DRIVERS OF BRAND RESONANCE

Developing the Strategic Brand Identity of Organisations

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this contribution are twofold. Based on a resonance driven view of the organisation the author first introduces and characterises the term of an organisational brand identity. Then a procedure for the development of the strategic brand identity of organisations, which is termed "Drivers of Brand Resonance" (DBR) is presented. Hereby the historically established drivers of brand resonance are identified and their potential future attractiveness is evaluated. In contrast to the internally oriented organizational identity concepts this approach is driven by socio-cultural meanings. These meanings provide a rich banquet of values, social concepts and archetypes for the creation of a unique strategic brand identity stimulating the most promising potential for enduring resonance.

The DBR-procedure has been evolving during two decades of practitioner researcher collaboration applying action research approaches and techniques with the CEOs and owners of twenty mainly family owned companies. For the purpose of this paper the MPREIS case, a regional food retailer with 200 supermarkets, is prototypically used to demonstrate the applied procedure and show the identified results.

With the application and continuous development of the DBR procedure in twenty companies from various industries and sizes and over a time span of twenty years a reliable and valid procedure for the consistent determination of the strategic brand identity of organisations seems to evolve. The combination of thick descriptions with collaging and the continuous reflection episodes in the microcosm of the organisation supports high quality data, consistent and reliable interpretation by high involvement of the members of the microcosm.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational identity is said to refer to the central, distinctive and enduring attributes of an organization (Chreim 2000, Albert and Whetten, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Dutton and Dukerich,1991; Scott and Lane, 2000). These attributes need to be consistently translated into corresponding signs of life, so that customers and other stakeholders are able to perceive them in a multisensory way and can grasp their inner meanings. If the interpretation of these perceived meanings create positive resonance in the minds and hearts of customers and other relevant system partners organisations generate profits, continue to invest and secure survival on the long term. Brands are typically carriers of particular meanings more specifically social cultural meanings, also termed cultural codes, which enable the transfer of meanings in every culture and society.

The above described mechanism for continuous growth and survival of organisations contain elements of various research disciplines, which foster a rather isolated optimisation of their topics. Organisational behaviour and development literature provide us with the organisational identity construct without linking it to the literature of branding, brand identity and brand management (Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger 2008; Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger 2009; Shelton 2003). The phenomenon of resonance seems to be neglected in social science at all. Here findings of physics offer a valuable source for understanding relationship building between oscillatory bodies. Branding and brand management on the other hand have little usage of organisational behaviour and remain in the marketing corner without putting the brand into the centre of the organisation and its leadership activities. The anthropological view on the functioning of societies through the transforming of meanings via socio-cultural codes has yet not been linked to brand management, brand identity building, and the stimulation of enduring exciting resonance.

In this paper we try to bridge these gaps through the introduction of a so called "resonance based view of the organisation" which builds the base for the conceptualisation of an organisational brand identity. After elaborating on this framework we present a procedure for the development of the strategic brand identity of organisations, which is termed "Drivers of Brand Resonance" (DBR) is presented. Hereby the historically established drivers of brand resonance are identified and their potential future attractiveness is evaluated. In contrast to the internally oriented organizational identity concepts this

approach is driven by socio-cultural meanings. These meanings provide a rich banquet of values, social concepts and archetypes for the creation of a unique strategic brand identity stimulating the most promising potential for enduring resonance.

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The paper concludes with a summary and outlook for further research engagements.

A RESONANCE BASED VIEW OF THE ORGANISATION

For the conceptualisation of our resonance-based view of the firm we borrow research results from the disciplines of physics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, management and branding. We apply a rather philosophical type of meta-analysis to integrate the essence of selected scientific findings within these chosen research streams. We start with the discipline of physics where the concept of resonance is well established and transfer the mechanism of creating the case of resonance on to the enduring relationship idea between organisations and their stakeholders. We then move to anthropology and sociology providing us with the notion of socio-cultural meanings. The locking into these meanings seems to be the main source for the development of social identity and enduring resonance. Finally we integrate some findings from management and branding research to compose our resonance-based framework for the organisation.

Transferring Physics "Case of Resonance" on to Organisations Long term Survival

According to physicians Tipler and Mosca (2009) oscillatory bodies can be moved into vibration. In this situation the body vibrates in a particular pulse not necessarily regular. This specific tact can be wavelike diffused via an appropriate medium. A good example is acoustic noise. The swinging membrane of a loudspeaker gives impulses into the surrounding air. These waves are absorbed by our senses of hearing and interpreted as a specific sound. Every oscillatory body has a so-called Eigen- or resonance frequency, which is the particular pulsing when a body is once activated and then left to its own resources. The external activation to oscillate can evoke different reactions depending on

the chosen resonance frequency of the body, the so termed exciter-frequency. The optimal resonance is achieved when the exciter-frequency equals the eigen-frequency of the targeted body. This ideal situation is called the resonance-case. Let's take the example of tuning forks. A test tuning fork tt1 with Eigen-frequency ef1 and three tuning forks t1, t2, t3 with Eigen-frequencies ef1, ef2, and ef3. If you now strike fork tt1 to vibrate there might be a very limited stimulation for t2 and a slightly higher for t3 but almost the same strong activation of vibration for t1. Fork tt1 and fork t1 generate the "resonance-case"; both swinging on the same wavelength.

From this resonance frequency discussion in physics we derive some important propositions for enduring resonance-creating mechanisms in companies.

P1: Every organisation can be considered as an oscillatory body, which disposes a particular Eigen-frequency.

The Eigen- or resonance frequency, the particular pulsing of the body can be described as the ticking of the organisation and relates to the companies' culture. Ferrari differs in its Eigen-frequency from IKEA and IKEA from Red Bull, BMW or Apple. The founder or overtaking long-term CEO typically drives the specific pulsing or the cultural imprint. Changes at the top management level often change the established Eigen-frequency as well, e.g. Ingvar Kamprad's impact on IKEA's ticking differs from the impact of Ingvar's sons.

P2: The particular Eigen-frequency is diffused via various media or life signs towards existing or potential customers, employees, suppliers or other stakeholders resulting in different type of resonance.

IKEAS's Eigen-frequency activates via its furniture assortment, accessory, Swedish style, amusing advertising, cosmopolitan orientation, shop design, merchandise presentation, behaviour of customer contact personnel and pricing various customer groups, employees or other system partners. Again as in the tuning fork example certain groups will be highly fascinated by IKEA's life signs and completely identify with its exciter frequency, others less, and others not at all. In extreme cases certain life signs will result in strong negative resonance, e.g. British Petrol's behaviour during the oil disaster.

P3: Only very few companies achieve the case of resonance, whereby the company's own Eigen-frequency equals the Eigen-frequency of its relevant stakeholders.

Steve Jobs, founder of APPLE, created such a company where this case of resonance evolved. It will be a big challenge for Tim Cook to maintain this state and continue the enormous positive resonance of apple consumers all around the world.

A Socio-Anthropological Perspective on Meaning Creation

As indicated above we argue that the main challenge for the long-term survival of organisations is creating and nurturing enduring positive resonance through the occupation of attractive cultural codes. From anthropological research we know that every culture is equipped with particular meaning systems, so called cultural codes, which enable the transfer of meanings by their relationship to each other as the basis for socio-cultural understanding. These codes contain cultural categories in the form of words, symbols, archetypes, gestures, mimics, behaviours or other signals. To achieve understanding it is necessary to know the categories and their relationships to (all) other categories in a particular culture (Bauernfeind, 2003).

Companies and organisations, which identify and develop attractive meaning systems for all stakeholders and continuously manage to occupy those, will become carriers of particular meaning systems. We term this type of organisation brand-driven organisation.

Brand-driven organisations derive their resonance and energy from the occupation of attractive cultural codes. These socio cultural fields of resonance are available free of charge to any institution or organisation and can be successfully approached by any organisation. These might be codes which have not been used by companies so far, e.g. "Red Bull" decided to conquer the socio-cultural meaning of energy through stimulating body and mind. Codes, which have been modified towards a new meaning system to attract people who resist meanings, which are inherent in red or white wine, like "Yellow Tail" as an alcoholic fruit drink. Others use codes which are new inventions, like innovations in the sports business such as "Burton snow or skateboards" for new ways to move you on snow or asphalt. Hence brands become and can be carefully defined as

carriers of socio cultural meanings in established or newly created contexts.

Socio-cultural Meanings and Organisational Brand Identity

As a logical consequence we describe organisational brand identity as the particular combination of socio-cultural meanings a company would like to represent and to be associated with by its relevant groups of stakeholders on the long term. Embedded into the centre of the unique combination of socio-cultural meanings is the core driver for the intended socio cultural meaning system. The core driver equals the historic and (modified) future central competence of the organisation and represents the fundamental base to successfully occupy the intended meanings system on the long run.

The uniqueness of the company evolves through the composition of the set of socio-cultural meanings, the particular meaning system plus the so-called core driver of the organisation. Both together determine the brand identity more specifically the strategic brand identity of the organisation.

Figure 1 shows graphically the interplay between the intended meanings system and the core driver of the organization as the cornerstones of the future brand identity of an organization, in this case of the hypermarket chain INTERSPAR.

Figure 1: Interplay of Meaning System and Core Driver as Cornerstones of Brand Identity

In the centre of INTERSPAR's brand identity stands the "The modern, price-aggressive marketplace for domestic work & living" as the dominant stimulator for the intended meaning system. This is composed of "fresh & tasty", "regional & international" and "topical and seasonal". These meanings mainly refer to the assortment policy. The meaning "easy shopping" and "engaged and helpful" emphasize the convenience and service orientation and the meanings "urban and contemporary", "popular and lively", "familiar and warm" impact on the particular style of the stores and the type of communication policy.

The probably most crucial leadership challenge of the organization is the conceptualization of the described brand identity. It should secure the long term focus for the whole organization and its employees and form the basis for enduring resonance through potential and existing customers and other important partners (Botschen and Thelen, 2011).

In the following chapter we demonstrate how this form of brand identity can be systematically developed and used at the same time as a vehicle for strategic renewal. We call this procedure for the creation of the strategic brand identity "Drivers of Brand Resonance".

DRIVERS OF BRAND RESONANCE (DBR)

For the development of the present DBR procedure the practitioner researcher collaboration in action research proposed by Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön (Organizational learning II, Theory, Method, and Practice, 1996) based on John Dewey (Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, 1938) was chosen. From the early nineties up to present within twenty companies conditions for collaborative inquiry were created, meaning practitioners share with academic researchers an interest in building explanatory models of organizational worlds. Both are unavoidably concerned with issues of causality and causal inference. By seeing both organizational practice and academic research as form of inquiry, we can reframe the conventional view of their relationship in a way that promotes both usable knowledge and robust research. Central to this reframing is Dewey's idea of inquiry, which begins with a problematic (doubtful) situation, which blocks action, and the

inquirer seeks to make that situation determinate to restore the flow of activity. Inquiry is to be tested by its success in resolving a problematic situation and by the value inquirers come to attribute to the new problems their resolution creates.

After twenty long-term collaborations to develop and implement a new strategic brand identity in companies of different sizes and industries our DBR procedure seems to produce promising results. At present it contains elements from organisational development studies about top management's discourse on identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1996), from Nutt's (1997) proposal that top managers can facilitate the implementation by providing a compelling projected identity, from Peter Senge's (1990) research on the learning organisation, Kotter's (2007) and Dannemiller Tyson Associates (2000, 2005) findings on change management as well as qualitative market research and creativity techniques. Figure 2 shows the thirteen main sequences during the entire DBR procedure.

Figure 2: Main Sequences during the entire DBR procedure

1. Initiation through committed key-players
2. Constituting core group and microcosm
3. Start-workshop: first search for drivers of resonance
4. In depth interviews with members of microcosm plus "experts"
5. Identification and analysis of established patterns of resonance and underlying socio-cultural meanings including validity and reliability checks
6. Workshops for reflection in core group and microcosm
7. Collages for the identification and the development of future patterns of resonance and meanings
8. Workshop: Presentation and reflection in microcosm
9. Further search for attractive socio-cultural meanings and resonance patterns
10. Composing the future brand identity consisting of central meanings and core driver including evaluation of attractiveness
11. Workshops for reflection in core group and microcosm
12. Acceptance and confirmation through core group
13. Processes of diffusion processes and start of implementation projects

For the detailed description of all sequences of the DBR procedure a regional food retailer, which operates at present two hundred supermarket stores in the western region of Austria, is prototypically used.

Drivers of brand resonance starts with committed, empowered and long term secured key players of an organisation. If one of these three requirements is likely to be absent we learnt it would not be worthwhile to start the process. Often the initiator is one person e.g. the entrepreneur, the CEO or one board member. If the initiator comes from a lower hierarchical level he or she needs support from the top level.

If these requirements are fulfilled, the next step is the formation of a microcosm of the whole organisation. The microcosm team follows the idea that you can model the culture and knowledge of a company in a team of 10 to 50 representatives of the organization. Thereby crucial players at various hierarchical levels across all functional departments are engaged to create enough concernment and commitment for the whole process.

The microcosm will serve as a co-creator of the company´s future brand identity, promoter of the future shared picture and transmitter of any important step throughout the whole organisation. In the MPREIS case the initiator was Mr. Anton Mölk one of the two owners of the company. The microcosm counted 32 people, including the so-called core group with three members, and three facilitators. The members of the core group act as the steering crew during the whole process, they conduct the collaborative inquiry together with the involved researcher and the two consultants. They are in charge of quick decisions, which are demanded during the identity seeking process. The composition of the microcosm, core group, and accompanying facilitators varies from company to company.

DBR officially starts with a meeting together with all members of the microcosm. Thereby typically five short presentations around the resonating power of the organisation will be held by selected members of the microcosm, discussed and reflected in the plenary. The event will be designed and facilitated by the involved academic researchers. This workshop serves as the official start of the new brand identity search and allows reflecting and merging different views about historical resonance patters of the organisation. This reflection meeting creates a first collection of historically established drivers of brand resonance.

In the next phase in-depth interviews with all members of the microcosm are conducted.

The interview is guided by a questionnaire to identify historically established patterns of positive or negative resonances. Stories and anecdotes of contact point experiences are ideally suited to create a deeper understanding of underlying patterns of positive, negative or missing resonance. Projective techniques are used to get a differentiated understanding and deeper insights into the "organisational" brand associations and meanings over time. An interview lasts in average two hours and is conducted and transcribed by the researcher who carries out the content analysis afterwards. Additional interviews will be performed with five to ten experts, loyal or critical customers to perform additional validity checks of the microcosm data afterwards.

The main objective of DBR-analysis is the identification of the central historically established patterns of resonance and their underlying socio- cultural meanings. Therefore the collected data is analysed by two to four researchers who typically conducted their ten to twenty interviews by themselves. The latter allows the interpretation of the data and the search for patterns of resonance in the light of a holistic even multisensory perception of the provided information.

Every analyst browses her/his data to identify historically established patterns of resonance. A pattern of resonance evolves over time through the reproduction of the same contact-point experience over time. Typically the interviewed employee or expert gives the interviewing researcher examples of positive and negative resonance stories and anecdotes which deepen the understanding of the pattern plus underlying mechanisms how these patterns were created within the organisation. This way the analyst can identify the most promising patterns of resonance in his/her data and proceeds a first convergent validity check through comparing the indentified stories and patterns throughout his/her conducted interviews. In the MPREIS case every researcher conducted thirteen interviews.

Then the pattern identification is compared and reflected across all involved researchers. At this stage inter-rater reliability typically ranges between sixty and eighty percent across patterns identified by involved researchers. Conflicting and new views about additional patterns of resonance will be intensively discussed and reflected before the pattern is added, modified or eliminated. In case of still remaining insecurity the original interviewee is contacted for classification or the members of the core group are questioned for additional insights. Every pattern of resonance, positive patterns of success, negative

patterns of failure is formulated as a proposition – including supporting and disturbing examples of contact point experiences of customers, employees and other stakeholders.

All resonance propositions are further described with photos and videos of observed contact point experiences or statistical data to strengthen the validity and objectivity of the observed pattern. The whole analysis is transformed into an aesthetical power point presentation. During a final "internal" presentation with all involved researchers plus two additional researchers the consistency and plausibility of all historical resonance drivers is checked and the formulation of the propositions fine-tuned. All propositions describing the central positive and negative resonance patterns unfold the established brand reality of the organisation. The brand reality is presented in a collaborative inquiry to the initiators of the new brand-driven organisation. This feed-back loop can be considered as a further external validity check. In 20 years of collaborative inquiry and about 50 core group reflections we observed 90 – 100 % agreement with the identified resonance patterns. The collaborative inquiry in the core group supports a deep understanding of each pattern and the development of a shared clear mental picture of the historically established brand identity of the whole organisation. Sometimes to increase commitment of the core group members the formulation of resonance patterns is optimised. Then the presentation in the microcosm occurs. This presentation normally lasts half a day and is given by the facilitators. In a prototypical analysis around 9 – 12 patterns of positive and negative resonance are identified.

These are reflected in portions of three by the members of the microcosm. During this feed-back loop typically the success patterns enrich the proudness and patterns of failure – sometime not conscious due to crowding out effects – increase the level of dissatisfaction with the present situation and create personal consternation.

All three effects – increasing proudness and/or dissatisfaction plus personal consternation form a beneficial base for the next step, the creation of the future brand identity for the organisation. Thereby the designing of collages in sub-groups of three up to five people of the microcosm evolved as an efficient and effective mechanism for finding the new brand identity. To further motivate the engagement of the people and richness of the results all members of the microcosm are confronted with three versions of collages from a different industry project, a lousy, a good and an extraordinary rich version. We observed a strong

tendency towards the creation of good or rich collages.

The base for this task builds the "established brand identity". Within the collage tasks groups are asked to decide which of the established patterns of resonance should be strengthened, modified or eliminated and which new ones should be added in the future, including their underlying reasoning (see also Kim and Maurborgne's (2005) four actions framework of the blue ocean strategy).

This results in a microcosm of 30 people in six collages of the future brand-driven identity of the organisation. These pictures are presented to the core group of initiators and involved researchers in a half-day workshop. There each group presents its collage in 15 minutes and another 15 minutes are dedicated to comments and questions of the remaining members of the microcosm. At the end of this session the two involved researchers moderate a first synthesising of future drivers of resonance.

All data and pictures of the collages meeting are complemented through additional screening and searching by the involved researchers. Hereby benchmarking experts, creative session of the involved researchers and their colleagues serve as important sources to identify attractive future drivers and to prove their potential resonating power. Extreme meanings will be reflected in short inquires with the initiators of the core group to stabilize their feasibility and potential of implementation.

Then it is the task of the consulting research group to compose the brand driven strategic identity of the organisation. In this phase established and future patterns of positive resonance are heuristically composed and according to their future resonance potential evaluated and integrated. During this explorative developmental phase one main focus is on the identification of new patterns of resonance, which fit the established ones and lock into socio-cultural meanings, which strengthen the relationship with existing and attract new customers and stakeholders at the same time. In an iterative process of adding, modifying and eliminating socio-cultural meanings the researchers try to achieve a brand identity which optimizes its resonating power for the next one to two decades of the companies life. Together with the identification of the future meanings the formulation of the core drive emerges. The future core competence delivers the basement to successfully occupy the intended meaning-system.

The integration of core driver and intended brand meanings bears the new strategic brand identity of the organisation. Again this "construct" is reflected with the core group of initiators and consequently modified. Then it enters the microcosm phase. In this meeting each meaning and the derived patterns of success of the intended brand identity are explained and reflected, the same mechanism is applied to the core driver.

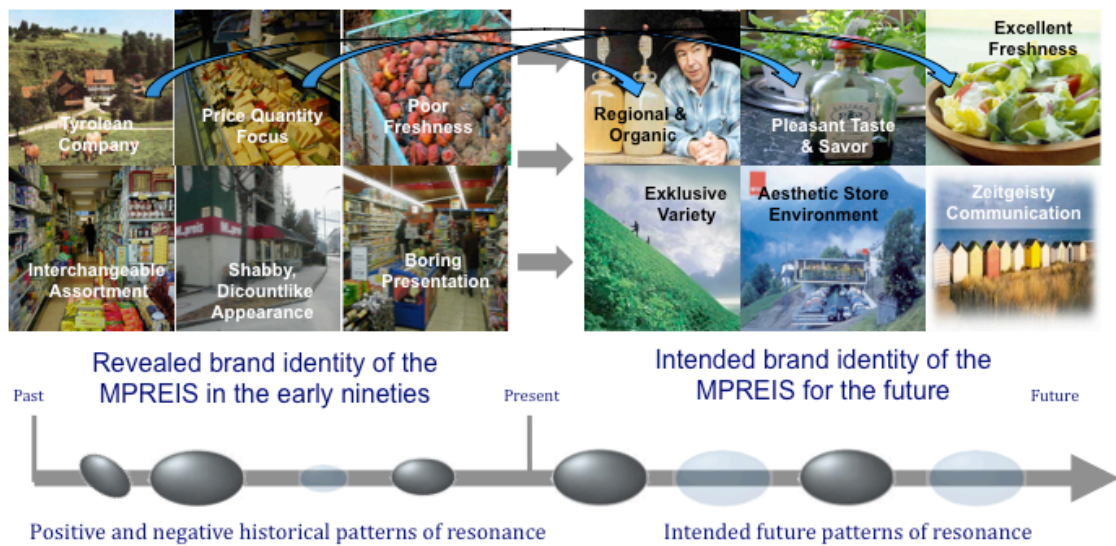Figure 3: Historical and Strategic Brand Identity of the MPREIS Company

Figure 3 summarizes the results in terms of the historical and future brand identity as a "big" picture (Kim and Maubourgne, 2005) applying the described procedure for the MPREIS Company. In the MPREIS case the shift from the historical brand identity in the early nineties to the intended future identity has been a really challenging one. Whereas the identified historical meanings were driven by the specific conditions of the food retailing industry the future brand identity represented a significant move to break with some of the established resonance patterns and related meanings.

The discussion and reflections support the construction of a shared mental picture in the minds of the members of the microcosm. The perceived attractiveness of the new brand identity eases the degree of identification and keeps the energy of involved people high. Valuable and critical comments enter the final version of the new brand identity.

In a next step the new brand identity is officially acclaimed as the company´s steering wheel for the next decade.

One way to inform and hopefully excite everybody in the organisation about the new brand identity is a whole-scale meeting (Dannemiller Tyson Associates 2005), where all members are informed about the result of the brand identity process and start working on particular tasks of the implementation. To become accepted throughout the members of the microcosm and in the mind and heads of all organisational members, teams who start working on projects with the strongest leverage on moving toward the new identity, need to be formed.

The meanings of the new brand identity are responsible for the enduring attraction of the organisation; the performance of the involved employees is responsible for the degree of satisfaction. If the new brand identity is not empathetically and clearly translated into concrete results and behavioural rules, employees will not be able to recognise the relevance of the new brand meanings for their daily working routines. The understanding of the impact of the new brand identity is a must for everybody in the organisation but does not guarantee that employees are automatically motivated and capable to perform the new rules of conduct. In most cases they will need support through trainings, adaptations and optimisations of structures and processes or alterations of their job profiles and responsibilities to successfully apply their new rules of conduct.

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

After 15 years of collaborative inquiry and action research we present a procedure of brand-driven strategic organisational identity development. In this approach the brand becomes the central vehicle for the strategic renewal of the entire organisation. Thereby we introduce the term of a resonance-based view of the firm in which the long-term survival is driven through successfully occupying so-called sociocultural meanings. The latter are cultural codes, which allow the functioning and developing of societies and can be selected by any organisation for free.

In comparison to organisational identities organisational brand identities derive their

energy and resonance from a systematic and logical electing and conquering of these socio-cultural meanings.

To successfully identify and compose the future brand identity of an organisation, we propose the so-called "drivers of brand resonance" procedure, which comprises thirteen phases, starting with the initiation through committed key players and ending with processes of diffusing the new organisational brand identity through the entire company. The uniqueness of the DBR procedure evolves through the combination of findings and techniques of various disciplines such as organisational development, change management, anthropology, qualitative market research, creativity approaches and brand management.

After 20 years of collaborative inquiry and action research of applying and optimising the drivers of brand resonance procedure, we observe the following strengths for the identification of established and valuable future drivers of brand resonance:

- Generation of rich data due to qualitative in depth interviews with experienced interviewees from all levels and functional areas of the whole organisation
- Committed and engaged interviewees who allow deep insights into "patterns of resonance" and who do not hide or prettify information
- High reliability of data collection procedure and high validity concerning content analysis of data
- Not a simple counting of noses but deriving and generation of theses about relevant resonance drivers
- Creation of a shared mental picture within the core group and the members of the microcosm about the established and future brand identity
- Personal consternation and involvement due to continuous reflection
- Inspiring creativity techniques which produces attractive patterns of resonance and underlying meanings
- Mutually developed strategic brand identity providing a solid base for implementing activities and processes to materialize the intended new organisational brand identity
- Involvement keeps energy high!

We hope that our characterization of organisational brand identity and the labelling of brand driven organisation stimulate the discussion on the corporate branding level within academics. On the entrepreneurial or CEO level we think that our described DBR procedure should help to accept and use the brand as a crucial leadership vehicle.

The resonance-based view of the organisation will provide an important field to enrich our understanding of the existence and long-term survival of any form of organisation and allow to critically question approaches such as the resource-dependence-theory of the firm. In this paper the focus was on the thorough description of the DBR procedure. Regarding the resonance based view we just presented our preliminary thoughts and reflections on a potential more elaborated resonance based "theory" of the firm.

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