

**TRANSLATING ORGANISATIONAL BRAND IDENTITIES  
INTO RESONATING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES**

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**Paper submitted to the**

13th International Marketing Trends Conference, January 25-26, 2014, Venice

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **TRANSLATING ORGANISATIONAL BRAND IDENTITIES INTO RESONATING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES**

Managing the transfer of meanings associated with the identity of any organizational brand to important stakeholders such as employees and customers is a difficult problem for managers because identity is an abstract construct. The brand's mission, vision and values may be clear to owners or few senior executives but remain unclear to the rest of the organisation. Similarly, when changing brand identity 'new' meanings might be carefully outlined during a strategic change process and become a shared mental model for executives involved in the change process but the future identity may have no real relevance for others. An important task for brand managers is to 'concretize' change in brand meanings for employees, customers and other important stakeholders so that abstract meanings are clarified through every contact point where stakeholders come into contact with the brand. We present an interdisciplinary approach for the translation of the strategic brand identity into concrete multisensory experiences and rules of conduct at contact points of an organisation involved in change. If the translation of the meanings is not clear and transparent and also consistent for the employees they will not adequately deliver high performance and this will result in disappointing contact experiences for customers.

## Introduction

Only very few companies successfully transfer their organizational brand identity's meaning-portfolio into concrete customer experiences via employees' behavioural conduct during touch point interactions. Some firms are well known for this, such as quality providers driven by their charismatic founders like Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts or Luis Vuitton, whereas other firms such as McDonalds and Starbucks produce a highly standardised service to achieve this effect. Although standardized offerings specify behavioural codes for employees they do not create outstanding customer experiences but still linger in customers' long-term memories and develop brands of enormous strength.

We ask the question: Why it is so difficult to deliver continuously stakeholder delighting experiences which are logically derived from meaning portfolios of an intended organisational identity? It is a complex task and after twenty years of collaborative inquiry and action research directed at creating congruity between intended and enacted organisational brand identity to drive brand resonance with consumers, we observe the following problems:

- A lack of attractive meaning portfolios composing their organisational identity in the first place
- If such portfolios exist they are not properly translated into concrete customer experiences and supporting rules of conduct
- If translation has occurred it is often not inspiring enough
- Concrete customer experiences and supporting rules of conduct are rarely shared across functional teams and hierarchical levels which leads to poor emotional and intellectual involvement.

One of the most crucial challenges for brand leadership and brand management is to ensure that their organisational touch point interfaces stimulate the co-creation of the meaning-portfolio of the intended organisational brand identity. A stakeholder's perception about an organisational brand identity is built during each and every interaction with a brand including any interactions with brand employees. (Schultz et al., 2005; Mühlbacher et.al 2006; Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger 2008, Batey, 2008; Brakus et al., 2009; Brodie et al., 2009).

To build resonating customer experiences we develop a conceptual phase model which outlines the stages while gaining the necessary commitment and support from employees to perform any renewal.

We first discuss organizational brand identity as a prototypical representative of meaning portfolios, which is based on McCracken's (1986) original meaning making model and Collins & Porras (1996) building your company's vision approach. We then present a conceptualization of concrete multisensory experience based on Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello (2008), understanding of brand experience, Vincent (2012) and interdisciplinary investigations. Finally we outline our phase model approach on translating abstract organizational brand meanings into concrete consumer or stakeholder experiences and accompanying supporting rules for responsible employers. The latter evolved from twenty years of collaborative action research (Dewey, 1938; Argyris and Schön, 1986) in fifty companies across industries and company sizes. Studies of Senge (1990 and 2000), Kotter (2007), Dannemillers Tyson Associates (2000 and 2005) and Nutt (1997) on the learning organisation, facilitating change through engaging people build the

main ingredients for our brand-driven translation approach where the brand becomes the main vehicle for change and renewal (Shelton 2003). For the detailed description of the phase model a prototypical case of a regional brewery is used.

### **The construct of organizational brand identity (OBI)**

It might seem cumbersome to introduce an additional construct like organisational brand identity (OBI), but we do this for good reasons. On the one hand it allows us to build on McCrackens (1986) original meaning making model, where culture stands as the original source and location of the general abstract categories of meaning from which brands ultimately must draw. These categories represent fundamental coordinates of meanings used to interpret the brand (see also Mark and Pearson 2001; Batey 2008). They provide the basic distinction that allow social individuals to make sense of phenomenon within the world (Bauernfeind 2003) and to (un)consciously create social and self-identity (Stets, Burke 2000). This view allows us to enrich the construct of organizational identity respectively corporate identity which is concerned with what organisations stand for and what central distinctive and unique characteristics they provide (Albert & Whetten, 1985, Balmer 2012, Kim and Maubourgne 2005) and where organizational meanings seem mainly internally evolving. Additionally we dissolve the brand from the product level and move it up to the organizational or corporate level. This perspective takes on board Collins and Parros (1996) elaborations on company visions where they distinguish between core ideology composed of core values and core purpose and envisioned future containing big, hairy goals and their description. Our construct of OBI consists of externally driven socio cultural value fields and the company's core domain drivers equalling Collins and Parros (1986) description of the company's core purpose. In our understanding this envisioned future is part of the organizational OBI due to the fact that the overall goal is the on-going developing and establishing of the chosen socio-cultural value field and their supporting core driver/competence.

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 driving core competence for the intended socio cultural meaning system. The driving core competence 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.

This way brands become carriers of socio cultural meanings in established or newly created contexts and can be defined as resonating meaning-portfolio driven by the company's core competence and created through all touch point experiences of the organisation.

The uniqueness of the company evolves through the composition of the set of socio-cultural meanings and the particular core driver of the organisation. Both together determine the brand identity more specifically the strategic brand identity of the organisation. Figure 1 demonstrates this view of organisational brand identity in a tourism context.

Figure 1: Components of OBI & Example of Tourism Destination Ischgl in Austria

Insert Fig. 1 here

We agree that a vivid description of the core values and core purpose is necessary to motivate and inspire but not enough to automatically and consciously derive concrete multisensory contact-point experiences. Therefore we present in the next section our understanding of multisensory brand experiences and accompanying supporting employees' behavioural rules.

### **Resonating brand experiences**

The OBI meaning portfolio provide an inspiring and limiting frame to derive consistent and stimulating concrete touch point experiences. Ultimately the intended OBI materialises through resonating touch point experiences with customers, employees and other relevant stakeholders. The accumulated experiences determine the mode and intensity of resonance (Tipler and Mosca 2009) – very positive via neutral to very negative, none to very strong and so forth. We adopt Brakus et al. (2009) dimensions of brand experiences and apply it to all 'signs of life' during touch point encounters; e.g. the product, service itself, promotion campaigns, shopping environments or the personal selling experience. Thus, we conceptualize brand experience as subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of any tangible or intangible organisational brand expression. According to Brakus et al. (2009) these touch point experiences have:

- Sensory stimuli: when the expression makes a strong impression by appealing to our senses
- Affective stimuli: when the expression conjures strong feelings or sentiments
- Intellectual stimuli: when the expression makes us think, or induces us to think in a specific way
- Behavioural stimuli: when the expression stimulate us to do things or change our behaviour as a result of the experience

These cause particular responses and a specific type of resonance.

Take the example of 'alpine strawberries' when they are first listed and sold in a supermarket chain. Sensory stimulation occurs through intense red colour, shape and size. The testing opportunity allows judging sensory dimensions such as structure, smell and taste. The connotation of 'alpine' stimulates feelings about mountains, pure air and induces good product quality. Intellectual associations might include small craft farming practices which would justify higher prices.

The three evaluation and association components together initiate or avoid particular shopping or buying behaviours. The following consumption experiences together with the earlier perceptions determine the overall resonance, e.g. very strong and very positive in the case of the discovered, bought and consumed alpine strawberries, and continuous rebuying and recommendation. We observe three phases, which stimulate and determine behavioural changes and continuous rebuy and consumption:

- The discovery phase of new sign of life, e.g. product, service, advertisement, browsing the internet or a shop, mouth-to-ear, tastings etc.

- The shopping or buying phase, often occurs right after the discovery phase, depending on the perceived cost-value relation
- The consumption phase.

All three phases often contain many touch points where continuously sensory, affective and intellectual stimulations, responses and evaluations take place. These lead to behavioural consequences and the overall judgment of the total brand experiences. The better and more stable these experiences, the stronger the brand equity generation and the stronger enduring positive resonance.

The crucial challenges in the creation of these many brand equity determining experiences are:

- To derive them consistently from the intended OBI
- To make them concrete and stimulating for customers and employees by
- Ideally surpassing industry established audience's expectations
- Lingering in your employee's and audience's memories well after the moment of interaction leaving an enduring strong impression afterwards.

To translate the often rather abstract meaning portfolio of organizational brand identity (OBI) into these kinds of resonating experiences we propose in the next section a co-creative phase-model.

### **The OBI Transition Model**

The following framework for effective translating meaning-portfolios into stimulating touch-points experiences evolved from our long term action research and consultancy work with fifty companies up to present (Botschen et. al 2012)

Figure 2 one summarizes the main phases and corresponding results in the procedure.

FIGURE 2: OBI-Transition Model  
Central Phases & Corresponding Results

Insert Fig 2 here

The case of Zillertal Bier, a regional brewery, is used to demonstrate the functioning of the indicated procedure and identified results.

The whole process is divided into a process and content stream, which are continuously interwoven. All results in the left stream of the transition model are generated in an expanding co-creation process. The phases of expanding co-creation into the whole organisation is described in the left stream of figure 2.

Depending on the leadership style the flow and intensity of integrating employees into the indicated co-creation phases differed. In very autocratic led organisations even the concrete customer experiences and behavioural rules are developed within the core group and microcosm of the company. Behavioural rules are then presented to the responsible employees and trained at their working places. In free-rein led organisations the transition

of the OBI is almost autonomously co-created by responsible employees, e.g. customer contact staff or the product or service development team.

In participative led enterprises, like Zillertal Beer the phases described in our Transition Model are typically followed through. Figure 3 shows these co-creation groupings and their corresponding results.

FIGURE 3: Zillertal Beer - Transition Model  
Central Phases & Corresponding Results

Insert Fig 3 here

As can be seen from the Zillertal Beer Transition OBI and leveraging strategic action fields were developed in the microcosm of the organisation. The microcosm team followed the idea that you can model the culture and knowledge of a company in a team of 5 to 50 representatives of the organization. Thereby crucial players at various hierarchical levels across all functional departments were engaged to create enough concern and commitment for the whole process.

The Zillertal Beer microcosm served 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. The members of the microcosm went into the formation of the 4 touch point teams of three members each, where under the guidance of the two external facilitators and under the earlier described components of resonating customer (stakeholder) experiences the concrete formulation of delighting touch point encounters took place.

After the optimisation of any intended concrete customer experiences through the core team and the facilitators the concrete experiences were presented to the code of conduct teams. The code of conduct teams are basically the touch point teams enlarged through additional responsible employees. In these groups any code of conduct to fulfil the corresponding customer experience requirements is developed. The code of conduct specifies the necessary resources to start implementing the specific rules per touch point and development zone. In the case of Zillertal Beer the main focus for the first year was on the development of the beer assortment and the accompanying service and delivery behaviour of beer operators. The continuous involvement of almost every employee during the Zillertal transition process raised the intellectual and affective involvement significantly.

### **Implications for research and management**

With the application and continuous development of the OBI-Transition procedure over more than ten years in companies from various industries and sizes a promising tool for the consistent determination of derived resonating (stakeholder) experiences has evolved. The process includes continuous involvement of employees from different hierarchical levels and functions and their impact on the intellectual and emotional buy-in of these organisational members. The parallel working on the concretising of abstract meanings of the OBI support the emerging shared mental pictures, which in turn augment the likelihood of brand consistent behaviour across brand strengthening touch point zones.

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