

Brand New World? – The management of meaning through branding in a knowledge-intensive firm

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Abstract

Organizational, managerial and leadership activity has traditionally been understood from a “substance” point of view. Organizations have been seen as typically producing tangible products through various forms of technostructural work process arrangements, and they have primarily been seen as contexts where leadership have been relation-oriented, task-oriented, neither or both. However, the current interest in organizational culture identity, image and reputation and organizational discourse points towards an understanding of organizational activity as increasingly occurring in the imaginary realm.

This development can be understood as a reflection of empirical changes in contemporary organizations. The traditional focus on production and manufacturing has, in many business sectors, been replaced with a focus on R & D, marketing, and branding. The phenomenon of branding, while common-sensically understood as a marketing tool, can, also be understood as an exercise in management of meaning. Branding does not only inform external stakeholders, such as customers and investors, about the core values of the organization. It also potentially instructs and directs organizational members. In this sense, branding can be viewed as a management and leadership practice. Drawing on a case study of a management consulting firm this paper attempts to illuminate the anatomy of such practices and, to some extent, their effects.

Introduction

It is frequently argued that Western-style late capitalism has entered a new era, where the epochal shift lies in the turn from stable to turbulent markets and rapid technological change. Although the scope and depth of environmental changes sometimes are criticized (c.f. Thompson 1993) environmental pressures are widely believed to play an increasingly important role in shaping organizational action. They also seem to have contributed to or stimulated the emergence of new ways of understanding organizational activity, as displayed in the current interest in organizational culture (Alvesson 2001a), identity, image and reputation (AMR special issue 2000), and organizational discourse (Human Relations special issue 2000). In short, this points towards an understanding of organizational activity as imaginary (Alvesson 1990, Deetz 1992), rather than as necessary anchored in substantive or material reality.

The development can be understood as a reflection of empirical changes in contemporary organizations. More and more organizations aspire and claim to be customer-orientated (Du Gay & Salaman 1992). Concepts such as temporary work and temporary organizations have emerged (Lundin & Söderholm 1995), presumably reflecting changing empirical realities. Organizations are increasingly adapting flexible and decentralized work schemes, at least in certain sectors (Thompson 1993, Klein 2000). These shift favors organizational structures often associated with knowledge-intensive firms, such as adhocracy (Mintzberg 1983). Furthermore, the rise and expansion of so-called knowledge work and the shift towards a consumer economy has prompted speculation if indeed society, the context of all organizational activity, has changed fundamentally. For example, organizations have recently increasingly become responsive to the idea that customers a) may have vastly different sets of preferences, and b) that competitive advantage lies in proactively foster diverse sets of customer preferences, rather than reacting to them (Du Gay & Salaman 1992). As a result, markets fragment, product life-spans contract, and planning horizons become tighter and more uncertain. Thus, as organizations become more sensitive and responsive to varied customer preferences – and also add effort to provide more choice and construct preferences – demand becomes less predictable and volatile. Ultimately, this creates a situation where surges and collapses in demand are the norm. As Du Gay & Salaman (1992) notes:

“ [The] traditional view of the merits of bureaucratic structures is entirely opposed by the current language of the sovereign customer; for this asserts that in order to compete successfully against competitor suppliers, and to achieve adequate profit margins, organizations must be able to satisfy customers. And in order to do this, internal organizational relations must resemble– indeed even become, market relations. Thus in a curious inversion of what was for many years the received wisdom, that the inadequacies of the

market should be ameliorated by the bureaucratic method of controlling transactions, market co-ordination is imposed on administrative co-ordination.” (Du Gay & Salaman 1992:619)

These changes have allowed new organizational forms and new organizational practices to emerge. As Klein (2000) has pointed out, the traditional focus on production and manufacturing has, in many business sectors, been replaced with a focus on R & D, marketing, and, of particular significance for this paper, branding. The phenomenon of branding, while widely understood as a marketing tool, can also productively be understood as an exercise in management of meaning (Smirchich and Morgan 1982). Branding does not only inform external stakeholders, such as customers and investors, about the value-added – and the core values – of the organization. It also potentially instructs and directs organizational members. In this sense, branding can be viewed as a management and leadership practice. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that in certain contexts this kind of “visionary” leadership is not only possible, but also the most feasible (Sandberg & Targama 1998).

This paper, drawing from a case study of a management consulting firm, aims to investigate branding as a management practice. However, contrary to the great majority of the literature on the pos and cons of brands and branding, I will only take a cursory interest on the effects of branding on external stakeholders, such as customer, shareholders, and suppliers. Instead, I want to focus on the intraorganizational effects of branding. More specifically, the paper attempts to provide insights into the discursive universe politically constructed through efforts of branding, and the effects on shared understandings and organizational practices.

Branding

Branding as a scholarly concept has primarily its origins in the field of marketing. Organizational theorists have, at least until recently, demonstrated surprisingly little interest in the concept, despite its obvious affinity to such popular concepts as organizational identity, image, and corporate culture. In this section we will briefly describe the concept of the brand, as conceived and used in the field of marketing, provide a short critique and outline our particular perspective on brands and branding.

The concept of the brand

The bare bones definition of a brand is that it is something that identifies a product or a service, be it a name, a symbol or something else (c.f. Keller 1993). In this sense, the brand has obvious appeal as a marketing tool and has also long been recognized as such. However, the recent interest in the concept of the brand, which at least partly can be related to the socio-economic changes outlined above, has focused on the capacity in the brand to create

distinction from other brands (c.f. Rossiter et al 1991, Keller et al 1998, Bottomley & Holden 2001) and thus contain value, so called brand equity (Keller 1993, Aaker & Jacobson 2001, Dillon et al 2001).

The idea of brand equity is, accordingly to Keller (1993), typically understood from either a financial or a strategic point of view. The financial perspective focuses on various ways to provide more accurate measurements of brand equity for accounting purposes (e.g. goodwill). The strategic perspective views brand equity as a way of increasing marketing productivity, in particular regarding decision processes on the marketing mix. From this perspective, “brand equity occurs when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand association in memory” (Keller 1993:2).

I refrain from going much further into the many models provided by marketing researcher’s on how brands, equity and customer memory relates to each other. One may, somewhat sarcastically, note the extent that these models are invariably complex, use fancy mathematical notation, and contain the assertion that generic brand names seems easier for people to recall, but specific brand names seems to be more distinctive. There are, however, other and more important reasons to be critical to the way the concept of brand are used in the field of marketing. I attempt to point to four areas of concern: that it is undersocialized, behavioralist, functionalist, and managerialist.

- undersocialized. The marketing perspective on the brand typically fails to recognize that social processes affect brand recognition, knowledge, and association. For example, Keller (1993) is at pains to give his theory on customer based brand equity some grounding in the psychology of the customer, but disregard the social and communicative processes that makes it possible for the customer to establish contact with the brand. As social psychologists (c.f. Asplund 1987), sociologists of knowledge (c.f. Berger & Luckmann 1966), and, indeed, organization theorists (c.f. Salancik & Pfeffer 1978, Weick 1995) has pointed out numerous times, perception, memory and knowledge are shaped in social processes. In blackboxing the social processes that affects brands and branding, the marketing perspective is unable to provide insights on how brands are socially constructed, maintained, consumed, and resisted. From the marketing perspective, all such questions are a priori understood as artifacts of the enigma of the human psyche.

- behavioralist. Remarkably, given the importance of the psychological machinery of the human in the marketing perspective on brands and branding, it typically draws on behavioralist notions of stimulus-response, conditioning, and positive reinforcement.

Bottomley & Holden (2001), for example, uses the stimulus word frequently – even in a discussion of cultural effects on brand extensions – and includes a secondary analysis of eight studies, all apparently compatible with stimulus-response mechanics. From a marketing perspective, brands operate pretty much as levers in a Skinner box, signifying good, bad, and indifferent experiences, and humans operate pretty much as rats. This may or may not be an illuminating metaphor for understanding the relationship between brands and humans, but it surely isn't the only one available. The behaviorist – and questionable – assumptions in the marketing perspective thus limits the insights it can provide to a narrow set of behaviors and to a narrow vocabulary.

- functionalist. The marketing perspective on brands draws mainly from functionalist assumptions on the nature of the social world and knowledge. That is, it assumes that the social world, such as brands, exist in a real and objective sense, and that it is possible, given sufficient methodological sophistication, to determine the impact and effects of brands in an objective sense. Keller (1993), for example, elaborates in length upon the issue that brand equity must be independent from other objective properties in the product to qualify as a meaningful phenomena. His argument has the rather absurd consequence that the brand, in order to provide equity, necessary must be understood as something that makes the customer to buy a product for no other reason than that they know the brand. Although it would be foolish to claim that functionalist assumptions are “wrong” – if such a claim would make sense at all – it can be argued that the assumptions is unnecessary restricted and fails to recognize or neglects important aspects. There is, for example, a compelling case that the social world is achieved rather than naturally occurring (Burrell & Morgan 1979), and that the subjective-objective distinction fails to recognize that the researchers tools – ideas, methodology, theories — as well as the marketing managers tools – brands, price, products – necessary are human inventions (Deetz 1992) and thus always “subjective,” whatever that means. Thus, the strong functionalist assumption impairs the marketing perspective from observing, commenting and illuminating potential important phenomena.

- managerialist. The marketing perspective on brands and branding advances from a purely managerial point of view. That is, conceptual advances are explicitly and implicitly geared towards better managerial practices (for explicit examples, see Rossiter et al 1991, Keller 1993, Keller et al 1998, Dillon et al 2001). This is not problematic per se. It can be argued that better managerial practices may be a social good by, for example, leading to less waste with scarce resources and to better and more accurate identification of human needs and wants.

However, these claims cannot be taken for granted. Such an approach is politically naive, morally questionable, and scientifically dishonest. What is good for management may not automatically be good for everybody else. Such assumptions, which clearly underpins most, if not all, marketing conceptions of brands and branding, puts the researcher in jeopardy of serving a particular social interest, rather than truth and/or social and scientific progress.

Branding as management of meaning

The marketing perspective on brands blackboxes internal organizational processes. From this point of view, organizations are understood as tools for managerial action. However, organizations are not only objects or tools. They are also contexts where human activities take place. The idea that organizations are objects with properties that to some extent are possible to manipulate in preferred directions is useful, but it is also limited. It ignores that organizations are settings where people act and interact. From this standpoint, technologies, structures and (brand) strategies certainly affects people, but not necessarily unambiguously, and hardly in a way that makes it justifiable to claim that they determine behavior – and only that. Rather, they are phenomena deemed more or less significant among people affiliated to the setting in question – phenomena that people tries to figure out, act upon and create responses to.

As stated above, viewing organizations as context assumes that an organization, rather than being a 'thing' of some sort, sums up to the particular circumstances at hand for people operating collaboratively. It assumes that organizational activities occur within boundaries – thus allowing some discretion and integrity to the notion of organization – but views these boundaries to be outcomes of continuous negotiations and, thus, as products of organizational processes rather than as properties of the object under study. It recognizes the often inert, framed, routinized and standardized nature of organizational activities but does not ascribe this to be inherent attributes in a mystical entity. Rather, it assumes inert, framed, routinized and standardized organizational action to be effects of recurrent social practices – practices caught up in and interwoven into webs of power relations, traditions, values, meanings, interactions and technologies.

From this point of view, managerial activity may be conceptualized as a system of persuasion that, among other things, attempts to influence the way organizational members enact a socially constructed reality. As Alvesson (1995) points out, even a formal reorganization of a fairly simple kind such as the introduction of new departmental boundaries, new routines, or new lines of communication call for some adaptations in the minds of those involved. Their ideas about

formal structure must change or be changed. Thus, significant managerial activity may be focused on affecting meanings and interpretations of the symbolic universe organizational members operate in. Cultural organizing processes constitute a crucial element in organizations. Such processes are often referred to as “symbolic management” (Alvesson and Berg 1992; Pfeffer 1981), “normative control” (Etzioni 1960, Kunda 1992) or “management of meaning” (Smircich and Morgan 1982).

In this paper, we understand brands and branding activities not primarily as marketing tools, but rather as a way of expressing preferred values and meanings. We understand brands as a symbol that is attempted to be charged with a particular meaning and a preferred interpretation. Thus, we focus on the brand as a vehicle for management of meaning and its internal effects among the organizational members.

Method.

The research that provides the empirical basis of this study includes longitudinal case studies of several organizations. The empirical foundation for this particular article draws, however, almost exclusively on one longitudinal case study: a study of a management consulting firm. The fieldwork started in September 1999 and is, as I write (March 2002), still on-going.

The empirical material consists of transcripts from 52 interviews with 45 persons, as well as notes from participate observation in several organizational gatherings. The participative observation includes following a team for two work days, participation in training sessions, and participation in various setting where organizational members have communicated internally, as in competence group meetings and the yearly meeting for everybody in managerial positions, and externally, as when presenting the company for students.

People from all parts of the organization have been interviewed: the CEO, partners, people in managerial positions, support staff, newly recruited organizational members and so on. There have been a bias towards the upper echelons in the company: We – the field material have been generated by a group of three researchers – have, in relative terms, focused more on experienced people with a couple years in the firm than on fairly junior people, which, in numerical terms dominate the firm. Thus, our sample is not representative, at least not in a demographical sense. However, we claim that our approach is better equipped for generating relevant and insightful material than a mechanical body-count representative sampling procedure would, since suchg a procedure would force us to include more people with arguably lesser experience and insight into the firm.

Fieldwork has been conducted through an open and emergent approach (Alvesson & Deetz 2001). More specifically, this means that we have not restricted us to a strict interview protocol. Instead we have based interview questions on a set of common themes, which consequently have been adapted to the particular developments of each interview. As our understanding of the field has developed, our lines of inquiry have followed suit. For example, findings and understanding from our first 20 interviews was organized in emergent themes, that was used as input in new interviews, both in terms of questions asked and whom to talk to. In this way we have been able to refine our understanding of the themes that have emerged, without provide excessive a priori closure to field-work practices.

The analysis of the material has proceeded from a perspective that may be labelled *discursive pragmatism* (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a, 2000b) In practical terms this means that I primarily draws upon discursively produced outcomes, such as texts and conversations. However, in contrast to certain version of discourse analysis (c.f. Potter & Wetherell 1987) it is assumed that our material allows interpretations beyond this specific level. The approach also differs from Foucauldian style discourse analysis, which tend to take an interest in phenomena that have impact on societal level (e.g. sexuality, gender, governmentality). This version of discourse analysis draws on the idea that discourse and texts are important in their own right but also important as clues to extra-linguistic issues. The study of discourses (i.e., verbal interactions or written accounts) provides an opportunity to gain insight on issues more or less loosely connected to discourse. Such issues may include symbolic aspect of organizational realities (corporate culture), structural aspects of organizational work (division of labor) and interactive aspects of the construction and reproduction of particular selves (social identity).

Discursive pragmatism cannot, of course, provide a complete understanding of the phenomena under investigation – to provide the definite story. Social reality is too complex, too equivocal, and too rich to be meaningfully reduced into one complete story. Discursive pragmatism may delimit the space available for claims on general and broad patterns in the setting under investigation, but it will not exclude such claims. Claims of general relevance in the discursive pragmatist approach are achieved through michroanchored theory (Knorr-Cetina, 1981) and on the inter- and intracontextual character of the findings. Discursive pragmatism admits for systematic comparisons within the setting where field-work has been carried out, and thus, for example, for claims of findings on the level of meaning that appears to be stable across various context.

The case

DeliverIT Consulting is a multinational consulting company. It has demonstrated sustained capacity for growth and profitability. It has developed long term and lasting business relationship with several big Swedish, European and American multinational companies. It is perceived as an attractive employer. It consistently ranks highly in student polls and is a popular employer among graduates.

The DeliverIT brand name may not be a household name but it is fairly well-known in the business sector, and also among students of business administration and engineering. It has attempted to strengthen its brand recognition through various advertising campaigns, which indicates that the brand per se is viewed as an important asset, at least potentially. We will discuss the impact of the brand on two levels, the organizational and the individual level. Since the brand is a way of summarizing key aspects of the organization, the organizational level is an obvious focus of analysis. The organizational level allows us to discuss the extent the brand is actively used as a managerial tool. The individual level is important, because it makes it possible for us to discuss the effects of the brand as management of meaning.

The organizational level: the brand and organizational identity

From an organizational point of view, the brand has external and internal effects. The external effects concern the impact of the brand on stakeholders outside the company, such as clients, competitors, suppliers, and shareholders. Since DeliverIT has managed to self-finance its growth, does not operate in a business with extensive government regulation and does not particularly depend on suppliers, the brand targets two main external stakeholders in particular: the clients and prospective employees.

The two markets: clients and recruitment

DeliverIT has managed to create a fairly consistent picture of its core strengths to clients through its brand. The excerpt below is illustrative:

My experience is that they have an enormous cadre of young and competent people. Now, competence may always be a contested issue but their analytical skills, their fast understanding of our situation has been absolutely fantastic. But they cost a helluva lot of money. (Client)

This view is fairly consistent with the view competitors, another external group, typically voice:

I think that they have a very good reputation. If I would by consultancy services, where I want somebody with a good reputation, and where everybody are more or less the same, there is no other company I would use. They are a bit square, guys wearing suits. Well, business casual nowadays since the introduction of the new dress code. They are competent but square. I the bottom line is that they have a positive reputation which means that they can afford to be expensive (former employee, manager at a competing consultancy firm)

The really good and big consultancy firms, such as ThinkIT, DownsizeIT, and to a certain extent DeliverIT whose reputation steadily is on the rise, their strength is that their brands are so strong that their partners and senior consultants matter less. And we aim for that, too. If you look at ThinkIT, a guy that is part of a team multiplies his worth in comparison to if he would defect and start his own company. (Partner, competing consultancy firm)

In this sense, it can be argued that DeliverIT's brand is a success. It seems to be able to communicate core capabilities, to the extent that competitors see them as role models. Unsurprisingly, organizational members indicate that prospective clients usually may be found lacking in terms of brand knowledge.

I believe that the clients know much less about DeliverIT than we desire. They really can't experience anything when they see our brand. The firms we haven't worked with don't know much about DeliverIT. Nice logotype, cheesy TV commercials. Appears to be expensive. The commercials too. High production values. They know that we are expensive. (Support staff senior manager)

Interestingly, this indicates that clients may be a target for the brand, but may be less affected by it than other stakeholders. Below, we will elaborate on the "others" who may be more affected by the brand. One such other external stakeholder is, obviously, prospective organizational members. They are, of course, unlikely to buy any services, but the brand still may be important here. As one organizational member puts it:

To attract people, of course. Recruitment. The brand helps. It is important for our ability to recruit people. We are always in the top of the lists of the most attractive firms. And that's good for our little group, too, that the brand attracts good people. (Support staff manager)

Recruitment is a key activity for management in a consultancy firm, in particular for achieving growth, but also for securing capable employees. A strong and well-known brand facilitates recruitment, thus potentially having impact not only on sales and market share but also in securing key resources – in particular for knowledge-intensive firms. This aspect of the versatility of brands also hints towards its internal uses, from a management point of view. Such internal uses will be developed below.

Internaleffects

According to organizational members the brand may be equal or even more important internally as externally. For example, members sometimes perceive that certain advertising campaigns focus organizational members, rather than other stakeholders, such as existing and prospective clients. As one member puts it:

"The brand is very important for us. Of course, the value of exposing it at airports might be debatable, but it is important for us who works here, that we work in a firm that put an effort in being visible and articulate in the public eye. It is important towards the labor market, in particular, towards student and other potential employees. It is probably not as important towards our clients. Personal relations matter more there. (consultant)

Actually, several organization members indicate that the brand is probably more important internally than externally. For example, one member claims that the brand is probably the

most obvious indicator of a common identity, and is work upon as such by management in various ways:

[The brand] is very important internally. We gather around our DeliverIT affiliation.. Our membership in the club. For example we have recently conducted an employee satisfaction-survey. The first question is, it is a five grade scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, "DeliverIT is a great place to work". That is the first question. I mean, the alternative is "How would you objectively rate DeliverIT as an employer?" Even in this context one tries strengthen and enhance the affiliation to and the identification with DeliverIT (Support staff senior manager)

The informant develops and elaborates upon the "club" theme:

"I think that we have managed to keep the distance towards ThinkIT – which is more of a New York firm, with expensive suits, lavish conferences, always the most expensive hotels suites – with a hard working mid-western work ethic. More or less. You don't put on your blue-collar shirt, but you work in your sleeves, undo the tie, and and get the work done.. If ThinkIT is Armani, then DeliverIT is Boss. Good quality for quite a lot of money but not heart-stopping expensive.. We are not among the lawyers and we are not among the accountants, imagewise. We are somewhere between. ThinkIT is among the lawyers or investment bankers. And frankly, that is positive for us. (Support staff senior manager)

The brand is, in this sense, a powerful device for creating, elaborating, developing and maintaining an organizational identity. It provides a way to summarize the work ethic, a particular way of life, relative modesty, status, relative prestige, core values, and – when read carefully – a chip on the shoulder, admittedly articulated in a roundabout and ambiguous way. Organization identity is typically defined as "the set of beliefs shared by top managers and stakeholders about the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics of an organization". (Scott & Lane 2000:44, drawing on Albert & Whetten 1985). In this sense, organization identity is a concept that probes further and attempts to capture a more complex phenomena reach than the brand, at least according conventional definition of the concept of the brand, which views the brand as an identifier. Organizational identity includes this aspect but also attempts to capture identifiers that are inert, resist change and have emerged over time. As Gioia et al (2000:64) put it: "Core features of identity are presumed to be resistant to ephemeral or faddish attempts to alteration because of their ties to the organization's history". Organizational identities are forged, as all social phenomena, in social processes. Organizational identity construction processes are typically defined in broad terms, as, for example, in Scott and Lane's (2000:45) definition: "the processes, activities, and events through which organizational identity becomes specified in the minds of organizational managers and stakeholders". Scott and Lane (2000) suggest that the construction of organizational identities lies in the hand of management: organizations impress desired images on their stakeholders through managerial action. Although management typically has high stakes in forging a good/successful/persuasive organization identity, and often engage in activities to sponsor a preferred identity (commercials, PR activities, kick-off's, customer meetings) they rarely – if ever – controls the identity ascribed to an organization.

Organizational identities are inert by definition and thus leave little room for continuous manipulation. This does not mean that organizational identities are completely stable and eternal. Organizational identities may be viewed as stable but still possible to reframe, reenact and re-interpret. As Gioia et al (2000) points out, organizational identities may better be seen as continuous rather than enduring:

“The notion of an identity that is enduring implies that identity remains the same over time that it have some permanency. An identity with a sense of continuity, however, is one that shifts in its interpretation and meaning while retaining labels for core beliefs and values that extend over time and context” (Gioia et al 2000:65)

Organizational identity differs from the related concept of image in that image typically is reserved for external stakeholder’s perceptions on the organization. Loosely defined, following Gioia et al (2000) image is the way the organization is perceived from an audience point of view, the audience here being any external stakeholder. There is an often uneasy relationship between image and organizational identity, a relationship that may spur members to engage in organizational identification more strongly. As Gioia et al (2000:67) put it: “[i]mage often acts as a destabilizing force on identity, frequently requiring members to revisit and reconstruct their organizational self”

As indicated above, the brand not only provides material for forging an organization identity. It also seems to provide cues and hints for how organizational members should be. In other words, it seemingly provides material for the construction and development of a professional and social identity.

The individual level: the brand as career leverage and identity provider

As indicated above, the brand has also uses and consequences on an individual level. I will point at two such uses and consequences: its instrumental value and its cues for identity construction.

The brand as a career booster

From an instrumental point of view, organizational members find the brand particularly useful for their career development:

But, it affects me on a personal level, that’s clear, Future career prospects is one important aspect. It is most certainly not bad to have been working here a couple of years, if one would want to move on to another company. In that sense, it affects you. And that’s probably good for the company as a whole. (support staff manager)

In fact, there are claims that the brand can operate as a substitute for a CV:

Our people have a very good reputation. If you have a CV that says that you have worked at DeliverIT for five years, they simply don’t give a damn about other qualifications, such as academic merits and examina. They don’t look at anything else. They just give them an offer. They know that we have rigorously tested them before they were offered anything here, and that we also have developed and educated them. Our people is very attractive. It makes us a bit exposed. (senior consultant)

Ironically, the brand thus, in this sense, becomes a liability for DeliverIT. The fact that the brand signifies a competent and capable work force makes the work force attractive on the labor market. Thus, the brand does not only create value for DeliverIT. It also creates value for its organizational members on an individual level, making it possible for individuals to leverage the brand for the own personal purposes. This effect is probably most acutely felt in knowledge-intensive firms, that is highly dependant on their work force. But it can be assumed that this is a general effect of the brand: that it provides leverage for individuals. This help us to understand why it almost always the most attractive people that leaves troubled firms – particularly knowledge-intensive firms. The brand association no longer provides leverage. Rather, it has become a liability.

The brand as identity material

However, the brand has not only instrumental value for organizational members as individuals. It also provides, as indicated above, material for identification and the construction of a professional identity. As one organization member puts it:

The DeliverIT brand stands for professionalism. It means that I'm serious and professional in my work. I must confess that I like the aura of the DeliverIT brand. I know that I was recruited to an elite and that I am still considered to be worthy an organization that recruits the best students, has the best clients and makes a lot of money. We employ one out of hundred that apply for work here. We have long and trying tests and evaluations and I have passed them all. DeliverIT is successful. We have passed ThinkIT as the most attractive employer among students at Stockholm School of Economics. It is a charmed and self-sustaining loop. But it also makes DeliverIT vulnerable, because if the brand ends up under a cloud, the charmed loop can quickly be transformed into a vicious one. (consultant)

Thus, the brand provides elite confirmation: a symbol of belonging to 'the best and the brightest'. The idea of an elite, as summarized by the brand, is justified and reinforced through extensive recruitment procedures, rich opportunities for competence development, cooperation with bright people, continous evaluation and feed-back procedures, high wages and career prospects, (either within or outside the company), and the up-or-out promotion system associated with the firm. The brand tells the member that he or she is a successful member of a successful firm; that he or she has the right stuff in terms of being bright, ambitious, and capable; and that in fact what makes the firm great also makes he or she great.

The brand and organizational identification

In this sense, the brand provides both meaning and instruction. As indicated above such meaning and instruction may vary, depending on, for example, stakeholder status. From an external stakeholder's perspective – as a customer or supplier – the brand provide interpretive cues on what to expect in terms of quality, expertise, and price. Since DeliverIT provides services, rather than product, such expectations concern member's conduct in interaction,

rather than product characteristics. As Scott and Lane (2000:46) points out: “[i]ndividuals enter a social interaction with prior beliefs about the self-concepts, values, and goals, and they make initial assessments of audience (e.g., their expectations, goals, and beliefs) and situational characteristics (e.g., social rules and roles) within which interaction will occur”. DeliverIT typically claims that their services are non-standard and demand intellectual effort. Thus, from an intra-organizational perspective, such expectations cues not only specific behaviors but also a particular mentality and mindset. In this sense, and as argued above, the brand summarizes and highlights key aspects of the organizational identity. Thus, it provides material for organizational identification. According to Bartel (2001:380) organizational identification “reflects a perception of oneness with or belonging to an organization such that a member’s perceptions about its defining qualities become self-referential or self-defining...”. Scott and Lane (2000) suggest three mechanisms for organizational identification cuing: the presentation of organizational images in organizational communications, the enhancement of the visibility of stakeholder’s organizational affiliations, and the embedding of stakeholders within the organizational community. The brand is, of course, ubiquitous in at least two of this three mechanisms: the brand is always present in presentations and documents used in internal communications, and is present in most client interaction, as a – often the only – remainder of who’s who, thus visualizing the organization and the organizational affiliation’s in communicative situations.

In a sense, the brand mediates organizational identity and image. As a powerful symbol, it discursively projects core values and feed-backs audience interpretations of the brand, through expectations and other interactional cues. Since the brand also is part of the organization’s image, the brand may affect organizational identification in two ways, directly by providing identity cues, and indirectly by the destabilising effect of external stakeholder’s interpretations and expectations, as noted above.

The brand as a key symbol

As a management consultancy firm, DeliverIT primarily employs knowledge workers – qualified professionals with university degrees. DeliverIT claims to provide advanced expertise and sophisticated solutions in several areas, such as business strategy, system development and system integration. In this sense, DeliverIT may be viewed as an example of a knowledge-intensive firm (Blackler 1995, Alvesson 1995). The label “knowledge-intensive” is problematic: it is vague and is, to some extent, more mystifying than revealing, since all kinds of work is based on knowledge. In this paper, following Alvesson (2001b) I will view

knowledge-intensive firms as organizations that claim particular knowledge. Such knowledge claims are defended, not because organizations actually have to demonstrate that they have superior knowledge, but rather because they operate in highly ambiguous circumstances that make knowledge claims difficult to test. Ultimately, knowledge-claims are here better understood as ambiguity-coping strategies than knowledge in any conventional sense.

Ambiguity makes its presence felt in several ways for kifs. The concept of knowledge is, for example, highly ambiguous thus making both the product in kifs – knowledge – and its production processes – knowledge development and maintenance – ambiguous in character. Although kifs claim to have particular knowledge it is often difficult to evaluate whether application of this particular knowledge is a significant part of what organizational members actually do. Tasks are uncertain, unique, unstable and complex, thus making it difficult to apply appropriately codified expert knowledge. They may vary from time to time and are often distributed to organizational members with little relevant experience.

The work results at kifs are, by nature, characterized by uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Expertise presupposes difficulty, which by definition will not exist if tasks are easy to master and includes standard solutions. Customer interaction, and learning processes typically fuel task uncertainty and complexity, thus adding to existing ambiguity. Hence, work results from kifs are difficult to evaluate and compare, and sometimes even to clearly identify.

Branding can be interpreted as an ambiguity-coping strategy towards external stakeholders. It provides a way of powerfully communicating certain qualities. In the case of DeliverIT, it communicates values, such as commitment to deliver on time and according to plan, a certain work ethic, and an emphasis on the collective, rather than the individual. It communicates certain capabilities, such as global reach, financial strength, and depth and breadth of competence. In short, it preempts and details expectations, suggesting the nature of the service, the delivery, and the price in advance, thus reducing ambiguity and complexity, at least on a perceptual and superficial level.

Interestingly, the brand also reduces ambiguity internally through providing particular meaning. In this sense, the brand operates as a key symbol. According to Ortner (1973) key symbols might be identified in a number of ways: that an informant tells the researcher that the symbol is key, that the symbol evokes emotions, that its nature is of particular interest, that it is ambiguous and/or is embedded in restrictions, tabus, and sanctions. The brand accommodate almost all items in this set of features. Informants think it is important, sometimes

obsesses over its meaning, respond emotionally to it, and its usage and meaning is formally monitored, pruned and developed.

We will point to two aspects that highlights the significance of the brand as a key symbols, and thus as an expression of attempts towards managed meaning. The brand summarizes complex elements and relationships, and stereotypes responses and conduct.

- Summarizing: summarize complex, ambiguous and even contradictory elements. The brand attempts to – successfully, it seems – to communicate a summary of what DeliverIT stands for: professionalism, quality, reliability, collectivism, competence, expensive but valuable services. The story is simple, coherent, persuasive. It summarizes and symbolizes a seemingly integrated set of virtues and capabilities. In doing so, it glosses over, downplays, and redirects attention from obvious differences, complexities and contradictions. For example, DeliverIT caters a broad variety of markets segments: it provides services and products ranging from maintaining decades-old administrative systems over implementing modern data management systems to design and implement organizational change, and to design corporate strategy and coach executives. It covers several branches: telecommunications, manufacturing, financial services, and the public sector, just to mention the most important ones. Projects differ wildly in terms of scope and scale. Some projects last a couple of months, other keeps on going on for years. Some projects employ only one team (a team is three to four organization members) or even just the odd consultant (rare), other projects employ hundreds of members. Members differ in experience: some have just recently left the university and have not experienced more than one or two clients, others have been there for more than ten years. Still, the brand is capable of giving sense to the idea that DeliverIT is coherently successful in this incoherent mix of contingencies – due to a coherent set of vices and capabilities.

- stereotypifying: The brand provides templates of conduct, recipes of action, and role characterization, thus stereotypifying social interaction. This happens partly because of its summarizing power, partly because of the service nature of the consultancy business. DeliverIT is a service provider and has to deal with the fact that they sell an act, rather than an artifact. As an act it is typically manufactured more or less in interaction with the client, and thus also typically include the client's co-operation. From this perspective the brand provides interpretive clues to the interaction. It tells more or less what the clients can expect from the consultants, and also something on what is expected from the client. More significantly, it tells the consultant what is expected from him or her, both in terms of what the client is expecting but also in terms of what superiors and peers is expecting.

This may not always be a positive thing. As one of our informants puts it:

Sometimes I don't even tell people that I am from DeliverIT. I tell them the project I am working in, but not more than that, because there are so much prejudice and it is just too much to handle. I remember a project a year ago on the commuter a guy from the project sat down beside me and started to bullshit about the DeliverIT consultants. Eventually I told him that I also belonged to DeliverIT. That put an end to the conversation. (manager)

The stereotyping effects provided by the brand can thus backfire, and create prejudices that constrain rather than enable organizational members. This points to an important theoretical aspect of key symbols. They are discursive terminals: they open up avenues of meaning, as developed above, but also provide discursive closure – the suspension of dissent, difference, and discussion (Deetz 1992).

Conclusion

Although the concept of the brand typically is used from a marketing point of view this study demonstrates that the concept has potential to illuminate organizational phenomenon. However, as discussed earlier in the paper, due to the shortcomings of the marketing conceptualization – more specifically, its undersocialized, behaviouralist, functionalist, and managerialist character – the concept needs to be rethought. In this paper, I have argued for a constructionist understanding of the concept with a specific intent to illustrate how the brand can be understood as a way of exercising management of meaning.

The empirical material from the case study suggests that the brand highlights and focuses key aspects of the organization identity. Second, it suggests that the brand provides cues for organizational identification, thus affecting both organizational and individual identity. Third, it is suggested that the brand mediates organization identity and image, thus potentially influencing organizational identification both directly and indirectly.

Finally, I argue that the brand can be interpreted as a way to cope with the inherent ambiguity in knowledge work. In this sense, the brand operates as a key symbol. As such it provides interpretive and action cues through summarizing and stereotyping events, persons, and recipes for action. In the summarizing mode, the brand expresses core values and beliefs. In the stereotyping mode, the brand cues templates for action and conduct in interaction.

Although this study demonstrates the value of using the concept of the brand to illuminate organizational phenomenon, it hardly exhausts the topic. In fact, it can be argued that the study creates more questions than it answers. For example, the study does not and cannot say whether it is a general – here understood as empirically frequent – phenomenon, if it is a local – here understood as rare – phenomenon, or, indeed if it is a typical phenomenon and for

what category of, say, organizations it is typical of. To answer such questions more research – theoretical as well as empirical – is needed.

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