux) are business brands constantly adding new business units and brands to their portfolio. By separating the product and the corporation, business brands foster a business identity by promoting the business values of competence, unity, vision and performance (Muzellec, 2005). Companies now carefully manage their corporate reputation and constantly monitor the equity of the corporate name.

Diageo, for example, regularly promotes its name and values to the general public, journalists, investors and the government. It evaluates the equity of its corpo-

rate name through the 'Corporate Brand Tracker'; the effectiveness of its Corporate Social Responsibility programme by measuring stakeholders' attitudes and behaviour both at the business unit level (such as the TNS mrbi, report, Diageo Ireland Stakeholder Tracker); and at the corporate level by adopting a share value approach to its CSR policies (Knox et al., 2005).

This evidence calls for a redefinition of corporate branding and its relationships with consumers and other stakeholders of the brand architecture (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006).

Implications for corporate marketing: a threefold classification for the corporate brand

The framework hereby proposed leads us to distinguish three types of corporate brand identity. At a minimum, corporate branding can confine itself to providing a visual identity to a 'trade name'. This corresponds to the traditional house of brands configuration, where the primary point of contact between the consumer and the corporation is in fact the product brand. As mentioned before, in this instance, the corporate brand is a trade name which is not actively promoted and acts as a simple umbrella name housing a collection of independent brands (Figure 2).

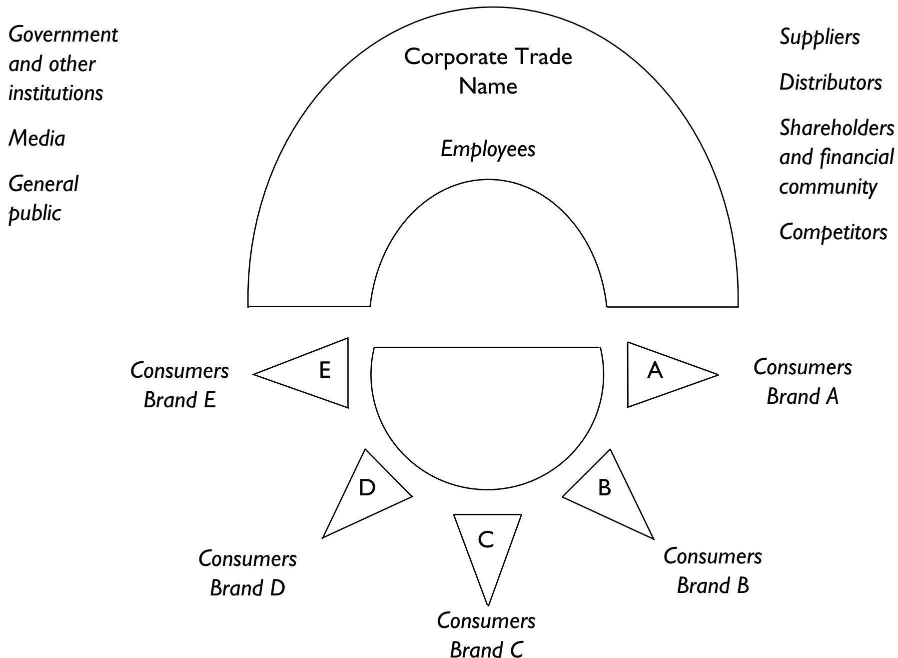

Figure 2

Corporate brand as a 'Trade Name'

In the context of a corporate trade name, brand marketing tends to focus mainly on the management of individual product brands. The corporate owner of the brands is not closely tied to its brands. The brands stand alone and are the principal point of contact with the consumers. The marketing organization of the corporation is separated into traditional brand management units which further distance the corporate brand from the consumers (Knox, 2004). This low organizational involvement leads Olins, one of the foremost consultants in branding in the UK, to question whether corporations such as Procter and Gamble or Unilever should actually be considered as brands at all (Olins, 2001).

One may also argue, however, that a trade name could be granted brand status if it is considered as a précis of the values that define the organization (Ind, 1998) or as symbolic of a corporate culture (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Corporate brands as trade names (P&G, Tyco, and Unilever) can therefore be seen as symbols associated with values. In this way, the corporate trade name acts as a flagship for employees and may be associated with values mainly promoted to internal stakeholders. As far as the external audience is concerned, P&G displays its values (integrity, leadership, ownership, passion for winning and trust) to its web users but does not run expensive billboard campaigns towards the general public or consumers to promote those. As a result, consumers may be aware of corporate names such as Unilever, P&G, Johnson & Johnson or Tyco but they may not have strong associations about them, nor can they relate them precisely to any particular product.

In other words, trade names can be considered as symbols associated with fundamental values (Ind, 1998; Urde, 1999, 2003) but may not fully correspond to the definitions of corporate brand as image building devices (Frost and Cooke, 1999; de Chernatony, 2002; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Fombrun and van Riel, 2004).

The second and most novel type of corporate brand identity could be called a 'business brand' as distinct from a pure consumer brand (product brand). A business brand is more than a simple trade name over a house of brands (such as P&G). It is not, however, a full corporate brand (such as 3M, Heinz or Danone) because it is not clearly visible to consumers – they have to read the small print on the package to find out which company owns the product. Yet thanks to a specific branding program, it is a strong name with various associations for particular stakeholders, hence the corporation could be fully granted the status of a brand.

Business branding may focus primarily on business stakeholders and other social partners (e.g. government, media) while the relationship between consumers and the product brands is nurtured at market level. For example, following a merger with GrandMet, the well-known and well-liked Irish company, Guinness, became just one business unit in a huge multinational corporation selling a wide array of products. The change of name to Diageo effectively led the group to gradually distance itself from its main product – Guinness Stout (Simmons, 2006). Muzellec and Lambkin show that the corporate culture of 'hard nosed' business is embedded in the corporate brand, which affects the relationship with distributors and suppliers; whereas the traditional values of welfare and philanthropy inspire the corporate social responsibility program and its promo-

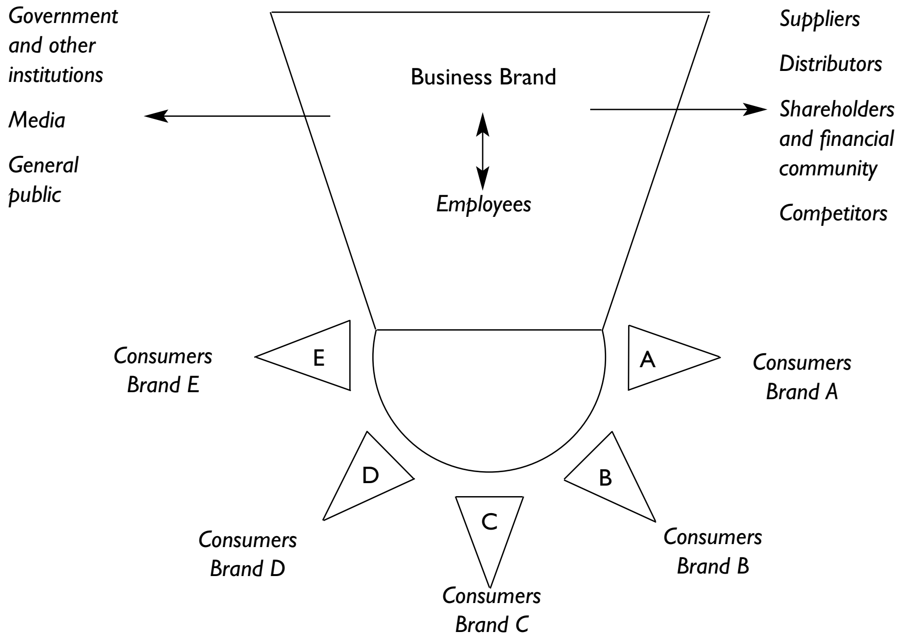

Figure 3

The business brand

tion towards government agencies and the general public (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2008). Through a carefully implemented marketing program, Diageo shapes an image of a socially responsible company and is associated with the slogan 'Drink responsibly'.

This multidimensional approach to branding means promoting different images for different stakeholders. From this viewpoint, corporate branding can be conceived of as a prism through which the corporation is perceived differently depending on the stakeholder perspective. This scheme is illustrated in Figure 3. This suggests, furthermore, that corporate branding may not always be a single, monolithic entity but a multidimensional one that can be configured uniquely for each of several stakeholder groups. Under such a configuration, a particular brand (e.g. Smirnoff Ice) may be perceived by consumers as 'cool, cheeky and young', while the corporate brand (e.g. Diageo) is primarily perceived as 'financially responsible' for the shareholders or as 'socially responsible' by the government and the general public (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2007).

Finally, the last type of corporate brand identity is the holistic corporate brand, which is both a corporate and a consumer brand. This corporate brand identity fits most closely within a branded house configuration. Aligned with the existing model of corporate branding (Schultz and Hatch, 2002; Urde, 2005), the corporate–consumer brand (e.g. Accenture, HSBC, Lego, Volvo, Virgin, Air France) is

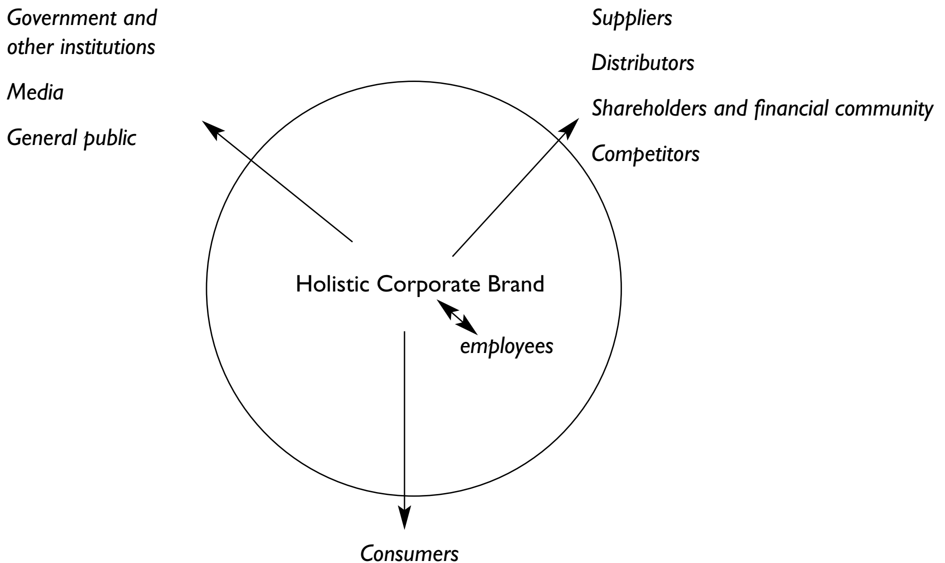

Figure 4

The holistic corporate brand

developed holistically and requires a certain degree of consistency between the brand image of the service/product and the images and identity of the corporate brand (Figure 4).

As the figure implies, the images of the corporation should be similar regardless of the position and interests of the stakeholders. Recent studies suggest that when a corporation and a product share the same name, consumers fail to distinguish between the two (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2007). Hence, successful corporate brands in this configuration align vision, culture and image and achieve a high level of coherence and consistency (Schultz and Hatch, 2002, Urde, 2005).

Some B2B brands may also be included in this category if they are primarily using an integration (branded house) strategy. For example, General Electric's slogan of 'Imagination at Work', which it displays constantly, is used to shape the image of an innovative company for its employees, its suppliers and its customers. GE is clearly a corporate brand, which can be seen both as a symbol associated with fundamental values and an image building device, as the advertisement in Figure 5 demonstrates.

Conclusions

The ultimate aim of this paper was to add value to the literature by introducing a dynamic dimension to the concept of brand architecture. This framework con-

Figure 5

GE advertisement

siders the vertical dimensions of the brand architecture and tries to show how changes at any one level reverberate to other levels. This framework paints a picture of the brand architecture as a dynamic model with constant change and evolution, as companies manage their portfolios of products and brands over time.

Using examples, the paper identifies two types of branding strategies: integration and separation. An integration strategy is where product brand image is used to improve the visibility of the corporation (ascending brand extension) or where the corporate brand is used to enhance the credibility of the product or services brand (descending brand extension). A 'holistic corporate brand' is the result of tight alignments between elements of the hierarchy (branded house context).

On the contrary, companies may deliberately separate their corporate and product brand identities in order to selectively address the needs and expectations of individual stakeholder groups. A separation strategy assigns a different role to corporate branding. In addition to the traditional 'trade name', which is at best a basic identity over a house of brands; we introduce the 'business brand' concept, which is consciously nurtured and is aimed primarily at stakeholders other than consumers.

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Notes

1. Corresponding author.
2. MSI Conference on Brand Architecture and Corporate Reputation, Charleston SC, March 16–18, 2005.
3. The term parent brand refers to the brand from which the extension has been initiated – not to the parent group – in this particular case it is actually the product family brand.

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