The dynamics of corporate brand charisma: Routinization and activation at Carlsberg IT

Mary Jo Hatch a,*, Majken Schultz b

*Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School, Kilevej 14 A-2000, Copenhagen F., Denmark

bCopenhagen Business School, USA

KEYWORDS
Brand charisma; Corporate branding; Weber’s routinization of charisma theory; Reception and activation of charisma; Carlsberg Group; Management of IT

Summary This article describes how Carlsberg Group’s IT unit (CIT) made use of Carlsberg’s corporate brand to develop its identity following centralization and downsizing of the IT function. Our observations suggested using the concept of brand charisma and thereafter we framed our analysis with Weber’s theory of the routinization of charisma. The study took place in the relatively unusual context of a truncated rollout of a formal corporate branding program, which allowed us to study the processes by which brand charisma was routinized. Findings indicate the important intermediary role played by middle managers who selected and systematized the set of brand beliefs taken up within the CIT project, and how employees accommodated these beliefs to their everyday work life. Accommodation was found to take place within four subdomains of activity: subculture, communication, technology, and hierarchical control. A key finding is that, through their reception and activation of brand charisma, the CIT employees contributed greatly to the endowment of charisma their brand carried. A revised Weberian model of the dynamic relationships between the routinization of charisma and its reception and activation constitutes our contribution to corporate branding theory. The article also offers empirical evidence in support of extending Weberian scholarship further into the field of brand management.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

In response to Marshall Meyer (1990), who questioned Max Weber’s relevance to contemporary organization studies, Lounsbury and Carberry (2005) countered that, although Weberian scholarship in organization studies has dwindled, Weber’s theories continue to offer fertile ground to organizational researchers. To illustrate their point, Lounsbury and Carberry used Weber’s work to explain globalization, post-industrialism, and varieties of capitalism in the information age. We think that corporate branding is another contemporary phenomenon amenable to Weberian analysis and devote this article to exploring what Weber’s theory of the routinization of charisma might reveal about corporate branding.

Interest in corporate branding migrated into organization studies from marketing, mainly in relation to research on organizational identity. In the realm of management practice, Olin (1989), Kapferer (1992), Ind (2001, 2003), Hatch and Schultz (2001) and Palmer and Greyser (2003) were among those who made connections between organizational identity and corporate brand management. Somewhat later, in the academic literature, Hatch and Schultz (2008) proposed organizational identity theory as a foundation for understanding how corporate branding works, while Kärreman and Rylander (2008) and Tarnovskaya (2011) presented...
empirical evidence of how employees used corporate brands as sources of meaning in their organizational identity work.

Our study of the role corporate branding played in a case of organizational identity building in Carlsberg Group’s IT function prompted us to investigate the concept of brand charisma, a term Smothers (1993) introduced into marketing in relation to product branding. Following Weber (1922/66), Smothers argued that brand charisma is a social construction of the consumers and customers who give a product brand its legitimacy. This article extends Smothers’ concept of brand charisma from product to corporate branding and thereby turns empirical attention from consumers’ relationships to brands to those of employees. We then move considerably beyond Smothers’ thesis to investigate whether Weber’s theory of the routinization of charisma explains how Carlsberg’s corporate brand exercised charisma.

We begin by reviewing the literature on brand charisma and Weber’s definition and theory of how charismatic leadership becomes routinized. We then abstract from Weber a framework for the analysis of our case consisting of three more or less sequential stages, each operating in a different hierarchical domain: (1) introduction of brand beliefs by top management; (2) their systematization by middle management; and (3) their reception and activation by employees. The empirical data to which we apply the framework comes primarily from interviews conducted with members of the IT unit of Carlsberg Group (CIT), and from material they created to document their process. In conformance to the theory of routinization laid out by Weber, our data analysis describes the role middle management played in systematizing brand beliefs, and the CIT employees’ accommodation of these beliefs to their everyday life.

Discussion then focuses on how the activities we observed not only accomplished the routinization of charisma, but also account for the endowment of charisma the brand carries. Endowment, we postulate, consists of at least two interrelated processes defined as the reception → activation of brand charisma. We conclude that interactions between the endowment and routinization of brand charisma observed in our case study extend Weber’s theory and reveal the dynamics of corporate brand charisma. Finally we present some implications of our findings for practicing brand managers.

**Corporate brands and Weber’s theory of charisma**

Although Smothers introduced the concept of brand charisma back in 1993, few have followed up on this idea. Those referring to his work tend either to underplay or dismiss it. In their review of brand equity theory, Thakor and Kohli (1996) lumped brand charisma together with brand image, brand personality, brand affinity, brand relationships and brand attitude, as if there were no significant differences between these constructs. Meanwhile McWilliam (1997), in justifying his study of low involvement brands, accused Smothers of reifying brands by suggesting they could have charisma. Reification being at the time and for some time since considered a mortal sin among the ranks of social scientists, the debate seems to have ended with McWilliam’s critique. However, after studying Carlsberg Group employees’ strongly emotional reception of a corporate brand initiative and what prompted it, we are inclined to come down on Smothers’ side.

The case for brand charisma Smothers (1993) presented departs from the observation that many more powerful brands exist than can be accounted for by the presence of charismatic leaders, for example, Coke, Nike and BMW. Although instances of leaders providing significant personal charisma to their corporate brands can be found — Apple’s Steve Jobs and Richard Branson’s Virgin — considerably more products and brands ignite the fervent passions of their constituents than there are charismatic corporate leaders to account for their power and influence.

Smothers (1993) relied on Weber (1922/66) to provide a definition and an explanation for product brand charisma. Weber (1947: 329) defined charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities.” According to Smothers, establishing that a brand has charisma amounts to demonstrating it is endowed with exceptional qualities by those it touches.

Reasoning by analogy, Smothers then argued that, if the social construction of a leader’s charisma occurs among his or her followers, consumers similarly construct what charisma a brand or product can claim. Although Smothers follows Weber in assigning responsibility for the social construction of brand charisma to consumers, he does not specify clearly how this process unfolds, which is one contribution this article will make. Another contribution is the extension of Smothers reasoning to employees’ constructions of corporate brand charisma. A third is to bring the routinization of charisma into view. A major premise of our argument is that employees engage in the same processes that consumers use when they endow product brands with charisma, and that these processes are similar if not identical to those Weber used to explain the endowment of a leader with charisma and how that charisma comes to be routinized.

Weber had much to say on the matter of the processes through which charisma is routinized, somewhat less to say about its endowment. According to Weber (1968/78), although significant societal change originates in the introduction of new beliefs by a charismatic leader, the processes by which such change comes about take place within everyday life where the beliefs are subjected to routinization, which includes both systematization and accommodation processes (see Fig. 1).

According to Weberian scholar Schroeder (1992: 17, 20), Weber claimed that:

... the struggle between charisma and routinization describes the flux between the initially revolutionizing impact of beliefs and their eventual accommodation to everyday life. Not the origin of world-views, but their subsequent force in shaping conduct and social relations is important ... once beliefs have come into existence through the assertion of charisma, their reception among certain strata depends on the predispositions of these strata ... These predispositions, in turn, depend on the social circumstances of the various strata, on their position in relation to other strata and on their common way of life.
Weber argued that in systematization disciples of the charismatic leader extend charismatic authority into everyday life, in the process dissipating some of the revolutionary appeal of the initial influence through association with the mundane, but also bringing it into alignment with culture. “A stratum of interpreters elaborates the belief-system so that it constitutes a coherent whole and its tenets are extended to apply to various aspects of everyday life” (Schoeder, 1992: 10). Thereafter accommodation involves negotiations around the interpretations and implementations of the new beliefs whereby extant obligations shape and alter the charismatic influence in ways that bring it further into line with the familiar and which cause it to conform to existing material, economic, political and social relations.

As Schoeder (1992: 10) noted: “… there is an accommodation of the belief-system to the interests of various strata of believers. As a result, its content corresponds more and more closely with what these strata, on the basis of their social position, had already been predisposed to believe or with their everyday conduct.” According to Weber (1968/78: 146), charisma does not stabilize; rather charismatic influence interacts with traditional or rational-legal influences present within the society or organization. Weber thus explained the dynamism of charisma as the result of demands made by everyday life on those who endow a leader with charisma. These demands push the recipients of charismatic influence to maintain the stability of their social position and material wellbeing (e.g., serve their family obligations, and their political and economic interests), even as charisma propels them toward change. This places the conflict between stability and change within those who respond to and thereby activate charisma.

Based on our review of Weber’s theory about the routinization of charisma we propose to examine the sequence of developments shown from left to right in Fig. 1 through analysis of our case study materials. Our data and methods are presented next, followed by analysis of how Carlsberg’s corporate brand became routinized within CIT through the systematization and accommodation of charismatic brand beliefs. The endowment and reception → activation of corporate brand charisma by CIT employees is treated in the discussion that follows the case presentation and analysis. We conclude the article by addressing the simultaneous unfolding of two processes Weber’s theory suggested to us underpin corporate brand charisma: (1) the process of routinizing beliefs associated with the brand, systematizing and accommodating them to everyday life within the organization, and (2) the process of endowing the brand with charisma, within which middle managers and employees, in receiving selected beliefs about the brand, activate its potential to influence them.

Data and methods

We studied the organizational developments following Carlsberg Group’s corporate brand rollout starting with its formal launch in the spring of 2009. Intended to support post-acquisition integration, one manifestation of the corporate branding process was the articulation of a new aspirational corporate brand platform known internally as The Stand, shorthand for “what we stand for”. It was while exploring how various subsidiaries perceived and made use of The Stand that we came across the CIT project described below.

Late in 2010 a key informant alerted us to a Virtual Friday Bar celebrating the end of CIT’s Brewing Greatness project. In January 2011 we conducted interviews with Carlsberg’s then CIO who headed CIT, and two middle managers who led the project: the Senior Manager of Corporate Communication IT, and a Communication Consultant who had been hired on a project basis to do identity building within CIT. At this time we viewed four videos documenting the project and were given an extensive PowerPoint-presentation summarizing its planning and implementation. In addition two project participants who happened to be available while we were on the premises shared their impressions with us.

After visiting several different subsidiaries we realized that Brewing Greatness represented one of the first and to date most comprehensive uses of The Stand within Carlsberg Group. We therefore conducted a second round of interviews, some virtual, at CIT’s offices in Copenhagen during August–September 2011. Ten project participants and the master brewer who helped design and manage the beer brewing process that comprised the main attraction of the project were interviewed at that time. We specifically sought people with diverse opinions and conducted interviews with all those recommended. Because we worked retrospectively, we were able to question whether the participants’ experiences had had a lasting influence on everyday life in CIT and if/how the brand ideas had affected their work or their organization.

At this time we also re-interviewed the two CIT middle managers responsible for designing and delivering the project, the head of CIT, and the corporate brand manager from Carlsberg Group, focusing on their impressions of the impact and reactions to the project in both CIT and elsewhere in the company. We also re-interviewed the senior executives directly involved in initiating The Stand in order to capture their knowledge of CIT’s Brewing Greatness Project and responses to it outside of CIT. Table 1 describes our data sources. All interviews ranged from 30 min to 1.5 h, were conducted in an open-ended style either face-to-face or using the company’s intranet platform, and all were taped and transcribed.

Data analysis involved derivation of themes following Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic methods and the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967). We relied primarily on
Table 1  Data sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of data</th>
<th>Specification of data</th>
<th>Origin of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Stand</td>
<td>PowerPoint slide presentation Video introducing The Stand internally</td>
<td>Produced by consultants in consultation with Exec Committee (ExCom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary Videos</td>
<td>Four 3–5 min videos showing employees in action, The Stand music track playing</td>
<td>Produced by student employee in Corporate Communication Department November 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brewing Greatness: Kick Off</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brewing Greatness: Starting the Brew</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brewing Greatness: The Label</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brewing Greatness: Bottling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>Brewing Greatness: 40 slides showing detailed presentation of stages of process</td>
<td>Produced by Corporate Communication team November 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IT Game plan for Carlsberg Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011–2013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with Project Organizers</td>
<td>Total interviews: 7 CIO (January/Jan 2010 &amp; September/ Sep 2011)</td>
<td>Face-to-face interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Based in Denmark)</td>
<td>Senior Manager Corp.com (Jan &amp; Sep)</td>
<td>Lasting between 1 and 2 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal Communication Consultant (Jan &amp; Sep)</td>
<td>All interview were taped and transcribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master brewer (Sep)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corporate Brand Manager (Sep)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with Participants</td>
<td>Total interviews: 12 Manager France (Jan &amp; Sep*)</td>
<td>Interviews marked × conducted virtually at Carlsberg HQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(multiple locations)</td>
<td>2 Employees Denmark (Sep)</td>
<td>Lasting between 30 and 45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee Finland (Sep*)</td>
<td>All interviews were taped and transcribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Employees France (Sep)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee Germany (Sep*)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee Croatia (Sep*)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee Switzerland (Jan* &amp; Sep*)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee, Office Coach UK (Sep*)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with Top Management (ExCom)</td>
<td>Total Interviews 4: SVP Communications &amp; CSR (November/Nov, Jan &amp; Sep)</td>
<td>Face-to-face interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SVP Group Innovation, Marketing &amp; Sale (Sep)</td>
<td>Lasting between 1 and 2 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All interview were taped and transcribed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

interview data to detail how the project came into being and what it involved, and to document employees’ interpretations of the project including characterizing their own and the reactions of their colleagues. As our analysis progressed we fed preliminary findings back to our key informants for their comments and further reflections.

Very few negative reactions to Brewing Greatness were registered within the CIT community. One, echoing top management concerns that IT needed to stay focused on its internal problems, mentioned wasted resources, while another criticized the project for not involving more people. Informants interpreted the largely positive, often enthusiastic responses to the project in relation to the context of uncertainty and feelings of local isolation and lack of appreciation that followed the downsizing and centralizing of CIT, conditions that had prompted development of the project. None of the participants claimed that Brewing Greatness transformed the day-to-day reality of this context, but nearly all we spoke with experienced the process as contributing to a stronger sense of belonging and the formation of a more cohesive and collaborative culture within CIT. We note that these effects would be expected from any form of participatory engagement in team-building and organizational development (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Mirvis, 2001), but argue that the charismatic qualities of Carlsberg’s brand brought an added dimension to these experiences.

One obvious weakness of our study is that we did not canvas a larger sample of CIT employees. The time demands of the larger study, of which this one was but a part, limited our exposure to the process. Also, having heard about the project at its conclusion, our only option was to study it in retrospect. Future studies of the routinization of brand charisma should aim to follow routinization processes more fully in real time, paying particular attention to
accommodation, which is difficult to capture as it is a widely distributed phenomenon happening among numerous people working in many places at the same time.

Case analysis: brewing greatness at Carlsberg IT

This section explores routinization activities conducted within three domains through which the Stand passed on its way to becoming part of Cit’s identity reconstruction process: introduction by Carlsberg Executive Committees, systematization within the ranks of Cit managers, and accommodation by Cit employees. Applying the framework shown in Fig. 1, our data analysis reveals the importance of “hand-offs” from one domain to the next, and indicates multiple subdomains of accommodation activity: subculture, communication, technology, and hierarchical control.

Introduction of the stand: corporate branding at Carlsberg Group

Until the late 1990s, Carlsberg Group was a regional brewing company operating mainly in the Nordic countries, UK and Malaysia. However, a decade of growth through major acquisitions, including in 2008 Brasserie Kronenbourg (France) and Baltika Breweries (Russia), elevated the company to the position of fourth largest brewer worldwide, moving it toward globalization and bringing with it the need for several significant organizational changes.

Creation of a regional structure to which local market serving organizations would report was one of the changes introduced to manage the much larger firm. To internationalize its leadership and better support its strategy to “be the fastest growing global beer company” the company hired a number of executives from several globally recognized fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies; we note that this response to recent marketplace developments occurred throughout the brewing industry at that time.

During our study we observed top executives committed to FMCG principles moving management hard in the direction of cost cutting and centralizing the key functions of IT, procurement, and supply chain management, while simultaneously voicing respect for the belief that “brewing will always be local”. This paradox was encapsulated by the term “glocal”, which was nearly always mentioned in the next breath after intoning desire for Carlsberg Group to be more like an FMCG company, though considerable confusion about the meaning of this term was manifest in our discussion with employees.

A corporate response to post-acquisition integration challenges of the much larger more international organization involved a corporate sponsored HR program called Winning Behaviors believed internally to have provided a more effective and expedient path to cultural change than had earlier value-driven efforts (see Gersen & Soderberg, 2012). However, one executive in particular felt that Winning Behaviors failed to articulate an identity for the now much larger Carlsberg Group as it simply stated, pragmatically, what employees should and could do to help the company and themselves within it. The desire on the part of the SVP of Corporate Communication to initiate a corporate branding effort as a follow on to Winning Behaviors was a move to symbolically integrate the now much larger organizational culture by promoting a cohesive identity.

Responding to the new business environment created by growth, the SVP of Group Sales, Marketing and Innovation (GSMI), recently hired away from a noted FMCG company, repositioned and re-launched its flagship Carlsberg Beer brand in international markets. To help with this effort he contracted a US-based consulting firm. With potential synergies to the re-launch of the product brand in mind, the SVP of Corporate Communication proposed jointly developing the Carlsberg Beer product brand and the Carlsberg Group corporate brand. In agreement, the SVP of GSMI funded development of a corporate brand positioning statement by the consultants. The consultants and the Carlsberg Group Executive Committee (ExCom) collaborated in the preparation of the corporate brand statement, timed to launch with the release of the repositioned Carlsberg Beer brand in March 2010. To avoid confusion, the product brand was known internally as The Brand while the identity statement was called The Stand (see Fig. 2).

The Stand was presented to employees as lying at the heart of the corporate growth strategy. The slogan “Thirst for Great: Great people. Great brands. Great moments.” was its headline. The Stand was presented to employees in a video with high production value and glossy eye-catching posters promoting key beliefs about Carlsberg including: “We never settle, but always thirst for the better”, “We brand as many, but stand as one”, “We constantly raise the bar”, “We brew a greater future,” all under the headline “Thirst for Great” (view the video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRcibNqWwKs&list=FLA7InOd4K6Ksz0SuwFf7Mjw&index=5).

The video also made references to company heritage through the symbolically laden word “brewing” and the corporate motto “Semper Ardens” (Always Burning).

While ExCom developed and introduced The Stand to Carlsberg’s employees, we argue it was employees who ultimately “endowed [The Stand] with . . . specifically exceptional qualities” . According to Weber (1947: 359), charisma arises “out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope”. Our informants often tied the enthusiasm they expressed for The Stand to their passion for brewing beer. A number of old timers we met throughout the company felt that this passion had languished following the recent shift to thinking of beer as a fast moving consumer good (FMCG), and

Thirst for Great


Founded on the motto, Semper Ardens – Always Burning – we never settle, but always thirst for the better.

We are stronger together because we share best practices, ideas, and successes. We brand as many, but stand as one.

With the courage to do, to try, to take risks, we constantly raise the bar.

We don’t stop at brewing great beer. We brew a greater future – for our consumers and customers, our communities, and our people.

This passion will continue to burn and forever keep us thirsty.

Carlsberg Group

Figure 2 Carlsberg Group Stand.
Carlsberg Group as an FMCG company. While the changes brought a sense of despair to these old timers, The Stand gave them hope that passion for beer and brewing would rise again. Interestingly, in the case of those newly hired into Carlsberg from the FMCG world, enthusiasm came from finding beer more engaging than toilet paper, soapsuds or razor blades. Thus, although devotion to the brand came in many shapes and sizes, it seems reasonable to conclude that employees from all parts of the company associated enthusiasm for the future with The Stand, in some instances delivering them from feelings of despair by calling forth hope. Thus all three of the sources of charisma cited by Weber manifested within Carlsberg at the time of our study.

Against the consultants’ advice, the company decided not to follow up the announcement of The Stand with an immediate formal corporate rollout. There were several reasons given for this decision. First, HR worried that a new program launched so soon after Winning Behaviors would confuse employees. Second, the CEO felt that corporate branding should develop “globally” rather than being forced onto subsidiaries and functions. Third, available budget for branding was tight due to heavy investment in recent acquisitions and in the global re-launch of Carlsberg Beer.

As a consequence of these considerations, implementation of The Stand was left primarily in the hands of those operating outside corporate headquarters. As they, too, were under significant pressure to decrease costs and streamline activities, most felt little incentive to do anything other than show The Stand video and display the posters. Many reasoned it was corporate’s responsibility to carry The Stand forward, not theirs. In the case of CIT, however, a different scenario unfolded.

**Routinization: brewing greatness in Carlsberg IT**

In this section we show how CIT middle managers systematized The Stand as introduced by top management by selectively embedding some of its key beliefs in their identity building effort. This first “handoff,” from top to middle management, saw the CIT middle managers (the first “stratum of interpreters”) engage in systematization by linking The Stand’s “Thirst for Great” theme to the physical act of brewing a beer. This activity was followed by a second “handoff” from the middle managers to CIT employees who, by brewing the beer and sharing it with their colleagues, accommodated beliefs about the corporate brand to their everyday lives.

**From introduction to systematization: linking “Thirst for Great” to brewing a beer**

September 2010 saw 17 local IT organizations spread across Northern and Western Europe downsized and centralized into one global IT function consisting of about 350 IT employees. This made CIT one of the first functions to experience the shift from a collection of local brewing operations to one integrated unit — at least in the European markets where IT’s centralization was first attempted. Integration involved outsourcing the help desk call center and redistributing retained roles and responsibilities through a new reporting structure. As the Senior Manager of Corporate Communication for IT explained, looking back:

So, for them and for us, this was new managers. You could have a new manager sitting in another country and for the first time in your life and you would have a new role. You should start working your new processes and you did not know where to find those processes. And people were getting quite frustrated and anxious about the future. And also now our chief IT man was no longer there.

CIT had long faced a less than positive image within the company. Some of its image problem stemmed from insatiable demand for IT services familiar to all IT professionals, some from problems CIT had not been able to resolve and which the reorganization was meant to address, and some from the effects of that reorganization. Particularly frustrating to employees was tension with local colleagues created by the transfer of local IT support to the outsourced call center. The Senior Manager for Corporate Communication IT explained:

They’re squeezed from group and from the local people all the time, sitting in this gap, trying to fill it out, trying to still make it to be local because they’re sitting in the local company. ... So suddenly you’re working across countries but your colleagues are not.

The confluence of these factors generated uncertainty, low self-esteem, and consequently a lack of enthusiasm among CIT employees. In this context two CIT middle managers, one of whom was the first in CIT to be introduced to The Stand through her reporting relationship to the SVP of Corporate Communication, regarded its “Thirst for Great” theme as a means to unleash the motivating potential of shared identity. This Senior Manager for Corporate Communication IT was working with an event management specialist who had been hired on a project basis as an Internal Communication Consultant to the IT Group, specifically to help build a shared identity and common culture within CIT. The Internal Consultant hit upon the idea of brewing a beer:

We were talking about how [to] get us closer together ... and we had a beer at one point. We’re sitting up in [the CIO’s] office ... on a Friday, and we’re talking about it, and suddenly ... it [the beer they were drinking] was something that had been produced up here for an event or something, where somebody had been here for 20 years and they brewed a [special] beer for him. And I was like, oh, you can do that? Ooh, that sounds interesting, and that sounds like there’s our symbol, that is what we’re doing. We had to find out ... what everybody is proud of, what we’re representing. That’s like OK, how can we link all of this history together? And duh — it’s right there in front of you, it’s a beer — that is technically what we’re doing, and there is where we have a common ground.

Thus the original inspiration for the CIT Brewing Greatness Project arose from the Consultant’s act of linking the “Thirst for Great” theme from The Stand to the idea of brewing a beer with her IT colleagues. For further inspiration she spent time in the historically preserved office of Carl Jacobsen, the second-generation owner of Carlsberg Breweries. There she found herself asking:

OK how can we do this? And mainly I was brainwashing myself with listening to The Stand, and playing the movie
constantly for a week, and trying to get some words out of it, and putting that together. And then linking it where I could say OK, what phrases can we put into our campaign, and then where it be possible to link it to the brewing part — so trying to meld them together.

When the two middle managers presented their idea to the CIO, he welcomed their initiative, expressing tremendous enthusiasm and offering his own ideas. As reported by the Consultant, he said: “It was really important for us to have something to build up our identity upon, and something that reflected the company, and the strategy, and the identity of the Carlsberg Group, and not only an IT department.” To this the Senior Corporate Communication Manager for IT added: “It was meant to be a process that built on The Stand, and what we stand for, and how we could Thirst for Great.” She continued: “For [the CIT employees] to feel like we’re delivering beer, we’re not making artists, we’re not IBM, we are Carlsberg. For me that identity is so important, so that, for me, ... whatever I do, I’ll try to put it on the beer agenda.”

The CIO claimed he immediately recognized charisma in the proposal:

The concept was so appealing that the people said let’s do this, this is, oh why don’t we do that, so things which were normally impossible ... [became] ... possible. So I think that a lot of the credit is actually down to the team and the people developing the idea on the fly as it sort of made more and more sense.

But once approved, the middle managers had a great deal of work to do to make their proposed project a reality. To help them get the project underway, the CIO called the head of the Carlsberg Research Center (where experimental brewing takes place) to ask for his support and involvement in the brewing part of the project. Referring to the corporate emphasis on cost cutting as well as the good relationship he shared with the head of research, the CIO explained: “We teamed up because this was a zero cost thing, so we had to use our network to get a master brewer. ... I told [the master brewer] how important it was for me, and so of course he stepped up.”

The brewmaster would oversee all brewing done by the IT participants, took sole responsibility for fermentation (which required little action), and coordinated distribution with the legal department. The brewmaster recalled how he explained the steps of brewing to the CIT middle managers, and where in the process he thought the project leaders could involve the Brewing Greatness participants:

Brewing is a one-day exercise where [the participants] mix the mould and water and then they create this liquid full of sugars which we then ferment with all the ingredients in. That’s the one-day exercise, so they were here for that. Then the fermentation itself is not that sexy. Basically you add the yeast and I think they were also here seeing that. And then sit ... We will do some sampling just to control where we are in the process and making sure that we know when the fermentation is over. But that’s a one to two week process, where there’s not much to do. So we decided this part plus the filtration which is not that interesting either we will do, and then they could come back and do the actual bottling and putting [on the caps and labels] ... [At that stage] you can basically see your product going into the bottle. ... Normally [you experience beer] the opposite way. Normally you see the bottle and take the product out; here you put in. So for them I think that was a good exercise and they all tried to see how they could get the beer into the bottle without having too much over-foaming and things like that.

With the brewmaster’s help, the CIT middle managers designed a participatory experience for representatives of CIT that would connect to The Stand, as this comment by the Communication Consultant shows:

So it’s like OK, what are the major steps, and something that I could link together with a campaign, or for what our purpose are within this? So I spoke with [the Brewmaster], went through [the stages of the brewing process] and got into this whole brewing thought. Then I sat — and for people around me looking, it’s like you’re nuts — I had The Stand music going, and the video going, nonstop. I was just on a roll, and then just brainstorming, and just thinking and trying to take some (like taking them out of the computer), I was like taking out the images, and the pictures, and the thoughts, and the wording, and then trying to think brewing, brewing, brewing, and then The Stand is within it.

Thus one way the design of the Brewing Greatness Project systematized brand charisma was by adapting it to the constraints imposed by the brewing process (see Fig. 3).

Further systematization came from decisions about who should participate and how to align involvement with the hierarchical structure of CIT. As the Consultant explained:

We decided OK, this is going to be a bottom up process — we need to involve people in this. We need people to brew this. We need people to be part of this, not just make a beer and launch it. So we started the brew, and with that we had some teams put together, and that was actually about eight people on each team up here at the Carlsberg Research Centre. And of course what was important was that it was being mixed of as many countries as possible, and as many levels as possible. So it’s not just somebody who always was up here because they are a manager for something, but it was on all levels.

More constraints on the Brewing Greatness Project came from executive directives to lower costs. In light of these constraints, the CIT middle managers deliberately scheduled the brewing activities to coincide with dates when the selected participants were to travel to Denmark for other reasons.

Conforming to the requirements of the brewing process, linking these to scheduled activities of the project, confront- ing budget limitations and cost concerns, and dealing with the consequences for who would represent the various parts of the CIT organization, all systematized the corporate brand’s charisma by shaping its influence. As suggested by Weber’s routinization theory, systematization focused the message of the brand on a subset of the beliefs it expressed, namely on the “Thirst for Great” slogan and passion for brewing. It also limited involvement in the brewing process to 30 CIT representatives and caused the managers to build in

The dynamics of corporate brand charisma 153
Brewing our new CIT organization

Figure 3 Carlsberg IT internal communication showing how the Brewing Greatness Project linked to the brewing process.

several virtual participation events to engage the others (e.g., voting on ingredients; naming the brew). Thus the charismatic ambition of “Thirst for Great” and the passion for brewing had to be scaled back to the demands of everyday life in CIT, just as the focus given to these themes narrowed the scope of cultural beliefs tapped by The Stand.

From Systematization to Accommodation: Brewing a Beer Becomes Drinking Their Beer.

Between the months of June and October 2010, 17 countries sent representatives to form two Brewing Teams to engage collaboratively in one or more of the various stages of designing, branding, brewing, and bottling a beer (shown in Fig. 3). Our efforts to document the routinization of brand charisma that occurred before and during these events revealed four subdomains of accommodation: subculture, communication, technology, and hierarchical control.

Subcultural Accommodation. Before any of the participants engaged in the Brewing Greatness Project, the brand charisma the project would see them activate had already been accommodated to two subcultures: that of the master brewers and that of the CIT management board. This part of accommodation overlapped with systematization (indicated by the intersecting circles linking systematization and accommodation in Fig. 1).

Within the occupational subculture of the master brewer the taste of a brewed beer indicates competence. For this reason the brewmaster felt he needed to accommodate the range of ingredients participants could use in creating the CIT brew to those he knew would produce a potable beverage:

I knew that the beer was supposed to be evaluated at some point in time and if everyone was looking first in the glass, then at me and saying “What the hell is this?” even though they have been involved themselves, I’m pretty sure they will point at me and say “But you were the one choosing this and that” . . . You don’t want to brew a beer where you say “OK it’s not me that’s going to drink it, so that’s their problem”. I mean you basically know that somebody knows that you have been involved in it and you don’t want your name linked to something that is barely drinkable . . . on the other hand I also wanted to make something a bit special.

In addition to accommodating brand charisma to the brewmasters’ subculture, the designers of the Brewing Greatness Project faced subcultural issues of their own in that they needed to respond to the interests and concerns of the CIT management board.

Discussion with the CIT board revealed a strong desire to have the final selection of ingredients symbolically represent CIT values, as the board understood them. To accommodate this need, the board made explicit links between the 10 ingredients the brewmaster had already specified, and 10 values they felt were important for rebuilding CIT’s subcultural identity. Thus the ingredient list from which participants in Brewing Greatness would select accommodated its quotient of brand charisma to the mundane demands of brewing a potable beverage in conformance to both the brewmasters’ subculture and to designing an identity-building project acceptable to the CIT management board.

Accommodation then continued as the Brewing Greatness Project was handed off to CIT employees whose first activity was to make choices from the list of 10 pre-selected ingredients offered, each accompanied by a value association defined by the CIT management board. All CIT employees
The dynamics of corporate brand charisma

had the chance to vote, from which a consensus emerged around: Chili — we are passionate; Rosemary — always responsible; and Honey — naturally helpful.

Those selected to participate in the first stage of the brewing process were then assembled in Copenhagen and asked to make a connection between the selected ingredients and The Stand. As the Consultant explained:

There was chili, and rosemary, and honey, all over the table . . . and then they had these posters, and they had big pieces of white paper, and pencils, and everything. And then we divided them up in some groups, and then went OK, go to town. Now you have to find out what is CIT’s “Thirst for Great”, using what you’re colleagues have been providing you with.

The Consultant described how she related one of the ingredients — chili — and the idea of passion as expressed in The Stand:

But how does CIT taste? Well, the fact that we knew that we have all what I’m talking about before, we have all the brands, we have everybody out there standing there being, and their pride in their Brewer, and their brands, and we have many recipes with one common ingredient — always burning — again with a passion to raise the bar for great.

In the film CIT produced to document the Brewing Greatness Project a narrator summarizes the connection made between the IT brew, CIT subculture, and identity this way: “This is not just any kind of beer that you can enjoy. It is a symbol of Carlsberg IT, with ingredients we want in our organization.” Referring to the label showing the ingredients and values printed by the second group of participants, the narrator announces: “This label is the label of our Carlsberg IT, it holds the ingredients that shape us today and captures the values that are the fuel to keep us thirsty for great in the future on our journey together.”

By selecting 3 of the 10 ingredient-value associations defined by the CIT board, participating CIT employees accommodated the charisma of The Stand to their identity and in doing so further narrowed the scope of The Stand as it operated in their subcultural context. But the substance of The Stand was also subject to accommodation, as the portion of the Brewing Greatness video depicting the fermentation process indicates. During fermentation, employees were asked to create a unique expression of CIT’s “Thirst for Great”, in direct reference to the part of The Stand on which Brewing Greatness focused:

When the beer was fermenting, you gave input on the question what is CIT’s thirst for great? The comments were used by the CIT board in a creative workshop to come up with a creative description of us. The outcome was: ‘Carlsberg IT’s the heart of our business. It is the heart of our business, defines who we are, and captures the value words and comments given by you . . . The heart is an organ, a muscle that pumps the blood around, we are dependent on it, it needs to be reliable. It is a symbol of passion and helpful, and it is red and hot as chili.’

Ultimately the CIT board chose among several names and label designs suggested by CIT employees. As the Brewing Greatness video explains: “When we were designing the label, names were suggested, with the winning name ChillIT, combining chili, our secret ingredient and IT and playing with the words, that it is so spicy, it needs to be chilled.”

By this point the part of The Stand that inspired Brewing Greatness had been packaged in a bottle of custom designed and labeled beer that served as a material artifact and symbol within the CIT subculture. We noted many ChillIT beer bottles, some full and others empty, standing on the desks and shelves of CIT employees as we continued our interviews across Carlsberg Group, indicating that the beer had become part of CIT’s history, its symbolic associations marked by the pride inherent in display, providing evidence of the accommodation of The Stand’s charisma to everyday life in CIT. The selected ingredients and their associated values, printed on the beer label affixed to the often empty bottles, provided symbolic reminders of what the Brewing Greatness Project represented for CIT employees, undoubtedly standing at some substantive remove from the intentions of those who had introduced The Stand.

Accommodation to Communication Practices. On October 8, 2010 at 14:30 in Copenhagen, ChillIT was launched during a “Virtual Friday Bar”. All participating CIT locations had been sent a portion of the beer and 350 IT employees were invited to join the launch. That nearly all of them attended indicates the significance this event held for them. Using internal video communication technology, for which CIT was responsible, each location toasted the others in their native tongue. The event began with the CIO giving an introductory speech from Poland where he was visiting at the time, a trip he intentionally scheduled during the Virtual Friday Bar to symbolically represent the distributed nature of CIT’s new identity. The Consultant noted the symbolic importance of the virtual social technology and the fact that it worked seamlessly:

For the launching celebration we had this European happening here [e.g., like the EuroSong competition], to drink our CIT beer and celebrate the new organization, a virtual event. So each country had a contact person who was participating in this whole part of course, and then we had a rehearsal, and we had been going through hoops and loops for this, and they got a little manual on how to do it, and they had a presentation, and they had the movies, they had everything.

She explained that people got involved in the Virtual Friday Bar in different ways, in part because each country had to accommodate its engagement to local laws and policies.

For example, one employee sitting in the UK, where drinking at work is not allowed, recalled:

So on the . . . evening before, I went to the supermarket and I bought some potato crisps which were rosemary and some other flavour. I bought some chilli chocolate and I bought some of the ingredients that were within the beer. I took those into work and we sat down and we had a little buffet thing with the chocolate and the crisps.

Meanwhile, people sitting in Copenhagen had the opportunity to experience the environment in which the beer had been brewed:
The facility we’d used was at the Research Centre over here—they have a big auditorium. So it was great, and we could have people walking through the actual brewery area, where it had been produced. And then upstairs, where we then had our IT facility… what was happening was that people came in, which was an amazing feeling to know that right now this is happening in 16 other places at the same time” (Communication Consultant).

In other countries the Brewing Greatness documentary was shown as a warm up for those attending the Virtual Friday Bar as a UK participant explained: “We played through the video so you could see what was happening in the brewing process.”

During and after the Friday bar, all participants were encouraged to upload pictures and video from their local events to the Brewing Greatness Team site, which is a Facebook-like application on the Carlsberg intranet. Later some of these pictures were made into a poster that groups displayed in their work areas. Here is a sample of messages posted on the Brewing Greatness ‘Wall’:

[From Feldschlössen Brewery, Switzerland:] You can be sure that we drank all of them already! Response to Feldschlössen: How many have you been drinking in Feldschlössen? 

Greetings to all our European colleagues attending the virtual Friday Bar!

Great beer! Thanks to all the brewing teams for putting so much passion into brewing it — and thanks to Julie for facilitating this fantastic event.

Where can we buy more?

Maybe its a good idea to do this now every Friday, let’s say at 14:00

I’m impressed.

Send more beer

Employees who participated in brewing ChillIT almost universally reported feeling more connected to CIT following their involvement in the Brewing Greatness Project. For example, one of the UK participants claimed: “I think the important thing that came out of [the project] was, it brought everybody together as a group. And when you see the videos, you can actually point to the people and go: ‘I think it’s important just to see us all working together.’” Another cited the example of a new willingness to pick up the phone and speak directly with a remote colleague, regardless of whether they knew that person to be the “right one” to respond to the request.

According to a participant from France:

I think people liked this [project] because of the rest of the time they work far away and are a bit alone at their work station and they know they also have colleagues in other countries but they don’t meet them and perhaps they have the courage to phone and ask them if they could help, but after they meet them and talk a bit to them they say ‘I know someone and am more confident to talk to them’.

It seems that calling upon a person for help simply because you know them breeched a former barrier to direct communication Carlsberg Group’s cultural norm to “talk to the right person”. While this might suggest a lessening of efficiency, it seems instead to have nearly always led to queries to reach the right person faster, that is via relayed telephone connections as opposed to writing an email and awaiting a response that could take hours or even a day to complete. Moreover, some participants reported believing that telephone connections with people met face-to-face during Brewing Greatness extended the collegiality developed during the project further into CIT. These in these ways Brewing Greatness and The Stand charisma it carried was accommodated into the communication practices of at least some CIT employees.

**Technical Accommodation.** From the start the CIT middle managers and their CIO saw parallels between brewing a beer and brewing an organization. They played up this metaphorical link, for example, by naming the project Brewing Greatness. But some employees took the metaphor a step further by connecting the brewing process to the processes of delivering IT, either as a group or individually. This personified Carlsberg Group for them and made them feel a part of something bigger, rather than serving a company without caring about its core business, an attitude FMCG companies are often accused of promoting.

Technical accommodation took two forms in our observations. First it linked the Brewing Greatness Project with CIT’s technological competence. One of the posts to the Brewing Greatness project wall stated “Its great having such a technical background to join each other”. As a participant from France told us: “A meeting was organised in Strasbourg and we had of course the beers for each one and also had small appetizers to eat and we all sat around a table and each country waited and when the moment comes to France we all say ‘hello, we are here! Cheers!’ So, it was funny.” These and other quotes refer to the IT communication platform, which had not always worked consistently, so both pride and a little relief were felt when the Virtual Friday Bar that relied upon it came off without a hitch.

As a Danish participant expressed it: “That Friday Bar got executed to perfection. And it was a very, very nice way of tying a little bow on the entire present.” The Senior Manager Corporate Communication IT commented on this aspect of technological accommodation as well:

… that was also very important for us because as a new virtual organization, not seeing each other, not seeing your manager every day and so on, we needed to start using this platform as our office. So this is what we’re trying to do all the time, and this was more or less the first step also in trying to say that we can actually do this virtually, and do something together, without seeing each other.

Thus part of the Brewing Greatness Project involved public confirmation that CIT could do its technological work effectively and thus transferred some of the charisma of The Stand’s "Thirst for Great" onto CIT giving a boost to its self-esteem and identity.

The second form of technological accommodation occurred when Brewing Greatness gave insight into how CIT contributes to the core of Carlsberg’s business to some of the participants. The connection forged between what CIT does on a daily basis and the physical activity of brewing enabled several participants to experience both a sense of belonging, not just to an IT unit, but to a brewing business.
Using the brewing process as a metaphor for their own work, these individuals began to see their IT work as a form of brewing. One of the Danish participants put it this way:

Just asking myself the question what is this now? Is this yet another touchy feel good project, or is this something with a distinctive outcome? And it was only when we started and there was posted news on the intranet that this was mimicking the exact same journey as we were on, that process of: you get all the raw materials and then process, by process, by process, by process.”

A French participant, who described IT as “part of the business”, claimed that Brewing Greatness is also a very good initiative to show that IT could help the business and this part of the business. In this sense I think it is symbolic … to show the brewing process to integrate IT was a good idea.” The Danish participant commented further: “this part of the brewing process is mimicking totally my part of the IT process”, you had a tangible reference to where the IT business was moving as [illustrated by] the basic core process within the company.”

Reflections like these link CIT technology and Carlsberg’s core technology of brewing to the Brewing Greatness Project and indicate to us that at least some employees took ownership of the branding and identity building processes started by the CIT managers in ways that these managers did not foresee and which the employees found personally and organizationally beneficial. Their insights also reveal how brand charisma became accommodated to the technological aspects of daily life in that the IT work they were responsible for doing seemed more significant for being connected to “Thirst for Great” and the Brewing Greatness Project.

Accommodation to Hierarchical Control. Although it might seem that CIT middle managers were simply promoting the interests of their superiors, there is considerable evidence to suggest that this was not the case. The lack of executive level leadership in implementing a formal corporate branding program was one indicator. While the CIO’s support of the Brewing Greatness Project responded to senior management’s wishes as expressed in The Stand, it violated other expectations concerning maintaining focus on CIT’s immediate problems as the IT function moved toward centralization. The CIO acknowledged the risks and the price he paid by supporting Brewing Greatness with his own authority and resources:

It is also taking a risk because doing these movies … I could look silly. But even though I spent [only] 10,000 [DKK, about 2000 USD] on doing the brewing and so on, it is still using money for something, and that’s a waste. And within Carlsberg whether it’s a thousand or a million, it’s still a waste. And again, am I actually using my time for doing something like that? Why are you not fixing the project? So it’s a huge risk to do that.

The price paid by the CIO became clear in his report of what happened at the budget meeting during which he first formally presented the Brewing Greatness Project to his superiors and peers:

I had a presentation for ExCom and I had to present the budgets. A part of that was also giving a status on IT, which is extremely cumbersome. So I was thinking about IT – what is the difference that makes the difference? And I think actually the brew was a part of making the difference. So I had a 3-liter beer [bottle] with a huge label. I was number six going in, and they were sitting like this after four hours of this [pointing to the slide deck he has been showing us on his computer]. So I had this [points to the bottle] – I have a gift for you, this is it, I just want to spend five minutes telling you what I have done. It’s about people. And I had ExCom sitting there, and half of them said huh, he’s totally out! … Show me the figures. And then the other half said OK, this was different. And the funny part was that I got a lot of very bad feedback, and then I got a very positive feedback from individuals [after the meeting].

Indeed, from a member of ExCom we heard that it was not so much the cost of Brewing Greatness that was of concern, but rather the overall rising costs of IT coupled with persistent problems in the IT organization. As our informant told us later:

Brewing Greatness was all about creating unity and togetherness within the IT organization across geographies and cultures and didn’t include any process with stakeholders outside the organization, for example with ExCom members or key customers and users. To put it simply: ExCom didn’t experience any Greatness coming out of the IT-bottle, so many found it hard to respond with enthusiasm. The gap between what was said and what was experienced was simply too big.

Although the CIO told us that one or two peer level managers did come to him in private to inquire about the Brewing Greatness Project and to learn more about the results, he nonetheless recoiled at the negative attitude expressed by his superiors and some peers. He told us:

I got the feedback, so having done that, having had the feedback, would I do it again? If the only thing I was missing was the result within Carlsberg IT I would no doubt do something similar … But having received the criticism … I would actually have to be honest, I would re-think it.

Upon further reflection he tempered his initial defensive reaction, revealing that:

I would probably do some things again, say be free of charge or whatever. We are [already] doing similar stuff actually … and the point was that I wanted to do something extremely ambitious and I wanted to do something that the IT community would talk about the next one or two years.

The CIO’s reaction to ExCom’s reception of the Brewing Greatness Project obviously put a damper on his enthusiasm and we argue damaged the brand charisma activated before this reception became known to him. If his reaction is any indication of the fate of The Stand’s charisma, it clearly shows that accommodation of brand beliefs to hierarchical control can sometimes work perversely to undermine top management’s intentions in brand building. Furthermore, the Brewing Greatness Project has to date gone untapped by anyone within the corporate communication function, which has responsibility for managing the corporate brand.
We speculate that corporate communication might have communicated this project as an example of local accommodation of The Stand if its reception had been more positive. Instead silence surrounding Brewing Greatness continues to accommodate further brand activity to the interests of hierarchical control thereby limiting the charisma it can generate. In this case, we argue, hierarchical control all but obliterated the spirit as reflected in this last comment by the Consultant concerning the brand charisma generated by Brewing Greatness:

[It] was . . . fun to see the reaction from people, because suddenly they were standing there with their beer, and [saying] see, we’ve made this! . . . I was sitting with a table of people and colleagues that I didn’t know, starting to talk about Brewing Greatness, and this beer that was being brewed.

After reading a draft of this paper, the SVP of Corporate Communication gave us her views on why Brewing Greatness has not had more impact within the company:

There is no doubt that Brewing Greatness is a really creative concept and a great idea to enable the development of the ONE IT organization. I also think the concept has the potential to be used in other parts of the Carlsberg organization. The challenge with promoting it to other subcultures as a best practice has been that apart from the first immediate reactions, IT has not been able to demonstrate positive business or organizational results coming out of the process. Other subcultures with the same challenges have therefore not seen Brewing Greatness as a model for how to create a more unified culture. A version 2.0 of Brewing Greatness would benefit from including key stakeholders in the (brewing) process as well as describing what a Great Brew looks like.

Our case ends here, although the endowment and routinizing of corporate brand charisma associated with The Stand continues throughout Carlsberg Group. The next section of this article explores the processes by which CIT employees endowed their corporate brand with charisma and how these processes of reception ↔ activation relate to routinization to form a dynamic theory of brand charisma.

The dynamics of brand charisma

We began this article by asserting that Carlsberg Group’s recently initiated corporate branding effort, known as The Stand, had charisma. Following Weber, we postulated that any such charisma would have been routinized. These ideas guided our analysis of the empirical case of CIT’s Brewing Greatness Project on the basis of which we conclude there is support for the finding that Carlsberg’s corporate brand charisma was routinized by CIT middle managers and employees through processes of systematization and accommodation.

This section addresses the as yet unexamined questions: where did brand charisma come from and how did it work? Below we explore the ways CIT middle managers and employees endowed the Carlsberg corporate brand with charisma, and then suggest what the relationship between endowment and routinization processes might look like (see Fig. 4). These interacting and mutually influential processes, we propose, constitute the dynamics of corporate brand charisma.

How Cycles of Reception ↔ Activation Endow a Brand with Charisma

Extending Weber (1947) and Smothers (1993), we located The Stand’s charisma in its reception and activation by employees. Our evidence that employees were receptive to the charisma of Carlsberg’s corporate brand was found in remarks like this one: "It really got to people. It was the most emotional thing that we’ve had for years because Carlsberg’s not that emotional." Many other interviewees reported feeling happy or excited by The Stand. One of the two CIT middle managers responsible for the Brewing Greatness Project observed: "people . . . were very emotional about it.”

![Figure 4](image-url)  
*Figure 4* Elaboration of the Weberian model to include the dynamics of reception ↔ activation interacting with routinization processes and to specify the domains of hierarchical activity within which these dynamics of brand charisma flow.
They thought it was really exciting and really good and I heard a lot of people saying ‘Hey, this is professional and this will get me up in the morning not the cost cutting.’”

Others repeated the idea of The Stand getting employees up in the morning, and we interpreted such remarks as indicating not just reception to, but also the activation of brand charisma. In a similar instance indicating activation, an employee told us that: “my buy-in was less than two seconds!” Furthermore, on multiple occasions we witnessed firsthand how The Stand video roused nearly everyone who encountered it to high levels of positive emotion and enthusiasm, unusual for this corporate workplace. More than once we saw multiple audience members with tears in their eyes, while others responded with broad smiles. It was rare to see someone remain untouched by the words and images, though some responded with embarrassment and complained that the film was a bit over the top (these were predominantly Scandinavians).

Our observations suggest that there is something exceptional contained in the corporate brand symbolism that encouraged the reception and activation of its charisma by CIT employees. Eisenstadt (1968: xix), a commentator and editor of Weber’s charisma theory, referred to the responses we point to here as “charismatic fervor” and interpreted Weber as claiming that: “charismatic fervor is rooted in the attempt to come into contact with the very essence of being, to go to the very roots of existence, of cosmic, social, and cultural order, to what is seen as sacred and fundamental.” The presence of such an existential object was indicated by one of our informants who said The Stand “hit a nerve in, let us say, the DNA of the company.” A key informant told us: “we’re not talking about being an IT guy first, it’s about being an IT guy in the Carlsberg Group.”

We contend that what was referred to as Carlsberg DNA taps into something sacred and fundamental within the company’s culture, something hard to name but which resonated with the employees who then activated corporate brand charisma through their receptiveness to its influence. Receiving “Thirst for Great” as charged with charisma and then designing the Brewing Greatness Project to activate it, and encourage further reception ↔ activation by others, occurred as CIT middle managers linked The Stand to the beer brewing process. The project implementation repeated this reception ↔ activation cycle multiple times as the selected CIT participants brewed a beer and all CIT employees shared their beer at the Virtual Friday Bar. In other words, through their engagement in Brewing Greatness, CIT employees, each in their own way, accommodated the charisma they associated with their beliefs about The Stand to multiple subdomains of everyday activity (culture, communication, technology and hierarchical control), and along with their receptiveness, activated the corporate brand’s charisma.

While their reactions and actions reduced the scope and scale of The Stand’s influence to fit within their everyday lives as IT specialists, reception ↔ activation also carried the culturally meaningful passion for brewing beer into daily life within CIT. For instance, through the acts of brewing and sharing a beer, CIT employees redefined their role within Carlsberg Group in ways that made the significance of their work more tangible and clarified their operational responsibilities within the larger organization. Thus the substance of The Stand went from being esoteric and abstract, to being concrete and operational, a move that simultaneously gave back to The Stand a dose of charisma in the form of passion for Carlsberg as a company. Ironically, by being restricted in its scope and scale to the everyday concerns of CIT, the influence of The Stand grew as its endowment of charisma tapped the heritage and art of brewing. It is thus our conclusion that routinization coincided with reception ↔ activation and that cultural heritage was also a factor in explaining the dynamics of brand charisma we observed within CIT.

So was McWilliam (1997) wrong in accusing Smothers (1993) of reifying brands by attributing charisma to them? Based on our case analysis we do not believe such criticism is justified. In line with Weber’s theory, we find that brands do not have a full complement of charisma from the start, no matter how well they are designed and introduced, rather charisma is equally, or even more so, an endowment offered by stakeholders. Just as Weber contended that charisma is a type of authority (an endowment) bestowed on leaders by their followers, our study indicated that stakeholders endow a brand with charisma (e.g., employees of CIT in our study, or consumers of the product brands studied by Smothers, 1993).

The reception ↔ activation of charisma constitutes charisma moment-by-moment, and it is in this sense that Smothers (1993) turned to social construction as an explanation for the endowment of brand charisma. However, our observations suggest that reception ↔ activation processes are more broadly based than social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) or for that matter enactment (Weick, 1979) allows. The processes we observed included emotional and esthetic reception, perception, interpretation and action (e.g., brewing a beer, naming and making a label to symbolize the beer’s relationship to CIT’s identity). The mutuality of reception ↔ activation indicated by the double arrow (with perception and interpretation sandwiched in between), implies that activation produces reception as much as the other way round. Importantly, our study also indicated that the likelihood of reception ↔ activation is contextualized by brand beliefs deeply seated in cultural heritage. All these connections, though grounded in empirical observation, cry out for further study. We theorize them here and below as a contribution to the literature on branding and to Weberian scholarship.

The mutuality of routinization and endowment

Mutuality between the processes of endowment and routinization occurs in ways similar to the mutuality of reception ↔ activation cycles. This mutuality implies that charisma only comes to life moment by moment through cycles of reception ↔ activation that are embedded in or at least co-occur with the routinization processes of systematization and accommodation.

Moreover, charisma, being deeply rooted in symbolic associations, also arises from the cultural depths that resonate with and inform new beliefs, or as Weber would have it, out of enthusiasm, hope and despair. We therefore confront a chicken and egg problem when we try to work out the causes of charisma, an indication that causality may not be easily or ever disentangled when processes are in view. We suggest instead that esthetic and emotional experience
(i.e., subjectivity) is the proper domain of charisma. In subjective terms, if you experience a brand as having charisma, then it has charisma for you; your reception of it as such activates charisma for yourself and, by contagion, for others. The link to activation is important to managers, because it is in activating employees that any organizational change in response to branding is going to occur.

One implication of our theorizing is that, because brands are largely symbolic, their meanings are distributed and will be both more and less varied than the meaning intended by the top managers who introduced them. In the case of CIT, meanings were less varied in the sense that not all brand beliefs put into The Stand were adopted by those designing and implementing the Brewing Greatness Project. At the same time, those beliefs that were featured experienced wider variance in attributed meaning as more and more people came into contact with them in different contexts over time (e.g., conversations with the master brewer, CIT management board meetings, participation in brewing ChiliIT, attendance at the Virtual Friday Bar, ExCom’s quarterly review of functions).

It was this unlocking of significance within everyday life, we contend, that endowed Carlsberg’s corporate branding process with charisma for members of CIT, and it was the careful planning and design by middle management of the Brewing Greatness Project that unleashed the potential of The Stand within CIT employees’ domain of action. Thus we believe that the processes of routinization (systematization and accommodation) were inseparable from the cycles of reception \( \rightarrow \) activation that endowed The Stand with charisma, as can be seen in our revision of the model based on Weber’s theory (compare Figs. 1 and 4).

Our elaboration of Weber’s model indicates the unique role middle managers assume in the dynamics of corporate branding. The model indicates that, in the main, middle managers link the routinization processes (primarily systematization, but to some extent also accommodation) with endowment processes of reception \( \rightarrow \) activation. Middle managers participate centrally in both routinization and endowment because they sit at the interface of the three domains of activity that embed the dynamics of brand charisma: introduction, systematization and accommodation. It is this double centrality that we believe gives middle managers, and particularly brand managers, a pivotal role in the endowment and routinization of brand charisma. Their position makes them the most credible role models for a branding effort because they sit with one foot in all the processes as well as the domains of action through which brand beliefs are routinized and endowed with charisma. At this point in its development our reasoning sorely needs further empirical study to confirm or deny the interpretations we drew from our empirical observations.

Conclusions and implications for practice

The CIT case reported here stands in contrast to studies of large scale rollouts of formal corporate identity programs such as those described by Schultz and Hatch (2003), Ravasi and Schultz (2006) and Kärreman and Rylander (2008) and recommended by Olins (2003), Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) and Davis and Dunn (2002), among others. By doing nothing more than developing and presenting The Stand, leaving it to be led by those positioned further down the organizational hierarchy, Carlsberg Group’s Executive Committee stopped what might have been a typical top-down formal implementation process in its tracks during the time of our study. We argue that this situation gave us unusual access to the processes through which brand charisma operates in an organization, and it has been these processes that occupied our efforts to understand the dynamics of brand charisma.

By following the halted corporate branding program into middle level management and lower hierarchical levels we were able to show that it was ultimately the CIT employees who activated the corporate brand’s charisma within their spheres of action, in this case by receiving and activating one of their brand’s slogans (“Thirst for Great”) and the company’s heritage of passion for brewing beer, as evidenced by their enthusiastic engagement in brewing and drinking their own beer together.

That “Thirst for Great” and a passion for brewing beer are only two parts of Carlsberg’s corporate branding platform, and that their meanings were elaborated and extended by CIT employees in ways that carried these meanings far from their origins in top management’s introduction of The Stand, shows how routinization reduced the scope and scale of The Stand’s charismatic potential while at the same time elaborating and enriching its substance. From this finding we conclude that a charismatic brand conforms to the highly varied needs and purposes of those most in control of endowing it with charisma — the brand’s stakeholders.

Among the stakeholders of corporate branding our theorizing gave a central position to middle managers, but this does not imply that middle managers should or even can be programmed to align their beliefs about the brand with top management’s wishes. If employees sense that their immediate managers are only towing the corporate line, the processes of reception \( \rightarrow \) activation may be undercut and even reversed. What is more, middle managers themselves require activation to engage in the endowment process and if they are faking it, this activation will not occur. This is because the managers will have been cut off from receiving the brand beliefs that license and inspire their action. As was seen with the head of CIT, brand beliefs inspired him to go against expressed wishes of top management that he focus entirely on IT problems and cost containment. In other words, we believe our case study shows that middle managers, and in particular brand managers, must have the freedom to act in accordance with their own emotional and esthetic reception \( \rightarrow \) activation cycles.

We imagine that, if the corporate brand were to take hold in other parts of Carlsberg Group to the extent that it did in CIT, it would undergo further routinization within other subcultures, with additional instances of scope and scale reductions and substance enrichment. Such routinization would also unleash the potential for even greater activation of brand beliefs, and with critical mass could lead to contagion, unleashing the much greater force of charismatic fervor that characterizes the charismatic brand.

In practical terms we conclude that it is unwise to expect the implementation of a corporate branding initiative to conform to expectations that accompany its formal introduction. We suggest that by anticipating this, brand managers can help executives appreciate the richness added to brand
symbolism by the activation of employees who respond to it, each in their own unique ways. This can be done, for example, by celebrating local interpretations of brand ideas and licensing mid-level managers to engage employees in brand- ing processes designed to serve their units’ unique purposes in relation to subculture and identity building, as the Brewing Greatness Project illustrates. Once this activity begins, contagion to other parts of the organization can be nurtured through communication and collaboration with first movers. Within this process executives should anticipate the simultaneous restrictions on the initial uptake of their ideas as well as appreciating the blossoming variability of ensuing meaning making activity. They should also guard against difficulties presented by top management strategies and objectives that run at cross-purposes to branding messages.

In particular our study indicated how hierarchical control can obstruct brand charisma and that such obstructions need to be anticipated and deflected. Threats to brand charisma, such as the one we observed, present a challenge to executives who, by introducing corporate branding initiatives, hope to achieve predictable and sustainable outcomes. For example efforts to control costs need to be balanced against the enthusiasm small investments in corporate branding can generate. Executives should bear in mind that the work of activation—routinization done by middle managers and employees is where the real action of charismatic corporate branding is to be found. This places responsibility for brand charisma within the domain of everyday organizational life where it remains in the control of employees and other stakeholders, and where middle managers can play pivotal roles.

Finally, our application and extension of Weber’s theory implies that instead of seeing the concept of “being branded” only in employees who act as brand champions (e.g., Ind, 2001, 2003; Maxwell & Knox, 2009), organizations can experience the state of “being branded” when employees and external stakeholders respond to and thereby activate the charisma of their corporate brands. In this organizational sense, “being branded” is driven by stakeholder and employee reception—activation that lies within their personal and interpersonal domains of influence, wherein middle managers, standing at the interface between employees and executives, can play crucial creative and facilitative roles. We conclude from our extension of Weber’s ideas that “being branded” is as much about what employees and other stakeholders do to an organization as it is about what organizations do to them.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Tuborg foundation for their support of our research and Anne Marie Skov, Hanne Luke, Julie Elmo and Kenneth Egelund of Carlsberg Group for their assistance with collecting and interpreting the data. We are grateful for the help and encouragement of our three reviewers and Kate Sullivan for her expert editorial advice.

References


