The role of Corporate Communications in promoting a coherent Corporate Brand image and reputation in Mauritius

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ABSTRACT

To sustain long-term survival in today's business environment, organisations must strive to break from the competitive clutter and become more visible by maintaining a positive image and reputation. This requires a holistic understanding of the communication process from a corporate branding perspective.

This research investigated the role of corporate communications in promoting a coherent corporate brand image and reputation in Mauritius. Empirically, this research is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key executives and external stakeholders such as communication consultants, investors and journalists.

The findings validated many of the theories proposed in literature and revealed how corporate communications must be integrated and well managed to enable differentiation through the corporate brand. Since expert guidance is necessary, it is advocated that the corporate branding process be coordinated by both the chief executive and the communication director. Additional insights gained from this study have been proposed as a 'de jure' model.

DECLARATION

I, Bharati Bina Hawabhay, declare that this research report is my own, unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Bharati Bina Hawabhay

August 2006

DEDICATION

In memory of my father

Kantilal Hawabhay

(1937- 2005)

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context of study

The competitive and comparative advantages of Mauritius are being challenged by a free trading regime, intense competition from emerging low cost economies, and the end of its trade preferences. In order to sustain its economic development and growth, there is an urgent need for Mauritius to re-orient itself to find new sources of competitiveness. According to a 'Competitiveness Foresight National Summit' held in 2004, the island's future seems to lie in services where investment capital needs are lower and factors such as people, capital, ideas and networks are more mobile.

Similarly, with the advent of globalisation, local businesses have been searching for more innovative, differential strategies to break out of the competitive clutter and achieve the required visibility and credibility on the local and global market. But as economies become more service-based, interpersonal relationships between organisations and their audience start to play a crucial role and if well-managed, can become the key to customer loyalty and long-term survival.

In that sense, corporate branding is acknowledged as one of the most prominent drivers of added value for all stakeholders of a company. Based on the concept of a unique value proposition which is *imperfectly imitable and substitutable* (Balmer & Gray, 2003) derived from the heritage, vision and values of an organisation, it has the power to create emotional bonding with its audience and supports the achievement of a favourable image and reputation in ways not fully attainable by product branding.

But corporate branding is not only about differentiation, it is also about belonging. While a successful corporate branding process requires a high-performance system of communication so that all messages are aligned, coordinated and integrated in a coherent manner, it also necessitates a healthy organisational culture to motivate employees to align their behaviour with the corporate objectives.

Many organisational failures often happen because of a breakdown in communication. Few organisations understand the need for a seamless integration across all operational and functional processes, because of a short-term outlook, turf wars, budget limitations, power games and a lack of knowledge of the processes involved. Managers tend to blame their lack of success on the difficulty of making employees understand their vision. But, they often overlook the fact that the communication problem is most probably rooted in their approach and in the prevailing corporate culture, which can neither promote positive attitudes in staff nor address their personal values and aspirations.

These issues are at the core of an effective contribution by corporate communications. Communication that builds relationships of trust and accountability among people is vital to the success of an organisation. For that matter, it is essential that management address the efficacy of its communication platform and allow communication managers to become a strategic partner at the macro organisational level by participating in corporate planning and providing expert guidance about stakeholder communications.

In parallel, a public-private partnership programme between the government and the private sector could leverage on country branding and corporate branding strategies to provide the country with its strategic direction to compete globally. Mutually beneficial value transfers between the country brand and strong corporate brands could then enhance cognitive associations internationally, by building an image of a dynamic economy beyond mere sun, sand and beaches.

This study takes an interest in the extent to which practitioners in large companies in Mauritius share the view of corporate branding as a holistic process and perceive the role of corporate communications as an integrative device for successfully bringing about operational integration along with cultural change in the achievement of corporate goals.

1.2 Significance of study

This research work helps to fill a gap. Research in the field of corporate branding and corporate communications in Mauritius has not yet been undertaken, hence this research work is an attempt to shed some light on the corporate branding process in local companies. It investigates how strong and well-managed corporate brands can improve the competitiveness of local companies. It is also hoped that this research work will initiate awareness for further research projects.

Promotes a better understanding of the communication process in organisations. As companies grow and gear themselves towards more expansion, an efficient communication strategy becomes a key factor in distinguishing successful corporate brands from their not so successful counterparts. However, many organisations still perceive corporate identity management and the corporate communication process as being merely traditional rather than strategic (Balmer & Gray, 1999). Undoubtedly, the art of effective communication is still a major challenge to organisations in the 21st century due to the complexity of maintaining consistency and coherence across the multiple communications channels.

Provides access to the views of practitioners. Despite the growing interests amongst academics on the subjects of corporate branding and corporate communications, empirical studies on how practitioners actually manage the processes are few and far between, due to the difficulty of getting access to case sites. Thus, this study is an attempt to validate the views of academics, as postulated in the literature, by investigating how practitioners and key external stakeholders implement their corporate branding and communication strategies in real life in order to achieve a strong corporate brand image and reputation.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

0ne of the objectives of this research study is to gain thorough insight into the challenges and significance of corporate branding as practised in Mauritius. Particular emphasis is placed on the management of the corporate communications process within large corporations and its influence on shaping the corporate image and reputation.

Another objective of this research report is to develop a 'de jure' model based on the findings. The intention is to provide local organisations with a framework for the management of corporate communications by showing how the components fit in a corporate branding strategy and help in achieving the objectives of a favourable image and strong reputation. This model is not intended to be prescriptive but will hopefully provide guidance and direction as well as prove useful in the formulation of a coherent communication strategy.

1.4 The Problem statement

The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of corporate communications in promoting a coherent corporate brand image and reputation in Mauritius.

The sub-problems have been defined as follows:

1. How can a corporate brand sustain differentiation and uphold competitive advantage in the market place?
2. What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
3. How can corporate communications promote a coherent corporate image?
4. How can corporate communications promote a coherent corporate reputation?

1.5 Assumptions

The determining factors provided by the panel of interviewees are fully inclusive of the situation within Mauritian businesses.

The chosen respondents have enough knowledge about the subject of corporate branding and communications to talk at length about the subject and its intended objectives.

The techniques and instruments utilised enable analysis of data in order to produce the results without loss in reliability.

1.6 Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

The sample is chosen from companies in Mauritius that subscribe to specific market standing as described in section 3.3.2.

This study does not discuss aspects of corporate co-branding, and brand extensions.

This study does not deal with the aspect of brand equity in depth.

Limitations

The sample is judgemental and non-random due to the qualitative nature of the research methodology.

No standardised instruments are used, since data collection occurs through semi- structured interviews. In order to circumvent researcher bias, every attempt is made to keep the objectivity of the data as explained in the research methodology chapter.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides the relevant empirical and academic evidence that assist in developing the appropriate research questions to address each of the sub problems.

The first section deals with a brief review of the evolution of the brand concept from product branding to services branding and finally to the new paradigm of corporate branding. This serves to (1) highlight how corporate branding differs from product branding (2) to reveal the main organisational implications of these differences and (3) to explain how and why corporate branding has risen in prominence in both the academic and practitioner fields.

2.1 Evolution of the brand concept

Fundamentally, the objective of branding is to create differentiation and preference for a product in the mind of the consumer, over and above the price and functionality of the product (Knox & Bickerton, 2003).

According to Keller (1998), a brand is a promise i.e. by identifying and authenticating a product or service, the brand delivers a pledge of satisfaction and quality. Kapferer (1997), on the other hand, describes the brand as a complex symbol that not only conveys the attributes or performance level of the offering but also reflects the values of the producer and projects a certain personality.

The development of product branding, over the last three decades, also mirrors the evolution of marketing as a discipline, which seeks to add value to the basic functionality of the product or service to create and maintain a distinct place in the target market. The marketing perspective advocates the primacy of customer demand as a guiding principle in generating brand value for customers (Macrae, 1999; Urde, 1999).

However, this belief was challenged by the development of brand positioning (Ries & Trout, 1982), which postulated that the offering (whether a product, service or company) had to hold a place of choice, not on the marketplace but in the mind of the prospect. This new perspective has led branding practitioners to re-orient their search towards creating unique value propositions in order to position their brands favourably in the minds of existing and potential customers (Keller, 1999).

The concept of positioning together with the 4Ps of marketing has been the main building blocks of product brand marketing practice since the early 1960s (Knox & Bickerton, 2003). However, the evolving business environment was giving rise to new challenges in the marketplace with the advent of globalisation, information and communication technology, increased competition and the rise of the services sector. As realisation dawned that product branding was no longer sustaining value like before, the need for new business models to differentiate offerings became an imperative and the focus shifted gradually from the product brand onto the integrity of the organisation, its people and unique resources and capabilities as a new means of generating and sustaining economic value (King, 1991).

Indeed, this concurs with the economic theory known as the “resource-based view of the firm” (Kay, 1999), that sees the firm as a collection of assets or capabilities, which are “…rare, durable, inappropriable, imperfectly imitable and imperfectly substitutable” (Balmer & Gray, 2003, p.983) and can provide the basis for superior performance. These resources and capabilities include patents and trademarks, *strong brands and reputations*, a well-established position in an industry, know-how that takes time to develop, and strong relationship patterns with suppliers and customers.

2.1.1 The evolution of services branding

The services sector has been evolving as a dominant force in the world as a provider of new employment opportunities: in 1990, international trade in services was worth some $600 billion world-wide (The Economist, 1990) and since 1995, more than two-thirds of the workforce in the UK and three-quarters in the USA, are employed in service companies (monthly digest of statistics and employment gazette, 1995). Furthermore, a 2003 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) asserted that 70% of the GDP and 65% of employment in OECD countries was coming from the services sector (www.oecd.org).

Corporate and services branding are closely linked because of their intangible attributes and heavy reliance on the interactions between employees and customers (King, 1991; Mc Donald, Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Contributions from Nayyar (1990), Bharadwaj, Varadarajan, & Fahy (1993) and Zeithaml & Bitner (1998) revealed that extrinsic cues such as the company's image and reputation are particularly important in adding value where consumer understanding of complex service offerings are "mentally intangible" to the average consumer, as in the case of financial services.

The dilemma for service companies, furthermore, is whether to build the brand on the product offerings or the corporate identity, i.e. whether the company's positioning should be driven by customer value or the vision (Van Riel, 1995; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Urde, 1999; Macrae, 1999).

The next table shows, at a glance, the main differences between product, services and corporate branding as sourced from the works of authors such as Keller (1998), Balmer (2001b) and Mc Donald *et al* (2001). The strategic value of the concept of corporate branding can thus be clearly assessed.

<u>Table 1: Summary of main differences between products, services and corporate branding</u>

	Product branding	Services branding	Corporate branding
Focus	Products	Services	The corporation
Values	Created by marketers	Driven by Co. core values and strategy	Created by founder(s), mix of corporate and other sub-cultures
Objectives	Create differentiation in specific markets; Obtain customer loyalty; Separate products from corporation	Create differentiation in specific markets; use corporate brand to obtain customer loyalty	Create awareness of company values, vision, trust, loyalty & goodwill amongst all stakeholders
Management	Middle manager	Middle manager	CEO
Cognate discipline (s)	Marketing	Marketing / customer service	Strategy / multidisciplinary
Target group	Customers & end users	Customers & end users	All stakeholders
Communications mix	Marketing mix (4 P's)	Services mix (8P's)	Total corporate communications mix
Time perspective	Short term –equivalent to product lifecycle	Long term –equivalent to company life cycle	Long term – equivalent to company life cycle
Advantages	Strong functional performance can create brand equity	Outstanding service creates lasting impression and differentiation	Favourable image helps in crisis management
Disadvantages	Can prove costly in R & D; lack of synergy between brands	Misalignment between corporate values & staff behaviour elevates cost of customer acquisition & retention	Damage to reputation create snowball effect; Organisational Integration required very complex & time consuming

Source: Adapted from the work of Keller (1997), Balmer (2001b) and Mc Donald *et al* (2001)

2.1.2 Significance of Corporate branding

Over the past decade, a number of developments have contributed to the rising importance of the corporate brand, and can be grouped under five broad categories (Einwiller & Will, 2002):

Growing importance of capital markets: in such markets, fund investors and financial analysts associate positive future expectations with strong corporate brands and a favourable reputation. Retail investors also represent a huge and yet unexploited market and are thus an interesting group that can be lured to buy a company's stock on the basis of a favourable corporate reputation.

War for talent: since a strong brand also projects a favourable image and reputation, it can assist in attracting highly qualified employees especially senior executives, which are very often in shortage.

Growing demand for accountability and transparency: there is increasing external demand for accountability of the organisation's policies and practices behind the brands being marketed. This is evidenced by the 'triple bottom line' concept (Elkington, 1997), and corporate notations assigned by independent enterprises (www.asset4.com) on the degree of accountability of companies towards their stakeholders and society in general. Corporate governance issues and statutory financial disclosure for transparency of dealings (e.g. OCED Principles of corporate governance) are also pushing companies to engage in strengthening organisational values such as integrity, financial solidity, social and environmental responsibility.

Need to create synergy between brands: since a company's offering is an important dimension of corporate reputation (Fombrun, Gardberg & Sever, 2000), the trend is to reinforce the corporate brand perception through associations with its strong product brands. The mutually reinforcing relations between product and corporate brands are reflected in a survey of the world's most valuable brands (Clifton & Maughan, 2000) where 19 of the top 20 companies listed shared the same corporate and product brand name.

Coordination and identity problems in multinational corporations: when mergers and acquisitions take place, organisations discover that it becomes an extremely ambiguous affair to cope with challenges such as diverse cultures, differing corporate identities and the number of internal communication channels. A corporate brand can help to coordinate common values and a common identity through its system of integrated corporate communications.

Some definitions of the Corporate brand

Hereunder, various academic experts' definitions of the corporate brand are given:

Ind (1997, p.13) states that "… the corporate brand is more than just the outward manifestation of an organisation – its name, logo, visual representation. Rather it is the core of values that defines it".

Urde (1999) believes that the corporate brand is a strategic tool of management, which can guide the organisational processes that generate and support value creation.

Balmer (2001a, p. 281) defines a corporate brand as "…the conscious decision by senior management to distil and make known the attribute of the organisation's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition".

Van Riel (2001, p.12), on the other hand, defines the corporate branding process as:

"... a systematically planned and implemented process of creating and maintaining a favourable reputation of the company with its constituent elements, by sending signals to stakeholders using the corporate brand".

It is worthwhile to emphasise that the main corporate brand is not the only medium through which signals are sent, as Van Riel's (2001) definition of corporate branding seems to suggest. An organisation's product and subsidiary brands are also contributors to the process of corporate branding as they also influence the corporate image and reputation through their associations with the parent corporation (Fombrum *et al*, 2000). On the other hand, stakeholders can also receive messages and information from external sources (e.g. word of mouth) which are not within the control of the company (Balmer, 1995).

However, creating and maintaining a positive reputation and an implied favourable image of the company are the end goals of the corporate branding process. A number of authors (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997; Greyser, 1999; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999) and practitioners (Macrae, 1996; Ind, 1997; Olins, 2001) have alluded to the potential economic value inherent in successfully managing and developing the brand at the organisational level.

The 'signals' communicated to stakeholders using the corporate brand are conveyed through the corporate identity mix of behaviour, communication and symbolism (Maathuis, 1999). These are important elements that are worthy of discussion as they are the foundation on which the corporate branding process operates:

Behaviour

Staff provides the interface between the organisation's internal and external environments (Kennedy, 1977; Balmer & Wilkinson, 1991; Hemsley, 1998) and contributes in building and maintaining the corporate brand image and reputation (Abratt, 1989; King, 1991, Harris & de Chernatony, 2001, Balmer, 2001a, 2001b). Staff behaviour is integral to the corporate branding process due to its crucially important role in transmitting the brand's values and establishing an emotional bond with external stakeholders (de Chernatony, Harris & Dall'Olmo Riley, 2001). Consequently, a good understanding of the corporate brand's identity is needed so that staff's attitudes and behaviours are aligned to the desired strategic objectives.

In this context, human resources (HR) managers are looked upon as agents of change and champions for employees' engagement (Ulrich, 1998). The HR department occupy a position of strategic importance in supporting the corporate brand strategy (King, 1991) because recruiting suitable employees with an affinity for the corporate brand will create benefits not only in terms of employee commitment, but also provide a financial cost advantage in terms of recruitment and training (King, 1991). Reward schemes would play major a role in the process and regular monitoring systems to identify employees' reactions to the brand values are important tools to track adherence to organisational values (de Chernatony *et al*, 2001). Furthermore, a company that invests in systems to maintain awareness of staff in the organisation's values and objectives will ultimately derive a better image and reputation (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

Symbolism

Symbolism is seen as the standardised visual identity systems such as symbols/logos, colours that serve as identification tools to make the abstract values of the organisation more tangible and consistent Balmer (2001). From an analysis of the literature, the author concluded that an organisation's symbolism can provide good insights into its corporate identity and can be used to send signals about a change in corporate culture and communication. Indeed, the role of symbolism has evolved from merely increasing an organisation's visibility to actively playing a role in communicating the corporate strategy (Olins, 1978).

Communication

The effective communication of corporate brands requires that all forms of communication whether visual, marketing, or organisational, should be consistent and integrated in order to effectively convey the core values into clear and appealing messages to internal and external stakeholders (Bernstein, 1986, Urde, 2003). In the corporate brand building process, the values that summarise the brand i.e. the core values, become the theme of communication and are suggested as common starting points (Van Riel, 1995) to communicate the brand essence in accordance with its identity (Urde, 2003). However, the management of the corporate promotion mix is different and more complicated than the marketing communications mix of advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, and packaging (Bernstein, 1986).

The importance of communication in ensuring cross-functional integration and consistency of messaging is discussed more in depth in section 2.6.

The role of the CEO as the driving force behind the corporate branding process must also be emphasised as he/she is considered as the brand's primary advocate and nurturer, constantly monitoring the implementation of the strategic processes and communication strategy (de Chernatony *et al*, 2001). Only a transformational type of leadership will be able to motivate, inspire and energise staff to live by the organisational values and project adequate behaviour (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2003). While communication plays a key role in distilling the 'ethos, aims and values' (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997) of the corporate identity across the organisation, the CEO's behaviour must also be consistent with his 'preaching' and 'walk the talk'.

On the basis of the above discussion, corporate branding is redefined, as proposed by Einwiller & Will (2002, p. 101):

"... a systematically planned and implemented process of creating and maintaining favourable images and consequently a favourable reputation of the company as a whole by sending signals to all stakeholders by managing behaviour, communication, and symbolism".

As the concept has various connotations when viewed from various perspectives, the following table provides the key benefits of having a strong corporate brand both internally and externally, as per authors such as Lewis (2000), Kotler (2003) and Aaker (2004). This summary also shows the competitive advantages that can be achieved in successfully managing the corporate branding process.

Table 2: Summary of key benefits of strong corporate brands from both internal and external perspective

INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
• Sustain vision and corporate identity • Support an integrated communication strategy across the organisation • Becomes a valuable intangible asset as the brand valuation can be worth billions of dollars on the balance sheet • Acts as an initial shock absorber in times of crisis • Attracts high potential human resources for recruitment • Reinforces employee commitment, loyalty, motivation and alignment to strategic objectives • Plays the role of an umbrella brand backing diverse offerings of a firm • Promotes corporate governance for more transparency and ethical corporate behaviour	• Make it easier to find investors as it enhances market capitalisation and often results in higher price-earning ratios. • Creates favourable corporate image and reputation of the organisation • Provides an attractive and unique value proposition to external stakeholders • Give more bargaining power with suppliers and retailers • Obtains a premium market price because of the higher perceived quality • Allows for diversification of offerings in other markets or introduction of new products / services more successfully, at lower promotional costs and in less time • Provides higher goodwill and better seller power in corporate takeovers

Source: Adapted from Lewis (2000), Kotler (2003) and Aaker (2004)

2.2 A comparison between Corporate identity and Corporate brand

Since the last decade, there has been heightened interest and debate in the academics' and practitioners' circles on the many facets of corporate identity. Conflicting viewpoints of authors from different academic disciplines have led to the two concepts of corporate identity and corporate branding being used interchangeably even though there are critical differences between them (Balmer, 1998). Figuratively speaking, corporate identity is the 'soul' of an organisation (Balmer & Soenen, 1999) whilst the corporate brand is the 'body', which cannot exists without the corporate identity. It is the aim of this sub-section to clarify the issue by comparing the mix of variables that comprise the two constructs.

2.2.1 Corporate Identity

According to the International Corporate Identity Group's (ICIG) statement, (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997, p.355), corporate identity "…articulates the corporate ethos, aims and values and presents a sense of individuality that can help to differentiate the organisation within its competitive environment".

Furthermore, Balmer (2001b) provides the following explanation on the characteristics of corporate identity:

- It is a summation of those tangible and intangible elements that make any corporate entity distinct.
- It is shaped by the actions of corporate founders and leaders, by tradition and the environment.
- At its core, is the mix of employees' values, which are expressed in terms of their affinities to corporate, professional, national, and other identities.
- It is multidisciplinary in scope, and is a melding of strategy, structure, communication and culture.

- It is manifested through multifarious communications channels encapsulating product and organisational performance, employee communication and behaviour, controlled communication, stakeholder and network discourse

Bick, Jacobson & Abratt (2003, p. 839) also describe corporate identity as "…the embodiment of the organisation. It is the communication of the core values, philosophy and strategy of the organisation through the delivery of its products and/or services".

Corporate identity thus refers to the distinct attributes of an organisation, i.e. vision, values and culture and is found within all business entities whereas a corporate brand is contingent and dependent on the organisation's strategy, business activities and type of industry.

2.2.2 The Corporate Identity Management Process

Central to the process of corporate identity management, are the concepts of corporate strategy, corporate personality/culture, and communications, in projecting the desired image and achieving a durable reputation (Marwick & Fill, 1997; Stuart, 1999b; Bick *et al,* 2003). Balmer (1998) suggested that in addition to the traditional 4 P's of marketing, the corporate identity promotion mix required six additional P's: philosophy, personality, people, performance, perception and positioning (Balmer, 1998). In a later article written in 2001, the author gave the term 'corporate marketing mix' in replacement of 'corporate identity promotion mix' and regrouped the ten P's under the mnemonic HEADS[2] i.e. what the organisation **H**as (the corporate identity), what the organisation **E**xpresses (the communications function), the dominant//mix of **A**ffinities held by each employee groups (organisational identity, corporate personality and culture), what the organisation **D**oes (corporate identity and profile) and finally how the organisation is **S**een by key **S**takeholder groups and networks (corporate brand, image, reputation and stakeholder theory).

The interplay of the various constructs in the corporate identity management process are also incorporated in an updated version of Abratt's (1989) model of Corporate Image Management, proposed by Bick *et al* (2003), as shown in Figure 1. The model incorporates the current thinking and all the significant features of previous models by authors such as Marwick & Fill (1997), Balmer (1998), Bickerton (1999) and Stuart (1999b) and depicts that:

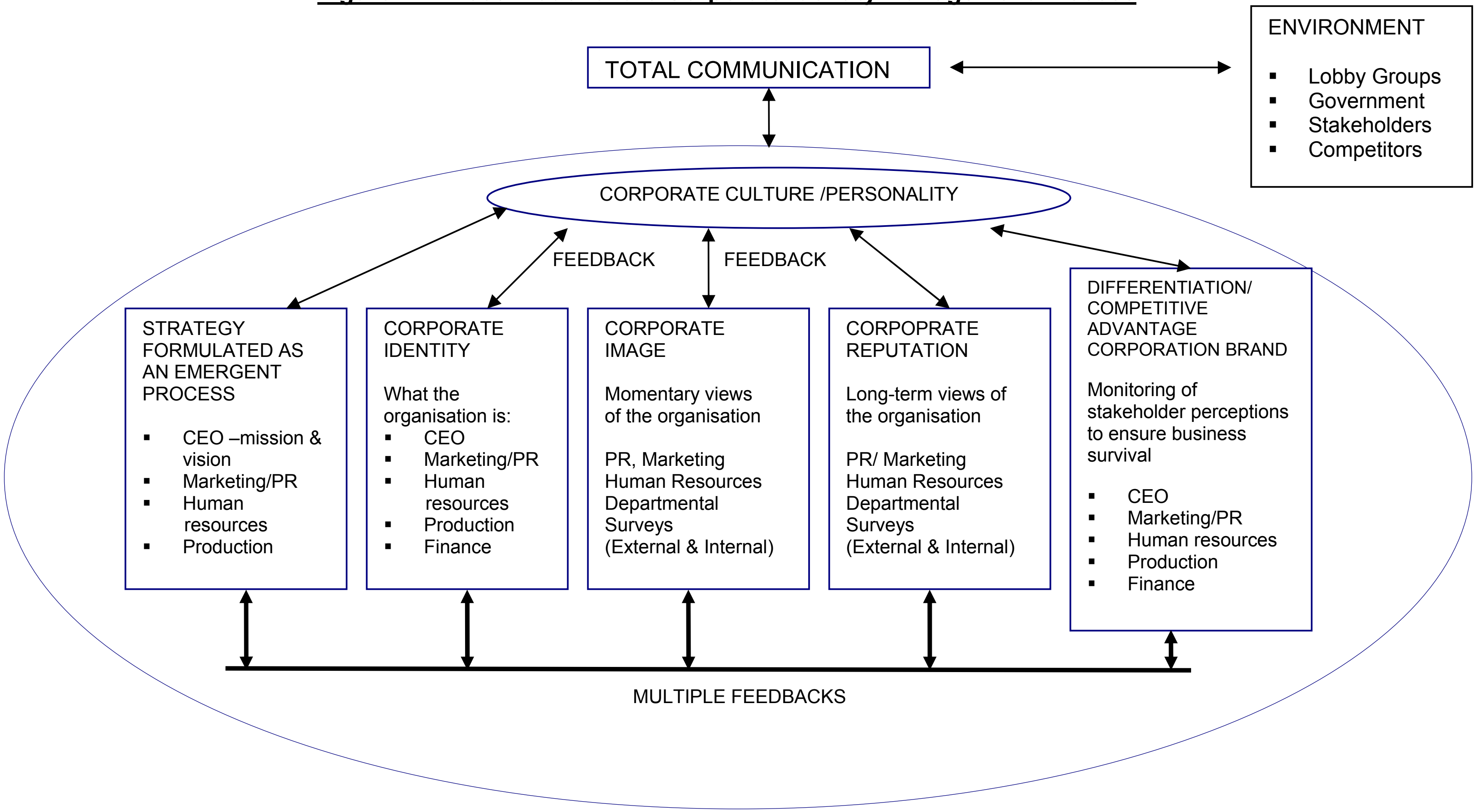
Corporate strategy is based on management communication, combining vision, products and services, organisational structure, and corporate identity structure (Marwick & Fill, 1997; Stuart, 1999b). It is viewed as emergent and adaptive to the market and environmental forces and in turn influences the organisational culture (Marwick & Fill, 1997; Stuart, 1999b; Bick *et al*, 2003).

Corporate personality is equated with the mix of cultures present within an organisational (Balmer, 1998; Bick *et al,* 2003) and has long been viewed as a distinguishing factor between organisations (Abratt, 1989; Howard, 1998; Balmer, 2001b). As outlined above, it is impacted by the fluctuating changes in corporate strategy and is thus preceded by corporate identity (Cornelissen & Harris, 1999).

Communication is part of the corporate identity mix and translates the reality of the identity into corporate images held by the various stakeholder groups by coordinating all planned and unplanned communications to project consistent and coherent messages (Abratt, 1989; Van Riel, 1995; Bickerton, 1999). .

Corporate image is a mix of signals projected by the whole organisation, especially staff, via their behaviours Abratt (1989) and is reported to be fleeting and momentary (Marwick & Fill, 1997; Bick *et al*, 2003) whist reputation is an evaluation of the image as held by people over time (Dowling, 1994, Stuart, 1999b, Bick *et al,* 2003) which eventually leads to sound financial performance and business survival.

Figure 1: A 2003 Model of the Corporate Identity Management Process



Source: reproduced from Bick, Jacobson & Abratt (2003)

The previous discussion has shown how the corporate identity construct compares with the corporate brand and the main similarities and differences are further highlighted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Summary of the main similarities and differences between Corporate Identity and Corporate Brands

	Corporate identity	Corporate brands
Necessary or contingent?	Necessary	Contingent
Applicable to all organisations?	Yes	No
Stability of attributes	Constantly evolving	Relatively stable
Applicability	Normally a single entity	Normally a single entity but can be multiple
Management responsibility	CEO	CEO
Functional responsibility	All functions	All functions
Disciplinary roots	Multidisciplinary	Multidisciplinary
Principal drivers	Strategy, culture, vision	Branding covenant, culture
Gestation	Short	Medium/long
Stakeholder focus	Mainly internal. external stakeholders vary in importance depending on strategy	Mainly external. Internal stakeholders also important
Desired profile among internal and external stakeholder groups	Variable: low to high	Normally high
Importance of controlled communication	Variable	Normally crucial
Importance of advertising and visual identity	Variable	Normally crucial
Key elements	Culture (sub cultures), strategy, structure, communication, performance, perception	The branding covenant, communication plus other identity elements (actual, communicated, conceived, ideal and desired identities (see Balmer and Greyer, 2002)
Key dimensions requiring alignment	Organisational attributes – (including sub cultures)/ Communication/perception	Corporate brand covenant/communication plus other identity elements (including sub cultures)
Portability	Normally difficult	Variable
Financial goodwill	Variable	Can be very high indeed

Source: Balmer (n.d.)

Table III. A comparision betweeen corporate identities and corporate brands

Source: Balmer & Gray (2003)

2.3 Brand Architecture

Brand architecture relates to the way in which various products of a brand portfolio are interrelated, structured, managed, and perceived as adding value to the organisation (Petromilli, Morrison & Million, 2002).

Two of the most common types of brand architecture are called the ‘branded house’ and ‘house of brands’: The ‘branded house’ architecture leverages on the corporate brand serving as an endorser to a series of offerings that may operate under distinct sub brand names. It also gives credibility in communications with stakeholders such as government, the investor community, potential employees and the public (Urde, 2003). The ‘house of brands’ architecture characterises a group of stand-alone brands where each product brand operates independently to maximise its market share and financial return. Under this approach, the performance of the whole range of independent brands is considered to be greater than if it was managed under a single umbrella brand (Aaker, 2004).

A third approach, called the mixed brand or hybrid approach, consists of a mix of corporate and product brands. Decision for this approach is usually based on the strength of the product brand and whether the corporate brand can add any value. Also, whilst the significant cost-savings and economies of scale that the branded house provides can prove to be more efficient to maintain in the global marketplace, there is nevertheless the risk that the entire product portfolio could be affected by a problem such as a product failure (Schultz, 2002).

Integrated corporate branding strategies may yield the greatest, long-term value for the brand, the brand portfolio and for the business in terms of added growth and market opportunities. Petromilli *et al* (2002) contend that innovative branding techniques such as ‘pooling’ which puts disparate brands in a portfolio to work in a concerted way to address a variety of consumer needs, can help to achieve greater revenue in a bigger market, and create loyalty-building opportunities across the brands.

A solid brand architecture strategy requires a clear definition and understanding of market dynamics, an awareness of key competitors' brand strategies and alignment with internal business goals and objectives (Petromilli *et al*, 2002; Schultz, 2002). A strategic approach to maximising on brand architecture takes cognisance of the brand portfolio as seen from the perspective of the customer, who ultimately determines a brand's success (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999).

2.4 Limitations of Corporate Branding

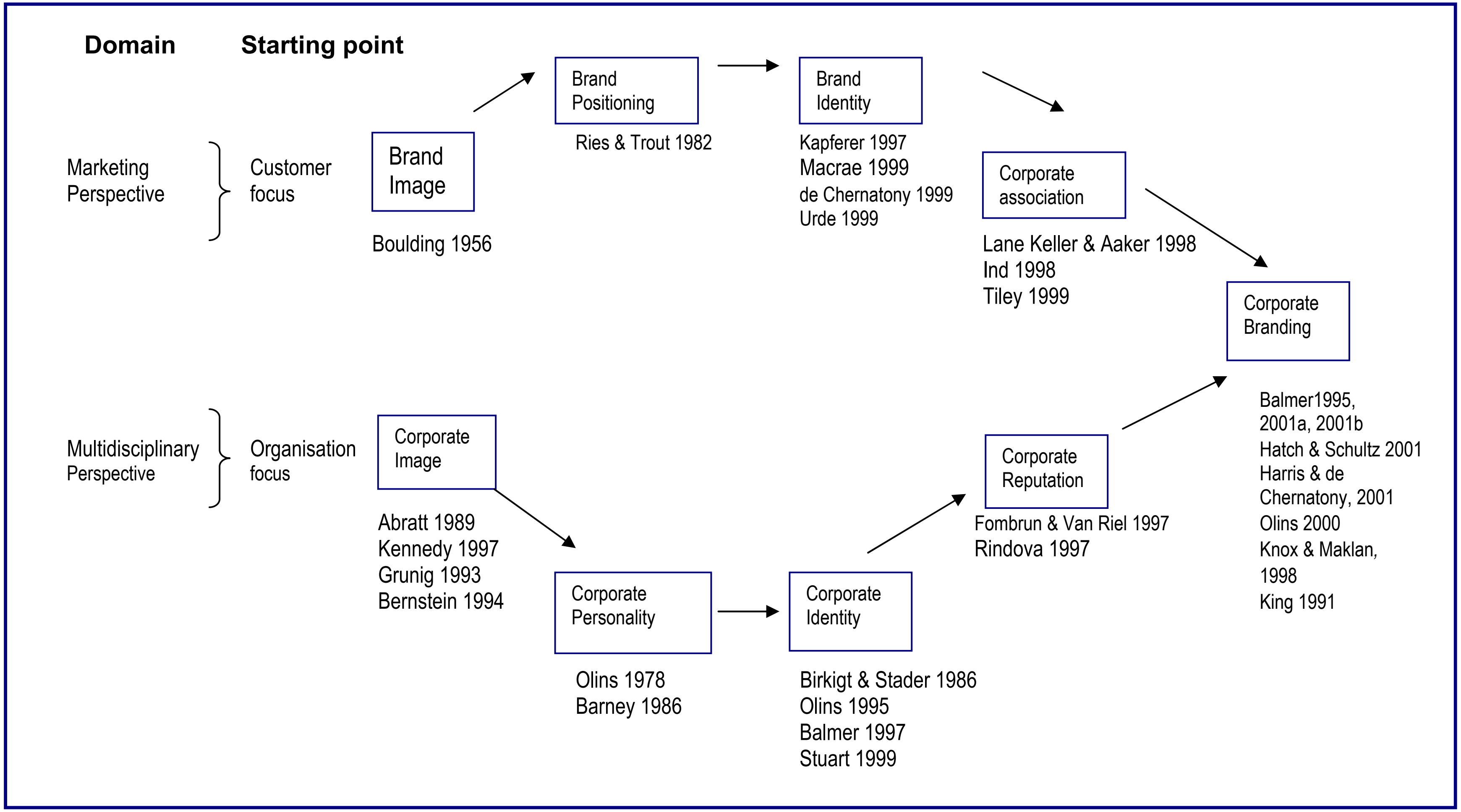
It must be stressed that the concept is not applicable when organisations operate in a monopoly situation, in commodity markets or in certain parts of the public sector (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Gilmore (1997) asserts that corporate branding needs considerable investment and company-wide efforts. Many organisations are therefore not ready or do not have the resources to engage in such a process despite the high return on investment that a strong corporate brand can generate.

Conclusion

This first section clearly demonstrates that the growing insights into the evolution and applications of corporate branding increasingly lend support to the process as a strategic tool for competitive differentiation and long-term profitability (Balmer, 1998; Urde, 1999). It is a multi-disciplinary concept driven by the corporate identity, culture and vision and leverages on behaviour, communication and symbolism to achieve the objective of creating a unique positioning in the minds of its multiple stakeholders (Van rielKnox & Maklan, 1998, Hatch & Shultz, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Figure 3 depicts the evolution of the brand concept over the years and the convergence of academic thinking, seen from two perspectives: the marketing perspective as driven by the customer focus and the multidisciplinary perspective, which focuses on the organisation as the driver.

Figure 3: Convergence of academic thinking



Source: reproduced from Knox & Bickerton (2001)

2.5 Addressing the first sub-problem through Research Question no 1

The literature reviewed so far addresses the first sub-problem on how a corporate brand can sustain differentiation and uphold competitive advantage in the market place. It shows that the corporate branding process leverages on:

- the distinct attributes of the corporate identity to create a favourable image and reputation (Rindova, 1997; Balmer, 2001b; Hatch & Schultz, 2001)
- a multidisciplinary approach which encompasses strategic management, marketing, human resources and total corporate communications (Bickerton, 1999; Van Riel, 2001;Marwick & Fill, 1997; Urde, 1999; Balmer, 2001; Bick *et al,* 2003)
- transformational type of leadership as the driving force to ensure organisational-wide commitment and energise staff to believe in the corporate brand values (de Chernatony *et al*, 2001; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2003)
- staff behaviour to create emotional bonding with its stakeholders (Kennedy, 1977; Balmer & Wilkinson, 1991; King, 1991)
- positioning the company as a unique organisational value proposition (Knox & Maklan, 1998; Hatch & Shultz, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001)
- integrated corporate communications to send coherent signals to stakeholders (Balmer, 1995; Van Riel, 2001)
- the organisation's resources and capabilities such as reputation, product and service performance, product brand and customer portfolio, strong relationship patterns with suppliers and customers to uphold competitive advantage (Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Kay, 2004)
- a well-defined brand architecture (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999, Petromilli, Morrison & Million, 2002; Aaker, 2004; Schultz, 2002).

Research Question No 1:

Why and how does an organisation leverage on the corporate brand in practice?

2.6 Communication

This section discusses the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process. Van Riel's (1995) model of organising and coordinating the communication process and Bickerton's (2000) conceptual framework of corporate brand management are examined to obtain insightful knowledge on the key aspects of the communication process, from both an internal and external perspective.

Importance of Communication

The fundamental purpose of workplace communication is to enhance the business performance of the organisation (Aberg, 1990). In order to support the achievement of an organisation's aims and prevent a fragmented image, all types of communication should be consistently aligned and comprehensively integrated (Aberg, 1990; Van Riel, 1995).

Because of the intense and competitive nature of the business environment today, it has become imperative for organisations to communicate effectively with all stakeholders. However, creating a coherent perception of an organisation in the minds of its stakeholders is a major challenge faced by many companies. This issue is particularly prominent for diversified corporations or large multinationals, which have grown through mergers and acquisitions, and comprise of multiple subsidiaries, business units, operating with multiple brands structures, each with their own culture and identity. Furthermore, other organisational issues such as diversity of culture and behaviour, language barriers, turf wars between divisions, deficient management structures, blurred responsibilities, divergence between desired values and actual organisational values make it a formidable task to maintain a synergy and coherence in the multiple messages and signals being sent to internal and external customers (Einwiller & Will, 2002).

The literature acknowledges the pivotal role of corporate communications in helping to create the required consistency and congruence of perceptions and advocate the urgent need to give due consideration to this critical aspect of the corporate identity mix (Van Riel, 1995; Balmer, 1995; Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

2.6.1 Van Riel's (1995) model of the communication process

Van Riel (1995) is one of the influential authors on the subject of communication within organisations. In order to promote cooperation and consistency among all relevant communication functions, Van Riel (1995) conceptualised a framework which advocates the definition of a corporate communication policy, based on three key issues:

Definition of common starting points (CSPs): The author argues that the adoption of a clear starting point will provide senior management with a strong focus and point of consensus when deciding on the strategic orientation to be adopted in decision-making. Thus, management must decide which central values will form the foundation of all forms of communication to be deployed by the corporate entity.

There has been much debate around the concept of CSPs in terms of which communication perspective to be adopted: authors such as Urde (1999) and Macrae (1999) stand by the marketing perspective (the bottom-up approach) which upholds the primacy of customer value as an effective means to create dialogue and alignment of business processes in support of the brand proposition. On the other hand, Hatch & Schultz (1997) advocate the organisational perspective (the top-down approach) arguing that the vision, as the driver behind the management of the brand, helps to create alignment between the internal culture and the external image of the company.

Use of common operational systems: the author advocates that choosing the same operational system such as computerised decision-making support systems will facilitate the coordination of all internal and external communications, help to achieve better control and can improve the implementation of corporate plans.

Coordination of decision-making in communication: the author proposes an intentional effort to harmonise communication through either

1. a communication directorate to take charge of all communication functions
2. a steering committee which regroups all executives in charge of the various types of communications activities or
3. ad hoc meetings to enforce frequent meetings of communication executives for knowledge sharing

Van Riel (1995) furthermore identifies three main forms of communication called the corporate communications mix: management, organisational and marketing. The first two levels of communication deal with all internally focussed processes and the marketing level deals with the external processes and when these three main channels of communication are integrated, then the desired image is acquired. These three levels of communications are also called formal communications or controlled communications (Balmer, 2001b) and are recognised as one of the most valued strategic tools of an organisation's communication strategy.

(i) Management communications

Management communication, also known as the input phase, is a controlled process, which involves the analysis and planning required in preparing the communication activities. It is based on corporate strategy, which constitutes the link between corporate personality and corporate identity and incorporates top management vision, decisions on the portfolio of products and services and organisational structure (Marwick & Fill, 1997).

In a corporate brand management process, it is important that the organisation's members hold congruent perceptions about the nature of their brand. However, as teams (management, employees and external agencies) responsible for managing the brand become larger and the composition of their members more diverse, they are likely to differ in their perceptions of the brand's identity (de Chernatony, Daniels & Johnson, 1993).

The importance of perception and the role of senior management in creating the desired perceptions in all audiences have been expressed by Bernstein (1984), who postulated that a company's image is a reality, resulting from a company's actions but if communication is mismanaged, then the unfavourable image in turn, impacts negatively on the company's reputation (Balmer, 1995).

Therefore, senior management teams need to ensure that all forms of brand communications present a coherent brand identity through a balanced internal and external perspective. Harris & de Chernatony (2001) also advised managers to relax their control over staff and empower employees to deliver coherent brand supporting behaviour by coaching them to believe in the brand's values and coercing them to become the organisation's brand ambassadors.

(ii) Organisational Communications

Since the operational and business environment is becoming more complicated all the time, it becomes more and more essential for staff to know where the organisation is heading and organisational communications is a catalyst in giving the internal audience a clearer direction and vision (Kalla, 2005).

Kitchen (1997) states that organisational communication can be used to create a more democratic, harmonised organisation by helping employees to fully understand where they fit into an organisation's strategy and how they contribute to the fulfilment of the organisation's aims and objectives. White & Mazur (1995) view internal communications as a two-way process conducive to a climate in which open communication can take place, based on trust. The authors see this type of democratic communication as most valuable in companies of less hierarchical and more flexible structure. Conversely, employees can turn indifferent when managers forget that employees are the organisation's most important asset (Argenti, 1998).

Indeed, organisational communication is crucial for providing information, achieving understanding and gaining employees' commitment (Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1998). The authors have demonstrated that when employees perceive that external communications accurately represent their first-hand experiences of the organisation and describe the organisation in accordance with their personal values, they develop a positive evaluation of their organisation. However, when employees feel that external communications exaggerate their organisation's claims compared to those they experience in their work environment, they tend to evaluate negatively the external communication messages as well as the organisation's activities.

Since the nature and frequency of communication affect the congruence between management and employees' perceptions, face-to-face communication as well as regular meetings is advocated in order to assess how accurately messages are understood and result in changes in behaviour (Fisher, 1993).

(iii) Marketing communications

Marketing communication is mainly aimed at the external customers, and marshals the marketing communication mix of advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, and packaging. The aim is to deliver a consistent message to the market and create an effective positioning for the brand in the minds of its prospects (Van Riel, 1992).

Since the final picture created in the recipient's mind must be consistent and not blurred by internal contradictions within the organisation, Van Riel (1992, p.16) took the marketing communication concept to a deeper level by calling it integrated marketing communication, or "…the integration of content and form of all commercial messages of a company, aimed at enlarging the effectiveness and efficiency of the company's total communication activity".

Thus, the author looked at integration from two main angles: marketing communications and co-ordination in organisational communications. This view concurs with Stuart's models (1994, 1999a), which refer to marketing communication and internal marketing (i.e. organisational communication) as the two forms of communications at the interface of identity and image.

2.6.2 Corporate Communications

On the basis of empirical evidence, Kitchen (1997) also concluded that the interaction between corporate and marketing communications in organisations were not fully integrated and coordinated since marketing communications are usually under the control of marketing departments rather than communication departments. Since marketing communication activities usually constitute a large portion of the total communication budget of a company, it is therefore necessary for marketing communications to be fully integrated with management and organisational forms of communications.

This understanding is reflected in the emergence of corporate communication as a concept which Van Riel (1992, p.26) defines as "…an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonised as effectively and efficiently as possible, so as to create a favourable basis for relationships with groups upon which the company is dependent".

According to Balmer (1995), corporate communications are the channels by which the corporate identity is projected to internal and external stakeholders and eventually translates over time into the acquisition of a corporate brand reputation. Dolphin & Yan (2000) further add that corporate communication is a strategic management process by which an organisation– whether public or private – communicates with its various audiences with the ultimate objective of improving its competitive advantage.

However, Maignan & Ferell (2001) suggest that whilst the intensity of corporate communications is expected to positively impact on stakeholders' attitudes and behaviours, the promotion of certain types of corporate initiatives may be beneficial only up to a point. Similarly Brown & Dacin (1997) report that if a company excessively communicates on 'laudable' actions such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, it may induce stakeholders to regard these activities as merely a promotional tool and they may become suspicious about the intent of the firm. In the same vein, Christensen (2002) perceives that corporate communicators are now transforming the notion of transparency from a market condition to a business strategy. However, the author argues that it would be fallacious to assume that the amount of information made available by a company will automatically lead to positive images amongst its stakeholders. Instead, a boundary effect can take place when increased access to information may lead to distrust and alienation.

2.6.3 The Bickerton (2000) model of Corporate Brand Management

In his attempt to develop a conceptual framework for corporate brand management, Bickerton (2000) draws on the research works of several authors to achieve an integration of all the components of internal and external communications, which are the cornerstone of corporate brand management. His model has subsequently been tested empirically in a pilot case study. Starting with the premise that the corporate brand is a valuable asset, the author has reiterated the challenges of integrating the mix of communications that exist in organisations, as defined by Van Riel (1995) and developing consistent corporate communications (brand consistency) across all stakeholders along with the importance of aligning the relevant business processes to ensure continuity with the corporate brand proposition (Knox & Maklan, 1998; Knox, 2000).

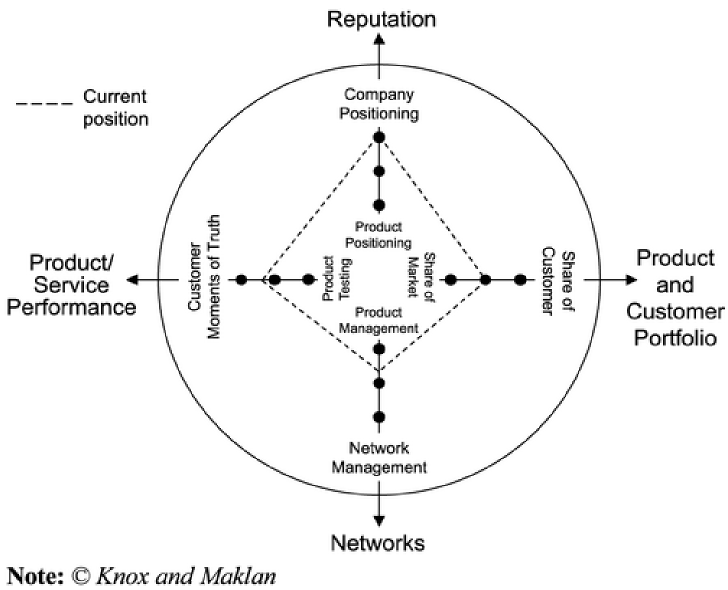
2.6.3.1 Brand context and positioning

It is understood that the interplay of three variables i.e. strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate image form part of the context of corporate branding (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Similar to previous authors, Bickerton (2000) was also faced with the issue of which CSPs to adopt in order to provide a platform for consensus among managers to initiate the beginning of a coherent communication strategy. In a bid to resolve this issue, the author was inspired by the work of Knox & Maklan (1998) who proposed a model called the Unique Organisation Value Proposition (UOVP), which is a strategic approach to branding and positioning the corporate brand, based on both a bottom up and top down approach. This framework consists of a blend of four organisational competencies (the organisational marketing mix) and core business processes capable of both promising and delivering on customer value.

The four components that can determine the effective positioning of the organisational brand are:

- reputation i.e. the organisational competencies for which the business is known built on the complete portfolio of the company's activities and values
- product and service performance i.e. the way customers perceive the organisations products and service delivery. It is about the "moments of truth" that customers experience in their day-to-day dealings with staff
- product brand and customer portfolio i.e. based on mass marketing where a limited portfolio of goods and services are sold to a very large customer group and on relationship marketing where customised solutions are sold to a limited group of customers
- networks: the alliances and partnerships that enable the company to deliver complex and value-added brand promises

<u>Figure 4: The UOVP model</u>



Source: Knox (2004)

The core processes that deliver value to customers vary by industry and within industry but can be broadly classified under five generic themes:

- Customer development
- Resource transformation
- Asset management
- Supply partnership
- Marketing planning

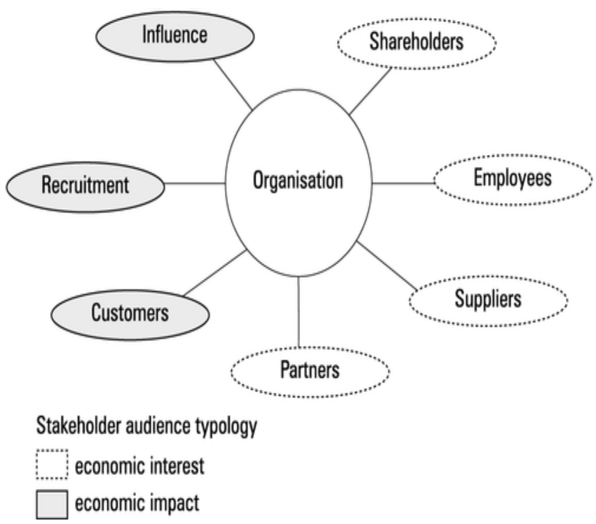
Thus, customer value is delivered through a close alignment between the core competencies that determine the brand's positioning and the organisation's core processes. Consistent corporate communications and ongoing review of the assumptions governing the brand distinctiveness and relevance are key elements in the framework.

Furthermore, senior executives' involvement in the process is crucial in ensuring that the goals of corporate brand consistency and continuity are secured (Knox & Bickerton, 2003). In their action-research work, the authors found that the adoption of a measurement tool to control and measure the consistency of formal communications proved to be of significant benefit to the management team.

2.6.3.2 Segmenting stakeholder audiences

Bickerton (2000) also stresses on the importance of segmenting the organisation's stakeholders in terms of their internal and external orientation so as to have a clear direction for the management of the communication mix. He concurs with Davidson (1999) who distinguishes between stakeholders who have an economic interest in the company (employees, shareholders, suppliers, partners) and those who have an economic impact (customers, regulators, investors, media).

Figure 5: Stakeholder audience typology

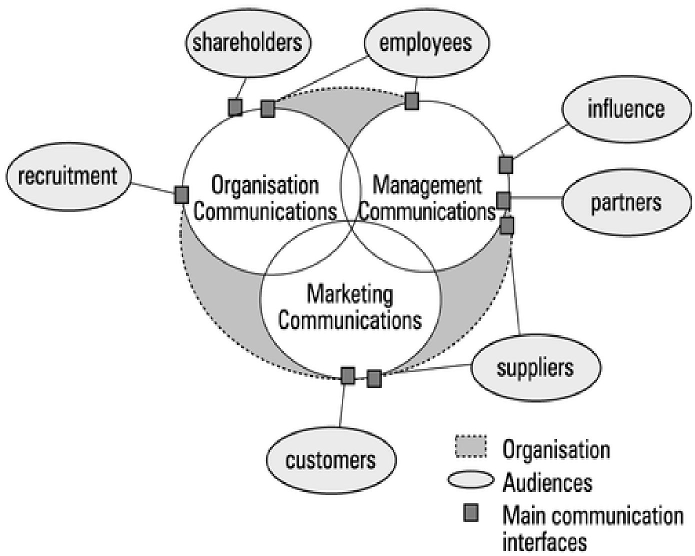


Source: Bickerton (2000)

2.6.3.3 Identifying the interfaces

The crucial point of contact between the organisation and its various stakeholders is at the identity/image interface (Abratt, 1989), which is also called the moment of truth for the organisation (Stuart, 1994). This is where the actual customer experience with the brand takes place and as such, corporate communications should ensure that, at each communication interface, staff behaviour and processes are coherently aligned with the corporate brand promise.

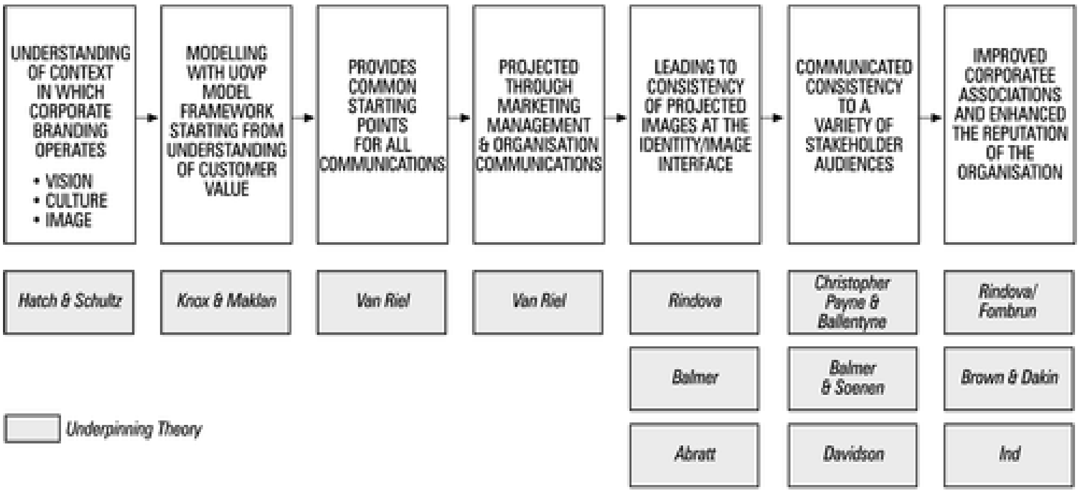
Figure 6: Modelling the Communications mix, Stakeholder typology and communications interface concepts



Source: Bickerton (2000)

Figure 7 hereunder shows the conceptual framework of Bickerton (2000), which blends the various aspects of communications as discussed along with the input of scholars that have contributed to its development.

Figure 7: A Conceptual Framework For Corporate Brand Management



Source: Bickerton (2000)

2.6.4 On-line Communication

The Internet is increasingly merging with the traditional economy and becoming an integral part of many companies' basic business model (The Internet Economy Indicators, 2001). This new media, comprising of web-based communication in areas such as e-commerce, emails, intranet, and websites, is known to offer unprecedented potential as a communication, collaboration and knowledge-building tool to enhance communication within a company as well as with the external audience. An empirical study by Einwiller & Will (2002) has highlighted a number of characteristics of the Internet that companies have to consider when communicating in the new economy:

2.6.4.1 Interactivity

The network characteristic of the Internet makes it easy for organisations to exchange and spread information in real time to all stakeholders. However, monitoring this interaction can be overwhelming for many companies who are still focussed on the classical media and are yet to develop proper tools for the coordination of this kind of communication.

2.6.4.2 Speed and Ubiquity

The growing demand for information coupled with the need for producing that information quickly are some of the greatest challenges of companies today. Speed and ubiquity allows general corporate information to be posted on a website for ease of access and to communicate critical news quickly and far away and it can be used to ensure the effective functioning of the company during any crisis. On the negative side, it also creates quality control problems and danger of hoaxes scratching the image of the company.

2.6.4.3 Internet brokerage

In pre-internet times, private shareholders used to receive their information through banks and financial brokers. Today, it is possible to inquire directly with companies on such matters but many companies have yet to install sufficient resources for online relations with their shareholders. Online investor relations can deliver three key benefits: message consistency i.e. the same message regardless of the media used, interactivity and mission orientation i.e. everything originates from the organisation's mission (Barker, 2004).

2.6.4.4 Transparency

The new economy is making companies not only more transparent but also more vulnerable to the eyes of its public and community: any stakeholder group can access information about another stakeholder group, either through the company's own website or through independent websites for corporate information (www.hoovers.com) and consumer communities (e.g. www.gomez.com). Thus, any contradiction in what is being communicated to any stakeholder group can be uncovered instantly thus creating doubts about a company's credibility. Therefore, organisations are contributing more to transparency by willingly sharing information with stakeholders. All messages that are transmitted through this channel must be coordinated and founded on the organisation's mission and positioning statements to provide consistency and coherence with the organisation's activities.

Conclusion

This section confirms the important role of corporate communications in sustaining consistency, congruency and coherence in messaging across various channels. Because of the inherent complexity in managing the process, it is imperative to have a corporate communication expert to provide guidance in setting the communication policies and common operating processes at the onset so that the organisation can effectively leverage on its core competencies to drive the desired positioning in the minds of stakeholders.

Furthermore, it is evident that online communication is now an integral part of doing business and provides an opportunity to organisations to build and manage stakeholders' relations online. It necessitates a dedicated team of professionals to effectively align this channel within the organisations' communication process.

Thus, by efficiently managing the corporate communication process, companies may well benefit from a better appreciation and perception from stakeholders, which eventually facilitate ascribing it with a favourable image and better reputation.

2.7 <u>Addressing the second sub-problem through Research Question 2</u>

The literature review from the preceding sections addresses the second sub-problem of determining the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process. The process rests on a framework to stimulate cooperation and better control amongst all relevant communication functions based, inter-alia, on:

- the definition of common starting points (CSPs) from which central values can provide a consensual ground for decision making (Van Riel, 1995)
- the UOVP model which combines both the vision and customer value as CSPs (Knox & Maklan, 1998; Bickerton, 2000)
- the organisational core competencies to effectively position the corporate brand in the minds of its stakeholders (Knox & Maklan, 1998)
- common operational systems or core processes to coordinate all communication functions in conjunction with the brand positioning (Van Riel, 1995; Knox & Maklan, 1998; Bickerton, 2000)
- appointment of one person, a steering committee or ad hoc meetings to take charge of the required integration of communication (Van Riel, 1995)
- an understanding of the orientation of main stakeholder groups to ensure alignment at each communication interface (Davidson, 1999; Bickerton, 2000)
- the online communication as an integral part of the communication strategy with a dedicated team to manage its unique characteristics (Einwiller & Will, 2002, Barker, 2004)

Research Question 2:

What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?

2.8. Corporate Image

Boulding (1956) and Martineau (1958) are some of the earliest writers who identified the link between people's perceptions of an organisation and their behaviour towards the organisation. According to Bernstein (1984), corporate image is derived from the feelings and beliefs about the company that exist in the minds of its audiences and that also arise from experience and observation.

Based on a review of current literature on the concept, Bick *et al* (2003) concluded that image is about stakeholders' instant impressions/momentary views of the organisation at a particular moment in time and that staff behaviour especially that of front liners has a direct impact on the views of people interacting with the company. Image can also be deliberately changed or manipulated to send new signals, as desired by management and is thus fleeting and not always based on reality (Kennedy, 1977; Podnar, 1999). Thus, image is short-lived but if projected in a consistent and coherent manner, it can be translated into a long-lasting reputation (Marwick & Fill, 1997).

Initially, the concepts of image and reputation were used interchangeably (Abratt, 1989; Dowling, 1993) but as research progressed, the two concepts were distinguished from each other. According to Abratt (1989), image was created from a mix of perceptions transmitted by the organisation, particularly through staff behaviour but Bick *et al* (2003, p. 840) reported that this definition was more in accordance with the late 1990's definition of reputation. Abratt in collaboration with Bick & Jacobson (2003) redefined corporate reputation as reflecting the long-term view of the organisation.

Dowling (1993) also described image as people's overall perceptions of the organisation but one year later, the author explicitly defined reputation as "…the evaluation in which an organisation's image is held by people" (Dowling, 1994 as reported in Bick *et al*, 2003). Similarly, Stuart (1999a) viewed reputation as being the overall development of image over time as well as a reflection of *external* stakeholders' perceptions while image would reflect *employees'* perceptions.

2.8.1 Key external stakeholder groups

Aaker (1996) talked about image from the customer perspective that associates tangible and/or emotional attributes such as innovation or trustworthiness to a brand but authors such as Berg (1985), Fombrun (1996) and Hatch & Schultz (2000) also considered the perceptions of investors, media and the general public about the company.

In an empirical study by Einwiller & Will (2002), the investors' community was ranked as the most important audience for corporate branding efforts followed by customers and journalists. The authors also reported the findings by Will & Wolters (2001) that apart from reporting on the financial performance, this important stakeholder group also need to be informed of the vision, management's profile, strategic objectives and future projects. This is due to the heightened need for transparency, accountability and good governance, as evidenced by the number of business news coverage and 'watchdog' institutions such as Transparency International that have emerged over recent years. White & Mazur (1995) pointed to an ongoing debate about the way in which investor relations should be handled i.e. who should have the responsibility of this important group while Einwiller & Will (2002) highlighted that the views may differ from company to company and are dependent on current trends.

As far as journalists are concerned, Ind (1997) sustained that erroneous media information can impact negatively on the public image and thus advised against ignoring the power of the media.

Furthermore, a corporate image study amongst opinion leaders and financial influencers (Gregory & Sellers, 2002) described the three most important attributes in formation of corporate brand image as pioneering, accountable and salient. The researchers also concluded that companies who could create an emotional bonding with customers were able to exploit their corporate brand successfully.

Figure 8: Key attributes that shape corporate brand perception

Key attributes	How is the image created
Pioneering	The company is pioneering in its field portrayed through intense commitment to R&D, diversification, a corporate vision driven by high quality, the speed with which a company brings new products to market
Accountable	The company is accountable due to high quality products and consumer confidence derived from its responsible and ethical actions
Salient	The company breaks through the communications clutter in a positive way to establish its presence

Source: Gregory & Sellers (2002)

2.8.2 Drivers of corporate image

Kennedy (1977) contributed significantly to clarifying the process of corporate image formation by identifying that (1) although company image can be manufactured, it must be based on reality i.e. on the general policies operating within the company and (2) employees, external groups and those having only indirect experience of the company are all impacted by what the company is communicating. Ind (1997, p. 83) concurred with the author by stating, “Perceptions of an organisation are determined, directly and indirectly, by managers and staff.” Hatch & Schultz (1997) also indicated that top management was influential in shaping employees’ behaviour.

Dowling (1986) was the first to talk about the impact of organisational culture on image, by treating it as a factor or determinant in the process. Bick *et al* (2003) conceptualised corporate culture as derived from the concept of corporate personality, which incorporates the corporate philosophy based on the core values and assumptions of the company. Hatch & Schultz (1997) however, viewed culture as a context, rather than a variable in the corporate image formation process, arguing that the cultural context could affect the managerial initiatives to project a desired image, by shaping employees' behaviour and their interactions with external audiences.

Dowling (1986) talked about the link between communication and image when he discussed three types of communication: internal communication, interpersonal communication and marketing media communication. According to him, interpersonal communication represents the images of the firm held by internal and external groups whereas mass media communication represents the company's perception of itself. The author advocated a need to modify the marketing media communication when discrepancies between internal and external images were signalled.

In support of Van Riel (1995), Marwick & Fill (1997) referred to both organisational and marketing communications as the dominant forms of communication at the interface of identity and image while management communication formed the bridge between corporate identity and corporate personality. Bick *et al* (2003) reiterated that the objective of the communications programme was to enable the company's systems and processes to sustain consistency and congruence in messaging to all stakeholders. Marwick & Fill (1997) further maintained that stakeholders' perceptions of the company must be understood in order to adapt the communication strategy to achieve the desired image and ultimately derive competitive advantage.

In the same vein, Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail (1994) explained that the process of organisational identification is affected by two types of image (1) the perceived organisational identity which refers to an internal member's belief about the organisation and (2) the external image of the firm i.e. the member's perception of what outsiders think about the organisation. Subsequently, employees are most likely to identify with a firm that shows concern for its organisational members who contribute to its growth and for the community at large, especially when organisations engage in corporate citizenship, playing their social role beyond the mere generation of profits. Such programmes are likely to help organisations build a positive construed external image amongst internal and external audiences. By contrast, if employees perceive that the external image of their firm is mainly negative, then they are unlikely to show commitment to their employer and their behaviour may be uncooperative (Maignan & Ferrell, 2001).

2.8.3 Measurement of Integrated Communication

It is understood that corporate branding is s systematically planned process of maintaining favourable images of the company as a whole by sending signals to all stakeholders (Van Riel, 1995; Einwiller & Will, 2002). However, it is also important to measure and evaluate the extent to which the total communication efforts of the organisation are effectively integrated to ensure that the perception of the corporate brand is being translated into the desired image (Barker & Angelopulo, 2006).

The authors propose that essentially, it is the process, output, and outcomes of integrated communication that need to be measured. Thus, an evaluation of cross-functional planning emerging out of the process needs to be carried out along with an appraisal of the consistency of the organisational brand messages (controlled, product, services and uncontrolled) received by stakeholders. The impact of the various brand messages in terms of what changes are brought to stakeholders' attitudes and behaviour also needs to be measured in accordance with the suggestion by various authors in literature (Dowling, 1994; Dutton *et al*, 1994; Aaker, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Marwick & Fill, 1997; Stuart, 1999a; Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Einwiller & Will, 2002).

Furthermore, since online communication is also an integral part of the communication process, its contribution in the measurement system is suggested in terms of online surveys or online discussion groups.

Finally, Barker & Angelopulo (2006) also recommend the appointment of a person or team responsible for the regular measurement of integrated communication, with due consideration to the strategic goals of the organisation.

2.8.4 Total Corporate Communications -a model by Balmer & Gray (1999)

Various writers have asserted that corporate strategy is an adaptive and emergent process, impacted by changing environmental factors, responsible for shaping and modifying the corporate image (Kennedy, 1977; Van Riel, 1995; Balmer, 1995, Marwick & Fill, 1997, Bick *et al,* 2003).

Inherent in corporate strategy is the corporate identity and Balmer & Gray (1999) affirm that companies have, for a long time, viewed both the corporate identity construct and the communications function through conventional lenses and thus failed to discover their importance in corporate strategy. However, managers are being compelled to reconsider innovative ways of promoting a clear corporate identity as recent environmental forces are threatening their companies' positioning and their corporate image.

The authors categorised a broadened communication process as a three-part system - primary, secondary and tertiary, which can be called upon to play a vital role in helping organisations obtain a first –mover advantage:

Primary communication projects a positive image of the company and thus ensures a strong reputation as it is based on Aberg's (1990) 'Total communications effects of product and behaviour' i.e. based on the product and service performance.

Secondary communication supports and reinforces the primary communication through the corporate communications mix i.e. an integrated mix of management, organisational and marketing communication (Van Riel, 1995).

Tertiary communication will be positive and result in a superior reputation if the above two steps are properly planned and implemented. This stage corroborates with Balmer's (1995, 1998) 'total corporate communications' approach, which claims that uncontrolled communication elements such as word of mouth messages should also be considered.

Thus, the authors maintain that if corporate identity and corporate communication is managed from a strategic perspective, it can provide an organisation with a distinct competitive advantage.

The ten environmental forces contributing to the increased importance of corporate identity and corporate communications are:

1. Acceleration of product life cycles

A product's life cycle is relatively short-lived in today's technological era while an organisation's values can be enduring, as they are associated with the seal of quality and consistent performance. A positive image and strong reputation can thus help a corporate brand in extending its product/service offerings and even diversifying in new ventures whilst sustaining competitive advantage over time.

2. Deregulation

Deregulation has allowed firms to compete in new areas but has also blurred their public images (e.g. financial services industry).

3. Privatisation programmes

These government initiatives have made companies vulnerable to identity crises. World-wide privatisation in public utilities - gas, rail and telecommunications – have given rise to an increasing number of new firms in need of clear corporate images so as to differentiate themselves from competitors and from their former bureaucratic identities.

4. Increased competition in the public and non-profit sectors

Intense competition is affecting almost every organisation in the public sector. In the case of public universities, identity management would be of strategic importance since they compete through image and reputation.

5. Increased competition in the service sector

Competition has intensified for service industries leading to a growing awareness about the strategic importance of a favourable corporate image and reputation.

6. Globalisation and the establishment of free trade areas

When expanding globally, a favourable image and favourable reputation can provide a strategic advantage to companies but significant efforts are required in developing and communicating a coherent global identity.

7. Mergers, acquisitions and divestitures

These challenges often lead to confusion, incongruent image and blurred identity resulting in poor support for the company in the transition period.

8. Shortage of high-calibre personnel

In the war for talent, a favourable reputation help in attracting high calibre staff and furthermore, such people can also become the brand ambassadors to the outside world.

9. Public expectations for corporate social responsibility

A number of industry surveys suggest that consumers are willing to make an effort to support proactive corporate citizens. Brown & Dacin (1997) identified the existence of a positive relationship between corporate social responsibility contributions and new product evaluations. Maignan, Ferrel & Hult (1999) found preliminary evidence suggesting that organisations with higher levels of corporate citizenship enjoyed greater levels of customer loyalty.

10. Breakdown of the boundaries between the internal and external aspects of organisations

Many organisations now view their value-chain relationships with suppliers, consultants, and other partners as important dimensions of their value propositions.

Conclusion

This section demonstrates that since image is based on perceptions, it is important to ensure consistency in the various signals and brand messages being transmitted from an organisation. Corporate image concerns both internal staff members and important external stakeholders and a regular assessment of the efficacy of integrated communications is highly relevant in ensuring that the perception of the corporate brand is being translated into the desired image.

2.9 Addressing the third sub-problem through Research Question no 3

The preceding literature addresses the third sub-problem about determining how corporate communications can sustain the achievement of the desired corporate brand image. It is purported that Corporate image can be promoted by:

- the promotion of the corporate identity through a corporate strategy based on
    - primary communication based on the product / service performance (Aberg, 1990; Balmer & Gray, 1999)
    - Secondary communication supported by the corporate communications mix (Van Riel, 1995; Balmer & Gray, 1999).
    - Tertiary communication based on an alignment of all planned and unplanned elements with the proper implementation of the two above processes (Balmer, 1995, 1998; Balmer & Gray, 1999)

- an understanding of all stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation so as to align corporate communication with the brand messages to prevent any contradictions (Berg, 1985; Dowling, 1994; Dutton et al, 1994; Aaker, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Marwick & Fill, 1997; Stuart, 1999a; Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Einwiller & Will, 2002)
- careful management of investor and media relations
- adaptive culture (Dowling, 1986; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Bick et al, 2003)
- key brand attributes that create emotional bonding and shape the corporate brand perception (Aaker, 1996; Gregory & Sellers, 2002)
- CSR programmes that contribute to the positive evaluations of new product and customer loyalty (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Maignan et al, 1999)
- having a measurement system to determine the extent of integration in communication (Bickerton, 2000; Barker & Angelopulo, 2006)

Research Question No 3:

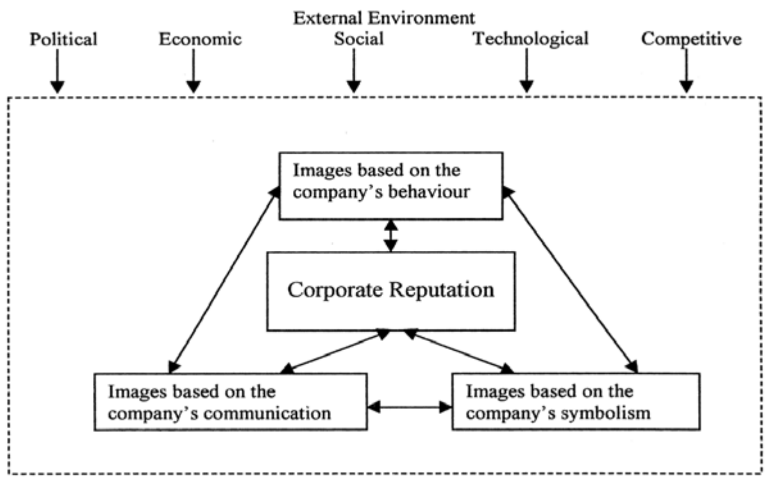
How can corporate communication promote a coherent corporate brand image?

2.10. Corporate Reputation

This section seeks to (1) distinguish between corporate image and reputation, (2) ascertain why external stakeholder groups such as investors use the concept as a determining criterion for investment purposes, and (3) investigate what are the key benefits and drivers of the construct. Finally, crisis management is briefly discussed as a strategic tool in managing reputation risk in contemporary times.

In an attempt to clearly define the concept of corporate reputation and identify its relationship with corporate image, Gotsi & Wilson (1999) came across different viewpoints in the literature review that suggested a dynamic, bilateral relationship between the two concepts. Thus, the author found that a firm's reputation influences image but is also impacted by how a company projects its identity i.e. through behaviour, communication and symbolism. This led them to redefine reputation as the overall evaluation of a company over time, based on stakeholders' direct experiences with the company, or from information derived from other form of communication and symbolism about the firm's actions and/or a comparison with the actions of other leading rivals.

Figure 9: The link between corporate image and reputation



Source: Gotsi & Wilson (1999)

2.10.1 Corporate Reputation v/s Corporate image

Fombrun & Rindova (1998) describe a brand's reputation as a collective representation of its past actions and behaviour that illustrate its ability to deliver valued outcomes to all its stakeholders. In contrast to a brand's image, which reflects current, changing perceptions, a brand's reputation represents the distillation of multiple images over time (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997). Thus, the main characteristics that distinguish corporate reputation from the corporate image concept is essentially based on the historical perspective i.e. the number of years that a company has sustained its survival with consistently positive behaviour.

Fombrun & Van Riel (1997) and Balmer & Gray (1999) also noted that the objective of corporate identity management is to establish a favourable reputation amongst an organisation's stakeholders. By encompassing the evaluations of all stakeholders, reputation provides a much more representative indication of brand performance.

Bick *et al* (2003, p. 841) conceptualise reputation as "…a stakeholder's overall assessment of the organisation's ability to meet pre-defined criteria (set by the stakeholder) such as integrity". They argue that achieving a strong reputation helps to ensure business survival and once established, a favourable reputation can easily promote the company's distinctiveness and support the growth of the corporate brand in the long term.

Furthermore, influential stakeholders' groups such as institutional investors rely on a company's emotional appeal, a strong corporate brand and reputation as determining factors for investing in a company alongside the CEO's profile and a clear communication of the corporate strategy (Gregory, 1997).

The link between the corporate brand equity and its stock performance has been the subject of a number of research works. Thus, Kerin & Sethuraman (1998) studied companies on the 1995 and 1996 Interbrand “Most Valued Brands” lists, and reported a positive relationship between market-to-book ratios and financial brand values. A statistically significant, positive time-series correlation between changes in brand equity and stock price movement was found, leading the researchers to conclude that “…the explanatory power of the product quality (brand equity) measure compares to that of ROI…and should be encouraging to those attempting to justify investments in product quality (brand equity), when tough questions are raised about the bottom line” (p. 201).

Banham (1998) observed that during a market crash in October 1997, companies with strong brands (e.g. GE, Microsoft, Intel) regained their losses by the end of the second day, while companies with weaker brands failed to recover. A later study by Parkhurst (2002) corroborated with the above finding and reported that a strong corporate brand could add from 5% to 7% to a company’s stock price in a bull market and also mitigate losses in a downturn.

2.10.2 How Is Corporate Reputation Created?

Corporate reputation is a result of both the attitudes and behaviour of employees and the outside perceptions of a firm’s culture (Gray & Balmer, 1998; Schultz & de Chernatony, 2002) and is often related to the reputation of competitors (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997; Gotsi & Wilson, 1999). Greyser (1999) claim that corporate reputation can be managed, altered or affected by corporate behaviour and by exogenous factors such as industry and cultural forces. Morsing & Kristensen (2001) concur with Ind (1997) about the role of the media, as an exogenous factor, because while it takes time to create a strong reputation, a newspaper article may have an immediate impact (good or bad) on a company’s image, its shareholder value, and its trustworthiness.

In times of corporate scandals, growing distrust towards companies and their leaders, corporate social responsibility or involvement in social efforts is seen as a vital element in helping to generate trust and admiration and in building strong corporate reputation (Porter & Kramer, 2002). A meta-analysis of corporate social responsibility research shows that the US stock market favourably evaluates organisations that demonstrate visible and provable good corporate social performance by giving a higher rating to their market value (Orlitzky, Schmidt & Rynes, 2003). In a survey of managers, Maignan, Ferrell & Hult (1999) also observed that employees of an organisation committed to proactive corporate citizenship are likely to express more dedication, have longer tenure with the company and be more willing to deliver superior performance at work.

2.10.3 Key drivers and Benefits

Greyser (1999) outlined the key drivers and benefits of a positive reputation as revealed from an international study on reputation undertaken by Opinion Research Corporation among 10,000 managers in various countries. The six key drivers were ranked according to importance, as shown in figure 10, while Aaker (1996) and Hatch & Schultz (2001) also highlighted innovation and corporate culture as key drivers.

Figure 10: Key drivers of corporate reputation

Key drivers of corporate reputation	
1	Competitive effectiveness (including innovation /R&D, high quality products)
2	Market leadership (including well-differentiated products)
3	Customer focus (including a clearly defined image)
4	Familiarity / favourability
5	Corporate culture (including high ethical standards and high-quality employees)
6	Communications (effective advertising)
Benefits of a positive corporate reputation	
1	Preference in doing business with a company when several companies' products or services are similar in quality and price
2	Support for a company in times of controversy
3	A company's value in the financial marketplace

Source: Greyser (1999)

Furthermore, Greyser (1999) is of the view that credibility is a central link between corporate behaviour and public confidence and as such, is a key driver in corporate reputation as customers expect coherence between what a company claims to be and what it actually does. Aaker (1996) adds that, credibility is achieved when the organisation is perceived as being expert, trustworthy and liked.

On the other hand, the loss of trust and reputation can result in (1) increased scrutiny by regulators and society (2) reduced support by customers and investors (3) lower employee morale (Dowling, 2006). The author further argues that since the high-profile corporate scandals, the spotlight is now more on the board of directors and corporate governance issues rather than solely on the CEO. Dowling (2006) thus proposes that reputation management should become the board's ultimate responsibility so that appropriate risk audits are undertaken to design proactive strategies to prevent or mitigate corporate reputation damages.

A strong and trusted brand can, in evidence, influence behaviour and attitude, enhance customer loyalty and provide significant competitive differentiation (Aaker, 1996, Gregory & Sellers, 2002). However, Schultz & de Chernatony (2002) find that there is growing global scepticism about brand trustworthiness, and Balmer & Greyser (2003) advise caution, as a good reputation on its own is no guarantee of business success.

2.10.4 Crisis management

Crisis management is a crucial part of present-day strategic management and is concerned with the survival and long-term prosperity of an organisation (Chong, 2004).

A crisis is seen as any unplanned event that can destroy or affect an entire organisation by threatening its products or operating divisions, harm the welfare of its staff and the public while severely threatening its financial standing and reputation. Therefore, it is crucial that organisations establish procedures to prevent, manage and mitigate a crisis (Mittroff, Pearson & Harrington, 1996).

Crises can be managed much more effectively if the company prepares for them. It is no longer a question of “if” a business will face a crisis; but rather, a question of “when,” “what type” and “how prepared” the company is to deal with it (Mittroff *et al,* 1996). Therefore, effective crisis management requires a systematic and disciplined approach based on alertness, managerial sensitivity, careful planning and organisational readiness. If a crisis does occur, it must be dealt with without trying to hide facts and emergency measures must be taken to protect people and all those assets that are valuable to the company, including intangible assets like goodwill and corporate image (Chong, 2004). Furthermore, it is important to have either a crisis management team with a clear chain of command, well in advance of any crisis (McKenzie, 1994) or a credible spokesperson who understands the values of the company and is able to articulate those values while addressing difficult circumstances (Kash & Darling, 1998).

Dealing with the media once a crisis has occurred is considered a very delicate PR exercise and Mittroff *et al* (1996) advocate a proactive approach where the company moves into a crisis response mode, in advance of hard information, by accepting guilt. The authors sustain that the cost of doing so is usually outweighed by the goodwill generated, which is of capital importance in such moments. Grönroos (2000) also agrees with the above authors that not communicating in such circumstances acts as a message in itself because stakeholders commonly view organisations that avoid communication as untrustworthy, uncaring of its public or lacking in respect. Therefore, it is generally better to convey negative information than not to communicate at all.

Crisis managers believe in the value of a favourable, pre-crisis reputation, which can deflect the potential reputation damage during the moments of turbulence. In support of this proposition, Coombs & Holladay (2006) found empirical evidence that, in times of controversy, a halo effect can operate for some organisations with very strong prior reputations.

2.10.5 Communications spending in Fortune 500 companies

In a research project carried out by Thomas L. Harris/Impulse Research (1999) and sponsored by the Council of Public Relations Firms, the corporate communications spending patterns of Fortune 500 firms were assessed in relation to their most recent Fortune "Most Admired Company" ranking, by using the widely known measure of corporate reputation. Respondents to this survey were managers, directors, vice presidents, senior vice presidents and executive vice presidents of corporate communications in fortune 500 firms.

An analysis of the spending and ranking data was believed to:

- validate a return on investment (ROI) for corporate communications.
- determine the relationship between reputation rankings and spending on specific public relations functions and agency support.
- provide benchmarking data on corporate communications spending by function
- track attitudes towards the status of corporate communications and determine whether they have any relationship to reputation rankings.

The main findings showed that:

In an analysis of the corporate communication budgets of the participating companies, spending decreases for each lower grouping of the Fortune reputation ranking. Thus, companies with strong reputations (the top 200) spend twice as much on Public Relations (average of $6M) than companies with weaker reputations (average of $2.8M). This would appear to validate a correlation between an investment in corporate communications and a company's reputation as measured by the Fortune "Most Admired Company" ranking.

A comparison was also carried out to determine the type of communication activities which had the greatest effect on reputation. Those areas that received the greatest emphasis among the top 200 companies were employee communications, industry relations, media relations and annual /quarterly reports.

Furthermore, high reputation firms used public relations as a resource for solving strategic problems and as a means of creating competitive differentiation. The management of reputation was also given full support and strategic focus by the top management of those ‘most admired’ companies, which found justification in the extent of competitive differentiation achieved against the lower group of companies.

Conclusively, these findings point to a significant relationship between corporate communication and the reputation ranking of those companies i.e. as the level of spending promoted awareness about those companies, the more favourably these companies were seen by the public.

Finally, the big budgets (42% of total communication budget) allocated to employee communications, industry relations, media relations, annual and quarterly reports and investor relations also validates the comments made in the literature about the importance of communicating clearly to these stakeholder groups due to their direct and indirect impact on corporate image and reputation.

Conclusion

This section indicates that corporate reputation is regarded as even more strategic than corporate image and has thus become the ultimate goal sought by companies world wide. Nevertheless, the achievement of a strong reputation rests on the management of the corporate identity and image based on behaviour, communication and symbolism over time.

Since a company's reputation is strongly linked to ethical behaviour and good governance, it becomes the board of directors' responsibility to design appropriate strategies to prevent or mitigate reputation damage.

2.11 Addressing the fourth sub problem with Research Question no 4

Corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation through its management of the company image i.e. through its behaviour, communication and symbolism. Concretely, reputation is promoted through:

- the CEO profile, the board of directors, clear communication of the corporate strategy, the company's emotional appeal and brand equity (Gregory, 1997; Kerin & Sethuraman,1998; Banham, 1998; Parkhurst, 2002, Dowling, 2006).
- Market leadership, innovation, outside perception of a firm's culture, high ethical standards and the staff behaviour (Aaker, 1996; Gray & Balmer, 1998;Greyser, 1999; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Schultz & de Chernatony, 2002; Bick *et al*, 2003)
- Communication of a clear and favourable image over time (Fombrun & Rindova, 1996; Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997, Gotsi & Wilson, 1999, Greyser, 1999).
- Managing media relations and CSR programmes (Ind, 1997; Maignan *et al*, 1999; Morsing & Kristensen, 2001; Porter & Kramer, 2002; Orlitzky et al, 2003)
- Having a crisis management plan to manage reputation risk (McKenzie, 1994; Mittroff *et al,* 1996; Kash & Darling, 1998; Grönroos, 2000; Chong, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2006)
- Substantial Investment in corporate communications spending to create more awareness (Thomas L. Harris/Impulse Research, 1999)

Research Question No 4:

How can corporate communications promote a coherent corporate brand reputation?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Qualitative research method

According to Leedy & Ormrod (2001) this type of research study lends itself well to qualitative research because the focus is on phenomena that occur in natural settings which need to be studied in all its complexity and multiple facets.

Qualitative interviews in particular were used because they allowed concepts and meanings to be explored in greater depth than questionnaires and also enabled the researcher to clarify her understanding of the respondents' views. Furthermore, different companies have different ways of developing their own communication processes due to their unique business environments and corporate vision. Since benchmarks are likely to differ significantly among firms, they cannot be assessed through quantitative measurement tools.

Some of the disadvantages of in-depth interviews are that different respondents may perceive and understand questions differently (Cooper & Schindler, 1998), the researcher's presence may cause bias responses and not all people are equally articulate and perceptive (Cresswell, 1994). Rowley (2002) also argues that successful execution of a research decisively depends on the competence and integrative powers of the researcher.

The researcher attempted to mitigate potential subjectivity by not leading the interviewee, intervened when necessary to ensure that the issues under investigation were addressed and the respondents understood the questions.

Zikmund (1997) stipulates that academic literature must be viewed with respect to the context and times it was formulated and its applicability must be continuously adapted to the rapidly changing environment. It follows that the writings may also have had an academic rather than business grounding and the research or opinions of foreign experts from developed countries may not be applicable or appropriate to the context of a developing country. For these reasons, the views of local experts were sought in order to develop a 'de jure' model, which would be more appropriate to the current business environment and local conditions. It also provided a good opportunity to check if the conceptual models in the literature would bear up in a real life business context.

3.2 <u>Research characteristics</u>

The characteristics specific to the proposed research study are similar to those proposed by Leedy & Ormrod (2001):

3.2.1 Theory-building

The purpose of the research was to explore, describe and explain how the corporate communications process is carried out, rather than to confirm or validate the success of any one such process. In that sense this research supplemented theory building about the communication process in companies operating on a developing island.

3.2.2 Emergent design

A research process may uncover a number of variables with regard to the subject matter being studied, and give rise to an emergent design. The researcher kept an open mind to allow for the emergent nature of this research, interpretations were made from the multiple perspectives that were assessed and incorporated in the final model.

3.3 <u>The research population</u>

The population comprised of all executives connected to the communication functions and who occupied full-time positions in large companies as well as important external stakeholder groups.

3.3.1 Sampling methodology

Ideally, the participants in a study must be a representative sample of the population about which one can draw conclusions. However, the most suitable sample for this study was a non-random (purposive), subjective (non-probable), and judgemental sample because specific individuals – those with knowledge about the communication process – had to be selected in order to get a cross section of opinions from various internal and external perspectives.

In selecting the external consultants, the technique of Snowball sampling was used (Atkinson & Flint, 2001), whereby one selected person willingly proposed the name of a potential respondent, who in turn referred the names of more people who are experts in the field being researched. This technique was used because the researcher sought to access real professionals who could talk knowledgeably on the subject of corporate branding and communications.

3.3.2 Sample size and selection

The advantages of in-depth qualitative research on relatively small samples are well documented in the social science literature when the intention is to generate information about complex social dynamics which cannot be accessed using quantitative survey questionnaires (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Three major groups of companies, from three specific industries such as financial services, commerce / investment and tourism, were chosen so that a cross industry comparison could be carried out as well as to allow any new variables to be uncovered, in terms of an emergent design.

Companies were identified and selected on the following criteria:

- market leaders within their respective industry (taken as an indication of image and reputation)
- featuring a monolithic and/or multi-brand structure

- diversified group of companies or part of a holding company
- listed in the 2005 list of top 100 Mauritian companies
- seen as being innovative or unique in terms of brand building and marketing activities with evidence drawn from media coverage and personal observations

As it was decided to interview senior executives in charge of various aspects of corporate communications, at the group level of the large organisations, the chief executives, the corporate communication managers, the marketing managers and the HR managers from the three organisations were approached. Then, important external stakeholders such as brand and communication experts, institutional investors and journalists as representatives of the media were selected. Thus, a sample of 23 respondents was obtained as hereunder:

- The chief executive officer (3)
- The group corporate communication manager (3)
- The group marketing manager (3)
- The group human resources manager (3)
- External brand / communication consultant (5)
- Institutional investor (3)
- Journalist (3)

LIST OF RESPONDENTS

Internal stakeholders

Finance / Banking: The MCB group

1. Group Chief Banking officer - Philippe Forget
2. Group Communication Manager – Therese Pilot
3. Group HR Manager – Marc Desmarais
4. Group Marketing Manager – Steve Leung

Investment: British American Investment group

5. Group Chief Executive Officer – Saleem Beebeejaun
6. Group Communication Manager – Mike Lynch
7. Group Marketing director - Deyan Ristic
8. Group HR Manager – Ramesh Moonshiram

Tourism: Veranda Resorts (part of Rogers Group)

9. General Manager - Jean Michel Pitot
10. Business Strategy –Communication director (Rogers Group) -. Jean Philippe Piat
11. Group Marketing and Communication Manager - Sophie Le Luron
12. Group HR Manager - Jean Cyril Julienne

External stakeholders

Consultants

13. Amadeus Advertising and Brand communications agency - Ashraf Oozeeraly
14. Imagine Communications - Jean Marie Richard
15. Atoba Visual Communications agency –Florent Beusse
16. Air Mauritius Brand and Communications advisor to the Managing director - Robert Alizart
17. Freelance Marketing and Brand Consultant - Maurice Thomas

Institutional Investors

18. Confident Asset Management - Rajiv Lutchmiah
19. Port Louis fund - Prem Beejan
20. State Investment Corporation - Randhir Mannick

Journalists

21. Le Mauricien - Gilbert Ahnee
22. Weekend - Jean Claude Antoine
23. L’Express – Arianne de L’Estrac

Brief history of sampled groups of companies

A synopsis on the historical background of each group of companies is given, to highlight current issues in connection with their corporate identity, image and reputation.

The first organisation is a leading financial group with the largest market capitalisation in Mauritius and listed as a blue chip company on the Mauritius Stock Exchange. It is also known as the oldest financial institution in the country and has a workforce of more than 2000 employees. In 2003, a massive fraud amounting to MUR 881M was detected in the flagship company of the group, which till today represents the biggest financial scandal in the island's history. As a consequence, Moody's downgraded the financial strength rating of the major institution from D+ to D. The source of the fraud was traced back to the top management level and the stakeholders and the public were appalled to read press reports about the extreme weakness of the internal risk management and audit system. Then in 2005, a second major incident happened in the same company where MUR 50M was stolen in broad daylight. The news caused furore once more and was talked about in the press for many months.

These two incidents were major tests for the communication strategy and crisis management capability of the company's 'etât major'. The interesting fact is that during those hard times, the group did not lose a single customer as a direct result of the bad publicity and poor image that was affecting them. *This group is called 'The finance group'.*

The second organisation is an investment based group, operating under five divisions with stakes in nearly 22 companies, and boasting of a number of products brands that are market leaders in their specific industries. Over the years, the group has grown from being essentially in the finance industry to a more diversified group.

Three years ago, they underwent a re-branding exercise where the corporate brand name was slightly modified to operate under a new holding company, listed on the Stock exchange of Mauritius. Furthermore, they chose a mixed brand architecture for the various companies of the group where the independent identity of the business units is favoured meaning that the corporate brand does not endorse any of the product brands.

Since 2004, the group suddenly started an acquisition strategy of established companies with strong corporate brands in such diverse industries as automobile, trade and commerce, retail furniture and domestic appliances. The newfound 'aggressiveness' on the marketplace started rumours about the group's political connections, there were unfavourable write-ups in the press and a perception that these companies have been acquired at premium prices well above the market value while the group itself is said to be heavily indebted. The group now boasts of a workforce of 1800 employees. *This group is called 'The investment group'.*

The third organisation is an emerging group of five medium range hotels and is part of the tourism division of one of the oldest and strongest diversified group in Mauritius. In 2004, a new 5-star hotel was added to their product portfolio. Since the holding company wanted to give more dynamism, focus and autonomy of decision making to its executive directors, it carried out reflection meetings with foreign consultants on a re-structuring and business process re-engineering exercise which lasted for some time. The process culminated in creating three distinct and autonomous divisions to the group, each with their own identity but endorsed by the corporate brand, which already had a positive image and strong reputation because of its track record. Last year, a big media-based campaign was launched to communicate the new business identity and corporate name of the three divisions. The group of hotels is part of the tourism and aviation division and operates under a distinct product brand, which is endorsed by the master brand. It has a total workforce of 1200 employees. *This group is called 'The tourism group'.*

3.3.3 Data collection

An interview schedule, as presented in appendices A to H, based on the four research questions derived from the literature review, was used collect the data and in the light of the answers obtained from the filed study, the emergent themes were content analysed.

Apart from the interviews, observations by the researcher and relevant documentation where possible were used in order to allow for triangulation to validate the research process (Yin, 1994).

The prospective interviewees were first contacted by telephone and/or email. In the initial introduction, the purpose of the study and a brief overview of the methodology were revealed. A letter from the executive director of DCDM Business School was also attached to the emails (Appendix M), certifying that the researcher was an MBA student and kindly requesting assistance in the completion of the research report. In cases where the person contacted was not the appropriate one, the latter willingly gave the contact details of the relevant manager and that person was then contacted.

Once the person expressed a willingness to participate in the interview, an appointment was set-up, the purpose of the research study was once more clarified and the interview was conducted. Four of the interviews took place at the DCDM Business School at the request of the respondents but the rest of the appointments were at the interviewees' respective offices. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to a maximum of one hour. All information volunteered by participants was used for analysis.

3.4 Administration of the interview

The objectives of this interview process were to:

- assess the understanding of the corporate branding concept by the interviewees
- develop a practical understanding of how the corporate branding and communications process enfolds within diverse organisations
- confirm the theoretical facets of corporate branding and corporate communications identified through the literature review
- explore what kind of management behaviour (past and present) contributes to the development of the communication aspect of their business
- validate the influence and importance of the communication process on forging the corporate image and reputation
- obtain the perceptual viewpoint of consultants on the management of the communication process
- gather the motivational drivers of investors in investing on those companies
- listen to the opinion and perception of the media on the way corporate image and reputation of listed companies is handled, with particular emphasis on the companies chosen in the representative sample.

Semi-structured interviews usually revolve around a few central questions (Leedy & Omrod, 2001). Since there were seven groups of respondents, each occupying a different position and responsibilities, the questions had to be slightly adjusted in relation to the person's profile. Each respondent's questionnaire is outlined in appendices A to L.

The individual interviews were conducted in person. Respondents were asked to define some of the key concepts to check their understanding and the interviewees were free to express themselves in their own way. The interviews were taped with permission from the interviewee and notes were also taken throughout the interviews, which were then transcribed ad verbatim and recorded electronically.

As the interviews progressed, it became obvious that some of the interviewees felt more at ease in expressing their views in French rather than in English. Hence, from the third interview onwards, a French version of the questions was included in the questionnaire and the choice of language was given to the respondents at the beginning of each subsequent interview. In total, eleven interviews were conducted in French and then translated in English and transcribed.

3.5 <u>Data analysis and interpretation</u>

The transcripts from the in-depth interviews were content analysed through frequency counts and the identification of recurring themes, by adapting Creswell's (1994) data analysis spiral as follows:

- The data were examined several times to get a larger picture
- General categories, themes and sub-themes drawn from the transcribed interviews were identified and classified to obtain a general pattern of ideas and experiences
- Data were then integrated and summarised and the themes that emerged were related back to the research questions and the findings in literature

In this way, the findings served to either confirm or not, the theories as highlighted by the literature review.

Content analysis is a systematic examination of a body of text with the purpose of identifying themes, trends or biases (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001) and to quantify the number of times the concepts or themes appeared in the text in an objective manner.

3.5.1 Types of content analysis

There are three major approaches to content analysis: conceptual analysis, procedural analysis and relational analysis (Carley, 1990), of which only the conceptual and relational types are relevant to this study:

3.5.1.1 Conceptual Analysis

The word ‘concept’ refers to a single idea either represented by a single word or a phrase (Carley, 1990). In conceptual analysis, the focus is on looking at the occurrence of selected terms within a text, although the terms may be implicit or explicit. While explicit concepts are easy to identify, it is methodologically more difficult to extract implicit concepts because this process requires subjective judgement. However, using only explicit concept analysis might result in a loss of the real meaning of the term (Carley, 1990).

As mentioned above, the main objective of this study was to confirm the motivational drivers identified in the literature review and to extract any additional insights. It was not important to identify in which order the concepts appeared in the transcripts (procedural analysis) but the relationships between the concepts was relevant to this study as explained hereunder (relational analysis).

3.5.1.2 Relational Analysis

This type of analysis enables further examination of the relationships among concepts in a text, since individual terms may not have any true meaning on its own (Carley, 1990). For relational analysis, it is important to determine on the outset about the type of concept that will be explored. The flexibility in determining the techniques of relational analysis to be used is well regarded by researchers who can thus devise their own procedures according to the nature of their project (Carley, 1990).

Thus, for the purpose of this research, the focus was on which themes/factors were mentioned (even if raised by only one respondent), the relationships between concepts and how many times the theme /factors had been raised. This allowed for essential elements connected with the research study to be discussed and helped to inform the researcher on the degree of understanding of respondents concerning the subject under study and uncover any best practice, which may help to enhance the process and be incorporated in the 'de jure' model.

The frequency of each factor / theme identified was tabulated in a descending order of number of mentions of each factor / theme and in terms of percentage, which was rounded up to the highest whole number. The number of respondents (N) differed from table to table depending on the category of persons interviewed. No statistical analysis was performed on the results.

To provide additional insight into the meaning of the results, comments from the transcribed interviews were used as part of the evaluation. The comments have been quoted ad verbatim. The researcher has not cited the names of the relevant respondent so as not to undermine the confidentiality requirement of the respondents, but has rather referred to the category the stakeholder belonged to.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

The validity of an instrument is how well it measures what it is supposed to be measuring, while reliability refers to the accuracy and consistency with which the instrument produces results (Leedy & Omrod, 2001).

3.6.1 External validity

External validity refers to the applicability or implications of this research for other companies in other settings and at other times. According to Leedy & Ormrod, (2001, p. 102), "…rather than sample a large number of people with the intent of making generalisations, qualitative researchers tend to select a few participants who can best shed light on the phenomenon under investigation".

This is the case for this research work. However, the purpose of the qualitative study is to validate the facets of corporate communications identified through the literature review. Moreover, the researcher sought diversity rather than coverage during the process of this study. Nevertheless, the external validity of this research is enhanced since it takes place in a real life setting (Leedy & Omrod, 2001)

3.6.2 Internal validity

Since there is the risk that the researcher's bias and values influence the interpretation of the data (Leedy & Omrod, 2001), the researcher looked for varying perspectives from multiple sources.

3.6.3 Construct validity

Rowley (2002) explains construct validity as reducing subjectivity by linking the questions posed during data collection to the original research questions. Yin (1994) suggested a test design for construct validity as the establishment of correct operational measures such as chains of evidence or triangulation. These suggestions were adhered to in the research process.

3.6.4 Reliability

Since a semi-structured interview guide and a recorded database were used in a systematic manner, reliability was ensured as far as possible. Moreover, the researcher personally conducted all the interviews to ensure equivalence.

However, given the qualitative nature of the research, the interpretations of the researcher play a significant part in the final interpretations. Similar research by another researcher might therefore not lead to exactly the same results.

3.6.4.1 The Pilot test

Leedy & Ormrod (2001) recommend the use of a pilot study to test the validity and reliability of a measurement instrument, which has never been used before, in terms of any ambiguity in wordings and instructions that could result in confusing statements. The draft questionnaire was pilot tested on four respondents such as the director of the Leadership centre of DCDM Business School, who is an industrial psychologist by profession, one marketing / training analyst at the same business School, and two MBA fellow classmates who are also managing directors of their own companies.

Their recommendations concerned the phrasing of the questions to be put to the chief executives, the relevance of the sub questions to gather more feedback when the questions are not fully answered by the main question and the variations in the questions to the external stakeholders. These were taken into consideration in the final interview schedule.

4. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the content analysis carried out on the responses that emerged from the interviews. It is divided into four sections, each part highlighting, in table form, the major themes and frequency of occurrence of factors, connected to the research questions.

4.1 <u>Results pertaining to Research Question no 1</u>

The findings obtained from the questions pertaining to research question no 1, as per Appendix A, are shown hereunder, on how practitioners actually understand and relate to the concept of corporate branding as a key competitive weapon. The respondents' level of understanding about the concept is first ascertained, then its strategic importance and relevance in current times is determined and lastly insights on how organisations leverage on the corporate brand is sought, both from an internal and external perspective.

For each of the tables presented, the following key applies:

CM: communication manager
MM: Marketing manager
HRM: Human Resources manager
Cs: Consultants
IIs: Institutional investors
Js: Journalists
N = Number of respondents

Q 1: What do you understand by Corporate Branding?

From Table 3, the opinions gathered from the internal perspective showed that the respondents were unanimous on four main aspects of corporate branding i.e. (1) as a promoter of corporate image (2) as a conveyor of the organisation's core values (3) as linked to the corporate culture i.e. to the attitudes of staff toward the corporate brand values and (4) as an endorser of products and services and their quality level.

67 % of respondents, inclusive of all communication and marketing managers, associated image building with visual communications such as logo and corporate colour.

All communication and marketing managers (42%) believed that a strong image is conveyed through coherent and clear messages to all stakeholders.

Then, 2 chief executives (17%) emphasised that corporate branding promote a favourable image through goodwill and credibility.

Table 3: How internal respondents relate to the concept of Corporate Branding

THEMES	GROUPS A, B C				N=12	%
	CEOs	CMs	MMs	HRMs		
Promotes the company image	3	3	3	3	12	100
Conveys core values of company to all stakeholders	3	3	3	3	12	100
Linked to corporate culture	3	3	3	3	12	100
Is an endorser of product / services and their quality	3	3	3	3	12	100
Vehicle to build image through visual identity such as logo, corporate colour		3	3	2	8	67
Promote strong image by conveying coherent and clear messages to all stakeholders		2	3		5	42
Promotes goodwill, credibility	2				2	17

Externally, 91% of respondents viewed corporate branding essentially as an umbrella brand that endorses the company's products/services and their quality level. 55% of respondents associated the concept with corporate culture in terms of staff attitudes, then as a promoter of the company image and corporate citizenship.

5 respondents (45%) believed that it is a means of communication with internal / external stakeholders to send coherent signals about the company's values, while 27% of respondents identified corporate branding as revolving around the vision and mission and a strategic promotional tool to communicate the market positioning.

Two institutional investors (18%) were convinced that it also promotes the company's goodwill while another colleague was of the opinion that the concept has an impact on the pricing power of the company and its market share.

Only one respondent asserted that corporate branding helps to build reputation.

Table 4: How external respondents relate to the concept of Corporate Branding

THEMES	Cs	IIs	Js	N=11	%
It is an endorser of products, services & quality	4	3	3	10	91
Linked to corporate culture	5		1	6	55
Promotes corporate image to all stakeholders	3		3	6	55
Promotes corporate citizenship	3	3	1	6	55
Means of communication with all stakeholders	4		1	5	45
To send coherent signals on company's values	2	1	2	5	45
It revolves around the vision and mission	2	1		3	27
Is a strategic promotional tool	2		1	3	27
Promotes goodwill		2		2	18
Helps to build reputation	1			1	9
Linked to market share & pricing power		1		1	9

SQ 1.1: Who takes the main responsibility for the corporate brand in your / an organisation?

This question aimed to determine the strategic importance of the corporate brand to an organisation. It was asked only to practitioners and consultants, as journalists and institutional investors would not have had much knowledge about the intricacies of the process. Thus, the number of respondents for this question was 17 out of 23.

The results showed that 60% of respondents, including the CEOs themselves, felt that the CEO should have the main responsibility of the corporate brand. The next highest score of 29% indicated that the CEO along with the management team should take responsibility of the corporate brand, while 24 % were of the view that the communications director also had his share of responsibilities.

18% of the interviewees considered that the management of the corporate brand should be incumbent on the marketing team while 12% voted for the head of communication in consultation with other business units.

Table 5: Who takes the main responsibility for the corporate brand?

THEMES	GROUPS A, B, C				N=5	N= 17	%
	CEOs	CMs	MMs	HRMs	Cs		
The CEO is the brand champion	3	3	2		2	10	60
The management team	1	1	2	1		5	29
The CEO and the communication director		1		1	2	4	24
The marketing team	1	1	1			3	18
The Communication director			1		1	2	12
The head of communication in consultation with other business drivers			2			2	12

Q 2: Why is this concept relevant in current times?

This question aimed to test the importance of the concept in today's business environment and retrieve further thoughts that may not been uncovered under the previous questions.

65% of respondents saw the concept as a means to differentiate from the competition through the core values, corporate culture and trust towards a company over and above the product attributes.

13% of respondents indicated that corporate branding conferred a global presence to an organisation.

One investor asserted that the concept is an innovative way of sustaining business survival in the long run.

The consultants furthermore added that though the concept was very important, local organisations neither had a good understanding of the process nor put much emphasis in creating and maintaining a positive image as compared to developed countries.

Table 6: Respondents' views on the relevance of the concept in current times

THEMES	CEOs	CMs	MMs	HRMs	Cs	IIs	Js	N=23	%
Fierce competition drives need for differentiation through core values, culture and trust over and above those of products	3	3	2	2	3	1	1	15	65
Confers a global presence to a company		1	1		1			3	13
Branding for future sustainability is becoming a new way of doing business						1		1	4

Q 3: How does / can an organisation leverage on corporate branding?

This question sought to examine how practitioners within organisations actually leverage on the corporate brand within their organisations. Then, the external respondents were asked their views. It is to be noted that the question has to be slightly modified when put to institutional investors and journalists so as to correctly gather their motivational drivers, in line with the perspective from which they deal with an organisation.

It is worthwhile to restate that many of the factors identified are interrelated but have been listed separately, for clarity and to facilitate the frequency count.

Thus, Table 7 shows that all practitioners and consultants identified ‘Staff commitment and behaviour’ as the most important driver. The second highest factor was ‘Through the corporate brand message’ with 82% votes, for which there is full agreement from the consultants.

76% of respondents, especially consultants, voted for ‘communication strategy to ensure coherence and consistence’ as crucial to the corporate branding process.

71% of respondents identified ‘Organisational values’ as a key success factor, which is often associated with corporate identity, which comes next with 59% votes.

65% of respondents were of the opinion that the marketing strategy involving promotional campaigns and positioning were equally relevant drivers through which a company can differentiate itself.

Two heads of marketing and HR also saw the concept as sustaining consistency in marketing communications through CSR programs, events sponsorship, media and investor relations.

The ‘Leadership’ factor was mentioned by 53% of respondents.

The remaining factors obtained less that average scores but are no less important factors such as:

- Product / service level (47%)
- Corporate strategy (41%)
- Positive image (41%)
- The reputation (35%)
- Visual identity (24%)
- Brand architecture (24%)
- Unique value proposition (12%)

Table 7: How can an organisation leverage on corporate branding?

FACTORS	GROUPS A, B, C				N=5		%
	CEOs	CMs	MMs	HRMs	Cs	N=17	
Staff behaviour and Culture	3	3	3	3	5	17	100
Through the Corporate Brand message	2	2	3	1	5	14	82
Communication strategy	1	3	3	2	5	13	76
Values / Corporate identity	2	3	1	3	4	13	76
Marketing strategy: Promotions / positioning	1		3	1	5	10	59
Leadership		2	2	1	4	9	53
Product / service level	2		2	2	2	8	47
Corporate strategy	2	2	1	1	1	7	41
Positive image	1	2	2	1	1	7	41
The reputation	1		2		2	6	35
CSR, investor / media relations, events funding		2	1		2	5	29
Brand architecture	1	1	1		1	4	24
Visual identity		1	2		1	4	24
Unique value proposition	1	1				2	12

Q 4: What would you consider as important criteria in evaluating a company for investment?

The above question was put to institutional investors and all three respondents concurred that the company's profitability, the share price, the goodwill and brand power/equity, top management's track record, the availability of independent reports, the extent of a company's disclosure, presentation and communication of information on its activities were important decision criteria to them.

However, each investor also had their own considerations such as the nature of the business i.e. the type of offerings and whether sustainable over time; the physical appearance such as the corporate office, which gives a good idea about the perceived credibility of management.

One investor explained that if the business model is sustainable, flexible and adaptive to the changing environment, then it may motivate his investment decision positively. He gave his point of view in those terms "…for example, if the hotel people think that they are going to sustain selling their hotels by going to fairs and don't pay attention to the internet side of doing business by having links with the internet-related marketing agents, then they are doing the wrong thing. This is because a large part of international trade is being now sold through the Internet".

Other factors that could influence a decision to invest in a particular company were the brand image in terms of the emotional bonding and loyalty derived from customers and the type of industry in terms of which stage it is in its life cycle.

Table 8: Important criteria considered in evaluating a company for investment

CRITERIA	Investors	%
The profitability	3	100
The track record of the top mgt / Corporate strategy	3	100
Independent reports from financial advisors	3	100
The share price	3	100
The way information is presented and is available	3	100
Disclosure of information about current and future plans	3	100
The goodwill and brand power / equity	3	100
The business nature	1	33
Physical evidence	1	33
The business model	1	33
Brand image	1	33
Type of industry	1	33

Q 5: What are the important criteria that the public look for when choosing a company to deal with?

This question was asked to journalists who were asked to adopt the outlook of a common man when answering this question and the results are summarised as follows:

All three respondents agreed that people would look for product quality and service level, which represents value for money. The service level may also be equated with the other factors such as the level of understanding/empathy with the client's needs, providing them with as much information as possible on their purchase and the after sales service.

Then, the positive image and reputation factors will give guidance in the choice of company but one journalist advised caution on going solely by the corporate brand, as it is difficult to sustain innovation and continuously adapt to change over time.

Table 9: Important criteria considered when choosing a company

CRITERIA	Journalists	%
Value for money in terms of quality products	3	100
Level of service / facilities	3	100
Positive image	2	66
The company's reputation / credibility	2	66
Level of understanding and empathy with client's needs	2	66
The sense of innovation	1	33
As much information as possible on their purchase	1	33
The corporate brand	1	33
The after sales service	1	33

4.2 <u>Results pertaining to Research Question no 2</u>

This section presents the results obtained from the questions that address research question no 2, as per Appendix B.

In order to have an objective assessment of the role of corporate communications within organisations, the respondents' understanding of the concept was first ascertained. Then, their views were collected on the role of corporate communications and how consistency in signalling is sustained across the various communication channels. As the respondents did not explicitly disclose their views on online communication, one sub question was used to prompt their views on this issue.

Q1: What do you understand by corporate communications?

78% of the all respondents claimed that corporate communications was about a mix of internal and external communications in a bid to project a coherent image of the organisation.

The internal communication was linked to:

1. Management communications

A communication manager believed that the concept helped to inform about messages from the corporate level, while one CEO explained that the internal communication must be well managed to obtain a favourable external image. One HR manager was of the opinion that it carried information to investors and strategic partners.

2. Organisational communications

This is evidenced by the sayings of one HR manager who equated the above theme with employee communications, while a CEO talked about the importance of culture as an influential factor in the company's performance. A marketing manager related this type of communications to internal communications concerning staff behaviour.

The external communication was associated with visual, marketing communications and media relations by most respondents, who stated that communication with external audiences is projected through brochures, advertising and public relations (PR).

A small number of respondents (13%) considered that the concept targets only external communications. In the words of a communication manager, it is "geared towards sustaining external image through logo, colour, brochures, marketing communications such as above the line (ATL) advertising, media relations through the PR department, social and community contribution".

One HR manager and institutional investor also highlighted CSR as an important aspect of external communications. It was seen as contributing to the social role of organisations towards the community. Activities such as the promotion of arts, sponsorship of youth activities, protection of the environment and contributions towards scholarships to needy children were expected to create positive associations in the minds of stakeholders and the public while also making the company more visible on the business scene.

One communication manager admitted that she had a substantial budget voted for such programmes annually (10M MUR from a recent article published in a leading newspaper in Mauritius, on 21 May 06). She further added that her organisation has always been proactive and known to help in rehabilitation cases on national level after major cyclones or floods "It has always been part of our culture and values and we have been discreet on many occasions in contrast to other companies."

Lastly, two journalists (9%) referred to the concept as a tool in crisis management that companies resort to, in case of corporate scandal. One of them further commented that corporate communications was "…just a fad like corporate governance: at the launch, everyone is excited about it, and later, it might be replaced by something else…according to me, there is a big gap between the way it is defined in literature and the way it happens in practice".

One consultant explained that the purpose of corporate communications is to systematically reiterate the values and mission of the company by reporting on the vision, strategy and positioning to stakeholders.

Journalists and investors shared some pertinent views on the concept as reflected in their reactions and answers to this specific set of questions:

One journalist reported that "…when a company pays a huge sum of money to external consultants, in order to manage their communication strategy, this sends a signal to me that they are trying to hide something… when the cost of communicating is exaggerated, then the objectives of such communications become suspect".

The institutional investors also felt that some leading organisations lacked the 'savoir-faire' on Investor Relations. One such respondent asserted that listed companies had the duty of providing easy access to an information service concerning their market performance. He suggested "…they can even outsource this service if they don't know how to do it". His counterpart added that corporate communication departments usually manage media relations and HR relations but lack in investor relations, and was disappointed that some organisations did not even post shareholders' information on their websites.

Table 10: All respondents' understanding of the concept of Corporate Communications

THEMES	CEOs	CMs	MMs	HRMs	Cs	IIs	Js	N=23	%
To communicate messages through various channels internally / externally in consistent manner to project coherent image	3	2	3	1	5	2	2	18	78
Geared only towards sustaining external image through visual / marketing communications, CSR, media relations		1		1		1		3	13
It is about advising management how to behave in certain situations							2	2	9

SQ 1.1: What is the role of corporate communications in a corporate branding strategy?

This question is again a process of triangulation to unveil more dimensions of the role of corporate communications in real life. The results are given in decreasing order of frequency. The findings presented in Table 11, is processed so as not to reproduce the themes already highlighted in the preceding table i.e. Table 10.

65% of respondents believed that ongoing and consistent information to stakeholders about the company's activities, values and brand identity helped to ensure visibility on the market place. Such communications has become an imperative because of competition and one HR manager stated that communicating regularly and coherently with staff also ensured confidence in them and commitment to the company.

44% of all respondents emphasised that corporate communications helped in promoting transparency and good governance within organisations. The consultants and investors were amongst the most forceful proponents of these aspects. Since the performance of the company is also reflected in the stock price, one consultant advised that it is important to be transparent and conform to good governance, particularly with investors and the public.

26% of interviewees felt that the management of corporate communications was the prerogative of the communication department, which also acted as a control mechanism. This is where the policies are set, guidelines are provided and according to one communication manager "It is not the job of the communication manager to communicate – his job is to ensure that it happens. That is the real challenge."

Finally, 26% of respondents also concurred that the challenge of corporate communications rested more with the internal type of communications, referring to staff behaviour and inter-functional communications, which needed to be well aligned and coordinated for the external message and positioning to be well understood by all stakeholders.

The journalists, inter-alia, felt that corporate communication is a dynamic process that cannot be taken for granted, because of its direct impact on the corporate image. However, one of them believed that organisations has yet to master the art of effective communication because despite their efforts, the corporate image is not clear and there is no evidence of a method to gauge the success of a communication campaign.

On the subject of media relations, some organisations are seen to communicate too much, while others do not communicate at all.

Finally, one press reporter explained "I will not be convinced to write about a particular company that is looking for free publicity but rather will surely write about the product if it is really for the betterment of the consumer. It is all in the dosage given to the right type of communications."

Table 11: All respondents' views on the role of corporate communications

THEMES	CEOs	CMs	MMs	HRMs	Cs	IIs	Js	N=23	%
To provide ongoing information about company's activities, values, brand identity to stakeholders to build a coherent image	1	2	2	3	2	2	3	15	65
To make company transparent and show as conforming to good governance	1	1			4	3	1	10	44
The role of any communication department is to set the policies, give the know-how and act as a control mechanism		2	1		3			6	26
To ensure that staff behaviour and functional lines are coherent with company's positioning		2	2	1	1			6	26

Q2: As you grow bigger and more diversified, how do you ensure consistency and coherence across the various communication channels within your organisation?

Though consistency and coherence was mentioned as integral functions of corporate communications, it was not clear how the three groups of companies really went about the process in reality. Therefore, the above question was explicitly asked to gather more insights. The views on online communication are also included in this section. A summary of processes used by each company is given in Table 12**.**

The CEO of the **Finance group,** having regional offices in Africa and France, declared that there were three main avenues of ensuring coherence:

1. at the board level: where common directorship and outlook i.e. same vision, values and style of management determine the corporate strategy and core values to be communicated to all stakeholders within the group
2. at the functional level: where all the compliance functions such as accountancy, risk management and HR operate through common systems and processes across the group
3. at the communication department level: which ensures that the graphic and corporate colours converge towards the visual identity of the group in Mauritius even though some of the overseas branches did not share the same corporate name (because they did not have 100% shareholding)

Thus, the communication manager reported that she is in charge of projecting a strong visual identity through high quality and long lasting materials such as brochures, reports, giveaways, staff uniforms and building infrastructures.

The marketing manager makes use of the corporate brand values in his marketing and positioning strategies. The HR manager, on the other hand, makes sure that employees are aligned to the group's values in terms of behaviour and commitment to the corporate brand, through regular training and staff welfare schemes to ensure loyalty. He also suggested holding quarterly or semester sessions with staff in order to share information about forthcoming events. In this way, awareness about the group's activities could be reinforced. In the same vein, an intranet system was soon to be implemented so that management information, policies and decisions could be accessed quickly and in real time.

When prompted, the CEO acknowledged that online communication is part of the corporate strategy even though it was felt that the majority of Mauritians are not mature enough to use this kind of technology. Nevertheless, it is considered as an important channel for posting key information on line and the group has a professionally maintained website with media and investor corners, offer Internet banking facilities and accept vacancy applications online. According to one investor, this group is quite good at posting information on its website. Furthermore, a major intranet project was in the process of being implemented so that organisational communications can be accessed easily and in real time.

Despite the achievements, it was felt that there is still a lack of consistency in inter-functional lines and each department was managing its communication needs on an ad hoc basis without any proper coordination. The marketing manager remarked, "…we are not very consistent in what we do. It is high time that we become more professional in managing all aspects of communications so that there is better coordination and coherence across board".

The communication manager also acknowledged that there was room for improvement. She reported having identified various gaps during a business process re-engineering exercise and that they were soon going ahead with a project to improve and manage the corporate communications in a more professional manner.

The Investment group leverages on a common resource centre to promote coherence and consistence by providing marketing and communication support to the various subsidiaries. This centre also carried out activities concerned with employee relations through the publication of the internal newsletter, media relations through the PR coordinator, events management, promotion of the CSR programmes and communication of the visual identity, through brochures, reports and press releases.

The CEO explained that though the brand architecture favours the independence of the subsidiaries, they are all unified through common values and common training to spread the same message across.

The HR manager reported they had meetings every week and that important news was communicated straight away, through emails, memos and face-to-face meetings. Moreover, he is part of a team brainstorming on how to develop a proper framework for communications by reviewing the weaknesses of the present system and choosing the best solution. He believes that this review should be on going and fine-tuned all the time.

When asked to elaborate on the online communication aspect, the CEO, talking from the e-commerce perspective, believed that local customers were not mature enough to use this technology, therefore it was not an integral part of the corporate strategy. Indeed, the researcher observed that their current website is very basic, did not provide thorough information about the various subsidiaries, was neither dated nor updated.

However, both the communication and HR managers stated that emails was a common way to communicate internally although they have been experiencing information overload and abuse of this resource by some staff members. However, they have been trying to control the use of this medium through training and user policies. The marketing manager also reported that a team was working on a new interface to support online queries.

Coherence at the **Tourism group** level is managed at three levels:

1. at the holding company level where the general guidelines and directions are set to ensure congruence with the master brand
2. at the hotel group level, where the marketing, communication activities and employee relations are overseen by the same executive.
3. through the dual reporting lines of the HR and communication managers from the hotel group to the Head office to ensure alignment in HR and communication processes between the product brand and the master brand

The CEO leverages on the brand architecture to determine how to position the various products brands and customer portfolios within the six hotel units of his group. Indeed, he decided to review the brand architecture following the addition of a higher category hotel, which was incongruent with the existing corporate brand values, as previously reported.

Staff behaviour, which represented a crucial element of the marketing communications strategy, is aligned to corporate values through a staff handbook common to all business units. Standardised work processes are similar to all hotels to ensure a similar image across board. The marketing and communication manager uses a mix of management (vision, values), organisational (culture and behaviour), and marketing communications with symbolism (direct mailing, advertising, brochures, customer relationship management) to ensure consistency in all messages channelled through her department.

When asked their views on online communications, the executives agreed that this channel provided interesting opportunities to tap online business and therefore were in the process of implementing an e-commerce infrastructure to communicate directly with their oversees customers and partners. The HR manager added that an intranet was available especially to supervisors and managers for accessing information about the whole group.

Table 12: A summary of processes used by each group to achieve consistency and coherence

THE FINANCE GROUP
CEO Common directorship and outlook; convergence towards the visual identity, core values, corporate strategy, systems / processes overseen by corporate office; online communications also facilitate access to internal / external information
CM Through the physical evidence such as giveaways, staff uniforms, buildings; integration of marketing and employee communications through existing website and upcoming intranet
MM The vision as main driver; staff behaviour; corporate brand driving consistency in marketing communications and also through use of online communication as additional channel
HRM Staff to go regularly through a corporate-branding or value-creation workshop; intranet system to also drive integration in organisational and management communications
THE INVESTMENT GROUP
CEO Through common values and common training to spread the same message across
CM Through internal communication to communicate the company values and external communication centrally managed by the resource centre
MM Through a centralised resource centre for all marketing and communication campaigns
HRM Through meetings every week, from top management memos etc. We communicate straight away important news.
THE TOURISM GROUP
CEO The brand architecture; culture, staff behaviour, visual identity; corporate values; and online infrastructure will be used in the same consistent fashion
CM Coherence driven by corporate and visual identity, corporate values, culture; and intranet
MM The vision, our values, organisational culture, visual identity, and marketing communications and online platform are the main drivers to ensure consistency
HRM A staff handbook with set of core values, common to all business units; standardised various procedures such as work processes common to all hotels to maintain a coherent image; intranet also facilitate easy access to group information

SQ 2.2: What are your views on online communication?

Similar to internal respondents, this set of external respondents had to be specifically asked their views on online communication.

This channel of communication was acknowledged as a new way of doing business, especially for e-commerce. The key characteristics of this channel of communication are considered to be the ease of access (ubiquity) and the need for real time information.

However, in the Mauritian context, consultants feel that it is not viable for companies to manage this type of communication because it is still not part of the local culture. One consultant explained, “In Mauritius, doing business on the Internet is not driving revenue because people are not mature enough and the Internet penetration rate is not high enough.”

In the case of journalists, while one press reporter declared that he searched websites for corporate information, another one was wary of this channel of information because it is ‘filtered information’ therefore not very reliable. However, from a consumer’s point of view, he agreed that it offered another alternative for choosing the best product.

4.3 <u>Results pertaining to Research Question no 3</u>

This section presents the findings related to the third research question of this study about how corporate communications promotes the corporate brand image.

The questions, as per Appendix C, required that respondents give their definition of corporate image, followed by an open-ended question on which processes were leveraged upon in the corporate communication strategies. A sub question had to be used to prompt the interviewees to talk about any instrument used to measure the success of their communication strategies. Finally, respondents were asked their opinions on who should have the main responsibility of looking after investor relations because this is also an ambiguous issue in the literature.

Q 1: What is your definition of image?

The findings showed that there was low convergence among the respondents as to the real meaning of the image concept. In fact, the researcher observed that respondents generally marked a pause to think about a plausible definition. However, interviewees could relate to the image construct more easily as compared to the 'Reputation' construct. In total, eight facets of the concept of corporate image were gathered.

35% of respondents believed that Image is how the company is perceived by stakeholders. The majority qualified stakeholders as staff, customers, partners, the market and considered that a false image is soon found out through negative word of mouth publicity.

One of the journalists could not really define Image, saying that it is an abstract concept, while his counterpart felt that Image is short term and is easily manipulated.

22% of the sample linked Image to perceptions based on product / service quality. One chief executive explained that there is a direct correlation between image and the company's market performance based on innovative products and being known as a visionary and fast growing company. Another CEO added that when a company shows that it is not only making profits but also cares for the community then the image is favourably accepted.

Four respondents (17%) also identified values and culture as dimensions of the concept. One HR manager considered that an image based on integrity and values enhanced business performance, while one marketing manager asserted that staff behaviour, especially in the service industry, has a direct influence on image, because they are the reflection of the company's culture.

'Image' was also considered as fleeting (9%), linked to logos, colours (9%), associated with credibility / goodwill (9%), trustworthiness (4%) and considered to be the first impressions of an organisation (4%).

<u>Table 13: All respondents' definitions of Corporate Image</u>

THEMES	CEOs	CMs	MMs	HRMs	Cs	IIs	Js	N= 23	%
Image is about how we are perceived by our stakeholders				1	3	2	2	8	35
Image is linked to perceptions on product / service quality	3		1	1				5	22
Image is the way we portray our organisational values and culture	1		1	2				4	17
Image is linked to the present and is fleeting		1			1			2	9
Image is about the tangible aspects of a company such as logos, colours						1	1	2	9
Image is linked to credibility / goodwill	1				1			2	9
Image is associated with positive qualities such as trustworthiness		1						1	4
Image is about the first impressions of an organisation		1						1	4

Q 2: What are the key drivers of your communication strategy to help your organisation achieve its desired image?

This question aimed at discovering the key processes that the three groups of companies leveraged upon in their efforts to achieve a favourable image. The results obtained from both internal and external perspectives, as shown in Tables 14 and 15**,** are similar in many respects but differ in the weightage given to each factor. As explained in the research methodology, the high frequency of occurrence of one factor does not necessarily lessen the importance of a less mentioned factor.

The findings from the three groups of companies are detailed through a case-by-case approach to allow for a holistic view of the processes. Useful insights are thus retrieved about how each diversified organisation makes use of the total armoury of corporate communications to deal with issues concerning their image. Each factor, as listed in Table 14, is highlighted in bold characters to draw attention to its use by each group of companies.

As mentioned in the synopsis, **The Finance group** had endured two major corporate scandals in a lapse of three years and as a consequence, was suffering from an *image deficit*. The CEO was conscious of this state of affairs and expressed the "… need to get back to normal and being natural".

The executives specified that the **vision was the main driver** of all corporate initiatives, from which all strategies were derived with the end goal of satisfying the customers. The CEO explained that the **corporate strategy** was a key determinant in making his organisation the market leader today and he strongly believed in **good corporate citizenship.**

According to the marketing manager, the **organisation's positioning** is based on the portfolio of products, which has been meeting customer demands over the years. In fact, leveraging on the **reputation of past products** is one key aspect of his marketing strategy. He explained that many of the company's products have been pioneers in their times and "are still around even after 20 years, maybe re-packaged but with the same concept". Thus, this is an indication of the group's **credibility** in the market.

As discussed previously, **online communication** is part of their communication strategy and was managed by a dedicated team of professionals to offer internet banking facilities, receive queries and invite applications for job vacancies quickly and cost-effectively. Furthermore, the **intranet project** is expected to promote integration of management and organisational communications and is also seen as a **transparent way of promoting employee relations** in a very cost-effective manner. Usual departmental meetings and other face-to-face briefings also support staff communications and are set objectives in the balanced score card of each department to motivate better interpersonal relationships.

The coordination of the **external communication strategy** is under the charge of the communication manager who performed the following duties:

- Media relations and press releases looked after by a PR coordinator
- Support to marketing communications by renting of space for ATL advertising such as billboards, radio, TV, brochures
- Organised participation in commercial fairs to promote awareness and visibility
- Maintaining the website managed by a dedicated team under her charge
- Compilation and publishing of annual reports
- Promotion of cultural events, protection of the environment, humanitarian activities and educational scholarships / bursaries

She also contributed to the **internal communication** by offering support to the HR department, in the organising of annual staff parties, distribution of greeting cards and publication of the internal newsletter.

During the times of crisis, the CEO of the Finance group did not regard the press as a credible party because erroneous information about the scandal had been published. Thus, he chose to communicate only to his main stakeholders such as staff, the shareholders and customers. According to him, the media community are “stakeholders but not in the same league for me to give that much importance to what they print. The media and the public overlap in more ways that one and their views are very impressionistic and based on perceptions, when good journalism should be based on facts”.

While asked to comment on how the Finance group managed its media relations, one journalist reported that the communication department stopped to communicate at the peak of the first scandal and that for the second time it happened, it was unforgivable that the group was still unable to communicate to its public because it had not learnt to react in a crisis situation. He insisted that today every organisation, even if they are the market leaders, is accountable to its stakeholders and society.

The CEO is in charge of **Investor relations**, as he believed that it is part of his job. He further added that that “…where communication and PR department is concerned, I am thinking about what they can bring to the party in terms of substance. Investors don’t talk about impressions, brands and perceptions but about substance. I would believe that the current set-up is the most appropriate, under the circumstances”.

The group is currently implementing an HR scorecard system to monitor and measure performance of staff. However, there was no monitoring of the communication process currently available.

The Investment group, as reported before, found itself in the public 'limelight' because it suddenly started acquiring leading companies on the market, was rumoured to be heavily indebted and press reports concerning suspected money-laundering activities in its foreign subsidiaries had been published. These issues fuelled speculations about the group's source of finance, political connections, the real motives of the acquisition strategy and level of transparency among the business community, the press and the public.

The person behind the communication strategy of this group is none other than the chairman himself. As the CEO declared, "The chairman is in charge of our communication strategy and gives us guidelines of whether to respond to negative media stories about us as we have been in press cuttings a lot for various reasons. Therefore, it is very strategic."

The CEO explained that the **brand architecture** leveraged on the corporate brand only in exceptional cases and this structure was preferred in order to prevent any negative impact on the corporate brand equity, in case of any mishaps. However, efforts were made to disseminate the group's core values and common training to each subsidiary. .

On the marketing front, all queries about the activities of the group were channelled through a customer service centre operating a free number and information about the group and the products/services were posted on a website. Online communications was not considered as an integral part of the communication strategy.

The corporate office looked after the **Investors relations**, which was understood to be more about overseas investors, because local investors were not considered as important stakeholders because they were not professional enough and the Mauritius stock market is seen as too small. The CEO argued that "…where these people are concerned, I don't see who else apart from the leaders can handle the queries. They ask about the vision, the future plans so it is important that the top management is involved".

On the local investors' side, the general feeling is that this group is not transparent enough because even though they disclosed their financial performance, there was too much speculation and incoherence about the corporate strategy and other issues.

The communication manager of the Investment group reported that his post has just been created to counteract the negative perceptions about the group and further to the new imperative of adopting a new approach and attitude towards corporate communications. His mission is to change the current image by, internally showing that the company cared for its staff, and externally, by opening the group more to the public eyes. Therefore, the process started with an integrated communication campaign where, internally he carried out:

- Focus groups with managers to ensure an open channel of discussion and discuss the results of the staff survey with managers so that they in turn could coach their subordinates
- Surveys to gather staff perceptions in collaboration with the HR department
- Publication of the internal newsletter with personal stories on any staff personal and professional achievements, in collaboration with the HR department

Providing for a career path, a motivating work environment and creating a proper balance between work and leisure for the staff are other factors contributing to the **internal image management** process aiming to promote staff loyalty and commitment to the organisation. The HR manager stated that staff, preferably those with leadership potential, were trained to become future leaders.

On the **external front**, they want to achieve a clear image through managing well the media relations and **explaining about the corporate objectives and**

strategy of acquisition that is being pursued. In order to be more open about the group's culture, a number of initiatives have been taken such as:

- Establishing corporate profiles of each company, preparing handouts to be given to the media on the various executives of the group to get them to know the professionals at the wheel of the various companies
- PR exercises where regular lunches between the executives and the media people will be organised so as to promote an informal way of getting to know each other
- Increased networking with business associations and ministries
- Media stories, events sponsorship, more interaction with the community through CSR programmes

The communication manager admitted that no systematic tracking of the communication strategy is undertaken regularly. But with the introduction of new systems and processes by the newly recruited communication manager, an assessment method is soon to be introduced.

In the case of the **Tourism group, staff behaviour and culture** are intimately linked to their **positioning** as a group of hotels with a human dimension, very family-oriented with personalised service and the Mauritian touch.

The CEO elaborated on his **vision as the driver** behind the various initiatives being undertaken. His ambition for his group is to become one of the top three players in the hotel business in Mauritius. The **image** that he wanted to build is that of an equal opportunity employer. He emphasised that his company's **organisational culture** was very customer-oriented in order to satisfy the customers, encourage them to come back and promote word of mouth publicity for the hotels.

The **internal communication** was geared to ensure that the staff force felt more inclined to show loyalty to the brand and comprised of

- Face-to-face meetings, forum of discussion or work councils where staff share ideas on how to exceed expectations in the service delivery
- An internal newsletter which carries personal stories about the hotel staff, and publishes the names of those who have been promoted
- A separate corporate newsletter, for those at management level, which is circulated compiled and published by the holding company
- Induction programmes for new recruits to learn about the corporate culture and core values, expected attitude and behaviour.
- Meeting with the CEO when new hotels are acquired
- A standard staff handbook, common to all hotels

The marketing manager also backed the **value of organisational culture** as a key element of their products and an integral part of her **marketing communications**. She further added that, in line with the vision, a higher category of hotel was added to the **product / service portfolio**. In order to promote the new hotel and new values, they were reviewing their brand architecture to support the coherence needed across the various products they now carried.

The communication manager highlighted the **importance of leadership** as a critical success factor. He emphasised that market success cannot be fully achieved if internally, they are not successful i.e. the management team and CEO, who is the brand ambassador, has to lead the way and walk the talk.

Driven by the awareness that tourism is an international business, **online communications** was soon going to further drive revenue by enabling secure communication in real time with partners and customers. This line of reasoning meets that of an investor who believes that doing business online is now a major aspect of international trade and it is important for hotel people to have links with Internet related marketing agents.

According to the marketing manager, **Investor relations** are best managed under the communication department since it is important to communicate on the vision, marketing strategy, product development and positioning of the company, apart from reporting on financial performance. However, the communication manager confirmed that the communication and finance departments jointly managed investor relations. Thus, once the finance division has decided on the information content, the communication department then works on the format and visual presentation of the message.

The CEO conceded that ideally, they needed a system to check the brand image. However, at the head office level, a perceptual survey of the group had been carried out prior to the re-branding campaign. This exercise was going to be repeated in two years' time to gauge how the new image has been received.

Table 14: The key drivers of each group's communication strategy

FACTORS	THE FINANCE GROUP				THE INVESTMENT GROUP				THE TOURISM GROUP				N= 12	%
	CEO	CM	MM	HRM	CEO	CM	MM	HRM	CEO	CM	MM	HRM		
Corporate identity and strategy for product / service portfolio	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		10	83
Proper coordination on external communications		X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	9	75
Internal image management with support of HR dept		X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	9	75
Staff behaviour	X		X	X			X	X	X	X		X	8	67
Service / product quality to satisfy public demand	X	X	X				X	X		X	X	X	8	67
Online communication	X	X		X					X	X	X	X	7	58
Corporate image and reputation	X	X	X						X	X	X	X	7	58
Integrated communications			X	X			X	X			X	X	6	50
Good media relations		X				X	X			X	X		5	42
Transparency						X		X	X		X		4	33
Social role and good corporate citizenship	X	X			X	X							4	33
Marketing strategy: positioning / promotions			X	X							X	X	4	33
Centralised marketing / communication resources					X	X	X						3	25
Leadership								X		X		X	3	25

The **external respondents' views** were next gathered and also compared with those from the internal respondents. Many similarities were found but some new insights were also retrieved. The critical success factors that share the same meaning with the preceding sections are not elaborated upon to avoid repetition. The factors are listed in descending order of occurrence.

55% of this sample acknowledged online communication as a source of competitive advantage, and investors specifically, are of the view that a properly maintained website (i.e. interactive and professionally managed), add value to the company's credibility.

However, as reported previously, consultants feel that companies do not consider this channel as viable because of the low penetration of the internet in the Mauritian society and the cost is still quite high.

While one journalist acknowledged that he uses the internet to access information everyday, his two other counterparts did not use this means as often in their course of work though they conceded that it is quickly becoming a very cost-effective driver of corporate information.

45% of respondents felt that having an **official communication specialist** is very strategic to a company, because not only would that person help to access information about the company easily and quickly but would also be an expert in handling queries especially in times of crisis. Talking from experience, one journalist said:

If you are from the Investment group and I call you for more information because you have just bought a well-known company, I expect that you are available for an answer. The communications department is supposed to function to protect the interest of the company but when it is unpleasant information, they don't communicate at all so this is a paradox.

One consultant believed that a **crisis management plan** was of utmost importance for big corporations such as banks, airlines and even universities. He considered a crisis as a disruption in the communication process but at the same time a good test of how the company's credibility is upheld by its stakeholders.

A consultant explained that the official spokesperson is usually very close to the CEO's office and is provided with a daily report about any incidents or events about the company that is worth reporting. Thus, by having all information at hand, a crisis can be handled in a timely and coherent manner.

For corporate communications to be seen as adding value, the communication campaign or strategy must be **closely monitored** to ensure that it is effectively promoting the desired perceptions. For instance, all newspapers must be scanned to check for any erroneous stories being written so as to immediately rectify the situation through communiqués. Otherwise, image tracking can be done through surveys, internally with staff and externally with customers. Regular reporting on market share and word of mouth reports can also give an idea of how the company is being perceived.

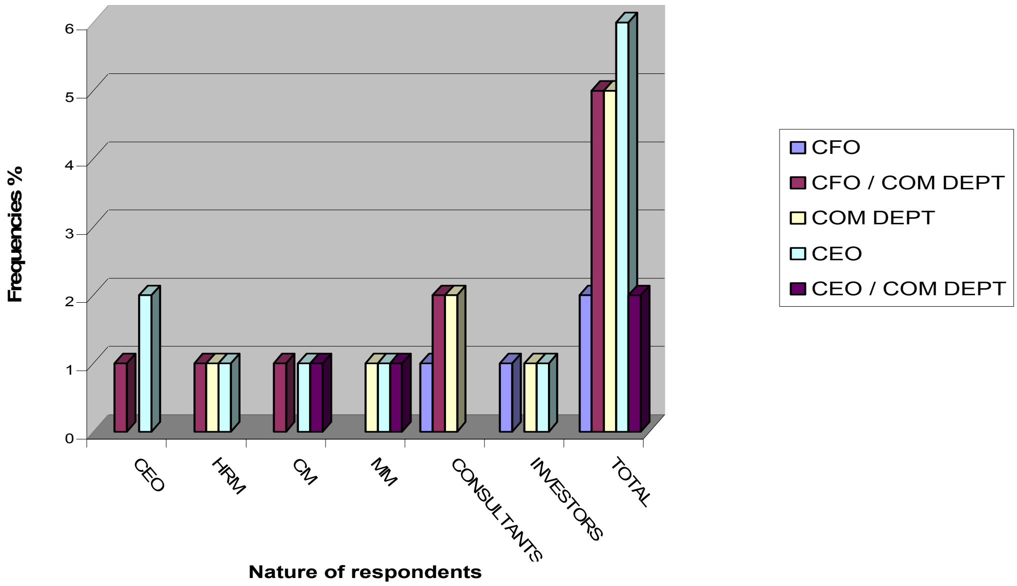
Finally, two brand experts advocated that a good communication strategy should start by first examining the stakeholders' perceptions about the company, which can be determined through surveys and focus groups. The next step would then be to get the right resources to carry an integrated marketing campaign for more awareness. Such a campaign would include advertisement, PR events, community service through CSR programmes, and training for staff to behave in accordance with the brand message.

Table 15: The key drivers of a communication strategy from external respondents' perspectives

FACTORS	Consultants	Investors	Journalists	N=11	%
Message about vision, strategy, positioning to stakeholders should be clear	4	3	2	9	82
Regular communication with investors / media through reports, meetings to promote transparency	3	3	3	9	82
Integrated communication through all channels of communication to all stakeholders	3	2	2	7	64
Ensuring coherence with values and objectives of company	4	1	2	7	64
Professionally managed and updated online communication	2	3	1	6	55
Staff must act as brand ambassadors	4		1	5	45
Appointed spokesperson for all company's information	1	1	2	4	45
Based on service and products performance	1	1	1	3	27
Crisis management plan	2	1		3	27
Close monitoring of the process	2			2	18
Through social role and good corporate citizenship	1	1		2	18
By first determining stakeholders' perceptions of company	2			2	18
Examination of brand architecture to drive consistency across subsidiaries	1			1	9
Leveraging on our corporate strategy in driving product / service portfolio	1			1	9

Q3: Who should be in charge of Investor relations?

Figure 11: Who should manage Investor Relations in Mauritian organisations?



Legend: CFO = Chief Finance officer, Com Dept = Communication department

The investor community is an important stakeholder group comprising of both existing shareholders as well as potential ones. It is an important source of finance and therefore has the right to access information on the company in which it invests. However, as in literature, it is not clear who should really have the responsibility of these relations: the CEO, the CFO or the communications director?

This question was put to all respondents, except for journalists. The results obtained are valid for Mauritius in the current business context.

The results show that the CEO is considered as the best person to look after this community. The communication department and both the CFO/communication department were given equal votes as second best alternatives.

As per the results discussed in section 4.1, this community's requirements are:

- Regular feedback on corporate strategy, vision and performance through presentations, meetings, reports
- Disclosure of information on current and future plans and projects
- Ease of access to information through professionally managed websites
- Professional service and technical knowledge
- Guided visits of companies on request

When asked their views on communicating solely with the corporate communications department for their requirements, the investors answered that if that they would be happy to work with them *"…provided they are well structured'.* Since people in that department are reputed to be communication specialists, the advantages, according to them, would be multi-fold in terms of easier access, more open channels of communication, professional service and coherent information.

4.4 Results pertaining to Research Question no 4

The findings presented here pertain to the fourth research question i.e. how can communications promote the corporate brand reputation.

All respondents were asked to give their definition of corporate reputation, followed by their views on how it can be promoted by corporate communications. External respondents were further requested to rate the corporate image / reputation of the three groups of companies in the sample. This was to gather an objective assessment of how the present images and reputations of these companies are perceived in order to allow inferences about the performance of their communication processes.

Again, many of the factors revealed are interrelated but have been classified under differing headings for conciseness. Thus, eight major themes were gathered and most respondents identified that reputation has got a time line.

Q 1: What is your definition of Reputation?

61% of respondents answered that reputation is closely linked to image. Thus, one CEO asserted that image and reputation should be aligned to each other, while one communication manager underlined that reputation cannot be manipulated as it is more fundamental but can, however, be reinforced by a new positive image. According to a marketing manager, image is what a company wants to portray and reputation is how the image is portrayed. His counterpart felt that brand reputation is more important since it is based on market feedback and must tally with image, but if the reputation does not reflect the image, then it means that the latter is not being well communicated.

One investor asserted that reputation is linked to image through quality of service, a well-known name and is more important in decision-making. One journalist was of the view that an image can be rebuilt but a broken reputation is very difficult to piece together as it is based on trustworthiness and loyalty. One consultant claimed that reputation is a reactive process and influences image. But image can be worked upon to impact on reputation. His counterpart believed that image preceded reputation while the latter is built over time.

In fact, five respondents (22%) considered that reputation has a long term run because it is linked to the history of the company and reflects the behaviour of the firm over the years and for these reasons the investors stated that they would base their investment decisions on reputation rather than image.

Some respondents were confused about the real meanings and difference between the two constructs and used them interchangeably. Thus, 17% of respondents believed that reputation was about perceptions i.e. what people think of the company. One chief executive considered that image is more important as it influences reputation and drives it while another CEO stated that he would not spend much time on the finesse that separates one from the other and added that "…image is reputation and reputation is image and both goes hand in hand".

Two executives from the Finance group (9%) were convinced that the group's reputation helped them to face the crisis situations that they went through. The communication manager believed that the CSR programmes over the years and staff behaviour provided the support needed to sail through the incidents, while the HR manager felt the group recovered its prestige because of the reputation and thus demonstrated their credibility in the eyes of stakeholders.

The other aspects of the construct were associated with the financial performance / bottom line (9%) and the result of good products, efficient staff, and superior customer service (4%)

Table 16: All respondents' understanding of Corporate Reputation

THEMES	CEOs	CMs	MMs	HRMs	Cs	IIs	Js	N=23	%
It is closely linked to image	2	2	3	1	3	3		14	61
It is built over time / long lasting			1		2	1	1	5	22
Reputation is a perception / what people think of you		1	1	1			1	4	17
Both image and reputation are more or less the same	1						1	2	9
Reputation helps to face crisis situation / linked to credibility		1		1				2	9
Reputation is the respect earned through what we have projected		1		1				2	9
It is based on the financial performance / bottom line		1				1		2	9
It is the result of good products, efficient staff, superior customer service							1	1	4

Q2: How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?

Once more, the findings are reported on a case-by-case basis, in line with a holistic approach and consistency in reporting. Since the answers to this question are expectedly similar to the previous one on corporate image, the respondents were not very voluble in their descriptions of the key drivers of reputation.

In the case of the **Finance group,** the question was not put to the CEO because he clearly stated that he did not see much difference between corporate image and reputation. In this regard, his views on the key drivers of corporate reputation are the same as for image and the key elements are summarised as follows:

An organisation should leverage on the corporate identity and strategy in determining the **product / service portfolio**; staff behaviour will be crucial in delivering the required service performance; **online communication** must be integrated and congruent with messages from other functional processes, to project the desired image and reputation. Finally, the company must continue to be a good corporate citizen by playing its social role fully.

According to the communication manager, the reputation is built through the fieldwork to build the **image**, leveraging on **staff interaction** at the interface with the external customers. She was convinced that "… we owe our reputation to our staff…" and hence did her utmost to thank employees, on behalf of the company, for their continued effort through end of the year parties, gifts, birthday cards and the likes.

As mentioned previously, the reputation is reported to have acted as a buffer during the crises, which was sustained by continued involvement in **social work** and community service over the years. The organisation was thus perceived to be close to its customers and to the public at large which added to its credibility.

The HR manager firmly believed that by living the brand image and having **crisis management strategies** inculcated into the systems of the company, these can provide for more robust ways to react to difficult situations. The faster and more efficiently an organisation can recover from any crisis such as a fire or union strikes, the more this adds to its credibility and reinforces its reputation.

For the marketing manager, reputation can be promoted by creating more awareness through the projected image of **quality product and service**, the company's **core values and culture** and word of mouth.

The Investment group's CEO and communication manager re-stated that the strategies would be similar to the **promotion of the corporate image** such as communicating more information about the group's **culture and values**, leveraging on **CSR programmes** and achieving a clear image through managing the **media relations** well. The basic aim would be to ensure consistent communications.

For the HR manager, the key drivers of reputation are qualified people to deliver the **best products / services** and **leadership** skills. He believed that if employees are treated well, they will work harder for the company. Thus, every effort is made to provide a motivating work environment and a proper balance between work and life for the staff. The style of management is devised to be participative and consultative and employees are empowered in decision-making. **Staff welfare** benefits are provided such as training, performance bonus, and better package than the competition.

He emphasised that managers were trained to be transformational rather than transactional leaders. In terms of succession planning, they were continuously on the look out for people with potential to train them to become future leaders.

The marketing director reiterated that by hiring a communication manager, they aimed to make the company **more transparent** to their stakeholders and the public, through the various initiatives as described previously.

The executives of the **Tourism group** also indicated that reputation is promoted through the management of the corporate image.

Thus, the CEO felt that the key point is to show that they are **unique and different,** and offered good value for money so that stakeholders continue to generate more business for them. Therefore the communication strategy must get the **image right** and the reputation will automatically follow, according to the communication manager.

The marketing manager reflected that since reputation is based on the past performance of the company, it contributes to the branding process and image. The HR manager believed that since image precedes reputation; the latter depends on staff attitudes, the way organisational values are upheld, and the **management of the corporate image**.

Table 17: Internal respondents' views on the key drivers of Reputation

THEMES	THE FINANCE GROUP				THE INVESTMENT GROUP				THE TOURISM GROUP				N= 12	%
	CEO	CM	MM	HRM	CEO	CM	MM	HRM	CEO	CM	MM	HRM		
Through image management	X	X		X					X	X	X	X	7	58
Social role and good corporate citizenship	X	X			X	X	X						5	42
Through core values and culture			X			X	X				X		4	33
Based on Staff behaviour	X	X						X			X		4	33
Keeping good media relations					X	X	X						3	25
Based on service / product quality to satisfy public demand	X		X										2	17
Consistent communications across various channels						X	X						2	17
Transparency about activities					X		X						2	17
Unique value proposition									X				1	8
Crisis management strategies				X									1	8
Transformational Leadership								X					1	8

The findings gathered from **external respondents** showed that according to 46% of respondents, corporate reputation is also promoted through the management of the corporate image. One of the consultants explained that both image and reputation should be aligned to achieve differentiation and competitive advantage in the long term. Similarly one investor remarked that the market performance of the company over time is more important than image.

Four external stakeholders (36%) re-stated that the projection of corporate values, media relations and achieving visibility through associations with social happenings will promote reputation.

According to 27% of interviewees, a communication strategy based on good products, best service quality, clear and coherent messages, integrity of purpose and dealings, transparency in terms of honesty about the financial figures, job satisfaction of staff and job attractiveness will promote the company reputation In the long run. However, one investor felt that even though reputation might be a driver for growth, it is not as relevant in the Mauritian context because customers and investors are very latent i.e. there is no activism against any company who may have done things wrong.

Managing investor relations in terms of providing easy access to information and disclosing future projects are seen to be a key driver of reputation, as maintaining open communication will lead to more transparency and induce trust in people.

Leadership is believed to reinforce the reputation of a company while one journalist remarked that the communication of content rather than the technique of communication will be accepted more positively.

Table 18: External views on the key drivers of Corporate Reputation

THEMES	Cs	IIs	Js	N=11	%
Management of the corporate image	4	1		5	46
Through media, CSR, corporate values	2		2	4	36
Consistent and coherent communications	2		1	3	27
Through product / service performance	2		1	3	27
It is promoted through integrity, staff welfare, transparency		2	1	3	27
Through managing well the investor relations and open communication		1	1	2	18
Leadership will reinforce the reputation	1		1	2	18
It is promoted through communication of content and not technique of communication			1	1	9

Q3: How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample?

As mentioned previously, the external stakeholders were asked to rate the image and reputation of the three groups of companies in the present sample in order to allow objective conclusions on how successful these companies are or have been in their communication strategies. In the same vein, Harris & de Chernatony (2001) suggested that, externally, managers need to check their brand's reputation to make sure that the brand's identity is being received effectively and valued outcomes are being delivered without fail.

The findings, presented separately for each group of companies, are very revealing.

The majority of respondents (64%) perceived the Finance group as having a strong image and reputation because of its size (the largest finance institution in Mauritius) and history. The CSR programmes, big promotional budget, strong corporate brand, high quality visual communications, the market performance, transparency in dealings and good media relations are the factors that are seen to contribute to the strong image and reputation.

However, all respondents talked about the negative impact of the two scandals on their image and reputation. In general, the consultants' feelings were that the image has been tarnished because the crises were poorly managed, the group did not immediately acknowledge that there was a serious problem and they chose not to communicate to the media and the public at the peak of the scandals.

Two of the institutional investors believe that it is the reputation rather than the image which has been 'badly' damaged because it was shocking to find out that they did not have a system to detect fraud or tight surveillance system. Therefore, their risk premium has increased and their share price might be overvalued. Nevertheless, they are still investing in the group, based on its overall performance down the years and the confidence that appropriate measures have been taken to rectify the operational weaknesses. The third investor did not consider the two incidents as having major repercussions on the group's image, as, according to him, they have the reputation of growing fast and have sustained the image of a lasting organisation.

The journalists also felt that the group did not communicate enough to the external stakeholders but the image was saved by their goodwill, trustworthiness and strong reputation that acted as a shield and also the fact that they are quite 'liked' in general.

Table 19: Image / Reputation of The Finance group by external respondents

FACTORS	C	II	J	N=11	%
Strong image and reputation because it is the largest finance institution and has been in existence for a very long time	4	2	1	7	64
They suffered a lot because of the scandal because they did not manage their communication strategy well	3		1	4	36
Their CSR programmes ensure a good visibility and presence on the market, they are quite liked and project a high quality graphic standard	1		2	3	27
It has the image of a lasting organisation		1		2	18
Strong reputation acted as a shield to the image			2	2	18
Their reputation is badly damaged after the 2 scandals		1		1	9
We invest in the group because its performance has been good, it being the largest organisation		1		1	9
The image has been tarnished	1			1	9
When the crisis happened, the staff morale was quite down and this shows that the staff may not be as closely connected to the essence of the brand	1			1	9
They must improve their HR practices, customers are not well served and they have not been informed of some structural changes going on		1		1	9
They seem to be quite transparent in their dealings and they maintain good media relations. I can easily access information and I know who the people in the communication department are			1	1	9

Most respondents were quite critical of the **Investment group**, as evidenced by 82% of respondents who characterised the Investment group's image as confusing and the communication strategy as very poor.

Overall, the consultants feel that the identity is not clearly projected, they have suddenly started an aggressive acquisition strategy and are in such diverse sectors that "…they must have a good communication strategy to explain why they are on a buying spree suddenly, but they do not communicate much".

On the other hand, two investors perceive the group as having a good reputation and clear direction, but only one investor out of the three is investing in them. The others are adopting a 'wait and watch' attitude, in the wake of more disclosure and transparency on the part of the management. One of the investors concur with other respondents on the fact that strategy is not well-defined, therefore the image is 'too nebulous'.

The journalists also consider that the sudden acquisition strategy is not well understood, and perceive the group to be politically connected, thus giving the wrong signals to the public. Furthermore, since they have their own press group, they are criticised for not communicating openly to the independent press.

Table 20: Image / Reputation of The Investment group by external respondents

FACTORS	C	II	J	N=11	%
The image is confusing, the communication strategy is very poor	5	1	3	9	82
It is seen as an aggressive group	1	2	3	6	55
The corporate strategy is not very well defined	3	1	2	6	55
It has diverse activities / there is no evident linkage between the various brand subsidiaries.	2		1	3	27
It is perceived to be politically linked with government	1		2	3	27
They have a clear direction and are well reputed		2		2	18
If they become more transparent and disclose more, then we might consider investing		1		1	9

The Tourism group has an overall good feedback from the respondents who knew that it was part of one of the largest diversified group on the island, but could not say much about its history as it is a relatively new corporate entity.

The consultants saw the group as dynamic and coherent with a good positioning. However, one of the experts thought that the communication activities should be handled by a special department rather than be cumulated by HR and marketing managers. He believed that this creates coordination problems and prevents the group from being as coherent as it could be.

The investors considered the organisation as profitable and held the view that the endorsement by the holding company gave it its credibility, although it is a new entity. The journalists perceived them as a friendly, mid range group of hotels, and felt that the identity was clearly communicated. Furthermore, it handles media relations well, projects a clear message about its positioning and direction. The third press reporter was amazed at how well the holding company managed its communication despite being such a large and diversified group.

Table 21: Image / Reputation of The Tourism group by external respondents

FACTORS	C	II	J	N=11	%
It are part of a big, diversified group	1	3	1	5	45
It project a clear message about their positioning and direction		1	2	3	27
It have medium range hotels and are profitable		3		3	27
It seem to be dynamic group	1		1	2	18
It is an emerging group and has a positioning statement	1			1	9
It should work more on their branding	1			1	9
It has similar activities so it is easier to be coherent	1			1	9
Its communication is shared by HR and marketing managers. This does not allow for needed coherence	1			1	9
It gives the impression of a friendly group of hotels, family oriented, not pretentious – its communication seem to reflect its identity			1	1	9
It maintains very good relations with the press			1	1	9
The 2 branding efforts within a short span sent confusing signals but we do invest in them		1		1	9

5. INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The objective of this chapter is to interpret the results presented in the last chapter. The findings are examined with reference made to the literature review and to each research question and at the end, it is clearly stated whether the research question is able to address the sub-problems fully, partially or not at all. The meanings of the results are discussed using ad verbatim quotes from the transcribed interviews to provide additional insights.

5.1 Research Question No 1

Why and how does an organisation leverage on the corporate branding process?

The set of questions that addressed the above question are stated below with the corresponding table of answers:

1. *What do you understand by Corporate Branding?* (Table 3,4)
   1.1 :*Who takes the main responsibility for the corporate brand in your / an organisation?* (Table 5)
2. *Why is this concept relevant in current times?* (Table 6)
3. *How does your / an organisation leverage on corporate branding? (Table 7)*
   3.1 *What would you consider as important criteria in evaluating a company for investment?* (Table 8) (Investors)
   3.2 *What are the important criteria that the public look for when choosing a company to deal with?* (Table 9) (Journalists)

Q1: What do you understand by Corporate Branding?

In general, the practitioners and external respondents are in agreement on five aspects of the concept i.e. as a promoter of corporate image, conveyor of core values, linked to culture, endorser of quality products and services and a supporter of goodwill for the organisation. However, each group of stakeholders differ in the degree of importance accorded to each factor.

The literature acknowledges that one of the main objectives of corporate branding is to promote a positive image. It helps to achieve differentiation and preference for a company's offerings, is helpful in attracting high potential staff and subsequently achieves competitive advantage (Bernstein, 1984; Balmer, 1995; Aaker, 1996; Van Riel, 2001; Einwiller & Will, 2002; Urde, 2003).

The views of respondents, that the corporate brand is a conveyor of core values, corroborate with the definitions by various authors that core values are the guiding principle of the brand building process and part of the corporate identity (Ind, 1997; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997; Urde, 1999; Balmer, 2001b). Values reflect an organisation's integrity and are promoters of trust and confidence in the minds of customers (Ind, 1997; Urde, 1999).

Corporate culture has long been viewed as a distinguishing factor between organisations (Abratt, 1989; Howard, 1998; Balmer, 2001). In literature, it has been equated with the concept of corporate personality, which is defined as "…an amalgamation of all the sub-cultures that are present within an organisation" (Bick *et al,* 2003, p.838) and, by extension, is also a manifestation of staff behaviour. Staff is the interface between the organisation's internal and external environments, they evince emotional responses from customers by transmitting the corporate brand's values and hence contribute in building the brand image (Abratt, 1989; King, 1991; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Balmer, 2001a, 2001b).

Under a ‘branded house’ brand architecture, a strong corporate brand plays the role of an endorser to a series of offerings that may operate under distinct sub brand names (Petromilli *et al*, 2002). Thus, positive cues of quality products / services, and trust are created in the minds of stakeholders as well as significant cost savings in marketing communications derived from the ‘umbrella’ brand effect when launching new products and services (Aaker, 1996, 2004; Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Kay, 2004).

Goodwill / credibility is associated with reputation (Aaker, 1996, Greyser, 1999), brand power and equity value in literature and a significant correlation between the stock price and the brand equity has been established through research undertaken by Kerin & Sethuraman (1998), Banham (1998) and Parkhurst (2002). One investor expressed his thoughts as follows:

It adds to the value of the brand equity when we, investors, perform our analysis …there are ways of evaluating the organisation: amongst others we look at the asset value, which also comprises the goodwill and the brand equity.

Since the corporate brand revolves around the company’s vision / mission and is a strategic promotional tool, it is able to convey the distinct attributes of the corporate identity to internal and external stakeholders and position the company as a unique value proposition (Rindova, 1997; Knox & Maklan, 1998; Balmer, 2001b; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Image building is also related to visual communications such as logos and corporate colour, because of the need to make the abstract values of the organisation more tangible and consistent (Olins, 1978). Indeed, apart from increasing an organisation’s visibility, symbolism plays an active a role in communicating the corporate strategy (Knox, 2000; Balmer, 2001b).

The communication of coherent and clear messages to all stakeholders is acknowledged in literature as being crucial in supporting the achievement of an organisation's aims and preventing a fragmented image (Bernstein; 1986; Balmer, 1995; Mathuis, 1999; Van Riel, 1995, 2001).

So far, the important attributes of corporate identity i.e. vision, culture and values as well as the dimensions of the corporate identity mix i.e. behaviour, symbolism and communication have been identified by respondents and literature has acknowledges these factors as the foundation on which the corporate branding process operates (Balmer, 2001b; Van Riel, 1995).

Corporate citizenship is another factor identified by external respondents, which also finds support in literature as a promoter of trust and reputation (Balmer & Gray, 1999; Porter & Kramer, 2002). In fact, large corporations in developed countries have been taking their social role very seriously, as evidenced by the 'triple bottom line' concept (Elkington, 1997) and corporate notations assigned by independent enterprises (www.asset4.com) on the degree of accountability of companies towards their stakeholders and society in general.

The objective of achieving a good reputation is mentioned for the first time by one consultant, as compared to 55% for corporate image, while the literature mentions that this objective might be even more important than image, which is seen as fleeting and more easily destroyed, while reputation is built over time and is more long lasting (Marwick & Fill, 1997; Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997). The consultant expressed his feelings as follows:

Corporate branding is about establishing a conscience, a credibility and reputation about the company's dealings. We have moved from the notion of being notorious to being reputable and this is where some companies go wrong in their communication issues when notoriety is confused for reputation.

The first question aimed to ascertain the respondents' understanding of the concept and the results so far, prove that they have a good knowledge of the topic.

Table 22: Comments from internal and external respondents

COMMENTS	
CEOs	• "It is about the goodwill i.e. equity value and values associated with a brand. We see products' life cycle becomes shorter, while corporate brands can span over time and that brand can sometimes carry the product brand" ▪ "It has to do with the perception of product quality, the corporate culture etc which promotes the construction of the corporate brand"
Communication Managers	▪ "It promotes a message to all stakeholders through the brand name and logo to promote strong corporate image, ▪ "to help company achieve its objectives and communicate its values, message must be cascaded down to all stakeholders for corporate branding to work" ▪ "…it needs to be coherent with culture and identity…"
Marketing Managers	▪ "Corporate branding is about conveying message about key values" ▪ " …a clear communication through colour , logo, messages.."
HR Managers	▪ "It starts with logo / image perceived by external stakeholders, also about internal staff and their perceptions of the brand, projects the organisation in its totality and not just symbols" ▪ "It is about creating an association with quality goods and services"
Consultants	▪ "…it is about branding the organisation in terms of an umbrella brand which gives credibility and good image to all its internal and external stakeholders." ▪ "It is about all signals coming from an organisation, which must be coherent to each other, in terms of the corporate values, its audience (internal & external). It also regroups all visual messages, and must be coordinated by the director of communications."
Investor	▪ " …corporate branding goes beyond the logo and has to do with the pricing power, the market share and the company's goodwill."
Journalists	▪ "It is about the image that comes immediately to mind and which is associated with quality, reliability, and credibility…. It gives a certain coherence and consistence to all its activities so that the customers are never disappointed."

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SQ 1.1: Who takes the main responsibility for the corporate brand in your / an organisation?

The fact that the CEO is acknowledged as being the brand champion by 60% of respondents is indicative of the strategic importance assigned to the corporate brand. This substantiates the conclusions of authors such as Keller (1997), de Chernatony *et al* (2001), Balmer (2001) and Mc Donald *et al* (2001) on the role of the CEO in the corporate branding process. They advocated a transformational type of leadership in order to motivate staff to project adequate behaviour and to derive the desired commitment to the brand's values and therefore corporate brand management should be under the responsibility of the chief executive.

57% of respondents proposed that the corporate brand should fall under the aegis of both the communications director and the CEO. One of the brand experts asserted that "The CEO and the communications director should be the main persons behind the corporate brand. The CEO should give the directives and the communications director is the implementer of the action plan."

Recent surveys in literature show that the communications director is increasingly becoming part of executive management committees and many of the Fortune 500 companies allocate substantial budget to the corporate communications department to sustain their image, reputation and visibility on the marketplace (Harris/Impulse Research, 1999; Dolphin & Yan, 2000; Einwiller & Will; 2002). Thus, in terms of best practice, it is inferred that the key persons behind the corporate brand must be both the CEO and the communications director. The latter would act as an advisor to the chief executive on how to manage the intricacies of the process so that all messages emanating from the organisation are consistent and coherent.

The contribution of the management team received the third highest score but this is a comparatively lower percentage with only 5 respondents reporting on this aspect, out of which three respondents also voted for the CEO as the main person. The reasoning behind is captured in this comment by one marketing manager that "The CEO has to manage the responsibility …but the true champions of the brand are those that are communicating it to the stakeholders i.e. managers, HR, not limited to the marketing dept".

Table 23: Some comments on who should manage the Corporate Brand

	COMMENTS
CEOs	▪ "The corporate brand rests with the corporate office because we decide what we want the brand to be and the marketing department is responsible for implementing the action plan to give the desired image" ▪ "It has a more consensual responsibility and would rest with the top management in charge of defining the company's policies/ strategies."
Communication Managers	▪ "The HR department would have the responsibility to manage the internal perception of the corporate brand while my department would manage the external perception of the image." ▪ "The CEO is the main responsible person. He should set the example supported by management and employees." ▪ "The brand building aspects are often delegated to the corporate communications department"
Marketing manager	▪ "The CEO should take responsibility as he is the one giving the strategic orientation and objectives… Then the heads of communications and marketing should also take their share of responsibility …"
HR managers	▪ "Technically, it's everybody. However, the top managers are responsible in the way they interact with all stakeholders" ▪ "The head of communication in consultation with the business drivers should manage the brand whose characteristics should be directly linked to the vision of the group."
Consultants	▪ "The CEO has an important role to play but the brand building aspects are often delegated to the corporate communications department." ▪ "The CEO must be a transformational leader who will be able to motivate his staff to be loyal to the brand and behave as the brand ambassadors. "

Q2: Why is this concept relevant in current times?

As stated before, this question aimed to retrieve any new insights about the concept. As such, respondents asserted that, leveraging on values, culture and trust *over and above those of the products* helped to differentiate against fierce competition and build a positive image and reputation. This finding corroborates with academic thinking on the rising importance of corporate branding as a strategic tool for business survival because product branding is no longer sustaining value and driving real differentiation in the increasingly competitive business environment (King, 1991; Urde, 1999; Balmer, 1998). Thus, competing through unique organisational attributes such as values, culture and trust, as embodied by the corporate brand and its offerings, is a strategic move in achieving the required positioning and ultimately, a competitive advantage (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997).

By giving a global orientation to local companies, corporate branding can provide local organisations with many potential advantages. As per Aaker (2004), a global brand brings prestige, more respect, visibility and is perceived to deliver innovative and quality products / services. However, the challenge also lies in achieving a global image without appearing distant and bureaucratic.

One institutional investor unveiled one further aspect of the relevance of the construct with this observation "…more and more corporate groups are trying branding for future sustainability. They are taking a position now in respect of future developments". This thought underlies the belief that corporate branding can provide staying power to organisations, based on the strong brand equity and reputation (Rindova, 1997; Balmer, 2001a, 2001b; Hatch & Schultz, 2001), the long term life cycle that it possesses (Keller, 1997; Balmer, 2001; Mc Donald *et al,* 2001) and the resource based view of the firm (Kay, 1999) that the corporate brand is *imperfectly imitable and imperfectly substitutable* (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Consultants provided critical insights on the maturity and degree of understanding of the subject by local companies, indicating that those companies who manage to implement their communication strategies well can capitalise on a first –mover advantage and achieve competitive advantage.

The validity test of this research study is, so far, sustained as triangulation has revealed four further aspects of the concept i.e. a strategic tool for differentiation, confers a global presence, provides staying power to organisations and the level of understanding of local companies vis-à-vis the complexity of managing the process in a systematic manner.

Table 24: Some respondents' views on the relevance of the concept

COMMENTS	
CEOs	▪ "The favourable image helps in creating the trust and good feeling on which we can leverage to outperform the market and beat the competition." ▪ "…it confers an equity value and positive image to the company's activities. It helps to communicate the vision and direction to all stakeholders."
Marketing Managers	▪ "It helps to project the values of the company externally; it projects the image that we want our customers to have and is a powerful marketing tool for our services / products. It also helps to bond the staff together as one big family." ▪ "It is important because it creates a commitment from all internal stakeholders such as staff and management to live up to the same values so that the external message is well received."
Institutional investors	▪ "Corporate brand image helped to capture more market share ▪ "…because of the emotional factors that it can evoke better than functional attributes alone."
Journalists	▪ "It s another way of helping the consumer in choosing a quality product manufactured or serviced by a reliable organisation. The consumer will also rely on values over and above those of the products. So basically it is about establishing an association based on trust with the customer."

Q 3: How does your organisation leverage on corporate branding?

The fact that 'Staff commitment and behaviour' is highlighted as one of the most important drivers of corporate branding in real life corroborates with literature on the crucial role of staff in the corporate branding process (Kennedy, 1977; Balmer & Wilkinson, 1991; King, 1991). Thus, by projecting a mix of signals, based on the brand's ethereal characteristic (Balmer, 2001b), staff behaviour ensured that the 'right messages' are received through their interaction with people at all customer contact points. Furthermore, commitment to the brand automatically leads to reinforced behaviour, staff loyalty and low staff turnover (King, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Leveraging on service performance in marketing communications is a corporate strategy, enabled by the organisational culture, which is used to promote consistency in organisational members' behaviours.

Table 25: Some comments on how organisations leverage on staff commitment and behaviour

COMMENTS	
CEO	▪ "We put lots of emphasis on the value of our staff in our marketing communications"
Marketing managers	▪ "Staff behaviour in communicating the right messages is crucial" ▪ "Our organisational culture promotes the customer care mentality at all levels of the organisation"
Consultant	▪ "The drivers are staff attitudes, the way they interact with customers, the commitment to the brand, empowerment and the level of service."

'The corporate brand message' as the second most important success factor can be interpreted to be the brand's core values, associated with trust, integrity, goodwill and organisational values, which become the theme of communication (Urde, 2003). The author suggests that they can be the common starting points (Van Riel, 1995) for communicating the brand's essence in accordance with its identity. Externally, the core values are realised through added values i.e. the advantages that a customer would associate with a brand, in terms of functional, emotional and/or symbolic attributes which then affect the corporate brand image, in a positive manner (Urde, 2003).

Table 26: Comments on types of 'corporate brand message'

COMMENTS	
Consultant	▪ "The corporate brand must act as an endorser of quality, project a message of trust and confidence on all the company's activities to its public"
CEO	▪ "The brand integrity i.e. goodwill is embodied and carried by our corporate brand"
Communication managers	▪ "Corporate brand represents the company's values and corporate Identity" ▪ "The corporate brand essence must be cascaded to all internal stakeholders and partners"
Marketing manager	▪ "Use of brand communications in sending messages " ▪ "The corporate brand helps in maintaining consistency in marketing communications."

'Communication strategy to ensure coherence and convergence' as voted by 76% of respondents, supports the writings of Balmer (1995), Van Riel (1995, 2001) and Hatch & Schultz (2001) about the pivotal role of a corporate communication strategy in helping to create the required consistency and formation of congruent perceptions and advocate the urgent need to give due consideration to this critical aspect of the corporate identity mix. Thus, the communication process is used to translate the reality of the identity i.e. the values, vision, mission, objectives, through staff, integrated marketing strategies, PR events, symbolism and standard operational procedures to project a consistent and coherent image to stakeholders.

Table 27: Respondents' views on 'Communication strategy'

COMMENTS	
Consultants	▪ "Communications will promote the visibility and is supported by the staff, management, market intelligence, and surveys. It is based on a clearly defined vision and mission" ▪ "Corporate communications will ensure there is coherence with the values and objectives of what the company stands for." ▪ "Integrated marketing campaigns would include ad campaigns for more awareness, PR events, CSR programmes, training for staff to behave according to the company values so that there is a common language and this should be on an ongoing basis." ▪ "The communication strategy must ensure coherence on all aspects of the organisation and sustain a common understanding of the company's culture and identity."
CEO	▪ "…our communications should carry a coherent message to all stakeholders".
Communication managers	▪ "Message cascaded down to all stakeholders through integrated communications to project a coherent external message from all business units."
Marketing managers	▪ "Consistency of corporate communications in communicating the same image." ▪ "Symbols and communications for a clear coherent message."
HR manager	▪ ''Standards of procedures to maintain a level of consistency such as staff handbook and a set of core values, common to all business units."

According to 76% of respondents, 'values' are also crucial to the process, and are associated with corporate identity, thereby sustaining the International Corporate Identity Group's (ICIG) statement, (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997), which interprets corporate identity as an organisation's ethos, aims and values that create a sense of individuality which differentiate a corporate brand. The importance of values has been elaborated in previous discussions and is part of the corporate marketing mix or HEADS[2] for the promotion of the corporate identity (Balmer, 1998).

Table 28: Comments obtained on the link between values and Corporate Identity

COMMENTS	
Consultants:	▪ "The corporate identity is the signature and goes beyond the logo to the core values, culture and staff behaviour" ▪ "The drivers are the brand personality, company values, culture and staff behaviour, corporate strategy, positioning and corporate identity."
CEOs	▪ "…our core values, culture, quality level are our main force…"
Communication managers	▪ "The corporate brand represents the values of the company" ▪ "Our identity is related to the nature of our business, core values and business strengths"
Marketing managers	▪ "the Corporate Brand represents our corporate Identity and it is important to make staff identify with the brand values"
Human resources managers	▪ "Inherent link between corporate identity and cultural values to create emotional bonding with all stakeholders" ▪ "By creating the necessary focus for all staff to remember the values by which this company lives for"

The multidisciplinary approach advocated in literature, which encompasses marketing, strategy, organisational behaviour and communications (Bickerton, 1999; Mc Donald *et al*, 2001; Bick *et al,* 2003) is upheld in real life practice as confirmed by 65% of respondents. So far, aspects related to strategy, behaviour and communications has been discussed. The marketing strategy, contrary to product marketing, is seen to be more integrated and take charge of promoting the organisation and its product/services brands through the 'corporate marketing mix' and positioning the company as a unique organisational value proposition through which a company could differentiate itself (Knox & Maklan, 1998, Hatch & Shultz, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Apart from the traditional aspects of the promotional mix of advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, and packaging, other factors that could enhance the visibility of organisations were highlighted as corporate social responsibility programmes (CSR), events sponsorship and other types of communications such as media and investor relations. Indeed, empirical evidence in literature suggests the existence of positive relationships between corporate social responsibility contributions and new product evaluations and customer loyalty (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Maignan *et al*, 1999). Therefore, CSR, as promoters of good corporate citizenship, can be included as important, new elements of the corporate marketing mix that serve to reinforce the corporate identity and brand image.

'Leadership' is identified as a significant driver of the corporate branding process and a transformational type of leadership is advocated to provide the strategic direction, motivate, inspire and energise staff to 'buy in' the organisational values and project adequate behaviour ensure organisational-wide commitment (de Chernatony *et al*, 2001; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2003)

Table 29: Respondents' views on Leadership, marketing strategy and positioning

	COMMENTS
Consultants	▪ 'The CEO is the brand champion and must be a transformational leader able to motivate staff to be loyal and behave as the brand ambassadors' ▪ 'The promotional strategy in terms of adverts, packaging, how to target required audience through consistency and coherence of message' ▪ 'The corporate branding process helps in the positioning and the marketing strategy defines the positioning in relation to the competition'
CEOs	▪ 'Top management decide on brand identity before communicating to all stakeholders' ▪ 'Differentiating through a unique proposition through promotional tools'
Marketing managers	▪ 'The CEO has the responsibility of the Corporate Brand to give strategic orientation' ▪ 'Brand positioning to create desired customer perceptions about offering" ▪ '…positioning of brand through brand values, benefits and attributes…'
HR managers	▪ '…based on quality of staff, our products, and communication strategies, leadership and culture, values…'
Communication managers	▪ 'Top management giving the inspiration and commitment needed to staff'"

The remaining factors are not less important success factors even though they obtained less than average scores:

The product / service level (47%) and corporate strategy (41%) are intimately linked to the corporate identity as per the definition of Bick *et al* (2003) who described corporate identity as the embodiment of the organisation i.e. "…the communication of the core values, philosophy and strategy of the organisation through the delivery of its products and /or services". Thus, by being the drivers of the product /service portfolio and their performance level, the vision and strategy determine the uniqueness of the company's offerings, in ways that would satisfy its stakeholders' needs (Marwick & Fill, 1997; Cornelissen & Harris, 1997).

Building a positive image (41%) with stakeholders from inside the organisation such as staff is considered to have more chances to succeed when projected externally. This is in accordance with Dutton *et al* (1994) and Stuart (1999a), who suggested that when the perceived organisational identity refers to an internal member's belief about the organisation, then employees are most likely to identify with the firm and help to project a positive external image amongst external audiences.

Furthermore, achieving a clear image through managing stakeholder relations especially with media is very important as erroneous media information can negatively impact the public image (Ind, 1997; Morsing & Kristensen, 2001).

A positive reputation (35%) is seen as strategic and a promoter of trust to internal and external stakeholders while also useful in launching new products. Indeed, the literature suggests that a strong reputation can easily promote a company's distinctiveness, ensure business survival and support the growth of the corporate brand in the long term (Bick *et al*, 2003; Aaker, 2004). While institutional investors will rely on a strong corporate brand and reputation for investment decisions (Gregory, 1997), the corporate brand reputation will enhance trust and credibility in its stakeholders (Aaker, 1996; Geyser, 1999) and will also allow for the successful introduction of new offerings, in less time and at lower promotional costs (Lewis, 2000; Kotler, 2003).

'Brand architecture' (24%) is an interesting factor dealing with the issue of differing values and corporate identities between a master brand and a product brand. The marketing manager of the hotel group believed that "…a corporate brand is important in a B2B market because of the financial leverage that it gives but in B2C situations, it may be that the product brand is closer to the customer".

As per the literature, a branded house architecture, which leverages on the corporate brand serving as an endorser to a series of offerings, gives credibility in communications with stakeholders such as government, the investor community, potential employees and the public (Urde, 2003). Aaker & Joachimsthaler (1999) suggest that a strategic approach to brand architecture should take cognizance of the brand portfolio as seen from the perspective of the customer, who ultimately determines a brand's success. However, Petromilli *et al* (2002) also contend that innovative branding techniques such as 'pooling' can help reinforce relationships between disparate brands in the portfolio when each brand in the portfolio provides unique set of values to the customer. Since a well-defined brand architecture strategy requires a clear definition and understanding of market dynamics, and alignment with business goals and objectives (Petromilli *et al*, 2002; Schultz, 2002), the dilemma may well warrant the expert advice of a brand consultant in order to determine the brand orientation being sought.

The communication of the visual identity (24%) such as the logo is also important in making the abstract values of the organisation more tangible and consistent, while also communicating the corporate strategy (Olins, 1978; Balmer, 2001).

Table 30: Respondents' comments obtained on other factors of importance

COMMENTS	
Product / service level	▪ "One of the drivers is the level of service…" ▪ "The quality of the service and welcome must be unique and genuine."
Corporate strategy	▪ "Our vision and corporate strategy provides our market leadership and business strength." ▪ "The communication infrastructure will disseminate the corporate strategy to all." ▪ "The vision and strategy are the drivers of the product /service portfolio."
Positive image / media relations	▪ "Building a positive image with stakeholders from inside the company, such as staff, and then the image projected outside will have more chances to succeed." ▪ "Achieve a clear image through managing stakeholder relations especially media…" ▪ "…promoting an image of a dynamic company…"
Reputation	▪ "Our reputation promotes trust to stakeholders like consumers, shareholders, staff …" ▪ "Using our reputation for launching innovative and quality products…" ▪ "A positive image and reputation with all partners is strategic…"
Visual identity	▪ "…through the visual identity such as the logo…" ▪ "Visual communications are very important for the tangible effect."

Q 3.1: What would you consider as important criteria in evaluating a company for investment?

The findings associated with this question in literature are summarised as:

Financial performance, CEO profile, strong reputation, image, strong corporate brands, good governance, transparency, pioneering, good corporate citizenship, (Gregory, 1997; Parkhurst, 2002; Banham, 1998; Kerin & Sethuraman, 1998; Porter & Kramer, 2002; Orlitzky *et a*l, 2003).

The results are found to be in alignment with the above findings but in varying degrees of importance.

'Profitability' and 'share price' are explicit prime criteria for investment and are linked to financial performance.

Investors mentioned the 'track record of the management team' rather than the CEO profile because "… it is important to get to know the top management behind the organisation, who they are, where they come from … the reputation of the people behind the organisation will create the reputation of the company". This implies that investors are giving more consideration to the board of directors rather than only the CEO. Corporate governance issues linked to recent high profile corporate scandals may well be the reason for this new perspective of judging the integrity of a company (Dowling, 2006).

One investor stated that to a certain extent, there is a correlation between the presentation/availability of information and the decision to invest. Good governance and transparency as major determinants for investing in a company is also sustained in literature where it is stated that accessibility of key information breed trusts and credibility and reduces alienation (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Einwiller & Will, 2002). Furthermore, the substantial budget allocated to annual and quarterly reports and investor relations by fortune 500 companies in the Thomas L. Harris/Impulse Research (1999) survey validates the comments made in the literature about the importance of communicating clearly to these stakeholder groups due to their direct and indirect impact on corporate image and reputation.

Another investor stated that he would consider a strong brand name as a criterion for investment only in the case of global companies rather than local ones. He would rather look at the portfolio investment strategy i.e. the types of products and services offered along with their durability over time as an important determinant for investing in a local company. This may be indicative of the relatively recent initiatives of local companies in developing their brands.

In terms of brand power / equity, two investors stressed upon the fact that it is the goodwill associated with the brand that gives the brand its power and adds to the value of the equity. The association of goodwill with reputation and credibility has been discussed previously and would also be applicable here.

One investor's claim that he would invest in an organisation that can forge customer loyalty and emotional bonding based on the brand image is in accordance with a corporate image study conducted by Greyser & Sellers (2002) amongst opinion leaders and financial influencers, who concluded that companies who could create an emotional bonding with customers were able to exploit their corporate brand successfully. Furthermore, customer loyalty is also sustained through corporate social responsibility programmes (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Maignan *et al*, 1999) and a meta-analysis of corporate social responsibility research shows that the US stock market favourably evaluates organisations that demonstrate visible and provable good corporate social performance, by giving a higher rating to their market value (Orlitzky, *et al*, 2003).

Q 3.2: What are the important criteria that the public look for when choosing a company to deal with?

As expected, products / services performance were the main guiding criteria for selecting the best company to deal with as supported by many authors in literature (Aberg, 1990; Balmer & Gray, 1999; Bick *et al*, 2003).

A positive image and reputation as determinant factors of credibility, reliability, and respect to external stakeholders is once more sustained as discussed in the previous sections. The fact that the corporate brand is reported to be a guiding factor in the face of product complexity concurs with the findings in literature by Nayyar (1990), Bharadwaj, Varadarajan, & Fahy (1993) and Zeithaml & Bitner (1998) who found that 'extrinsic cues' would help a consumer to decide on a brand, especially where consumer understanding of complex service offerings are 'mentally intangible' to the average consumer.

However, scepticism about always relying on the corporate brand is also echoed in literature which reports growing global scepticism about brand trustworthiness and advises caution about taking good reputation on its own as a guarantee of business success (Schultz & de Chernatony, 2002; Balmer & Gray, 2003).

Table 31: Journalists' comments

COMMENTS
'A good brand image attracts the respect of stakeholders'
'The public basically look for value for money and will judge a company on its level of credibility, reliability and reputation'.
'The corporate brand may be a deciding factor but can also be a trap when the company does not constantly sustain its growth and innovate to stay modern, then the corporate brand will not be consistent with the service experience.'

Conclusion from findings related to Research Question no 1

The first sub problem sought to investigate how a corporate brand can sustain differentiation and uphold competitive advantage in the market place.

In the light of the above discussion, it is concluded that the respondents could relate to the concept of corporate branding as a strategic differentiation tool against the competition.

The first research question fully resolved the first sub problem and the major findings obtained during the field study upheld those in literature.

5.2 <u>Research Question No 2</u>

What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?

The set of questions that helped to address research question no 2 are:

1. *What do you understand by corporate communications?* (Table 10)
   - SQ 1.1 *What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?* (Table 11)
2. *As you grow bigger and more diversified, how do you ensure consistency and coherence across the various communication channels within your organisation?* (Table 12)

Many of the factors and themes revealed in the results from the first section on the corporate branding process are echoed in this second part as well. This is not surprising since communications has been identified as part of the corporate identity mix and is in fact the channel through which the messages and signals about of the corporate identity (vision, culture, and values) are projected. Elements that have already been discussed and interpreted in the previous section are not elaborated again, except where additional dimensions are revealed.

Q1: What do you understand by corporate communications?

The literature describes corporate communications as being an integrated mix of management, organisational and marketing communications by which the corporate identity is projected to internal and external stakeholders to achieve the objectives of a favourable image and reputation (Bernstein, 1986; Van Riel, 1995; Balmer, 1995; 2001b; Bickerton, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

The above description is upheld in practice, by 78% respondents who stated that it is a combination of all internal and external communication channels encompassing strategic objectives, values, staff behaviour, culture, corporate identity, advertising, product / service performance, corporate citizenship, investor and media relations. These findings indicate the awareness of practitioners and onlookers about the need for a systematic integration of all communication channels in order to prevent a blurred or fragmented image of the organisation (Van Riel, 1995; Einwiller & Will, 2002).

A small percentage of respondents saw only the external dimension of the concept as sustaining the external image through actions such as CSR, PR, visual and marketing communications. The literature highlights the necessity of resolving the perception about corporate communications being traditional and only linked to symbolism i.e. as having only an external orientation (Olins, 1978; Knox, 2000; Balmer, 2001b; Einwiller & Will, 2002).

Table 32: Some comments on the respondents' understanding of the concept of Corporate Communications

	COMMENTS
CEOs	• "It is about communications within a group and externally with respect to our image." • "It has a strong strategic component and also involves culture and symbolism."
Communication managers	• "It is both internal and external, to communicate our values to the community…" • "It is mostly geared towards sustaining the external image through social activities, visual & marketing communications, media relations and online communication"
Marketing managers	• "It is related to the company itself and serves to communicate our corporate brand, information from the CEO to the staff, etc. must be consistent " • "It is about all types of communications but should reflect the same message"
HR managers	• "It is communication geared towards the external stakeholders and is looked after by the communication manager. I look after the internal staff communications" • "…it is about the communications decided and managed at the top level…"
Consultant	• "It is the way a company defines its role and mission to stakeholders in different environments, based on the fundamental values of the group" • "It is the way in which a company has its policies structured taking into account customers' needs and their perception about the company. "
Journalists	• "we do not really understand what it is but is a slogan that we use in general. There is a big gap between how it is defined in literature and the way it happens in practice. Its main purpose is to advise the management on how to behave in certain situations"

SQ 1.1: What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?

The need for ongoing information about the company's activities, as expressed by 65% of respondents is linked to the need for visibility and awareness vis-à-vis the company's audiences (Aberg, 1990) and the competition as revealed by Balmer & Gray (1999) in their 'Total Corporate Communications' model. It is also associated with the purpose of assuring consistency and continuity with the corporate brand proposition (Knox & Maklan, 1998; Knox *et al*, 2000).

The critique of the media people about the failure of companies in achieving clear images despite great efforts revealed the importance of having an on going review or measurement tool to gauge the success of communication strategies. The journalists' views concur with an action-research work by Knox & Bickerton (2000), where they found that the adoption of a measurement tool in helping to control and measure the consistency of formal communications proved to be of significant benefit to the management team. Barker & Angelopulo (2006) also advocated the need to evaluate the outcomes of all communication activities.

Furthermore, the recurring demand of press reporters for more open channels of communication based on mutual respect and the right 'dosage' in their communication campaign seems to agree with the findings of Brown & Dacin (1997) and Maignan & Ferrel (2001) that the content and frequency of communications must be carefully considered because excessive amount of information may cause a boundary effect, which can lead to distrust and alienation (Christensen, 2002).

The role of corporate communications in promoting good governance and transparency is again indicative of how companies are expected to be accountable for their actions, towards all their audiences and society (Balmer & Gray, 1999; Fombrun & Rindova, 1998; Einwiller & Will, 2002).

Corporate communications is specifically linked to the communication department acting as the hub through which the guidelines are given and the policies are set to ensure coherence and control. This new dimension confers a strategic importance to the communication directorate as a policy maker, in terms of helping to determine the corporate identity, the brand identity and the messages that should be communicated. This is in line with the proposition by Van Riel (1995) who suggested that coordination of decision-making in communication can help to achieve the desired control and cooperation amongst all communication functions. Once the brand essence is determined, then the corporate communication tool is put to use to project that message (Dolphin & Yan, 2000).

Achieving a coherent positioning of the organisation in people's minds is a major goal of corporate communications (Van Riel, 1995; Balmer, 1995; Dolphin & Yan, 2000). Though it is mainly projected through the external communication channel i.e. marketing communications, it will never be consistent if the internal counterpart i.e. management and organisational communications, are not aligned and well coordinated (Van Riel, 1995; Kitchen, 1997; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Dowling (1986) also advocated a need to modify the marketing media communication when discrepancies between internal and external images were signalled.

Q2: As you grow bigger and more diversified, how do you ensure consistency and coherence across the various communication channels within your organisation?

The Finance group's use of the vision and organisational values as common starting points (Van Riel, 1995) provided the focus to rally all internal stakeholders behind the corporate brand as well as obtain the support of the marketing, HR and communication departments. This is clearly the top down approach advocated by Hatch & Schultz (1997) to create alignment between the internal culture and the external image of the company.

The compliance with pre-determined procedures ensured by common systems and processes enabled a better control and consistent delivery of performance in the execution of plans (Van Riel, 1995).

By associating all aspects of its visual representation with tangible, high quality standards which are long-lasting, the organisation made use of symbolism to communicate its corporate identity and strategy (Olins, 1978) by signalling that the organisation does not compromise on delivering high level performance.

The brand architecture also favoured the branded house approach, thereby enhancing clarity, synergy between sub brands and leverage to be used in varying business contexts (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999; Aaker, 2004).

Online communication as an integral part of the communication process contributes in making the company more transparent by making important information available instantly (Einwiller & Will, 2002). There was evidence of a team exclusively dedicated to this task, under the supervision of the communication department.

The fact that the communication department handled part of the marketing and employee communications and will be responsible for hosting the forthcoming intranet system shows that integration between management, marketing, organisational communications is largely achieved.

However, it was felt that though the image was well projected externally, the biggest challenge rested on achieving greater coordination and integration internally.

Despite some discrepancies, it can be concluded that the Finance group is quite successful in integrating its communication mix and achieving consistency in doing business.

The Investment group's 'mixed brand' architecture allows its product brands to dominate niche markets with a targeted customer value proposition to achieve a clear and consistent positioning (Bickerton, 2000). At the same time, it shows prudent risk management in minimising the threat of contamination to the entire brand portfolio in case of mishaps (Schultz, 2002).

This strategy is also reminiscent of an integrated corporate branding strategy such as 'pooling' to help strengthen relationships between disparate brands in the portfolio (Petromilli *et al*, 2002). For example, the group was essentially in the financial services sector but, under its expansion strategy, acquired a leading car company and now uses its leasing and insurance companies to provide a package deal to its customers.

The common staring point is inferred to be the corporate brand values, which spreads the same fundamental statement to all sub business units, while the latter focus on delivering on customer value by leveraging on their individual core competencies such as reputation (as evidenced by their market leadership positions), product / service performance (which sustain the reputation), product brand and customer portfolio and networks and processes (Bickerton, 2000). This is not a pure UOVP model because it is not fully endorsed by the master brand but nevertheless, is seen to be quite successful because of the clear positioning achieved by the product brands.

The central resource centre is seen to integrate aspects of marketing, visual and organisational communications for the group while the newly appointed communication manager seeks to provide more policies and guidelines for a better control of communication activities. The existence of a steering committee for coordinating discussions for a proper framework for communications as advocated by Van Riel (1995) is also a good initiative. Management communication is supported at the group HR and sub-units levels, however, the extent of commitment of staff to the group as compared to the individual branches where they work can be questioned as each subsidiary has its own identity and hence it own culture.

Furthermore, the acquisition strategy of various companies, in a short lapse of time, has led to a proliferation of more diverse cultures and brand identities thereby, accentuating the misalignment between the corporate personality i.e. "…the underlying cultures of various members of the organisation…" (Bick *et al*, 2003, p.852) and the corporate identity. As a result, some serious misgivings on the corporate brand image are being experienced, leading to negative perceptions with external audiences mainly, while the product brands image do not seem to be affected to a large extent.

This situation recalls organisational issues such as diversity of culture and behaviour, language barriers, turf wars between divisions which occur in diversified corporations or large multinationals, which have grown through mergers and acquisitions, and comprise of multiple subsidiaries, business units, operating with multiple brands structures, each with their own culture and identity (Einwiller & Will, 2002). Corporate communications theory emerged out of the need to resolve such issues by promoting better coherence and consistency in stakeholders' perceptions (Van Riel, 1995).

In the case of the **Tourism group**, the clear branded house architecture plays a major role in promoting coherence across the various hotel units. Furthermore, the master brand, in the role of endorser to the sub brands, provides credibility and substance to the emerging brand by featuring on all the visual communications of this group of hotels.

The UOVP model is seen in action with two main attributes of the corporate identity as the CSPs i.e. the vision and the core values, along with the organisational marketing mix to effectively position the group of hotels and deliver on customer value. Moreover, the implementation of the e-marketing aspect of online communication is going to provide more leverage in the positioning based on speed and ubiquity (Einwiller & Will, 2002).

The staff handbook supports the coherent propagation of the set of core values through hotel units while standardised processes provide the synergy across all hotels to ensure that the corporate personality (Bick *et al*, 2003) support a consistent service delivery congruent with the desired image.

The dual reporting lines from the HR and communication department to the holding office reinforce the alignment of the core processes and competencies with the master brand proposition (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997; Knox & Maklan, 1998).

Integration is achieved across management, marketing and organisational communications of all hotel units from the group HR and the appointed communications coordinator i.e. the marketing / communication manager, in line with Van Riel's (1995) reasoning.

So far, the Tourism group is seen to support both Van Riel's (1995) model of organising and coordinating the communication process and Bickerton's (2000) framework of corporate brand management.

Conclusion from findings related to Research Question no 2:

The second sub-problem aimed to explore the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process.

In the light of the above discussion, it is concluded that the respondents could relate to the concept of corporate communications as an integrated mix i.e. a combination of internal and external communication segregated into management, organisational and marketing communications. Its role is viewed as essential in promoting integration and consistency in all stakeholder communications to project a favourable image and reputation of the organisation

The second research question fully resolves the second sub problem, substantiates the literature, and suggests that the role of the corporate communications must respond to a continuously changing environment by constantly innovating and adapting its contribution to overall organisational effectiveness.

5.3 <u>Research Question No 3</u>

How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand image?

This question aimed to determine how each group leverages on the corporate communications mix and their core competencies and processes in the implementation of an effective communication strategy to support the business objective of achieving the desired corporate image. The findings are discussed and compared with those advocated in literature.

The questions that referred to research question no 3 are stated below:

1. *What is your definition of image?*
2. *What are the key drivers of your /a communication strategy to help your/an organisation achieve the desired image?*
   SQ 2.1 How can the performance of the communication process be measured?
3. *Who should be in charge of Investor relations?*

Q 1: What is your definition of image?

The majority of respondents believed that image is how the company is perceived by stakeholders, thus corroborating with the definition in literature about image being linked to people's perceptions or beliefs of an organisation (Boulding, 1956; Martineau, 1958; Bernstein, 1984).

Innovative quality products and services affecting the company's performance and growth are considered as pioneering, accountable and salient, which furthermore create emotional bonding and shape favourably the corporate brand perceptions (Aaker, 1996; Greyser & Sellers, 2002).

Corporate values and culture as related to staff behaviour and associated with image has been discussed previously as being integral to corporate identity and responsible for giving an organisation its distinctiveness (Balmer, 1995; Cornelissen & Harris, 1999) while staff behaviour is crucial in transmitting the brand's values and creating emotional bonds with stakeholders (Kennedy, 1977; Abratt, 1989; Stuart, 1994; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Balmer & Wilkinson, 1999).

It is noteworthy that the majority of respondents qualified stakeholders as staff, customers, partners and the market, implying that the perceptions of both internal and external stakeholders were equally important. This finding concurs with the literature about the importance of creating consistency and congruence of perceptions internally so as to project a coherent image externally (Kennedy, 1977; Dowling, 1986; Abratt, 1989; Van Riel, 1995; Marwick & Fill, 1997; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Ind, 1997; Bick *et al,* 2003).

The external image is directly influenced by front line staff at any time (Bick *et al,* 2003) and both Abratt (1989) and Stuart (1994) have qualified the identity / image interface as the crucial point of contact or moment of truth between the various stakeholders and the company. This interface can also be viewed as the point at which the corporate identity is externalised to shape the corporate image.

While respondents' views that image is short term, fleeting, easily manipulated and based on the first impressions formed of a company have also been highlighted in literature by Podnar (1999) and Bick *et al* (2003), Kennedy (1977) advocated that image should be based on the realities of the company to be long lasting.

The statement of one chief executive that a company acquires a favourable image when it also cares for the community is also pertinent as CSR programmes are seen to enhance a company's market visibility, support for its offerings, sustain the internal image, impact positively on product evaluations by customers and subsequently promote customer loyalty (Dutton *et al*, 1994; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Maignan *et al,* 1999; Balmer & Gray, 1999).

Q2: What are the key drivers of your/a communication strategy to help your/an organisation achieve the desired image?

The key factors of the **Finance group's** communication strategy are: the corporate identity (vision, values and culture) and strategy as drivers of the product / service portfolio and performance, internal image management, proper coordination of external communications, online communication, social role and good citizenship.

Under the **Finance group**, the vision, as one of the attributes of the corporate identity is evidenced as the common starting point responsible for clarifying the direction of the group and defining the corporate values on which the brand essence (Macrae, 1996) would rest. The previous section described how *the commonality of purpose and outlook* helped to achieve consistency in doing business.

Additionally, there is evidence to show that the marketing strategy leverages on four key elements (Knox & Maklan, 1998) that has been delivering customer value over the years, which in turn, determines the organisation's positioning. Thus,

1. the pioneering attributes of past products endorse the successful launch of new, innovative products, in line with the established reputation
2. product and service performance is of superior quality based on market research and staff behaviour aligned to the corporate brand values
3. product and service portfolio are determined by the corporate strategy
4. networks comprise of franchise with leading international brands such as Visa Electron, Maestro, American Express, Master Card (as gathered from the group's annual report dated 30 June 2005)

In this sense, the group is positioned as a unique value proposition (UOVP) (Knox & Maklan, 1998; Bickerton, 2000), which is based both on a top down i.e.

vision (Hatch & Schultz, 1997) and on a bottom up i.e. customer value approach (Urde, 1999; Macrae, 1999).

The communication manager's direct reporting line with the CEO indicates that her function is considered as strategic, which substantiates the findings by Balmer & Gray (1999) and Dolphin & Yan (2000) that corporate communication departments are seen as contributing to the boardroom agenda.

Research confirms that a strong corporate reputation helps to attain and sustain above average industry financial performance (Gregory, 1997).The fact that the group's financial performance continuously outperformed the market, despite two major negative events in its recent history, is an indication of the trust and goodwill that it enjoys vis-à-vis its stakeholders. This sustains the tertiary communication theory of Balmer & Gray (1999).

With reference to the Total Corporate Communications model of Balmer & Gray (1999), the primary communication is therefore driven by the strong corporate reputation. The image has been favourable and still is despite the recent scandals as described further down and in later sections. The secondary communication based on the corporate communication mix is seen to support the primary communication to a large extent, as described above, which additionally ensures the consistence and coherence required throughout the process (Kitchen, 1997; Van Riel, 1995; Stuart, 1994, 1998a).The intranet will soon be called upon to be a major tool in ensuring that management communications could be accessed more easily and in real time.

The strong goodwill and credibility of the Finance group is indicative that tertiary communication is positive. However, the image has certainly been negatively impacted by the two incidents, as gathered by the perceptions of external respondents, especially media people providing evidence of uncontrolled elements at play. Therefore, total corporate Communications need some more adjustments to be fully aligned to the desired image (Balmer & Gray, 1999; Ind, 1997).

By keeping a low profile and not communicating with press during the scandals, the management ignored the power of the media and suffered much damage to its image. The issue of dealing with the media once a crisis has occurred is highlighted in literature as a delicate affair and it is suggested that it is generally better to convey negative information than not to communicate at all (Grönroos, 2000; Mittroff *et al,*1996). The authors sustain that the cost of doing so is usually outweighed by the goodwill generated, which is of capital importance in such moments.

The fact that the second time round, the organisation again mishandled its media relations and there was no high calibre spokesperson or team to handle the critical situation dealt another severe blow to its image. However, the favourable, pre-crisis strong reputation helped to deflect the potential reputation damage during the moments of turbulence and allowed the group to benefit from the halo effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). It can be alleged that any further controversial incident may seriously affect the credibility of the organisation to sustain its integrity in doing business therefore a crisis management plan is strongly recommended to effectively prevent, manage and mitigate a crisis by providing a systematic and disciplined approach based on alertness, managerial sensitivity, careful planning and organisational readiness (Mittroff *et al*, 1996).

Moreover, the company has infallibly been contributing to community welfare over the years, as part of its corporate social responsibility programmes. Orlitzky *et al* (2006) reported that a meta-analysis of corporate social responsibility research has proved that the US stock market does not deal severely with companies that have shown good corporate social performance. In fact, good corporate social performance is seen to improve the market value of these companies.

The handling of investor relations by the CEO's office is indicative of the strategic importance assigned to this important stakeholder group (Einwiller & Will, 2002).

The intranet-based electronic platform will also greatly enhance the exchange and coordination of information and communication internally. However, the literature suggests that the perceptual views of *outside* stakeholder groups such as customers, partners, investors, media and the public must also be understood in order to adapt the communication strategy to achieve greater competitive advantage (Aaker, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Stuart, 1999a; Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

No measurement system was in place to evaluate the process, output or outcomes of the overall communication strategy in order to assess its success (Barker & Angelopulo, 2006). Only the behavioural and service performance aspect of staff attitudes was going to be measured by the HR scorecard system, which is nevertheless a step in the right direction.

Table 33: How each department of the Finance group contributes to the Communication strategy

CEO	COMMUNICATION MANAGER
▪ gives the strategic direction and define the company's policies. ▪ provides the needed support to the communication department for managing the visual identity and external image ▪ oversees core values, corporate strategy, systems and processes so that there is a consistency in doing business Online communications "It is important but Mauritians are not mature enough. But we have always anticipated the future and been pioneers. Even though it takes some time to be part of the culture of local people, it has to be done because surfing online is the new world for the upcoming generation."	By managing the external image and providing support: ▪ in organising and planning of any outdoor events through PR, visual communication, website management ▪ to marketing and other business units in terms of promoting their services ▪ to the HR dept for employees relations Online communications "We have a team to manage our website and coordinate the various queries concerning our products and services. " "We are working on a big intranet project, in support of the HR department. The Webmaster under my responsibility will technically manage this intranet."
MARKETING MANAGER	**HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER**
▪ promotes current and new products / services and company image through the portfolio of products and services ▪ collaborates with the communication department for marketing communications and ensure visibility through fairs, advertising, brochures and retail marketing Online communications "It is an important tool in promoting the image but must be user-friendly. However, in Mauritius, the population is not mature enough to use IT technology online"	▪ the driver behind many communication initiatives for staff ▪ HR is a strategic partner so they are mostly geared to interact internally with the main customers who are the main support departments Online communications "Very important and we are actively setting up an intranet for staff communications. A team from Communication department who will update and post new information on our intranet."

In terms of the **Investment group**, the organisational structure was found to be more of a top down nature where the vision was, in all evidence, the main driver behind the management of the master brand.

Under the mixed brand architecture, the product brands i.e. the business units were positioned in relation to the client, based on the product brand's values, benefits and attributes (Hatch & Schultz, 1997, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Therefore, the primary communication i.e. achievement of a positive image based on product/service performance (Aberg, 1990) takes place at the business units level. It is the marketing perspective upholding the primacy of customer value as a common starting point (Van Riel, 1995) that creates the dialogue and alignment of business processes in support of the brand proposition (Urde, 1999, Macrae, 1999; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999).

The secondary communications (Balmer & Gray, 1999) partly support the primary communication because corporate communications is only partly integrated, as explained in the previous section.

Fombrun, Gardberg & Sever (2000) maintain that the corporate brand perception can be reinforced through associations with its strong product brands. But, in the case of the Investment group, the master brand does not endorse any of its product brands; therefore this may explain the non-association between the group and its offerings in the public's minds.

Thus, if the tertiary communication at the business units' level is quite positive, as deduced by their innovative products and market leadership in specific business fields, it did not result in superior reputation at the group level, as per the comments of the investor community and the media, discussed in the previous sections.

The internal image management initiatives of the communication manager are in line with the recommendations of consultants to first identify the perceptions of key stakeholder groups. However, the external corporate image was not measured to gauge how it is received in order to adapt the communication strategy to achieve the desired image, as advocated in literature (Berg, 1985; Dowling, 1994; Dutton *et al*, 1994; Aaker, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Marwick & Fill, 1997).

By leveraging on a combination of media relations, CSR strategy and more transparency to change the image of the group from being “a silent group, shy of publicity” to one playing a more active role on the local scene, the external communication strategy attempts to mitigate the negative impact of the uncontrolled communications (Balmer & Gray, 1999). But literature also warns about a boundary effect which may take place when the increased intensity of corporate communications, especially the promotion of ‘laudable’ actions such as corporate social responsibility programmes, may induce stakeholders to regard these activities as merely a promotional tool and make them suspicious about the intent of the firm (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Similarly, Christensen (2002) perceives that corporate communicators are now transforming the notion of transparency from a market condition to a business strategy, but there is no guarantee that the amount of information made available by a company will automatically lead to positive images amongst its stakeholders.

Giving much attention to international brokers against local investors do not promote trust and credibility locally and send confusing signals which might play against the group. Furthermore, the proper control and coordination of the communication strategy is not assured since the chairman, who is acknowledged as the person in charge, does not reside in the country. The existence of a crisis management plan was also not found.

The group was going to have a tracking system for its communication activities and this showed the commitment to provide adequate resources to the new communication initiatives.

Table 34: How each department of the Investment group contributes to the Communication strategy

CEO	COMMUNICATION MANAGER
▪ decides on the brand message to be communicated and directs the common resource department for implementing the action plan to achieve the desired brand image ▪ Motivaties everyone in the group to live up to the brand ▪ All investor relations and government relations fall under corporate office Online communications "I believe that Mauritius is not sophisticated enough and there is no clear mechanism for online buying."	▪ department consists of PR manager, the research and development officers and communication manager who reports to the director of the resource centre and the CEO ▪ is responsible for all corporate brochures of the group, handouts to the media. Online communications "We communicate a lot through email and trying to educate the staff on using email in a professional manner as there has been abuse of this communication channel in other companies."
MARKETING MANAGER	**HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER**
▪ offer professional resources in marketing and communications to people who are non-professionals in corporate communications ▪ also outsource services to other companies Online communications "There is a team working on our new website with a new interactive interface and graphic design. This is meant to support on line queries and communication about our activities."	▪ part of a team, which is trying to develop a proper framework for communications ▪ finding out the weaknesses of the present system to implement a better solution – believes that this review is on-going and needs to be fine-tuned all the time Online communications "Overload of emails not really adding value so we communicate more through face to face meetings."

As mentioned previously, the **Tourism group** is part of a diversified group. In that sense, it is a subsidiary with a portfolio of five mid-range hotels and one 5star hotel. The corporate strategy favours an organisational set-up with a decentralised structure with responsibilities shared or delegated to the main managers of the group, at the level of both the holding and hotel group. Staff behaviour, product / service quality and vision are the prime success factors of their communication strategy.

Primary Communication (Balmer & Gray, 1999) is promoted by the pioneering attribute of the corporate brand i.e. the introduction of a new deluxe hotel coupled with the provision of new services associated with wellness services to provide a more holistic experience to the customer helped them to graduate to a new stronger image, closer to the customer (Aberg, 1990; Knox & Maklan, 1998; Urde, 1999; Macrae, 1999; Bickerton, 2000).

Secondary communication supports primary communication through integrated corporate communications as discussed already. Furthermore, the brand architecture is also undergoing a review in order to ensure more coherence across the group in terms of the different set of values that may cause the image to become blurred (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999; Petromilli *et al*, 2002).

By designating the marketing and communication manager as the official spokesperson for the group (McKenzie, 1994; Kash & Darling, 1998), who in turn maintains a media friendly approach with the press, the organisation provides a clear signal of transparency and accountability to this important stakeholder group. The positive feelings and beliefs created about the company were eventually translated into a positive image as evidenced by one journalist who stated that "I know who are the people in the department… their faces as well. They project a clear message…which is well received".

Furthermore, efforts to carry out staff and customer surveys to gather the perceptions of their internal and external customers are part of a measurement system to align corporate communication with the brand messages in a coherent manner to prevent any contradictions, as advocated in literature (Berg, 1985; Dowling, 1994; Dutton *et al*, 1994; Aaker, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Marwick & Fill, 1997; Stuart, 1999a; Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Einwiller & Will, 2002; Barker & Angelopulo, 2006).

Thus, tertiary communication is perceived as positive and is reflected in the goodwill and credibility generated (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997) as evidenced from an increasing number of repeat customers and support from overseas marketing agents. Thus, the total communications approach of Balmer (1995, 1998) is achieved to a large extent by the various efforts to ‘control’ unplanned communications.

The joint management of investor relations by the finance and communication departments at the holding office is a novel approach, which ensures that the messages are coherent in form and content with standard visual systems, as advocated by Einwiller & Will (2002) in their model of organisational communication.

However, there was no evidence of a crisis management plan at the hotel group level.

Table 35: How each department of the Tourism group contributes to the Communication strategy

<table>
<tr><th>CEO</th><th>COMMUNICATION MANAGER</th></tr>
<tr><td>

ensures the implementation of all decisions concerning mission / vision
gives managers clear responsibilities to communicate values consistently and carry the messages needed to propagate the corporate image
corporate strategy decides on product / service portfolio for the various hotels, the service level, and brand architecture

<u>Online communications</u>
“It’s going to be part of our new communication strategy; we will be receiving bookings online as well. A team will take charge of this aspect…”
</td><td>

sets the directions and provides the general guidelines as far as the group communications strategy is concerned
“It is very important that we have the right to scan all types of communications before they are communicated to anyone to ensure coherence with our corporate brand image.”

<u>Online communications</u>
“It is a very important means to provide coherent information, internally and externally as it can be accessed worldwide. We are right now, in the process of implementing an e-marketing platform to attract additional business in this way.”
</td></tr>
<tr><th>MARKETING MANAGER</th><th>HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER</th></tr>
<tr><td>

Doing a lot of marketing activities such as positioning the products, branding, promotion, PR, media, corporate design, CSR, events, sponsorship, online communication, employee communications, and the internal newsletter, in consultation with the HRM.

<u>Online communications</u>
“…very crucial to us as we are competing on an international level… the e-commerce aspect will allow us to sell directly to customers and pass on the savings to them”.
</td><td>

I report to head office as far as the group organisational / internal communication is concerned and I then cascade these decisions to the HRM of all hotels and from there to the staff.
I report to the managing director as far as management communications is concerned.

<u>Online communications</u>
“We have an intranet where the group information is posted. The website is updated by a team from marketing department.”
</td></tr>
</table>

External respondents raised many critical success factors similar to the practitioners that substantiated those in literature, but also unveiled new dimensions to the theme under discussion that have not been encountered so far. These factors were amongst the least frequently mentioned ones but nonetheless considered as crucial to the success of a communication strategy by the consultants. Some of the comments that support the findings are given in Table 36.

The key insight by the media people about how essential it is to strike the right balance or *dosage* in any communication campaign is in accordance with the statements by Brown & Dacin (1997) and Christensen (2002). Any exaggeration might fail the very purpose of the communication strategy but if the communication campaign is well orchestrated, then a high level of awareness can be achieved freely through the press.

The journalists especially suggested an appointed spokesperson for all company's information as part of a crisis management plan and is in accordance with Kash & Darling (1998) who suggest that a credible spokesperson, who understands the values of the company and is able to articulate those values while addressing difficult circumstances, should be designated to handle critical situations.

The consultants' recommendation that companies include crisis management planning as part of their communication strategy is in accordance with the literature (Mittroff *et al,* 1996; Kash & Darling, 1998; Chong, 2004). The belief of one consultant that a crisis is a good test of a company's credibility is furthermore supported by the halo effect that emerges based on perceptions of trustworthiness, liking (Aaker, 1996) and reputation (Greyser, 1999).

The close monitoring of the process advocated by external respondents is one of the key elements of a communication strategy (Bickerton, 2000; Barker & Angelopulo, 2006) which is usually neglected or else being done only internally or externally as seen in the previous sections. Furthermore, commitment for corporate branding from top management has been established, but very often, the middle management level is seen as slack (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Bickerton, 2000). Therefore, having such a measure in the corporate reporting system is also a way to drive commitment to corporate branding efforts from middle management level.

The literature also recommends that a tracking system is important to measure the extent of integration of communication functions (Barker & Angelopulo, 2006), and ensure a total corporate communications approach (Balmer, 1995, 1998). The measurement system should also be able to indicate the extent to which stakeholder relations have been strengthened, reputation has been improved, and revenue has been increased (Barker & Angelopulo, 2006).

As far as online communication is concerned, the views obtained support the findings in literature that the ease of access, ubiquity, and access to information in real time are the key elements of communicating through this channel (Einwiller & Will, 2002). Information overload, the difficulty of ensuring the same brand experience in a virtual environment and the low internet penetration are reported to be the major obstacles to its use in Mauritius, nevertheless reputed companies are increasingly using this medium to communicate with their stakeholders. By sharing information in this way with their surroundings, organisations are contributing to being more transparent while at the same time enhancing their credibility (Greyser, 1999, Christensen, 2002).

Table 36: External respondents' views on key drivers of a communication strategy

	COMMENTS
Consultant	**On ensuring coherence** ▪ "..the ability to communicate clearly and maintain coherence in all communications about core values, history and objectives are crucial". ▪ "..the message must be true to the brand values, reflect the philosophy of management and must also be based on true facts".
Institutional investors	**On vision, strategy, positioning** ▪ "A good communication strategy should communicate a clear message. Once a good perception is created, it should be maintained." ▪ "Every message sent must be backed by concrete evidence of activities and good delivery of performance consistently to generate trust in the firm." **On Investor relations** ▪ "In Mauritius, we do not have a good coverage or interpretation of financial news by credible experts so investors meetings would be welcome where important corporate information would be exchanged." **On Integrated communication** ▪ "A good communication strategy should touch all stakeholders. There should be open channels of communication, from management to employees, to suppliers and other networks, a customer hotline, investors and media, the government, etc."
Journalists	**On media relations** ▪ "Companies have realised that ads alone are not sufficient, in Mauritius, people give a lot of credibility to the press and any information released will have a bigger impact than an ad campaign." **On Integrated communication** ▪ "I feel that it is important to have a communication department especially when a company grows bigger and more diversified, thus they can communicate important information internally and externally as staff also have the right to be informed about issues related to the company, otherwise this can cause frustration."

Q3: Should Investor relations fall under the corporate communications department?

It was important to clarify which department should have the responsibilities of this important stakeholder group, as there were divergent views in literature (Einwiller & Will, 2002; White & Mazur, 1997) which was also evidenced in the field study.

The fact that the CEO is favoured as the person to look after the investor community is indicative of the strategic importance assigned to this stakeholder group. But it is interesting that the consultants and investors voted equally for both the communication and finance department as being apt to handle this kind of relation, because they are accessible more quickly, easily and on a regular basis. Einwiller & Will (2002) also advocate that the corporate communications department should also be involved in investor relations based on the findings by Will & Wolters (2001) that apart from reporting on the financial performance, this important stakeholder group also need to be informed of the vision, management's profile, strategic objectives and future projects. This is in accordance with the findings in the previous chapter that this community demands regular feedback on corporate strategy, vision and performance through presentations, meetings, reports, a permanent contact desk, professionally managed websites and coherent information.

Based on the findings and as a best practice, a recommendation is made in the 'de jure' model that investor relations should be jointly managed by the CEO's office and the communication department.

Conclusion from findings related to Research Question no 3

The third sub problem sought to determine how corporate communications can promote a coherent corporate image.

Conclusively, this section has been enriching in terms of additional insights gathered about key factors that can help to add value to the communication process. The findings show that many of the key processes that are highlighted in literature are used in real life by the population sample. The manner in which the communication strategies were conducted to achieve the objective of a favourable image and reputation also substantiates many of the recommendations made by leading authors in the literature review. Thus, the third sub problem is fully resolved by the third research question.

It is demonstrated how corporate communications play a key role in developing and promoting corporate identity image by its direct influence on strategic processes. Therefore, a good communication strategy is essential to any organisation. It needs to be formulated by the communication department in close conjunction with the CEO and the management team, with due consideration given to the nature of the organisation itself; its mission and vision; and its key audiences.

The findings suggest that the communication director plays an increasing role in the formulation of corporate strategy but his input could and should be greater and used at a higher level. The communication director is expected to have a deep holistic knowledge of his organisation but his challenge is in acting as a bridge between his organisation and its audiences, forging a ‘rapport’ with them, with the purpose of developing and enhancing the image and reputation of the organisation.

In turn, the organisation as a whole must understand and believe in the importance of total corporate communications.

5.4 <u>Research question no 4</u>

How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?

This question aimed to determine the extent to which respondents could relate to the difference in the two concepts of image and reputation and how they managed to promote their corporate reputation in practice.

The questions that referred to research question no 3 are:

1. *What is your definition of reputation?(Table 16)*
2. *How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation? (Tables 17, 18)*
3. *How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample? (Tables 19, 20, 21)(external respondents)*

Q 1: What is your definition of Reputation?

The majority of respondents identified that there is a close relation between image and reputation, similar to Gotsi & Wilson (1999), who concluded that there is dynamic and bilateral relationship between the two concepts.

The belief of respondents that reputation is more fundamental and is reinforced by a positive image corroborates the conclusion of Gotsi & Wilson (1999) that a firm's reputation is influenced by how a company projects its images through the corporate identity mix of behaviour, communication and symbolism.

The fact that an investor considered reputation to be more important in decision-making because of the well-known name again supports the finding by Gregory (1997) that a strong corporate brand and favourable reputation are prerequisites for investors for investing in a company, as previously discussed.

Contrary to image, it was felt that a broken reputation is very difficult to piece together since it is based on trustworthiness and loyalty. Again, literature highlights this issue by arguing that if there is incoherence between what a company claims to be and what it actually does, then credibility is lost (Aaker, 1996; Greyser, 1999).

One common feature of reputation raised by most authors in literature is that reputation is the overall evaluation of a company over time, based on its past actions (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997; Gotsi & Wilson, 1999; Bick *et al,* 2003). This was supported by 22% of respondents, who felt that the history and behaviour of the company over the years were strong determinants of reputation.

17% of respondents could not easily make out the difference between image and reputation as reported in the findings. This state of things has also been the subject of much discussion and research (Dowling, 1994, 1996; Abratt, 1989, Gotsi & Wilson, 1999; Bick *et al*, 2003). The fact that one CEO considered image as more important and another one felt that reputation is image and vice versa, indicates that some people relate more to the image construct that reputation.

The findings also showed that a strong reputation, staff behaviour and CSR programmes are reported to have helped the Finance group to face two crisis incidents. Empirical studies in literature show that a positive corporate reputation provides support for a company in times of controversy (Greyser, 1999). Involvement in social welfare is seen as a vital element in generating trust and admiration and in building strong corporate reputation, providing the needed credibility to sustain competitive advantage (Porter & Kramer, 2002). Furthermore, the key importance of staff behaviour, as a cornerstone of the corporate identity is well discussed as a promoter of image and subsequently the reputation over time.

Q2: How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?

The executives of the **Finance group** showed the understanding that corporate brand reputation is achieved through the management of image, staff behaviour, social contributions to society, high service / product performance, integrity and culture. These drivers are similar to the ones reported by Greyser (1999) from an international study among 10,000 managers in various countries. Similarly, the findings provide evidence that the benefits of a positive corporate reputation, as reported by the above author, accrued to this group of companies such as preference in doing business with this company against the competition and the brand equity / goodwill obtained in the financial marketplace.

There was an indication that a crisis management plan was to be implemented while it was not the case for the other two companies.

The managers of the **Investment group** also believed that the key drivers of the their corporate reputation rested on the promotion of the corporate image based on the culture, values, CSR programmes, media relations, high service performance, leadership and making the company appear more transparent.

This is an indication that this group aimed to leverage on the corporate identity mix of behaviour, communication and symbolism in order to achieve its goal (Gotsi & Wilson, 1999). The fact that the chairman is reported to be the main person supervising the communication strategy and a communication manager has been hired to carry out these initiatives in a systematic manner proves that the Investment group now considers corporate communications to be a process of strategic importance.

Similarly, the **Tourism group** confirmed that corporate reputation is achieved by the effective management of corporate image, based on the positioning of the brand as a unique organisational value proposition (Knox & Macklan, 1998). This is further evidence that their core competencies and processes are the main elements that are driving brand consistency across the various communication interfaces (Bickerton, 2000).

The literature indicates that reputation is also promoted through the CEO profile and/or the board of directors (Gregory, 1997; Dowling, 2006). While the CEO of the Investment group observed that he would rather keep a low profile, the communication manager specified that the management team of the business units was going to be pushed into the limelight through networking and media relations. On the other hand, the researcher confirms that the CEOs profiles of the Finance group and the Tourism group are communicated regularly through the press and they are members of various high profile committees on corporate governance and tourism associations.

All three communication managers provided details of the activities that they carried out demonstrating that a substantial budget was allocated to the various promotional activities of this department in a bid to raise their level of awareness internally and on the marketplace. This again substantiates the research undertaken by Harris/Impulse research (1999) that the level of spending on certain key aspects of corporate communications such as employee communications, media and industry relations and quarterly/annual reports can positively affect a company's reputation.

Q3: How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample?

The fact that an above average number of respondents perceived **the Finance group** as having a strong image and reputation is indicative of the emotional appeal, credibility and confidence that it enjoys vis-à-vis its most important stakeholder groups such as staff, customers and shareholders (Aaker, 1996; Greyser, 1999; Gregory & Sellers, 2002).

The key elements that have contributed to the image and reputation such as the organisation's lasting power over the years, the CSR programmes, big promotional budget, strong corporate brand, high quality visual communications, the market performance, transparency in dealings and good media and investor relations reflect various aspects of the corporate communications mix and indicate that, overall, there is coherence in communicating, internally and externally (Van Riel, 1995; Bickerton, 2000). Conclusively, the communication strategy of the Finance group has been successful in promoting a favourable corporate brand image and reputation, which furthermore proved to be of capital assistance in times of crisis.

The high percentage of respondents (82%) critical of the image and communication strategy of **the Investment group** reflects the poor credibility and lack of emotional bonding that the organisation faces externally (Dowling 2006). Furthermore, the ethical standards are not perceived as high due to the political connections hinted at and the lack of transparency is linked to issues of good governance and integrity (Greyser, 1999). Thus, it can be inferred that the lack of coherence, consistency and integration between internal and external communications is responsible for the 'confusing' image and not so strong reputation, despite the fact that some of the product brands are market leaders in their specific industries. There is no transfer of goodwill from the product brand to the corporate brand or vice versa and as such, the group does not enjoy the trust and admiration of the marketplace.

In contrast, **the Tourism group** enjoys a clear image as its communication strategy is seen to reflect its identity. Because it is an emerging group, its reputation is not yet well defined but is believed to benefit from the strong reputation of its holding company. Once more, a well-integrated and consistent corporate communication mix is evidenced in the critical success factors of its communication strategy responsible for ascribing the group with a positive image, aligned with the image and reputation of the mother company.

Based on the above findings, it can be concluded that the ‘most admired companies are (1) the Finance group (2) the Tourism group. A comparison between these findings and the research conducted by Thomas L. Harris/ Impulse research (1999) demonstrates that those two companies also promoted awareness through substantial investment in communication activities, and the top management gave full support and strategic importance to the communication in charge.

Conclusion

The fourth sub-problem sought to determine how corporate communications could promote a coherent brand reputation and the findings corroborate with the literature that reputation is achieved through the management of corporate image and a sustained awareness about its activities. Therefore, the fourth research question fully resolves the fourth sub problem.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, the main findings and insights gained during the research study are summarised. The ‘de jure’ model is then presented, depicting how the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process helps to integrate the various channels of information so that the resulting image and reputation is coherent with the corporate identity. Some suggestions to management are then proposed based on the findings and the chapter concludes with suggestions for further research.

Summary of Results from Research Question no 1

The purpose of the research was to investigate the role of corporate communications in promoting a coherent corporate brand image and reputation in Mauritius.

Empirically, this research is based on semi-structured, in depth interviews with internal practitioners such as the chief executive, the heads of communication, marketing and HR departments, within three large organisations and external stakeholders such as communication consultants, institutional investors and media people.

The first research question dealing with the concept of corporate branding found that it helps to differentiate from competition by positioning the company as a unique value proposition in order to create a favourable image and reputation. This is based on the distinct attributes of the corporate identity i.e. values, culture and vision which is communicated through the mix of symbolism, staff behaviour and corporate communications.

Most practitioners and consultants agreed that an organisation can leverage on corporate branding through a multidisciplinary approach based on corporate vision/strategy, marketing strategy, human resources management and integrated corporate communications to send coherent signals to stakeholders. Staff behaviour is crucial to the process as it creates emotional bonding with stakeholders and is a reflection of the brand values and organisational culture. The communication strategy must ensure that all brand messages are coherently aligned and consistent with the brand promise, both internally and externally. Inherent to corporate branding is the product / service performance and the visual communications in making the corporate brand more tangible. A transformational type of leadership is one of the driving forces of the process to ensure organisational-wide commitment.

In large and diversified organisations, it is important to define clearly the brand architecture so that product brands can benefit from the strong image and established reputation of the master brand.

When a product complexity is high, an organisation’s positive image and reputation, along with the corporate brand, become the major determinants of choice for the public.

Apart from profitability and the share price, investors also base their investment decisions on the goodwill and brand power / equity, reliable and on independent reports about the organisation’s performance. Contrary to past research, current issues linked to corporate governance are pushing the board of directors, and not only the CEO profile, under the scrutiny of this community. Furthermore, there appears to be a correlation between the level of transparency and the decision to invest, therefore organisations are advised to have clear and consistent reporting about the corporate strategy and other future projects to this important stakeholder group.

The concept of good citizenship through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes is seen to be a key promoter of the corporate image and it is suggested to be included in the ‘corporate marketing mix’ for the promotion of the organisation as a unique value proposition.

It is further advocated that the corporate branding process should be carried out by the CEO in collaboration with the Communication director.

Thus, the findings resulting from the first research question fully resolved the first sub problem, which sought to investigate how a corporate brand can sustain differentiation and uphold competitive advantage in the market place.

Summary of results from Research Question no 2

The second research question was:

What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?

Corporate communication is found to be a mix of management, organisational and marketing communications i.e. a combination of internal and external communication channels designed to promote strategic objectives, values, staff behaviour, culture, corporate identity, advertising, product/service delivery, corporate citizenship, investor and media relations.

Online communication, in terms of email, intranet and as an e-commerce tool is acknowledged as an integral part of the communication process by making important communications available instantly and cost-effectively and thus contributing to making the company more transparent. However, it needs to be looked after by a dedicated team to keep all information updated, support interactivity and offer a brand experience similar to the offline experience. External respondents especially feel that having a well-maintained and user-friendly website adds to the company's credibility.

The role of corporate communications is to provide on-going and consistent information to stakeholders about the company's activities, values and brand identity to ensure visibility on the market place. It further helps in promoting transparency and good governance within organisations.

In order to ensure consistent and coherent communications, organisations leverage on common starting points such as vision, organisational values and /or customer value to promote consensus when deciding on the strategic orientation to be adopted in decision-making and common operational systems and processes to further enable a consistent delivery of performance across all functional departments. Appointing a communication manager or steering committee for the coordination of all communication activities, is a best practice and provide a control mechanism where the policies and guidelines for all communication plans are set. However, many organisations do not have a means of gauging the level of integration or success of their communication strategies.

The media people recommend having the right dosage of communications so that any communication campaign does not look *contrived*. Furthermore, they would like organisations to maintain an open channel of communication even during times of controversy, through an official spokesperson.

Operating under a mixed brand architecture needs careful thought as it does not seem to promote synergy between the mother company and its subsidiaries, thereby creating a misalignment with the desired culture and values. On the other hand, having a strong endorsement from the holding company, allows for stronger clarity and reinforces the vision, culture and values between the brands. This in turn allows for stronger commitment from staff and more positive perceptions from the external audience.

The second research question fully addressed the second sub problem, which aimed to explore the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process.

Summary of results from Research Question no 3

The third research question was:

How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand image?

Because of the highly abstract aspect of the concept, there was low convergence on its real meaning; nevertheless a good majority of respondents believed that image is how the company is perceived by stakeholders. Corporate values and culture related to staff behaviour were also factors affecting the image received by external stakeholders. However, the concept was believed to be short term and fleeting, linked to the present and easily manipulated. The perceptions of internal stakeholders were considered important in creating consistency and congruence of perceptions internally so that the image projected externally is positive.

Furthermore, one chief executive observed that image is accepted favourably and reinforces goodwill and credibility when a company shows that, apart from making profits, it also cares for the community. This fact is highlighted in literature, which proves that CSR programmes are seen to enhance a company's market visibility, support for its offerings, sustain the internal image, impact positively on product evaluations by customers and subsequently promote customer loyalty.

The critical success factors of a communication strategy that contribute to the achievement of the desired image are: (1) the product / service performance (2) properly planned, integrated communications where management ensures that strategic objectives are coherently conveyed (3) organisational communication to sustain the internal image through alignment between group culture, staff behaviour and the corporate brand values and (4) the marketing strategy to communicate a unique value proposition through a clear positioning based on core competencies such as reputation, product / service portfolio and networks.

Moreover, marketing communications make the value proposition tangible externally through promotions tools such as brochures, packaging, advertising, and direct selling. The company's visibility is enhanced through proper management of media and investor relations, good corporate citizenship, and the online communication channel.

A crisis management plan is now a crucial part of strategic planning along with a designated spokesman and/or crisis management team. Furthermore, it is important to maintain contact with the media and the public during controversial times by accepting responsibility for any damage and showing what is being done to rectify matters since the cost of doing so is usually outweighed by the goodwill generated, which is of capital importance in such moments.

Organisations that enjoy a strong pre-crisis reputation can benefit from a halo effect, which helps to deflect reputation damage during the moments of turbulence.

It is recommended that investor relations be overseen by the CEO's office but with the support of the corporate communications department to ensure coherence as well as easy and ongoing access to key information.

The third research question thus, fully addressed the third sub problem of determining how corporate communications can promote a coherent corporate image.

Summary of results from Research Question no 4

The fourth research question was:

How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?

The majority of respondents identified that there is a close relation between image and reputation but that reputation is more fundamental and can be reinforced by a positive image. It is also more important in investment decision-making along with the corporate brand. Contrary to image, a broken reputation is very difficult to piece together since it is based on trustworthiness and loyalty. The history and behaviour of the company over the years are the major determinants of reputation.

Furthermore, a strong reputation, consistent high service performance and staff behaviour along with on-going CSR programmes are reported to help an organisation in facing crises.

A strong reputation can be achieved by managing the corporate image through staff behaviour, core values and culture and the projection of the corporate identity. Furthermore, other factors that contribute to the process are based on the nature and quality of the product / service portfolio, integrated communications, transformational leadership, positioning the company as a unique value proposition, online communication, internal image management, corporate citizenship, good media and investor relations, and more transparency about corporate performance.

A new insight was that the content of communication rather than the technique of communication is more important to induce the media to give publicity to an organisation.

Thus, the fourth sub problem was fully resolved by the fourth research question.

Conclusion

By investigating how large and diversified companies in a real setting leverage on corporate branding through integrated communications, this research study shows that many of the best practices advocated in the literature are upheld and are still valid, albeit in the current business context of a small developing island.

This research work also demonstrates that, in the corporate environment, communication is a complex phenomenon, composed of planned communication and unplanned elements, affecting the organisation through informal channels, which are more difficult to understand and deal with. Moreover, recent developments such as the increased obligation of organisations towards society, the need for more transparent communication towards both internal and external stakeholders and the strategic importance of having a crisis management plan to prevent or mitigate reputation risk are forcing companies to review their business assumptions and find innovative measures to respond and adapt to the fast changing environment.

By clarifying how successful organisations leverage on effective communication strategies in order to achieve the intended image and strong reputation, this report contributes to knowledge on the strategic importance of the communication function in providing guidance to management in the new business paradigm.

Furthermore, the new insights revealed during the course of this research work contribute to an emergent design that can led support to the corporate strategy and thus further enhance the practice of corporate communications in large organisations.

6.1 Limitations of this research

As is often the case with qualitative research, several factors may limit how representative it is of the general situation.

With regard to the interview process, the sample size was too small to provide sufficient data to make any forceful assertions. However, the aim was to review current literature, and combine this with the insights of a number of experts to produce a model that should prove useful to strategists looking for more innovative strategies to sustain competitive advantage for their organisations.

It was unfortunate that there was poor response from many initially identified respondents during the sampling process. This delayed the data collection considerably and the researcher had to narrow this study to look at only three major groups in three distinct industries.

6.2 Recommendations

The challenge of communication rests in achieving a consistent image for an organisation's brands and presenting its messages in a coherent manner through integrated communication. For that matter, a better understanding and holistic view of the communication process is required from a corporate brand management perspective.

In order to promote better alignment between the components, a 'de jure' model is proposed, which incorporates useful suggestions to management. The model hereunder shows that the corporate branding process starts with the projection of the corporate identity i.e. the organisation's vision, values and culture which impacts on the corporate strategy. At this level, key decisions are taken concerning the strategic goals, the portfolio of product and services, the branded house architecture, the common starting points for driving consensus in decision making and the common systems and core processes that will provide a coherent platform to all functional and sub business units to drive consistency in doing business.

The model also depicts that the aim of corporate branding is to position the organisation as a unique value proposition based on behaviour, communication and symbolism in order to achieve a favourable image and reputation.

Thus, the corporate identity mix of behaviour, communication and symbolism is ever present in the process throughout the organisation, while it interacts with, and is impacted by, other multidisciplinary aspects such as marketing strategy, human resources management and integrated corporate communications to send coherent signals to stakeholders.

Human resources management is shown as influencing organisational communication, in terms of recruitment, training and incentive schemes, while it is also part of management communications. The latter, in turn, is influential on the marketing strategy of the organisation, which is responsible for devising the marketing communications mix, in collaboration with the corporate communications department. Marketing communications in turn leverage significantly on symbolism to make the abstract values of the corporate brand and product brands tangible to the consumer.

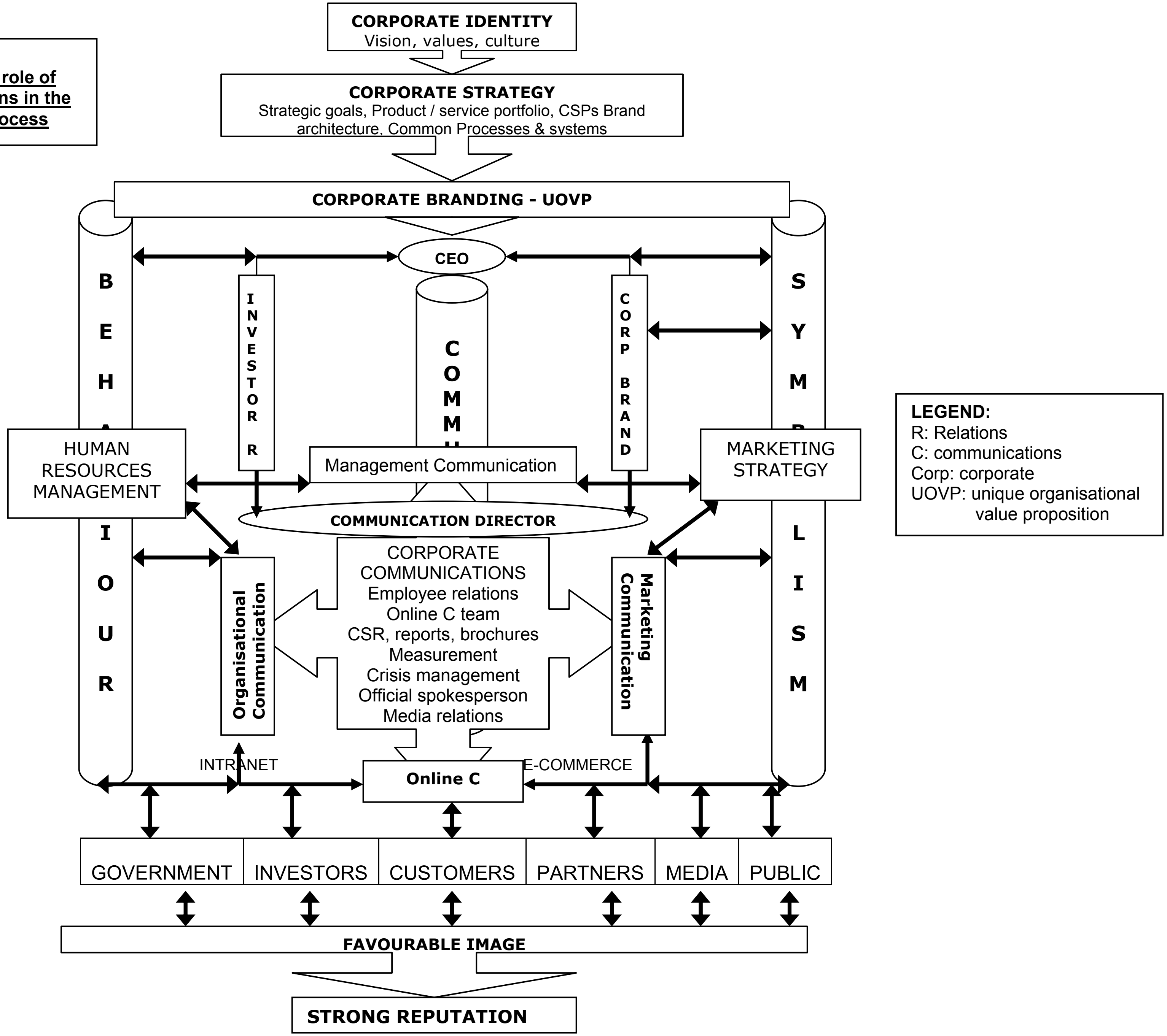
While the CEO has the main responsibility of investor relations and the corporate brand, it is recommended that the communication directorate be also involved in both activities, ensure coherence, easy and ongoing access to key information. The CEO also has an influence on internal members' behaviour and on the visual identity of the organisation via symbolism.

As communication is central to the corporate branding process, the model shows how it helps to integrate the triad of management, organisational and marketing communications into a central corporate communications hub. Online communication is shown as the fourth addition to the hub as an important channel integrating with, and impacting on, organisational and management communication via the intranet and on marketing communications as an e-commerce tool whilst providing a link with external stakeholder groups. It also incorporates the visual identity of the organisation, through symbolism, which helps to communicate the corporate strategy and present a congruent image. Though online communication is now acknowledged as an integral part of the process, models in literature do not depict this channel of communication as shown herewith.

The corporate communication function is overseen by the communication director who is responsible in setting policies and guidelines to coordinate all communication activities with internal and external stakeholders thereby ensuring a better control of planned and unplanned signals. Furthermore, he is a high calibre, authorised spokesperson of the company, appointed to maintain an open channel of communication with important external stakeholder groups. He is in charge of the crisis management plan and is at the head of a team dealing with the media and the public in case of any controversy. CSR programmes and the measurement of the *outcomes* of all communication strategies must take place quite regularly and is therefore the prerogative of this directorate.

There is a two way interaction between the internal members and external stakeholders, which is continuously shaping the stakeholders' perceptions and behaviour, towards the organisation. Since the corporate brand image is a significant driver of differentiation and is also influenced by a company's product brands, it becomes imperative to create communication synergies between the brands. Thus, if the corporate branding process is well-planned and integrated, the image will be favourable. When this favourable image is clearly and consistently projected over time, as a unique value proposition, then an emotional bonding is established with customers and a strong reputation ensues.

Figure 12:
A 'de jure' model of the role of Corporate Communications in the Corporate Branding process



It is also suggested that:

To ensure commitment to the corporate brand values and positive behaviour in employees, managers must themselves become more receptive to suggestions from staff, better communicators with the right attitude and leadership style to coach and motivate organisational members in delivering against performance targets. The internal image can be better controlled and the corporate culture can be made more adaptive to the changing business environment by assigning enough resources to the corporate branding process and aligning the personal values of staff with the desired corporate values.

Furthermore, instilling a knowledge-sharing attitude in all members is conducive to a less bureaucratic and a more learning type of organisation, which can leverage on new ideas within the company itself to streamline processes to become more user-friendly and promote an innovation and entrepreneurial spirit across board.

Human resources managers must become change agents to both staff and management by aiming to provide the right incentives and career paths to high potential staff in order to retain them. Even though intranet systems facilitate access of organisational members to key information quickly, care must be taken that this is not at the expense of regular face-to face meetings and other social interactions.

Cross-functional integration can be promoted by building alliances with the teams of other functional and operating units, through a more decentralised structure. Indeed, by replacing the traditional command and control structures by a more flexible model, regular contact between line and staff functions can lead to better understanding and mutual respect.

Corporate marketing necessitates not only a planning perspective, which addresses the matching of external opportunities with core competencies, but must also consider making the whole organisation become market-oriented. This calls for a more focussed approach to deliver on customer value based on innovative ways such as Customer Relationship Management to promote customer loyalty while searching for new customer segments to exploit.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

Since senior management do not always consider communication managers as a strategic partner, there is a need for more research to demonstrate concretely how the concept of corporate communications can add value to the organisation, based on a measurement system that will enable an evaluation of the return on investment that this directorate provides in terms of financial revenue and stronger brand equity.

Further research is also warranted on how technology can help to further harmonise the business systems and processes to achieve more integration across functional lines.

The present study can be repeated with a larger sample of customers and staff to determine how aligned their perceptual views are with those of the management and the external stakeholder groups.

As corporate social responsibility programmes ha been mentioned several times, it will be interesting to research on how do (1) customers' evaluation (2) employees' evaluations of CSR practices affect their behaviour towards companies in Mauritius.

Further research efforts can also be focussed on how to promote staff commitment and a group culture aligned to the vision in a diversified group of companies, which does not endorse its subsidiary brands.

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Appendix A: Interview Outline for Research Question No 1

Practitioners

1. What do you understand by Corporate Branding?
   1.1 Who takes the main responsibility for the corporate brand in your organisation?
2. Why is this concept relevant in current times?
3. How does your organisation leverage on corporate branding?

Consultants

1. What do you understand by Corporate Branding?
   1.1. Who takes the main responsibility for the corporate brand in an organisation?
2. Why is this concept relevant in current times?
3. How can an organisation leverage on corporate branding?

Institutional Investors

1. What do you understand by Corporate Branding?
   1.1 Why is this concept relevant in current times?
2. What do you consider as important criteria in evaluating a company for investment?

Journalists

1. What do you understand by Corporate Branding?
   1.1 Why is this concept relevant in current times?
2. What are the important criteria that the public look for when choosing a company to deal with?

Appendix B: Interview Outline for Research Question No 2

Practitioners

1. What do you understand by corporate communications?
   1.1 What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
2. As you grow bigger and more diversified, how do you ensure consistency and coherence across the various communication channels within your organisation?
   2.1 What are your views on online communication?

Consultants

1. What do you understand by corporate communications?
   1.1 What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
   1.2 What are your views on online communication?

Institutional Investors

1. . What do you understand by corporate communications?
   1.1 What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
   1.2 What are your views on online communication?

Journalists

1. What do you understand by corporate communications?
   1.1 What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
   1.2 What are your views on online communication?

Appendix C: Interview Outline for Research Question No 3

Practitioners

1. What is your definition of image?
2. What are the key drivers of your communication strategy to help your organisation achieve its desired image?
   2.1 How can the performance of the communication process be measured?
3. Who should be in charge of Investor relations?

Consultants

1. What is your definition of image?
2. What are the key drivers of a communication strategy to help an organisation achieve its desired image?
   2.1 How can the performance of the communication process be measured?
3. Who should be in charge of Investor relations?

Institutional Investors

1. What is your definition of image?
2. What are the key drivers of a communication strategy to help an organisation achieve its desired image?
3. Who should be in charge of Investor relations?

Journalists

1. What is your definition of image?
2. What are the key drivers of a communication strategy to help an organisation achieve its desired image?

Appendix D: Interview Outline for Research Question No 4

Practitioners

1. What is your definition of reputation?
2. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?

Consultants

1. What is your definition of reputation?
2. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?
3. How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample?

Institutional Investors

1. What is your definition of reputation?
2. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?
3. How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample?

Journalists

1. What is your definition of reputation?
2. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?
3. How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample?

Appendix E: Interview Questionnaire for Practitioners

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 1

1. What do you understand by Corporate Branding?
   1.1 Who takes the main responsibility for the corporate brand in your organisation?
2. Why is this concept relevant in current times?
3. How does your organisation leverage on corporate branding?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 2

4. What do you understand by corporate communications?
   4.1 What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
5. As you grow bigger and more diversified, how do you ensure that consistency and coherence is maintained across the various communication channels within your organisation?
   5.1 What are your views on online communication?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 3

6. What is your definition of image?
7. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand desired image?
   7.1 How can the performance of the communication process be measured?
8. Who should be in charge of Investor relations?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 4

9. What is your definition of reputation?
10. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?

Appendix F: Interview Questionnaire for Consultants

Questions pertaining to Part I:

1. What do you understand by Corporate Branding?
   1.1. Who takes the main responsibility for the corporate brand in an organisation?
2. Why is this concept relevant in current times?
3. How can an organisation leverage on corporate branding?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 2

4. What do you understand by corporate communications?
   4.1 What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
   4.2 What are your views on online communication?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 3

5. What is your definition of image?
6. What are the key drivers of a communication strategy to help an organisation achieve its desired image?
   6.1 How can the performance of the communication process be measured?
7. Who should be in charge of Investor relations?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 4

8. What is your definition of reputation?
9. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?
10. How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample?

Appendix G: Interview Questionnaire for Institutional Investors

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 1:

1. What do you understand by Corporate Branding?
   1.1. Why is this concept relevant in current times?
2. What would you consider as important criteria in evaluating a company for investment?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 2

3. What do you understand by corporate communications?
   3.1 What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
   3.2 What are your views on online communication?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 3

4. What is your definition of image?
5. What are the key drivers of a communication strategy to help an organisation achieve its desired image?
6. Who should be in charge of Investor relations?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 4

7. What is your definition of reputation?
8. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?
9. How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample?

Appendix H: Interview Questionnaire for Journalists

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 1:

1. What do you understand by Corporate Branding?
   1.1. Why is this concept relevant in current times?
2. What are the important criteria that the public look for when choosing a company to deal with?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 2

3. What do you understand by corporate communications?
   3.1 What is the role of corporate communications in the corporate branding process?
   3.2 What are your views on online communication?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 3

4. What is your definition of image?
5. What are the key drivers of a communication strategy to help an organisation achieve its desired image?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 4

6. What is your definition of reputation?
7. How can corporate communications promote a coherent brand reputation?
8. How do you perceive the corporate image / reputation of the companies in the sample?

Appendix I: Interview Questionnaire for Practitioners (French)

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 1

1. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de corporate branding?
   1.1 A qui revient la responsabilité de gérer votre label corporate ?
2. Pourquoi est-ce que ce concept est important de nos jours?
3. Comment est-ce vous vous différenciez par rapport á la concurrence?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 2

4. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de communication d'entreprise?
   4.1 Quel est son rôle dans votre stratégie de corporate branding?
5. Comment est –ce que vous assurez la cohérence et consistance requises par rapport aux différentes avenues de communications du groupe?
   5.1 Qu'en est-il de la communication par Internet?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 3

6. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de l'image d'une société ?
7. Comment est-ce que la communication d'entreprise peut promouvoir l'image désirée de votre organisation?
   7.1 Comment est-ce que vous faites pour mesurer la performance de votre processus de communication?
8. Qui devrait prendre en charge la communication avec les investisseurs?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 4

9. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de réputation ?
10. Comment est-ce que la communication d'entreprise peut promouvoir la réputation de votre organisation?

Appendix J: Interview Questionnaire for Consultants (French)

<u>Questions pertaining to Research Question no 1</u>

1. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de corporate branding?
   1.1 Qui devrait gérer ce label corporate au sein d'une société ?
2. Pourquoi est-ce que ce concept est important de nos jours?
3. De quelle façon est-ce que ce concept pourrait aider une société à se différencier par rapport á la concurrence?

<u>Questions pertaining to Research Question no 2</u>

4. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de communication d'entreprise?
   4.1 Quel est son rôle dans une stratégie de corporate branding?

Prompt: Qu'en est-il de la communication par Internet?

<u>Questions pertaining to Research Question no 3</u>

5. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de l'image d'une société ?
6. Comment est-ce que la communication d'entreprise peut promouvoir l'image désirée d'une organisation?
   6.1 Comment est-ce que la performance du processus de communication peut être mesurer?
7. Qui devrait prendre en charge la communication avec les investisseurs?

<u>Questions pertaining to Research Question no 4:</u>

8. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de réputation ?
9. Comment est-ce que la communication d'entreprise peut promouvoir la réputation d'une organisation?
10. Quelles sont vos perceptions par rapport à l'image et la réputation des sociétés mentionnées?

Appendix K: Interview Questionnaire for Institutional Investors (French)

Questions Research Question no 1

1. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de corporate branding?
   1.1 Pourquoi est-ce que ce concept est important de nos jours?
2. Quels sont vos critères de sélection d'une société pour vos besoins d'investissements?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 2

3. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de communication d'entreprise?
4. Quel est son rôle dans une stratégie de corporate branding?

Prompt: Qu'en est-il de la communication par Internet?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 3

5. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de l'image d'une société ?
6. Comment est-ce que la communication d'entreprise peut promouvoir l'image désirée d'une organisation?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 4

7. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de réputation ?
8. Comment est-ce que la communication d'entreprise peut promouvoir la réputation de votre organisation?
9. Quelles sont vos perceptions par rapport à l'image et la réputation des sociétés mentionnées?

Appendix L: Interview Questionnaire for Journalists (French)

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 1:

1. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de corporate branding?
   1.1 Pourquoi est-ce que ce concept est important de nos jours?
2. Quels sont les critères que vous prenez en compte lorsque vous choisissez une société pour vos transactions?

Questions pertaining Research Question no 2

3. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de communication d'entreprise?
   3.1. Quel est son rôle dans une stratégie de corporate branding?
   3.2 Qu'en est-il de la communication par Internet?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 3

4. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de l'image d'une société ?
5. Comment est-ce que la communication d'entreprise peut promouvoir l'image désirée d'une organisation?

Questions pertaining to Research Question no 4:

6. Qu'est-ce que vous comprenez par le concept de réputation ?
7. Comment est-ce que la communication d'entreprise peut promouvoir la réputation de votre organisation?
8. Quelles sont vos perceptions par rapport à l'image et la réputation des sociétés mentionnées?

Appendix M: Letter of Introduction from DCDM Business School

DCDM Business School

Leading Business Knowledge Propagators

DCDM

P.O. Box 19,
Quatre Bornes
Mauritius

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132, St. Jean Road
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Offices in Madagascar, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Zamdia, Chad, Rwanda, Réunion Island and Botswana

7 November 2005

To Whom It May Concern

This is to confirm that Ms Bina HAWABHAY is a registered student on the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme of the Graduate School of Business Administration of the University of the Witwatersrand which is offered in Mauritius through the DCDM Business School.

One of the requirements of the degree is the generation of a Research Report. We would appreciate it if you and your organisation could provide Ms Hawabhay with any assistance she may require in this respect.

Yours sincerely

Prof E Charoux
Executive Director

Web site: http://www.dcdmbs.com