Managing Organizational Expression

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on how organizations express who they are and what they stand for to all of their internal and external stakeholders. As opposed to some of the other topics reviewed in this handbook, ‘organization expression’ is not a well-established academic field with either a clear set of core concepts or any well-established perspectives. On the contrary, inclusion of this topic in the handbook is based on the observation that academics increasingly use concepts such as identity, values, vision, mission, corporate branding and corporate reputation to study the forms that organizational expression takes and the practices and processes companies engage in order to express themselves. Furthermore, consultants and managers are showing interest in managing organizational expressions for the purposes of adding value to their brands or muscle to their reputations, and this produces pressures to integrate across the full range of different business functions, making this topic particularly appropriate for macro OB.

There are many reasons why organizations are devoting more and more energy and resources to expressive organizational practices. One is that companies face increasing difficulty sustaining competitive advantage based on product differentiation alone. Stand alone products and services are easy targets for imitation and companies search for renewed uniqueness by turning to the organization itself. Another reason is that numerous stakeholders, ranging from NGOs to institutional investors, pressure organizations for greater transparency and openness about their affairs, governance and citizenship practices. Last, but not least, employees and customers have developed expectations about what organizations should offer them in return for their commitment and loyalty. Increasingly, employees do not just look for a place to work, they also search out a source of identification that enhances their self-esteem and provides a sense of belonging. Similarly, customers today do not only consume products and services, they also consume the attributes of personal identity.
that association with an organization brings. Together these developments require organizations to become more explicit about the premises for their business strategy and the values that lie behind them.

In order to serve as a destination in this search for meaning among internal and external stakeholders, organizations must be able to offer expressions that invite sense-making and offer markers of identity. However, not all organizational expressions are deliberate or intentional, and some expressions are easier to manage than others. For example, the Nike Swoosh and the iconic Apple logo are examples of intentional expressions that become relatively straightforward to manage once they are created; but the behaviour of a Nike supplier towards the media, or the attitude of an employee interacting with customers in the local Apple store are also important organizational expressions that, compared with a corporate logo, are much harder to control and more complex to manage. Nonetheless, organizational behaviours as well as the symbolism they uphold constitute the organizational expressions that determine stakeholders' perceptions of the organization.

The problem of managerial control has several implications for the management of organizational expressions. First organization expression cannot be fully conceived or managed within the boundaries of any single academic discipline. Thus, managing organizational expression entails a multidisciplinary and multi-functional approach. Second, most disciplines have defined their core constructs and related managerial practices within their own internal framework without considering how the same phenomenon or practice is defined within other disciplines. This implies that organizational expression demands a broader perception of individual constructs than found within individual disciplines. The combined interplay between the many different forms of expression creates what Schultz, Hatch and Larsen (2000) labelled ‘The Expressive Organization’ arguing that the symbolic and emotional dimensions are becoming central to doing business. In this chapter we address basic concerns related to how and why organizations express themselves and then provide an overview of what we consider to be the main theories and approaches relevant to managing organizational expression. Although we stress the cross-disciplinary origins of organizational expression, we ground the many conceptual voices within organization theory. The ambition to manage organizational expression raises several questions concerning the authenticity of expression, the involvement of stakeholders in creating and consuming expressions, and the illusion of managerial control of the expressive process. These questions are examined in the third section of the chapter, while the last section points to some of the ways in which expressive organizations can enrich and expand our understanding of management.

**ANTECEDENTS OF THE FIELD**

There are two main reasons why organizations seek to express themselves. One reason is the aspiration to make a difference in the marketplace by distinguishing the organization from its competitors by creating products and experiences that are unique to the company (Aaker, 1996; Albert and Whetten, 1985). Being seen and heard is the first step to being noticed by stakeholders and thus basic awareness is the foundation for creating an image or reputation, but being regarded as a preferred supplier, partner or employer and earning the emotional attachments this brings from stakeholders requires more than simple awareness and in this regard organizations increasingly turn to processes of self-expression via developing their style or voice. For example, the preference for an Apple computer not only depends upon a purchase, it also means buying into an attitude towards computing that differentiates Apple and pc users. Understanding such a dynamic led Apple marketer to an ingenious advertising campaign featuring two people who represented these differences: the stodgy older pc user, and the cooler if geekier Apple user. Associations to commercials such as
these encourage Apple users to express their felt differences by using their computer to signify belonging to the Apple World.

Many scholars will argue that organizational expressions along with organizational forms are the victims of institutionalization and imitation processes across different organizations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott and Meyer, 1994). This implies that organizations tend to become more similar in their values, symbols and various identity markers and as a consequence it becomes harder to tell companies operating in the same business area apart. For example, banks, airlines and mobile phones can all look remarkably alike. However, the focus of managing organizational expression is to keep searching for new ways to make a difference that are relevant and meaningful to stakeholders in spite of institutional pressure to conform. Southwest Airlines is a notable example of creating an emotional difference that is relevant to employees and customers alike. The Southwest difference is based in fun and unique customer service. The new cell phone ‘Serene’, created in collaboration between Bang and Olufsen and Samsung, is another attempt to make a difference based in product design, aesthetics and user interface.

The second important reason organizations express themselves is to attract stakeholders to the organizations by creating a sense of belonging among them. This is most obvious in relation to employees. Many employees do not just choose a place to work – they join a company because of the values, ideas and activities with which they will be asked to identify. Furthermore, the perceived uniqueness of the organization often provides a source of pride and esteem that creates a feeling of commitment among employees and other organizational stakeholders. The people working for Southwest Airlines are not just working for an airline to receive a pay-check. They are part of a group that expresses care and respect for one another, which gives employees reason to connect with the belief that their warmth and creativity are foundations for the company they serve.

The importance of making employees feel that they belong to the organization has been emphasized in the literature on organizational identification. Leading scholars within this field claim that how employees experience themselves as members of an organization and whether they are able to identify with organizational values and beliefs are central to understanding the engagement and satisfaction that they reap from their organizational membership (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Pratt, 2003). According to Ashforth and Mael, the ability of management to get employees to identify with the organization opens onto new kinds of symbolic leadership in the areas of socialization, role conflict and inter-group relations. The main argument in this literature is that strong identification with the organization overshadows the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles and relationships that people must maintain inside and outside the organization. Employees of Southwest Airlines may have different roles and individual attitudes depending on whether they serve customers in the air or provide administrative services on the ground, yet they have the chance to share a strong feeling of belonging to Southwest and their ‘customer service commitment’ (see www.southwest.com) helps them to transcend potential conflicts.

By the same token, dedicated customers or suppliers also feel that they belong to the organization and use organizational expressions as evidence that confirms (or denies) their sense of belonging. As stated by researchers such as Du Gay (2000) and Kozinets (2002), customers consume the organization for their own purpose and engage in sense-making of their individual consumption. Such enthusiastic customers may even appropriate the organization’s expressions for their own purposes, such as when members of Harley-Davidson fan clubs tattoo the Harley logo on their arms and go on a ‘ride’ with other Harley owners and employees, or when kids join the LEGO Club to share ‘My Own Construction’ (individual LEGO constructions) with other users (see www.lugnet.com).
Many managers and consultants have long held the mistaken belief that organizations own the meanings of their expressions. Meaning necessarily belongs to those who provide it – that is to the internal and external stakeholders who value organizational expressions and determine their worth via their own perceptions (e.g., firm reputation) and actions (e.g., regarding purchases and loyalty). This belief in management’s ability to ‘give sense’ to organizational expressions (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) coined the phrase ‘sense-giving’) has dominated the areas of identity management and corporate branding (e.g., Ollins, 1989; 2004; Schmitt & Simonson; 1997). Here the evocative design of corporate symbols and the orchestration of large-scale marketing campaigns and other communication efforts have seduced management into assuming that their intentions will be echoed in stakeholder perceptions.

In more recent work the focus has shifted to how stakeholders make sense of organizational expressions and construct what often turns out to be a cacophony of multiple meanings for each of them. The managerial challenge is thus transformed from one of controlling and centralizing corporate expressions to one of engaging and listening to stakeholders, forging new expressions in response to stakeholder perceptions, concerns and interests. Nissan learned to do this during their massive turnaround in which they redefined not only their beliefs and values, but learned to interact with customers in new and what the company called more ‘authentic ways’. Local Nissan dealers moved into new physical settings designed to express the renewed energy of their brand, while the Nissan Shift advertising campaign reflected the numerous ways in which their customers responded to the brand, which the company discovered via psychographic marketing research. At the same time the company expanded involvement in the local community and started to build ‘authentic’ customer relations, which in the words of Nissan ‘embodies boundary-pushing passion as part of everyday life’.

**CENTRAL APPROACHES AND MAIN THEORIES**

As stated above, ‘organizational expression’ is not an established academic field, but is rather a theme that can be found in many different disciplines and that ranges across several theoretical terrains. The book, *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation and the Corporate Brand* (Schultz, Hatch and Larsen, 2000), grew out of this cross-disciplinarity. In this book a group of leading scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds and interests were asked to write about how organizations express themselves through organizational identity, image, culture, reputation and corporate branding. While the group of authors experienced high agreement that all these constructs were important and interrelated, you can see myriad disciplinary differences in the ways they use terms such as identity, image and brand. Thus, our overview of organizational expressions we will reflect cross-disciplinary differences as well as the cross-functional difficulties managers face when they engage in managing organizational expression.

**The Symbolic Foundation**

While some complications emerge from differences between conceptual definitions, a more fundamental challenge is that almost all behaviour that occurs in an organization becomes an organizational expression for someone, from employee actions and even the silent gestures of top management during a meeting, to statements made by customers and the stockholding behaviour of investors. For that reason it is impossible to point at specific artefacts, forms or types of behaviour that will always be interpreted as expressions of the organization. Expressiveness depends on context as well as the uses made and meanings given to them by their audiences. Thus, in order to become a full-blown and recognized organizational expression any artefact, claim or set of behaviours must be associated with some meaning by one or more individuals. This symbolic dimension of organizational
expressions is prominent within each of the multiple disciplines that study organizational expressions (Cohen, 1985; Gagliardi, 1992; Gioia, 1986; Pondy et al., 1983). However, because a single expression can be associated with multiple and even contradictory meanings constructed by different stakeholders, the symbolic meaning and importance of an expression can change over time, sometimes fading out of everyone’s consciousness. For example, a very large office stuffed with high class designer furniture is most likely perceived as an expression of power and status among managers, whereas employees may find that it represents the oppression and greed of top management. Fifteen years ago, walking around with a big laptop was seen as an expression of status and importance by many people, as this device was only accessible to the most valued employees in most companies. Today a big laptop has the opposite symbolic meaning, as it shows that you are not keeping up with the latest gadgetry.

One implication for management is that the symbolic meaning of organizational expressions cannot be taken for granted. Associated meanings often differ between stakeholders, just as the messages symbols communicate may change over time. As a first step in managing organizational expressions managers must sensitize themselves to symbolic multiplicity and seek to understand the cultural contexts and myths that influence how meaning is embedded and constructed (Holt, 2004). This will not only give managers a better understanding of the role of current expressions, but also enable them to tap into the tensions and desires that activate their stakeholders in the construction of new expressions. When Nike chose to market their new golden football shoe using a video clip with Brazilian star Ronaldinho doing incredible things with a ball, they were not only marketing an expression of sports in the vein of their ‘Just Do It’ slogan. Nike also tapped into the style and rich mythology of Brazilian football players, which millions of people relate to the Brazilian team’s world renown for playing elegant and spirited football.

With that basic understanding of the symbolic nature of organizational expression in mind there are some forms of organizational expression that, while not interpretable without input from multiple audiences, are likely to become meaningful to stakeholders and thus are worthy of management attention. These are depicted in Figure 22.1 where we locate them in terms of the disciplines that have traditionally taken responsibility for their management.

Organizational Culture and Identity

Within the field of organizational behaviour, the concern for organizational expression is most often found in organization culture studies and more recently in the focus on organizational identity. Organizational culture studies have generated awareness of the importance of symbols and artefacts as expressions, but also as objects to be used by managers for influence (see Martin, this volume). In the framework proposed by Edgar Schein, artifacts are the most visible and immediate of organizational expressions, including objects, words and deeds. Artifacts provide both symbolic and physical material to organizational members who use them to express their culture’s deeper layers – espoused values, values in use and assumptions (Schein, 2004). The importance of artifacts to management is elaborated by Schein in his distinction between primary and secondary mechanisms by which leaders embed and transmit organizational culture to organizational members and other stakeholders. While the primary mechanism focus on how leaders express their values and attitudes, the secondary mechanism refer to significant organizational expressions (Schein, 2004:246):

Primary Embedding Mechanisms:

- Managerial reactions in crisis situations
- Criteria for management’s distribution of scarce resources
- Criteria for management’s distribution of power and status
- Criteria for management’s recruiting, promoting and firing of employees
Corporate Branding
Meanings associated with the company and its products & services
Brand experiences
Brand architecture /name systems

Visual Identity
Logo & taglines
House style
Design principles
Packaging
Architecture & interior

Corporate Communication
Corporate storytelling
Media relations
Narratives & storytelling
Company web-sites
Internal communication

Organizational Identity
Top management as role models
Vision, mission, values
Identity claims:
Self-definitions & self-categorization
Autobiographies

Organizational Culture
Organizational symbols & artifacts
Organizational rites & rituals
Espoused values & values in use
Employee behavior

Different Kinds of Organizational Expression

Figure 22.1 Organizational expressions from different disciplines.

Secondary Embedding Mechanisms:

- Organizational design and structure
- Organizational systems and procedures
- Rites and rituals of the organization
- Design of physical space, facades and buildings
- Stories about important events and people
- Formal statements about organizational philosophy, creeds and charters

The embedding of culture happens, for example, when managers tell organizational stories, create and use objects and images that represent the organization, and employ metaphors, nicknames and other figures of speech to express to stakeholders which values are treasured in the organization.

For example, in their efforts to transform the organization, top managers often repeat the same phrase over and over again in order to create a ‘burning platform’, such as ‘Must-Win-Battles’ or ‘The Will to Win’. In some cases management can deliberately use artifacts to engage employees in expressing their interpretation of the organizational culture. This has happened, for example in the toy company LEGO Group during their crisis in 2003–2004, where employees were invited to use the LEGO bricks to express their interpretation of the problems that faced the company at the time. Figure 22.2 shows examples of how people can use LEGO bricks to express their perceptions about corporate problems (see also Schultz, et al., 2006).
There are too many skeletons in the closet

Copyright (2007) LEGO SERIOUS PLAY.

Figure 22.2 Examples of how people can express perceptions about corporate problems using LEGO play materials.
In similar ways, organizational rites and rituals, such as meeting patterns, management traditions and celebrations may be invoked to express the attitude and aspirations of top management. Also, organizations are increasingly using their physical space to express their cultural core values and remind occupants what the organization stands for. Some of the most compelling examples in Europe are the new headquarters buildings by ING Group in The Netherlands and Agbar in Barcelona. At ING the buildings are designed to be transparent, bold and sustainable in order to express the values of freshness and openness that management wanted to nurture in the culture by the open spaces, lightness and bright colours. In Spain water provider Agbar chose French architect Jean Nouvel to design their new and very phallic Torre Agbar, which changed the Barcelona skyline. Torre Agbar was not only a remarkable and highly visible manifestation of the vision of the company; it has become a symbol of the New Spain and the business potential in the formerly public monopolies. Figure 22.3 shows the new headquarters building and its influence on Barcelona.

As explained by Martin (2002), the symbolic meaning attached to organizational expressions may differ radically between different subcultures within the organization, just as artifacts may take on ambiguous meanings invoking simultaneous contradictory emotions. For example, expressions of the proud cultural heritage of a company may simultaneously invoke romantic sentiment and deep irrelevance. The multiplicity in the interpreted expressions becomes even more diverse in relation to external stakeholders, where customers from different national cultures and social lifestyles may interpret the same expression in radically different ways. This was the case, for example, when American consumers perceived LEGO’s world famous bricks as generic plastic construction blocks by American consumers, whereas European consumers associated LEGO bricks with children’s development and playful learning (Schultz, et al., 2006). Intriguingly, artists who use LEGO bricks, parents of LEGO users, and many other subcultures within the LEGO network harbour more subtle variants on these various meanings.

The concept of organizational identity addresses how organizational members define and construct themselves as an organizational collective (see Brown this volume). Compared with the concept of culture, organizational identity has a stronger focus on the textual, reflexive and narrative dimensions of how organizational members express...
who they are (Hatch and Schultz, 2000). Organizational identity researchers have also been concerned with how symbolic expressions are used to represent identity, as in the case of Pratt and Rafaeli showing how the meanings of dress (uniforms versus one’s own clothes) were negotiated among organizational members in the construction of their identity as nurses and members of specific working units/subcultures (1997).

Other researchers attend to the role of organizational discourse in self-representations and the communication of organizational beliefs to both internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Cheney and Christensen, 2001). Related to Schein’s distinction between espoused values and values in use, this critical perspective on identity treats the concept like espoused values in the sense that most of this work is concerned with identity claims and organizational autobiographies. Some of this work focuses on the organization as a social actor that states and explains itself in ways that indicate concern for legitimacy, while other work is more in line with organizational culture theory in that it emphasizes collective beliefs and understandings of ‘who we are as an organization’ held by organizational members (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Whetten and Mackey, 2002).

Within organizational culture studies there has been a fierce debate regarding whether or not cultural expressions can and should be managed. The skeptics point at the difficulties of managing subjective meaning and sense-making processes or point to the oppressive side of using ‘soft power’. By the same token others have been optimistic regarding the managerial possibilities of ‘engineering’ organizational culture, typically defined as values based management. Nevertheless, insights from both organizational culture and identity theory have inspired management practices by providing tools and processes for managerial influence (i.e., managing values, artifacts and other symbolic expressions) and pointing at the symbolic dimensions of managerial action, such as paying attention to the expressive dimensions of organizational structure.

**Corporate Identity, Branding and Communication.**

Researchers working on corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate communication have examined expressions from the point of view of how to construct and manage organizational expressions targeted to both internal and external stakeholders. The most pronounced attempts to create and control organizational expression are found within the field of corporate identity, which originated in graphic-visual traditions dedicated to the design of corporate logos, symbols and house style (Olins, 1989). Here, the use of corporate heritage as well as the design of names and shapes and the use of colour has resulted in a whole industry dedicated to creating visible, recognizable and distinct expressions for companies. Wally Olins, one of the leading thinkers in this area, founded the company behind the creation of the Orange brand, the first lifestyle driven provider of mobile telephony in the UK. The square of bold Orange colour was intended by the designers to symbolize the fresh and free spirit of Orange, while in reality it might have been associated with a range of different meanings by other stakeholders. Other companies have been keen to preserve their rich heritage through their entire range of corporate signalling. For example Johnson and Johnson always seek to enhance the longevity and trust people have in their brand by relying on the set of core expressions they have used since 1943 when their Credo was first written down (see www.jnj.com about the Credos history).

Many of the practices developed in relation to corporate identity drifted into corporate branding making it difficult to distinguish the concepts of organizational expressions used by marketing, strategy and organizational theory. As opposed to branding individual products, which has a long tradition within marketing, corporate branding focuses on how companies use a range of different resources based in the organization itself to express their uniqueness and to differentiate their brand (Schultz, 2005; Hatch and
Compared to corporate identity, corporate branding is also more concerned with how employees and customers interpret and act toward corporate expressions. Organizations as brands have been labelled a ‘branded house’ opposed to a ‘house of brands’ (Aaker, 1996) implying that there is a set of central ideas, belief and symbols that are connected to everything the organization does. No matter whether they operate within music, airlines, books, health clubs, games, and so on, Virgin companies clearly belong to the same corporation led by British icon Richard Branson. All companies use Virgin’s red and white street-style to express their central ideas of ‘fun, value for money, innovation, competitive challenge and brilliant customer service’ (see www.virgin.com/about us). In addition Richard Branson has not held back in exposing himself as a symbolic expression of his company, whether dressed as a bride at the opening of Virgin’s first Bridal Store in London, or demonstrating the importance of standing up to challenges by flying his hot-air balloon around the world (or nearly so).

Expressions of corporate identity and corporate brands tend to be more coherent across different businesses and markets as they serve as markers of recognition and trust in a global marketplace. However, the growing nationalism and awareness of local cultures constantly raise questions about how organizational expressions should be adapted to local and regional cultures, while still being recognized as part of the same brand. One of the brands that successfully tapped into local cultural expressions is Swedish Absolut Vodka which, through their playful and evocative marketing campaigns, combined the shape of their bottle with a range of different, but related cultural expressions, such as different local cities.

Corporate communication has focused mainly on how organizations tell stories to internal and external stakeholders about who they are, what they are doing and how they are doing it. They use a range of different internal and external communication channels to tell these stories (see Cheney and Christensen, 2001; Cornellissen, 2004). Corporate communication grew out of public relations, which concerns how organizations express themselves through the media and how they learn to improve their corporate reputation by interacting with journalists and the business press. Increasingly, organizations also use corporate web-sites, weblogs and other kinds of on-line presence to communicate about themselves and to invite stakeholders into a dialogue with them (references). In these regards more and more companies are turning to the formation of on-line communities, customer clubs or other types of on-line/off-line events where stakeholders can engage more regularly with the company and each other by expressing their opinions, beliefs and experiences with the company’s products and service. Although the digital dimension is very important in seeking to involve external stakeholders, they also offer expanding opportunities for employees to engage directly with external stakeholders, such as the annual Brick Feast held in the US, where managers and employees from LEGO Company are invited by the LEGO Fans to join the celebration of people’s individual and collective constructions (see www.brickfest.com).

Towards Cross-Disciplinary Frameworks

One of the implications of the increasing overlap between stakeholder audiences is that the same organizational expression will be interpreted from different perspectives at the same time. For example, a lot of the corporate descriptions on web-sites about core values, company history and dedication to citizenship are equally relevant for employees scrutinizing corporate values, customers searching for interaction (to complain or to praise), students exploring job opportunities, journalists looking for historical information and investors requesting detailed data. Another implication is that expressions intended for one audience may have significant impact on other audiences. Cheney and Christensen (2001) demonstrated...
how organizational marketing efforts speak more to organizational members than its customers, just as citizens put great emphasis on how organizations treat and communicate with their employees in their judgement of corporate reputations (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2003). This more comprehensive and ambiguous role of organizational expressions is reflected in the development of more integrated conceptual frameworks including several of the core concepts relevant to organizational expressions that emerge from a multiplicity of academic disciplines (Balmer and Greyser, 2003; Hatch and Schultz, 2000, 2001, 2003). One example of such an integrated framework is the conceptualization of corporate branding by Hatch and Schultz pointing at the alignments between the everyday practices of the organization (organizational culture); where the organization aspires to go (strategic vision) and how the organization is perceived by external stakeholders (images). The corporate branding framework shows how managers can use the full range of expressions related to culture, identity, vision and image in creating both distinctiveness and a feeling of belonging in the eyes of all stakeholder audiences. Thus, a more integrated approach to organizational expression has significant implications to management practice, pushing management in a much more cross-functional and less turf-focused direction. The ability of management to overcome cross-functional boundaries, which have been institutionalized for decades in theory and in practice points at one of the most critical issues in managing organizational expressions.

CRITICAL ISSUES FOR THE PRESENT

There are several critical issues in the management of organizational expressions.

**The Need for Cross-Functional Collaboration**

The ability to overcome cross-functional boundaries in managing organizational expressions is one of the most critical challenges to management, as organizational expressions not only emerge from different academic disciplines, but also have been developed within different professional subcultures in organizations, most often between human resources, marketing, corporate communication and investor relations. Some of the functions most often involved in managing organizational expressions are summarized in Figure 22.4.

The challenge in managing organizational expressions is to create cross-functional collaboration between these different business functions, and blend their different competencies and affiliations with various stakeholder groups. If the organization is dominated by isolated subcultures, the risk is that each function brings along its own set of pitfalls reflecting the limitations of any specialized competence. For example, marketing and sales functions learn what consumers want and how to create marketing campaigns, promotion material, sales initiatives, training etc. that help their companies respond to customer demands. Human resource functions focus on recruiting new employees through ads, web-sites and events and developing and retaining those they already have, for example by creating individual rewards that celebrate organizational values. Meanwhile, corporate communication disseminates information internally using channels such as intranets, corporate magazines and events, and externally to media and special interests via all kinds of press releases, interaction with media, information material, specialized reports (e.g., reports related to corporate social responsibility, media training of managers). These activities, in turn, cause the company to develop functional distinctiveness among advertising and sales groups that, in their own ways grow dissimilar from each of the others due to their responsibility for customers.

More and more companies have started to establish specific functions dedicated to the bigger picture of corporate brand or reputation management (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2003). These functions often have a dual role of
MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL EXPRESSION

Corporate Branding/ Reputation: Focus on all Stakeholders

Investor Relations: Focus on investors

Marketing & Sales: Focused on Consumers

Human Resources: Focus on current & future Employees

Corporate Communication: Focus on Media & Special Interest Groups

Different Organizational Functions that need to collaborate

Figure 22.4 Functions involved in managing organizational expressions.

initiating cross-functional collaboration and spearheading the overall identity of the corporate expressions. For example in Danish pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk the corporate branding function has been responsible for creating and translating the central idea of ‘Changing Diabetes’ into the multiple needs of specific markets and business areas involving pretty much all staff functions in the organization.

Turf wars are deadly to the management of organizational expressions, as organizational expressions rely on cross-fertilization of competencies, knowledge and perspectives among a range of different professional disciplines and business functions. The risks can best be seen in cases where silos allow a single business function to hijack the brand management process. For example, if marketing takes over corporate expressions, they are often restricted to marketing campaigns that do not resonate throughout the organization or extend beyond customers to touch other stakeholders. The risk of corporate communication hijacking the expressions is that they become little other than a platform for media relations and corporate social responsibility programs. Or, if human resources stage the dominating expressions they may focus so intently on internal issues such as values-based management or the use of expressions for recruiting purposes that customer impact and external stakeholder relevance are lost from sight.
The Limitations of Consistency

In general many managers have mistakenly believed that organizational expressions are amenable to the techniques by which tangible corporate assets are managed when, in fact, organizational expressions require new management techniques that recognize and use the added value of their intangible and much more symbolic nature. Much expressive management has been concerned with the consistency and regularity of symbolic expressions based in the assumption that it is the tangible dimension of representations such as logos, style and stories that requires managerial attention. Also, the managerial concern with consistency assumes that stakeholders are more attracted to repetitive clarity than they are to open-ended expressions. This focus on controlling the tangible dimensions of organizational expressions traces to corporate identity, marketing and brand managers, but has also influenced value-based management practices and numerous variants of culture and identity management (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Schein, 2004; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997).

When scholars such as Dave Whetten (2006) argue that the statement and communication of identity claims are at the heart of identity management, he is assuming that official and explicit self-presentations are the most central expressions of organizational identity for stakeholders. This stance shows bias toward consistent self-proclamations opposed to scholars who argue that shared understandings and beliefs among organizational stakeholders are the foundations for identity, even with their multiple meanings and symbolic ambiguity (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Other scholars have argued that the belief in consistency will not stand the test of time as it is downright counterproductive to stick to one expression in the face of dynamic movements in the economy. In his work on iconic brands, Douglas Holt showed that it is the ability to change modes of expression that keeps companies relevant in their local context, and claimed that the ability to change defines iconic brands (Holt, 2004). He offered the examples of several iconic American brands, such as Budweiser and Harley-Davidson which have changed their marketing and symbolic expressions radically over time in response to the shifting issues of importance to their customers. He presented the Budweiser campaign ‘This Bud’s For You’ as an example of a company tying working class masculinity to the popularity of Reagan and Rambo in the early 1980s in the US, and how this approach lost its relevance at the end of the decade and was changed completely by the self-ironic Budweiser Frog Campaign. His argument is that management should pay much more attention to the macro-cultural context and the identity conflicts that are important to their key audiences instead of insisting on consistency and clarity in their organizational expressions.

Critical Voices of Power and Control

A third issue concerns the extent to which organizations are able to control organizational expression and whether they should. Many companies systematically track and then fine-tune their organizational expressions using marketing impact studies conducted by Millward Brown or other advertising agencies. By engaging in various marketing activities and tracking stakeholders’ reactions, they are left with the impression that expressions can be controlled for intended consequences, but critical voices from both inside (employees) and outside (customers) these companies challenge this presumption of control by taking matters of organizational change into their own hands. For instance, consumers have forced McDonalds to adapt to local cultures and traditions making it now possible to buy a decent espresso at McDonalds in Milan, while other countries have demanded and received healthy options on local McDonalds’ menus.

Consumer driven brand communities provide more evidence that organizational expressions are part of a wider conversation. This evidence can be found, for example, in consumer communities dedicated to Jeep, Mini and Saab automobiles or those comprised of devotees to Harley-Davidson
or Triumph motorcycles (Antorini and Andersen, 2005; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Consumers who join such communities create their own experiences of products sometimes transforming transform the tangible product (e.g., by customizing the vehicle in their own way) as well as its associated meanings (e.g., by connecting the car with specific kinds of activities or experiences). One foreseeable consequence of this aspect of organizational expressiveness is that organizations will proactively involve internal and external stakeholders in acts of co-creation. This could lead to more democratic and dispersed ways of managing organizations, but could also been seen as new forms of co-optation, where the creativity of consumers are exploited by corporations.

According to another group of observers, organizational expressions are increasingly taking over both public and in some cases private domains of communication. Naomi Klein (2000) and others have argued that, as a form of corporate expression, brands invade our lives leaving little opportunity to avoid their manipulative and seductive power, even if we wanted to. This is, for example, the case of companies sponsoring everything from school materials to sporting events in the hope of making us associate their own corporate logo with our personal interests. Klein claims that within the last 10 years, many public organizations, NGOs and individuals have been turned into brands by being forced to develop and sometimes even leverage the marketing value of their expressions in order to survive. Consider how competition over resources and attention has pushed some NGOs to join forces with companies in cause related marketing and other kinds of corporate citizenship. As a result, NGOs like the Cancer Foundation and the Red Cross lend legitimacy and respect to companies while receiving money and – according to Klein – surrender to the global capitalism in return. Within critical culture studies other scholars have argued that organizational expressions themselves are dominated by consumerism, transforming what were once meaningful expressions originating in the organization’s culture into empty speech cluttering the marketplace ( Alvesson, 1990; Du Gay, 2000).

Acknowledging the limitations of control is not restricted to critics. For example, recent marketing studies have focused on how consumers embrace, change and customize products and services to fit their individual needs and values. One such example is the on-line bookstore Amazon. Based on your purchase history, this company can offer a unique set of books to you using a personal tone of voice. Other companies are seeking similarly involving means to create organizational expressions personalized to your interests and desires on their web-sites. For example BP’s ‘On the Street Campaign’ invited consumers all over the world to post home-made video clips describing their opinion about the world’s energy situation. Thus, the insistence upon full managerial control over organizational expressions that dominated the early days of corporate branding is being replaced by appreciation for more flexible and customized expressions. Critics may argue that corporate domination is receding from view, yet remains a powerful force under the surface, while optimists argue that never before have people had so many opportunities to reject brands and expressions that they do not like (e.g., Olins, 2001).

New Directions

There are several pertinent issues pertaining to the future management of organizational expressions. One set of issues relates to organization’s ability to develop new forms of management that acknowledge the cross-functional nature of organizational expression. This implies that organizational expressions be ‘led from the middle’ in order to create connections between employees as they construct and deliver expressions to stakeholders who, in turn, interpret, transform and bounce back to organizational members impressions of what these expressions mean to them. The development of cross-functional management practices becomes
even more complex as organizations expect managers to involve both internal and external stakeholders proactively in the co-creation of expressions. In this sense the management of organizational expressions will require the ability to listen to stakeholders as well as creativity in taking the multitude of their different meanings and perceptions.

Another set of issues relate to the question of authenticity. As organizations become ever more professional and evocative in the way they construct and communicate organizational expressions, it becomes increasingly important for both employees and customers to tell the difference between an authentic expression and those expressions that are fakes. At the most tangible level, this is, for example, found in the area of luxury goods, where companies such as Louis Vuitton, Prada and Bulgari are struggling to maintain their authenticity in the face of abundant fakery. In their struggle to fight back these organizations have added still more meaning and heritage to their products using a full range of organizational expressions to protect and nurture their authenticity. As part of this process of expanding their sources of authenticity organizations become aware of the historical development of their organizations and engage in a process of connecting past design language and historical markers with the creation of current expressions that reinterpret and twist their past heritage.

As organizations increasingly seek to customize their expressions and invite stakeholders to join in, it becomes increasingly more difficult to tell who is making the promises and who is responsible for the performance. This raises another issue with respect to authenticity. When Wal-Mart employees dressed in a company jacket with ‘How can I help you?’ emblazoned on the back, walk in the other direction when they see you approaching, are they denying corporate authenticity or expressing their own? What is an authentic expression of a customer-focused and service-oriented culture when employees are trained to deal with customers in particular ways that may be a far cry from what they or their customers want from the organization? Thus, on the one hand we predict that stakeholders will be even more concerned with honesty and trust in the ways organizations express themselves, and on the other hand each stakeholder him/herself will increasingly take an active part in assuming responsibility for creating authentic expressions. We predict that this conundrum will make it much more difficult to claim the critical outsider position found in the work of Naomi Klein and others.

Taken together, we believe the future challenges posed by organizational expressions require a paradoxical approach to management. Managers will have to learn to become skillful and sophisticated in balancing the many simultaneous different pressures and trends that will be brought to bear on and through organizational expressiveness. On the one hand, new forms of stakeholder involvement will emerge and turn the organization into a facilitator for the co-creation of expressions with stakeholders rather than an independent producer. By the same token each stakeholder will seek to combine and individualize expressions to suit his or her personal identity. Organizations will have to construct expressions that are adaptable to local cultures, styles and tastes in order to engage stakeholders and create a sense of belonging. On the other hand, organizations must be recognized and perceived as distinctive by multiple stakeholders in a marketplace saturated with symbols. Organizational expressions will need to be somewhat coherent making it clear that they refer to the same organization in order to reap the benefits from their brand. In their search for ways to balance coherence and adaptation, managers will have to remain true to both past values expressed by the organization while creating relevance for the future. Managers will engage in new forms of practices that blend functions, competencies and mindsets in less predictable ways than in the past, while at the same time keeping a strong focus on the central ideas of the organizations’ identity.
REFERENCES


