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# Towards an integrated approach to corporate branding – an empirical study

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## Keywords

Corporate identity, Brands, Communications, Organization

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## Abstract

Based on the findings of an empirical study among communication executives in 11 multinational companies we propose an increasingly integrated approach to corporate branding. Key aspects which support our claim are the growing importance of the financial community, the augmenting skills shortage driving competition for current and future employees, and the enhanced transparency of corporate activities being greatly supported by the particular characteristics of the Internet. In order to achieve greater integration and eventually a favourable reputation we propose an organisational model combining centralisation and team organisation which particularly aims to support integration across the various functions responsible for stakeholder relations.

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## Introduction

Creating a coherent perception of a company in the minds of its various stakeholders is a major challenge faced by many companies. Particularly in large multinational corporations speaking with one voice is a challenging task. Especially when grown through extensive merger and acquisition activities, large companies often comprise multiple subsidiaries and subsequently multiple brands and cultures. Orchestrating the signals these diverse corporate subsets send out to their stakeholders is often impeded by various aspects such as historic turf wars between divisions, cultural and language differences, deficient management structures and unclear responsibilities, or simply by spatial separation. Furthermore, incoherence in messages and difficulties in co-ordination are often fostered by communication representatives' narrow focus on their particular stakeholder groups. For example, investor relations representatives only have a small community of investors in mind. Those responsible for a certain product brand focus on their particular customer base and the internal communicators primarily see their recipients, the employees. Such thinking in a box and acting in narrow realms of stakeholder groups often leads to the communication of messages that might be suitable for each individual stakeholder group, yet all in all the picture drawn of the company as a whole is blurred or even contradictory. We purport that a stronger integration of the different internal units responsible for stakeholder relations is needed in order to foster more coherency in messaging and to eventually generate a coherent corporate brand image and favourable corporate reputation. The management process of creating and maintaining a coherent corporate brand image in the minds of each individual stakeholder which is the basis for a favourable overall corporate reputation shall be labelled corporate branding.

After defining the relevant theoretical concepts that underlie our research, we present the results of an empirical study in the scope of which we revealed various developments and dimensions that point to the necessity for an integrated approach to corporate branding. Based on the findings and insights we developed a model for



organising the functions responsible for stakeholder relations in order to foster more integration, better co-ordination and eventually the creation of a more favourable reputation.

### Definition of concepts

Corporate branding has been defined by Van Riel (2001, p. 12) 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.

The corporate reputation in turn is seen as the net perception of a company's ability to meet the expectations of all its stakeholders (Fombrun, 1996). Underlying this net perception are the individual images the company's various stakeholders have stored in their minds about the organisation. Those image aspects about a company represent "the sum of beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that a person or group has of an object" (Barich and Kotler, 1991, p. 95). We want to emphasise that the object of interest is the company as a whole. For stock corporations this means that the favourable reputation relates to the brand name under which the stock is listed at the stock exchanges. Applied to the example of DaimlerChrysler corporate branding means strengthening the brand DaimlerChrysler and not primarily its subsidiary or product brands like Mercedes-Benz, Chrysler, or Jeep.

We do not completely follow Van Riel's (2001) conceptualisation that the vehicle for sending out signals is the corporate brand. Product and subsidiary brands can also be of great significance for the process of corporate branding when being brought into some connection with the corporation as a whole. Therefore, every signal sent out by the company or its constituent elements that influences stakeholder images and the corporate reputation within this systematically planned and implemented process shall be considered corporate branding. Signals sent to the stakeholders are conveyed by behaviour, communication, and symbolism (Birkigt and Stadler, 1998; Maathuis, 1999). Apart from that, there are influences deriving from external sources that can generally not be planned and managed by

the company. Corporate branding shall consequently be defined here – closely following the definition presented by Van Riel (2001) as:

... 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.

Within most corporations corporate branding is incumbent upon the corporate communication function of which symbolism or corporate design is part. Nevertheless, communicators can only communicate successfully if corporate behaviour allows for it and if the dimensions that have been unveiled as the pillars of reputation – products and services, financial performance, workplace environment, vision and leadership, social responsibility, and emotional appeal (Fombrun *et al.*, 2000) – permit to be positive messages conveyed. However, in our research on corporate branding we focus on the function most strongly involved in shaping corporate images and reputation, that is corporate communication.

### Methodology

Our research aimed to gain thorough insight into the challenges and significance of corporate branding, as defined above, as well as approaches to its management within multinational corporations. To be able to uncover and explore aspects and mechanisms of corporate branding we chose a case study approach (see Yin, 1984). For our case study we combined desk research on the topic with semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 23 communication executives at 11 multinational companies. Interviews were conducted between July and September 2000. Companies we invited to participate were identified and selected on the following criteria:

- be among market leaders within their respective industry;
- have global reach;
- feature a diversified or multibrand structure;
- rank high in reputation surveys (*Global Fortune 500*, *manager magazin*, *TIME*), and have European headquarters (France, Germany, Switzerland).

All companies were publicly owned having their stock listed at major stock exchanges, except one that is in the process of planning its listing. As interview partners (all headquarter representatives) we could win the head of corporate communication (five) or their deputy (three), head of corporate marketing or business communication (three), head online communication (three), and other persons working within the corporate communication (eight) or corporate marketing (four) function.

### Significance of corporate branding

There was mutual correspondence regarding the actual and future importance of the topic of corporate branding: all of our interviewees stated that the topic was regarded as highly important for their company and that importance had increased over the past three to four years and the rise in importance is expected to continue in the future. Apart from some particular developments that are specific for the situation of an individual company or industry (e.g. deregulation), the developments underlying the rising importance of corporate branding can be grouped in five categories to be discussed in the following:

- (1) *Growing importance of capital markets.* A strong corporate brand and favourable reputation is regarded as a prerequisite to succeed in the global financial marketplace: “A strong corporate brand image has positive effects on the stock price. With the corporate brand the financial community associates future expectations” (interview quote). Institutional investors and financial analysts are seen as most important within the financial community; the latter take a particular position because of their strong influence on the media. For those professional groups the so called “soft factors” are said to be of growing importance, above all the CEO, clear communication of the corporate strategy, and the company’s emotional appeal (see also Gregory, 1997). Corporate reputation is furthermore seen as a decisive factor for retail investors to buy the stock. This investor group is perceived as highly interesting because “there are 40 million people in Europe

who have 100 000 to 1 million Euros in liquid assets. This is a huge and unsatisfied market” (interview quote).

- (2) *“War for talent”.* A dramatic picture of actual and future human resource shortage has been drawn by McKinsey and Co. (Chambers *et al.*, 1998; Axelrod *et al.*, 2001). In two US surveys researchers found that “companies are about to be engaged in a war for senior executive talent” (Chambers *et al.*, 1998, p. 46). This development is also perceived in Europe: “An important driver for our corporate branding initiative is the war for talent. In 10-15 years we will have an extreme shortage of personnel in all areas. We will then at least be able to say that we have identified the problem in time” (interview quote). A company’s reputation plays a crucial role when it comes to winning talent. What job aspirants are looking for most is a “great company” that has at its core an appealing culture and inspiring values. One-third of the companies in our survey spontaneously stated that winning highly qualified employees is an important factor driving corporate branding efforts.
- (3) *Need to create synergy between brands:* Corporate values become increasingly important as consumers become more critical: “People are more and better educated, more demanding and more interested in the companies behind the products. They want to know, is the company trustworthy, does it act correctly etc.” (interview quote). Corporate values like integrity, financial solidity, social and environmental responsibility are therefore important signals also for consumers. Apart from strengthening product brands through corporate values there is a strong tendency to strengthen the corporate brand by creating associations with its product brands. This trend is due to the fact that a company’s products and services are an important dimension influencing corporate reputation (see Fombrun *et al.*, 2000). Yet this is purported to frequently cause resentment in marketing managers who fear their product brands may become diluted or weakened.
- (4) *Co-ordination and identity problems in multinational corporations.* Common

values and a common idea, represented by the corporate brand that “holds the amorphous structure of our corporation together” (interview quote), can contribute to escape the frequently reported co-ordination trap (see also Wiedmann and Jugel, 1987). Nevertheless, companies report to proceed cautiously when it comes to integrating acquired companies under the corporate umbrella: “We want to demonstrate that we are not dictators . . . we want to turn the persons concerned into involved partners” (interview quote on rebranding issue). A serious obstacle concerning the successful communication of a common idea is the excessive complexity and multitude of corporate messages: “Our goal is to reduce the complexity of communication by reducing our key topics, what we want to bring across and stand for, to the essentials. Only then can the company’s representatives around the world support our messages” (interview quote). Intranet based electronic platforms, like DaimlerChrysler’s “Global News Bureau” (see Walther, 1998), can greatly support the exchange and co-ordination of information and communication internally.

- (5) *Growing demand for transparency.* The tendency towards greater transparency is due to increased obligations concerning corporate governance and financial disclosure (e.g. OECD Principles of Corporate Governance; KonTraG in Germany; SEC regulations and “fair disclosure” laws in the USA). Apart from enhanced pressure for transparency from financial markets, public and media interest in companies has grown. Evidence for this is the significant increase in the frequency of business news which has been happening over recent years. The demand for transparency is largely supported and stimulated by the possibilities of the new media. The Internet and its services provide a platform that makes it possible for companies to lend insight to an infinite amount of information (see also below). The audiences demand that companies make use of this possibility.

Although commitment for corporate branding especially from top management was stated to be high throughout all companies it appeared strongest in the media and telecommunication companies. Deregulation and developments in information and telecommunication technologies, as well as fierce competition in the market are certainly responsible for this in addition to the drivers just mentioned. Apart from the top management’s commitment it is particularly the commitment from middle management which is seen as an inevitable prerequisite for successful corporate branding: “Commitment also from middle management is needed to penetrate the corporate brand spirit throughout the company” (interview quote). Clearest commitment to corporate branding – namely incorporating a measure in the corporate reporting system (the balanced scorecard) – is demonstrated by only one of the 11 companies. However, this does not imply any consequences, for example for managers’ bonus plans, if reputation goals are not met.

### Importance of stakeholder groups

Although companies have to be aware of the needs of all stakeholders, some stakeholders are considered more important than others. Their ranking differs from company to company and time to time depending on current demands, pressures and goals. Yet there was nearly mutual agreement that the financial community is the most important stakeholder group for the corporation and thus for corporate branding efforts. When asked to rank the various corporate stakeholders according to their importance (assigning equal importance was permitted), only two companies ranked the financial community second. Second priority in importance was assigned to an almost equal extent to customers, current and future employees as well as journalists. Not surprisingly, the importance of customers for corporate branding has shown to be greatly dependent on the brand strategy (see Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 1999). In the case of a “branded house” strategy but also in the case of the corporate brand serving as an endorser, the corporate brand’s importance for the customers was claimed to be higher than when the company pursued a “house of

brands” strategy. The general public and governments ranked third. Public interest groups were ranked second last before competitors and just after the company’s industry partners. Changes in importance over time have been expressed: “When you think back ten years, public interest groups and governments were certainly highly important especially against the background of the environmental issues heavily discussed at that time. Then, those groups were of even greater existential importance than financial analysts” (interview quote).

### **Communication in a networked world**

The Internet is increasingly becoming part of the basic business model for many companies and it is rapidly becoming an integral part of the traditional economy (The Internet Economy Indicators, 2001). It has in particular sparked a shift in how people communicate with each other and in how companies can communicate with their stakeholders. Thus, the impact of the Internet on communication has been remarkable, especially that of the services e-mail and World Wide Web (WWW). Our interview partners perceive the Internet as a great challenge bearing a number of possibilities and advantages but also many risks that are still difficult to manage. It is above all the Internet’s interactive nature, the increased speed of communication, its ubiquity and its transparency that are responsible for those challenges.

#### **Interactivity**

The Internet’s network characteristic greatly facilitates the exchange and spread of information. Thus, the dimensions one-to-one and many-to-many are greatly facilitated through the new technologies (Hurme, 2001). However, these new possibilities for dialogue and interactivity are also viewed with some scepticism. Some interviewees mentioned a greatly increased number of requests via e-mail, the processing of which is an enormous challenge. Bi-directional online communication is still perceived as something that will happen, but not yet: “In the future we will have to communicate faster and bi-directionally” (interview quote). The Internet greatly facilitates the diffusion of knowledge among stakeholders with various interests in

the company – be it products, shares, or employment. Most of this interaction is out of a company’s control. Monitoring discussions on the Internet is a topic for some; yet companies feel rather ill prepared: “We do watch what is going-on on the Internet. Yet, I have the impression that we are not prepared enough for discussions on the Internet because we haven’t got the right tools. We are still too much focused on classical media” (interview quote).

#### **Speed**

Most frequently mentioned as one of the greatest challenges is the greatly enhanced speed of communication and dissemination of information. This has the obvious advantage that “breaking news can now be communicated a lot faster” (interview quote). Also positively mentioned was the fact that the flow of information can to a certain extent be accelerated through averting many inquiries for general information which can now be gathered through the company’s Web site. Nevertheless, “the increasing speed of information production as well as the growing demand for information is the greatest challenge at the moment. The problem lies in ensuring information quality, that is the internal validation of content” (interview quote). A survey by IMT Strategies (2000) revealed similar results in that more than 60 percent of the respondents stated that increased speed had a negative impact on public relations. Apart from communicating low quality information, interviewees mentioned the danger of hoaxes that can now spread in a matter of seconds.

#### **Ubiquity**

The ubiquitous nature of the Internet allows companies to communicate their operations world-wide to a much larger audience. The Web presence of a company can be accessed anytime and anywhere by everybody who has Internet access. This requires harmonisation of communication in order to avoid contradictions. In the positive case, this leads to more internal co-ordination concerning mode and content of communication: “Now, we are a lot more forced to harmonise our communication. What has not worked for decades is suddenly possible now” (interview quote). It furthermore demands clear assignment of responsibilities: “Everybody can now communicate with a world audience

without having a clue. This can cause severe legal consequences. You have to assign clear competencies, who can release what and when” (interview quote). A special aspect is the world-wide access to Internet brokerage which leads to an increasing and increasingly global base of private shareholders. In pre-WWW times private shareholders received their information through banks and buy-side analysts. Today they also potentially have the possibility to communicate directly with the companies they hold shares in. Most companies have not yet installed sufficient possibilities for online communication with their private shareholders.

### Transparency

The possibility for every stakeholder to access almost any information directed at other stakeholder groups – for example customers or activists accessing investor information – has led to much greater transparency than ever before. Today, a customer interested in buying Siemens products from the Siemens online mall can at the same time check the development of the company’s stock price, look at the recent press releases, and find out about job openings. The consequences of these new possibilities are evident: any contradiction in what is being communicated to different stakeholder groups can be unveiled without a person having to undertake great efforts. Apart from information conveyed by the company itself, transparency is furthermore enhanced by a plethora of other Internet sources like independent sites for corporate information (e.g. [www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com)), consumer communities (e.g. [www.gomez.com](http://www.gomez.com)), anti-corporate sites (e.g. [www.mcspotlight.org](http://www.mcspotlight.org) or [www.chasebanksucks.com](http://www.chasebanksucks.com)), discussions in newsgroups and many more.

### Necessity for integration

Against this background of current developments and challenges being faced by large companies, we consider the necessity for an integrated management approach to corporate branding. We deduce this conclusion from the following reasoning: stakeholder groups like above all the financial community and future as well as current employees have gained at least equal importance for large companies as their

customers. Particularly for the financial community and for employees, the corporate brand image is a significant driver for appreciation yet it is also influenced by a company’s product brands which play an important role for a company’s reputation (Fombrun *et al.*, 2000). On the other hand the corporate brand image can also be a decisive influencing factor for a company’s customers. The encouragement for creating communication synergies between the brands becomes obvious. Furthermore, it is the development towards greater transparency which drives the necessity for more integration. Stakeholders gain more insight into a company’s actions and a more differentiated image of a company in general. This increases the danger of their detecting possible inconsistencies and contradictions which can inhibit the formation of a coherent corporate brand image and favourable reputation.

The factors that drive greater integration we have unveiled in our research must be seen in addition to those discussed in the marketing literature, which are above all the growing number of communication instruments, communicators, and brands, the fragmentation of media, and an information overload on the part of the recipients (e.g. Bruhn, 2000). Nevertheless, our findings broaden the scope of integration incitements as they demand integration across all functions concerned with stakeholder relations. Therefore, we propose a stronger integration between the various functions concerned with stakeholder relations.

### Integrated corporate brand management

From the management perspective integrated corporate brand management takes place on four levels (e.g. Staehle, 1990): planning, organising, guiding, and controlling. In the following we want to concentrate on the organisational set-up of communication functions. Organisation exerts a great influence on how well co-ordination can work and it can be perceived as one important prerequisite for good planning and guiding and therefore holds an important role within management.

In our interviews, we also addressed the topic of how functions responsible for relating with stakeholders are organised within the

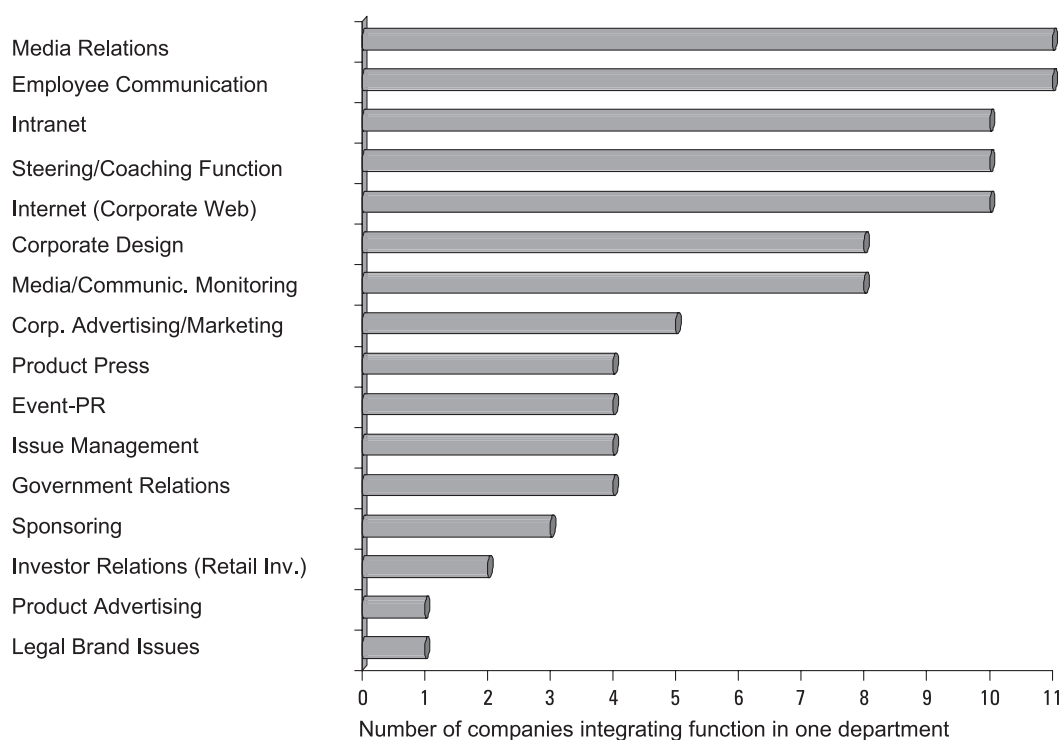
companies. We mainly concentrated on the organisation of corporate communication functions. Models of organising differed greatly between companies, ranging from corporate communication headquarter units with large staffs of around 150 employees where almost any working area of communication was integrated to models where work was divided among as little as three to ten people. Figure 1 displays the degree of integration of functions of communication within one department.

Our findings match those of surveys conducted by the Ashridge Strategic Management Centre (ASMC) on the size and structure of corporate headquarter staffs (of which corporate communication is only one part). A major finding of the ASMC study was that the size of corporate headquarters varied from about ten to well over 1,000 for companies with 10,000 employees in total. These differences are said to reflect different views about the right role and responsibilities of headquarters (Goold *et al.*, 2001). In our research, we could also observe that the size of the headquarter communication department was largely dependent on the corporate philosophy of centralisation versus autonomy of business units. Furthermore, views diverged concerning the integration and similarity of marketing and corporate communication

functions, ranging from “Communication is communication, whether it is marketing or for example financial communication. The principles of communication apply for a product in the same way as for a deal or for the annual results” (interview quote) to “Marketing and corporate communication are related yet have very different tasks to fulfil . . . Therefore, we clearly separate these fields” (interview quote).

The ASMC surveys have shown that large headquarters staffs are not generally rated more effective than small ones (Goold *et al.*, 2001). It is rather the skills of the staffs and the value-added from their activities that matter more. Nevertheless, in communication where one major goal should be the coherence of messages conveyed, a stronger integration of the various functions involved seems more likely to actually lead to this desired result than scattering functions throughout the organisation. As has been stated by one of our interview partners: “You can decentralise everything but not communication” (interview quote). One aspect that often accompanies wide distribution of functions across units within companies is that there is no one person or function that has sole responsibility for corporate reputation. In a survey among 32

**Figure 1** Integration of communication functions (empirical results)



*Fortune* 100 companies the reputation management firm Weber Shandwick revealed that none of those companies had a single executive solely responsible for the overall reputation function. Instead, efforts to shape reputation with the key constituencies were scattered to as many as nine different departments (cited in Barnett *et al.*, 2000). A previous study by our centre revealed similar results concerning the degree of integration (Will *et al.*, 1999).

**Proposed model for organisation: combined centralisation and team organisation**

For corporate branding to achieve desired outcomes we purport that an integration in organisation is most promising. This does not necessarily imply that all functions must be integrated in one single department.

Depending on the corporate culture and philosophy this could be counterproductive, particularly if the corporate culture is one of entrepreneurship and autonomy. We propose a combination of centralisation and team organisation to work best in order to achieve good co-ordination and desired results (see Figure 2). In this model, the functions that are most central to corporate communication should be centralised in one department.

These functions are:

- internal communication;

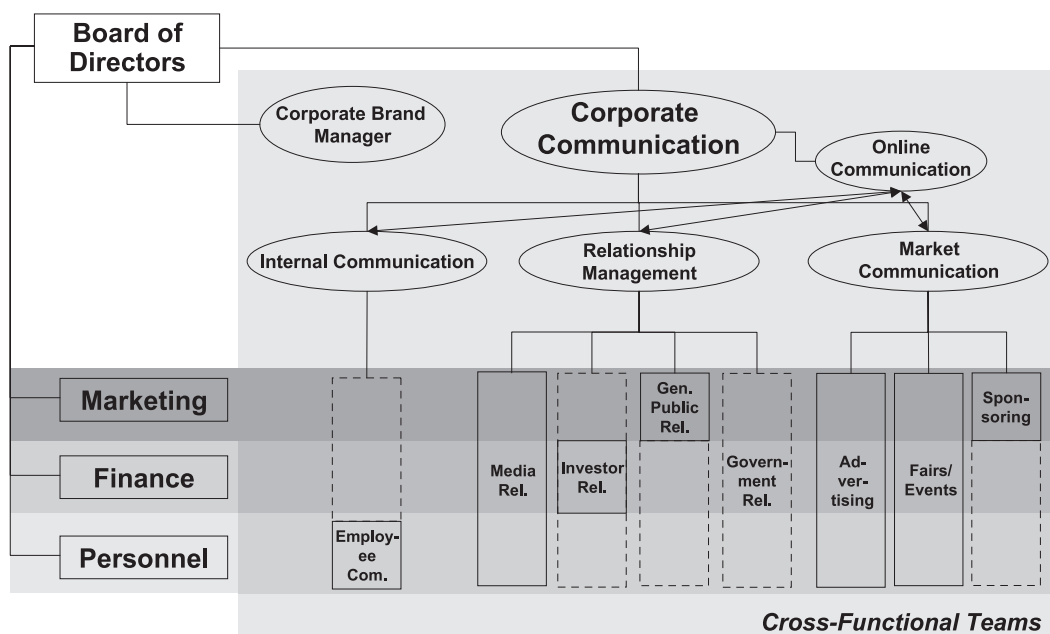
- the relations with non-customer stakeholders, that is the media, investors, the general public, and governments; and
- central functions of market communication, like corporate design, corporate advertising, corporate events, and corporate sponsoring.

Online communication because of its relevance for all functions should hold a cross-functional position. The department for corporate communication should be attached to the board of directors and report directly to the CEO. In fact, a direct line of reporting of corporate communication to the CEO exists in all 11 companies we interviewed.

Most uncommon might be our suggestion for integrating investor relations in the corporate communication department or – at least – establishing strongest links in the form of permanent cross-functional teams. This claim is based on the fact that investor relations need to strongly communicate strategic orientation, future prospects, the vision and management’s capabilities apart from bottom-line facts and figures (Will and Wolters, 2001). To date, investor relations is in most companies traditionally part of the finance department. In two of the companies we interviewed, relations with retail investors were part of corporate communication.

In addition to those functions integrated in one corporate communication department, we suggest to install permanent as well as temporary teams that foster integration and

**Figure 2** Combined centralisation and team organisation model of communication



co-ordination particularly between corporate communication and the other units or departments that maintain stakeholder relations and exert influence on the corporate brand image (on team organisation see for example Katzenbach and Smith (1993) or Mintzberg (1979)). Cross-functional teams that work together on a permanent basis should be established in any case between corporate communication and marketing, finance, and personnel. Particularly the integration with product branding bears greatest challenges, because marketing traditionally claims superiority when it comes to the issue of branding. Nevertheless, corporate branding needs to integrate all of a company's stakeholder relations which can best take place on the corporate level.

Advantages of cross-functional teams are improved communication and co-ordination, motivation, and better internal understanding to counteract "departmentalism", and enhanced support of and identification with results. Possible disadvantages of cross-functional teams are unclear responsibilities and decision making power. To counteract these disadvantages and to emphasise the significance of corporate branding for the company, a special function should be installed. This function should be responsible for guiding the teams, and overlook all activities that exert an influence on the corporate reputation, in short "watch over the company's intangible assets" (Fombrun, 1996, p. 197). This function could be incumbent upon the head of corporate communication, yet in order to avoid conflicts of interest, the "corporate brand manager", or "chief reputation officer" as Fombrun calls this position, should most optimally hold an independent position and report directly to the CEO.

In order to steer corporate branding activities world-wide and co-ordinate messages and performance also with representatives around the world, central corporate communication should have a steering or coaching function. As our survey revealed, nearly all of the companies we interviewed reported that headquarter communication was coach or "steersman" for world-wide communication activities. Headquarters develop guidelines and frameworks for communication, yet ensuring that everybody follows those guidelines was

reported to often be difficult. Referring thereto,

... commitment also from middle management is needed in order to disperse the corporate brand spirit throughout the company. The problem is that our corporate philosophy is much too liberal; there are no sanctions if somebody rather likes to follow his own rules (interview quote).

Internal education on the advantages and methods of corporate branding is an effective way to move forward. Some of the companies in our survey actually offer internal courses on communication for non-communicators.

### Concluding remarks

Creating coherent corporate images in the minds of all corporate stakeholders is of vital importance against the background of current developments and challenges reported by the communication executives from the multinational corporations we interviewed. The narrow focus often applied when attending to the diverse stakeholder groups is not appropriate for meeting the challenges described above. One important step to arrive at more integration between the diverse functions responsible for stakeholder relations is applying an appropriate organisational model. Although every company needs to consider its organisational set-up of communication functions with regard to its culture, philosophy and history, a stronger integration through the installation of permanent as well as temporary teams is most promising for arriving at the ultimate goal, a favourable overall reputation. Furthermore, we support the integration of the most crucial functions of corporate communication in one department rather than scattering them around the organisation as well as installing a superordinate function of corporate brand manager.

Organisation is certainly only one aspect for meeting the challenges. Most important within the scope of corporate brand management is furthermore planning. A decisive definition of corporate values, for example in the form of a corporate brand identity system (see Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 1999), which communication executives can use as a guideline, needs to be set up. Or, as Van Riel (1995) proposes, representatives from various communication

functions should jointly develop so called “common starting points”, which can be considered as central values functioning as the basis for undertaking any kinds of communication envisaged by an organisation. Another management field that demands further research is the measurement of the results of the corporate branding process. To be able to install incentive mechanisms for managers to add value to the corporate brand their contributions need to be measured. Only then can bonus plans be made dependent on their contribution to the corporate brand.

Our research presented here could only cover a small aspect of this wide field of corporate branding and reputation management. It aimed to generate a better understanding of the current demands and challenges communicators within multinational corporations are facing today and in the near future as well as generating some ideas for better corporate brand management. Nevertheless, much research lies ahead in this important and complex field.

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