

Corporate Identity and Public Relations in the Hotel Industry

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Abstract : From the point of view of hospitality management, corporate identity is reported to constitute an undoubtedly significant corporate asset. However, the concept has received little attention from researchers in the field. One particularly neglected area concerns the way in which hospitality organisations reveal their identity through communication. In this connection this paper seeks to add a perspective by presenting the approach and main findings of an exploratory study of practitioner perceptions of corporate identity and related public communications (PR) activities in the hotel industry. The data presented in this study involve the examination of the views of the marketing directors of five-star hotel properties in Athens, Greece. Given the paucity of prior research in the area, an exploratory investigation was adopted. This was based on the use of a semi-structured interview schedule. The results suggest that the investigated hotels have to a certain extent taken on board the concept and practice of corporate identity communication as part of their PR work. Yet, confusion over the relevant terminology continues to rage and the concepts of corporate identity, image and reputation are treated as synonymous.

Keywords Corporate identity, Public relations, Hotel industry, Greece

Introduction

Management scholars argue that corporate identity is an essential part of powerful corporations. A strong corporate identity can differentiate a firm from its competitors (Dolphin 2004), significantly enhance financial performance (Cooper 1999), influence customer's buying behaviour (Nguyen and Leblanc 2001), and have a strong impact on stakeholder loyalty (Balmer 1995). However, while there is a great deal of evidence to show that organisations have become more interested in the benefits that management of the corporate identity might bring, much ambiguity exists as to how firms should do this (Van Riel 1995; Ruth and York 2004). One area characterised by such ambiguity is related to the way in which an organisation reveals its identity through communication, and in particular through the use of public relations (PR). Indeed, noticeably absent from relevant discussions has been any significant body of research concerning what corporations are actually doing in the way of adopting identity management as a separate and substantial aspect of PR (Hutton et al. 2001). Past studies have attempted to provide some

evidence regarding the ways in which firms can communicate their identity to key publics through PR, but most discussions have remained only theoretical (see Davies and Miles 1998; Hutton et al. 2001).

From the point of view of hospitality management, observation of leading chains around the globe has indicated that many of them frequently change their identity (Van Doorn and McCaskey 2003). Balmer and Gray (1999) note a number of environmental forces contributing to the increased number of changes made in corporate identity: acceleration of product life-cycles, deregulation, privatisation, increased competition, globalisation, mergers and acquisitions, and public expectations for corporate social responsiveness. In these factors, Herstein *et al.* (2007) see reasons for the increased interest of hotel chains in corporate identity: the need to differentiate due to increased competitive activity and rivalry, redefinition of marketing in terms of developing/maintaining relationships, and increasing recognition of the value of integrated marketing communications. Hales (1997) points out that implementation of a corporate identity strategy is also of increasing importance for stand-alone hotels. Indeed, with so many leading organisations claiming to offer excellent service and facilities, this can no longer offer sufficient differentiation (Morgan et al. 2003). As a result, the need for organisations to portray a unique identity is more critical than ever. As Nguyen (2006) argues, even for a tourist who has never visited a hotel, a particular place, or even a country, this identity is their first impression of the organisation and may have a great influence on buying intentions.

Yet, although identity emerges as an undoubtedly significant corporate asset, it has received relatively little attention from researchers in the hospitality sector. Related previous research has been more focused on the associated concept of image, while at the same time focusing on the destination rather than the corporate level (Hosany et al. 2006). With the exception of the work of Herstein et al. (2007), tourism and hospitality research is marked by the absence of any systematic effort to understand issues related to the way in which organisations communicate their corporate identity. This missing element has not gone unnoticed. Indeed, Oh et al. (2004) identify the paucity of corporate identity studies in the field. Having reviewed a total of 97 outputs in hospitality marketing research for the period of 2002-2003, they indicate that corporate identity did not emerge as a research topic in any of them. The same source suggests that only 2.1 percent of the reviewed studies has analysed issues related to PR.

Against this background, this paper presents the results of an exploratory study of perceptions of corporate identity and related PR activities among a sample

of marketing directors (MDs) of five-star city hotels in Athens (Greece). Hence, it offers insight into current practice *vis-à-vis* corporate identity communication at the top level, i.e. among marketing executives managerially responsible for communicating their hotel's corporate identity. Collected data were therefore based on privileged information, with key players in the field that were in a special position "to know". As well as contributing to knowledge about views and activities in this rapidly expanding area, the research also has a more general significance considering the enhanced role of PR recently observed in the hospitality industry, and the likelihood that fast changing market and business conditions are forcing hospitality organisations to re-examine the communication value of PR (Kotler et al. 2006). The study is very much a pioneering work in this field and uses the broader literature on corporate identity management and PR as a specific context in which to focus on relevant questions within the context of the hospitality industry.

Corporate identity and PR

The subject of corporate identity has attracted interest among marketing academics and practitioners over the last three decades. Following the work of practitioners, such as Bernstein (1984) and Olins (1990) and academics such as Topalian (1984) and Gray and Balmer (1998), among others, knowledge and understanding of the concept has grown considerably. Nevertheless, despite the increasing number of studies published in this area, defining corporate identity is a challenging task given that it is difficult to conceptualise (Dolphin 2004). This is confirmed by Davies (2003) who argues that because the study of corporate identity is relatively new, some of its terminology has yet to be standardised. It is therefore the aim of this section to review viewpoints in the literature regarding what is actually meant by the term corporate identity, in an attempt to clarify the concept.

The review of the relevant literature has indicated that throughout the years definitions offered for the term corporate identity by marketing academics and practitioners can broadly be merged into three dominant views. These are the graphic design paradigm, the integrated communications paradigm, and the interdisciplinary paradigm. Referring to the first view, a number of authors define the term corporate identity in a way that appears synonymous with tangible imagery. The following quote captures the essence of this view:

"Corporate identity is the outward manifestation of the organisation ... It includes the corporate logo, but it also includes the house style use on its letterheads and corporate publications, interior and exterior design of buildings, staff uniforms and vehicle livery, and packaging and products". (Blythe 2000: 112)

This view of corporate identity as a visual means of identification is mainly based on the assumption that visual elements are memorable and their recognition level can be very high (Balmer and Wilson 1998). For example, McDonald's golden arches are recognised worldwide. From a similar perspective, Baines et al. (2004) note that the most splendid liveries of modern companies have been those of airlines and that livery is one of the most effective ways of establishing corporate identity.

The second dominant view believes that organisations should be focusing on the way in which they reveal a consistent identity through a planned communication scheme. By adopting Van Riel and Balmer's (1997) perspective, consistency in communication should be used by organisations in order to develop a coherent sense of self and deliver it to their stakeholders. This view is shared by Markwick and Fill (1995) who note that these planned communications should be orchestrated so that consistent messages about the organisation are delivered to specific target audiences. According to Gray and Balmer (1998), the methods of these communications should be defined in the broadest possible sense because stakeholders are influenced in many ways. Thus, they may include almost everything, from the way telephones are answered to the design of corporate buildings and their interior layout. For instance, even the corridor lampshades in a Hilton hotel conform to the Hilton corporate identity scheme, as do the serviettes on most airlines.

Within the broad purview of writings in the third dominant view, authors typically seek to transfer the attention of researchers on corporate identity from concern for visual representation and communication alone to a more balanced consideration of the concept. At issue is the proposition that the use of visual cues alone can be misleading and, in order to understand an organisation at a deeper level, other cues must also be taken into consideration (Van Riel and Balmer 1997). The perspective is well expressed in a statement by Markwick and Fill (1995: 397):

“Corporate identity is projected to stakeholders using a variety of cues ... Some of these cues will constitute the organisation's visual identity. Other cues will focus on behaviour, the actions of the organisation and other forms of communication”.

Howard (1998: 141) also adopts a similar perspective and uses the term corporate identity to “encompass all the ways a company identifies itself”. In a similar vein, Van Riel (1995) observes that corporate identity refers to the self-

presentation of an organisation and thus consists of the cues that it offers via its symbols, communications, and other signals. However, at the same time, unintentional or emergent messages are also being transmitted (Van Riel 1995). For example, within the context of the hospitality industry, a service that fails to deliver the expected quality could counteract the impact of any planned cues. In this regard, it is the totality of these identity cues that an organisation uses either deliberately or accidentally to present itself that serves as the theoretical ideal unit of inquiry for the interdisciplinary paradigm researcher.

As the discussion above suggests, corporate identity is the reality of the corporation. It refers to the organisation's presentation of itself to its various stakeholders and thus consists of the cues that it offers via its symbols, communications and other signals (Balmer 1998). This is not the same as corporate "image", which involves the knowledge, feelings and beliefs about an organisation that exist in the thoughts of its audiences based on these cues (Hatch and Schultz 1997). Image, therefore, exists in the mind of each stakeholder and for this it cannot be managed directly. Rather, management seeking to influence the images held of their organisation can only achieve this through the management of corporate identity (Markwick and Fill 1995). By communicating coordinated identity cues, images may be altered in the minds of recipients.

A substantial amount of academic research has been completed into how organisations manage their identities. Investigations have focused both on corporate policies relating to corporate identity management and on the corporate communications strategies employed by organisations engaged in identity management (e.g. Topalian 1984; Olins 1990; Markwick and Fill 1995; Van Riel 1995; McMillan and Joshi 1997; Van Riel and Balmer 1997; Balmer 1998; Balmer and Wilson 1998). In contrast, research into how identity issues are seen by the marketing and PR executives which service the corporate sector has been sparse: a disturbing fact as general marketing and PR work recognises that PR is a critical link between the corporate identity of an organisation and its various stakeholders. Adcock *et al.* (2001: 327), for instance, suggest that "improving public awareness of the company's corporate identity" is a major aspect of PR activities. According to Rossiter and Percy (1998), moreover, other communication activities are less widely and less broadly applicable than corporate identity and PR, which are activities that all companies undertake, whether in a planned way or not. Hutton *et al.* (2001) also qualify this point when they observe that if the building of corporate identity is to emerge as a significant business function, it should rest on a foundation of what is traditionally termed PR. Graff (1981: 17), considering the idea of identity,

called it “a phenomenon of public relations”. From the particular perspective of hospitality management, Herstein et al. (2007) argue that PR activities are a crucial corporate identity communication channel and provide supporting evidence from a case study of the largest hotel management company in Israel. PR, therefore, is seen as a necessary element of corporate identity communication.

The study

The data presented here involve the examination of the views of the MDs of five-star hotel properties in Athens. The sampling frame thus excludes smaller hotels from the lower star categories, even though they represent the majority of the industry. Desk research prior to design of the study found that those hotels made minimal use of corporate identity management. Moreover, they typically did not maintain an autonomous marketing department but left marketing as the responsibility of the general manager or, in the case of those with 20 beds or fewer, the owner. The findings reported here thus reflect the practice of a numerically small but operationally important subset of the sampling universe.

Given the paucity of prior research in the area, an exploratory investigation was deemed appropriate. Exploratory studies are suitable for “making probes for circumscription, description and interpretation of less well understood topics” (Johnson 1998: 139) and where relatively little is known about a subject (Churchill 1991). Accordingly, the aim of the study was to establish frameworks for future analysis, rather than to specify and test particular hypotheses *per se*.

In the absence of a validated instrument for exploring perceptions of corporate identity and related PR activities, the researchers had to develop one anew. For the purpose of this case, the advice of Churchill (1979) was followed, by first defining the domain of the constructs to be measured on the basis of relevant work, as reported mainly by Olins (1990), Van Riel and Balmer (1997), Adcock et al. (2001) and Baines et al. (2004). Having done so, a preliminary semi-structured interview schedule was developed, which benefited from the use of both open and closed questions. This enabled the researchers to frame a clear vision of the boundaries to the investigated topic without constraining respondents from developing their ideas on the raised issues. Semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate, as they are regarded as a significant data component of exploratory inquiry (Carson et al. 2001) and in addition they provide a well-suited method for smaller-scale exploratory research (Williams 2003).

The interview schedule was pre-tested by consultation with a panel of academic experts in the PR and hospitality fields plus executives in three leading

Greek marketing consultancies, one of which specialised in tourism and hospitality marketing. The results indicated the need for only minor amendments. The eventual interview schedule comprised three sections. The first part collected some basic information concerning the hotels' marketing department and the extent to which they undertook dedicated corporate identity work. The second section queried the use of PR activities for communicating corporate identity. The final section gathered respondents' views on the role of corporate identity within their own organisations and explored their perceptions and opinions regarding corporate identity generally.

Potential respondents were selected from the Attica Hotel Association Directory (2007). The directory contains reliable data on more than 200 hotels, located in the city of Athens, Athens suburbs, Athens coast, Piraeus and the rest of Attica prefecture. The sampling frame extracted from the directory comprised 16 hotels situated in the city-centre of Athens, classified as five-star. These organisations were contacted by telephone to explain the research project and determine whether their MDs would be prepared to participate in the study. Fifteen of the sixteen MDs agreed to participate in the study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted under the condition of confidentiality and thus no data on individual hotels or MDs are reported.

Findings

One-third of the hotels' marketing departments spent less than 10 per cent of their time on identity management; six departments spent between 11 per cent and twenty per cent on the activity. Only three departments devoted more than half of their time to identity matters, and just two departments had a separate person solely employed on corporate identity management.

All respondents claimed to use a number of PR activities for the communication of corporate identity. The commonest activity reported by all respondents was the use of audiovisual material. Audiovisual materials, such as videos, are sent to prospective customers to highlight the services and amenities offered by the hotels. Eight respondents recorded their involvement in press releases, press relations and sponsorship activities. Generally, press releases are used to convey informative messages to target audiences about individual services and products. Press relations are undertaken by placing newsworthy information into the media to attract attention to the hotels' services. Another related common practice is to invite members of the press to stay at the hotel for a night, to dine in the restaurant, and enjoy the facilities of the hotel. The purpose of this is to

cultivate good relations with media correspondents and consequently get favourable coverage in the press. Sponsorship mostly takes the form of financial support for sport and cultural events. Four MDs reported conducting PR activities using the Internet. These include product and service information, and press releases. The least reported activity (two respondents) was counseling as directed at issues of environmental conservation, i.e. the actions taken to protect the environment.

Commenting on the major stakeholders targeted by these PR activities, all respondents indicated that these are holidaymakers and corporate customers. This customer orientation is also mirrored in the PR objectives of respondent hotels, as these encapsulate the basic philosophy underpinning corporate identity communication. These were defined by all respondents as informing potential customers about the hotel's identity; persuading customers to think or act in ways that benefit the organisation; and keeping existing customers aware of the organisation's identity. Interestingly, these objectives represent three distinct orientations of PR practice as exemplified by Hutton (1999): information, persuasion, and reminder.

Responses to section 3 indicated a division of opinion on whether Greek hotels are generally uninterested in identity management. Seven respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this proposition, eight respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Nevertheless, a clear majority (ten respondents) agreed/strongly agreed that the Greek hotel industry will increasingly turn its attention to corporate identity management in the future. There was general consensus that corporate identity is as vital an ingredient of business as accounting, marketing etc., with nine respondents agreeing/strongly agreeing with the proposition. However, only five respondents reported switches of PR expenditures towards identity at the expense of other PR activities. Opinions differed regarding whether managing corporate identity is basically the same as managing corporate image. Seven respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this proposition, while six respondents held the opposite view. It was the case nonetheless that the majority of respondents distinguished corporate identity work from other PR activities.

A clear majority of twelve MDs either disagreed or strongly disagreed that their department is generally uninterested in corporate identity. On the other hand, respondents were less complimentary about their departments' ability to undertake effectively corporate identity work. Only four respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposition that their department lacks the expertise necessary to communicate effectively the hotel's corporate identity. However, the

majority of MDs indicated that they were reluctant to employ extra staff to implement corporate identity communications more effectively. Likewise, a majority of respondents believed that their department is so committed to enhancing other marketing activities, that identity work takes a back seat (ten respondents in favour of this proposition, four against and one having no firm opinion).

Conclusions

The results suggest that five-star city hotels in Athens have, to a certain extent, taken on board the concept and practice of corporate identity communication as part of their PR work. There was widespread support for the propositions that corporate identity communication is a vital ingredient of business, distinct from other PR activities, and that the Greek hotel industry will increasingly turn its attention to corporate identity management in the future. On the other hand, the responses indicated a number of barriers to the adoption of corporate identity. These concern a lack of expertise within marketing departments, deep attachment to the enhancement of other marketing activities at the expense of identity work, and a reluctance to employ extra staff to implement identity communications more effectively.

In general, this work is primarily based on the use of audiovisual material, and to a lesser extent on press releases, press relations and sponsorship activities. These are mostly directed at individual services and products. However, PR activities do not only aim to position a company's products and services in the market. PR activities which are directed at company recognition and familiarity rather than individual products/services, contribute to communication of a company's identity (Karaosmanoglu and Melewar 2006). In this connection, there is a question regarding the dissemination of essential identity cues of respondent hotels to the communication process, and consequently of the effectiveness of PR to achieve exposure of a favourable corporate identity. Also taking into account the particular emphasis placed on audiovisual material, this evidence suggests that corporate identity is perhaps narrowly conceived by respondents, with undue emphasis being accorded to tangible imagery (i.e. graphic design paradigm).

Another implication of the present study is that the investigated hotels are calling for market-centric PR. This is evident throughout the study's findings. In all hotels, the PR function is handled by the marketing department; PR activities are aimed at customers; and customers were identified as the hotels' major stakeholders. In this context, PR becomes a communication tool that will work in synergy with others to achieve previously defined marketing objectives. When

seen from this perspective. PR activities are related to marketing objectives in regard of sales volume and customer satisfaction (Lages and Simkin 2003). PR, however, is concerned with a much wider range of communication objectives, not necessarily directed towards sales transactions (Brassington and Pettitt 2000). For example, Herstein et al. (2007) point out that an organisation's PR system as a source of corporate identity communication, plays a major role in directing employees' perception of the organisation's business policies and social values. The increased interest attracted by the subject of corporate identity among marketing academics and practitioners may perhaps encourage marketers to consider the longer-term corporate input possible from PR.

One final conclusion from the themes emerging in this study is that there is frequent misunderstanding between study respondents of the terms identity and image. This, of course, is not a surprising finding. As Dolphin (2004: 78) has argued, "confusion has raged over the last 40 years as to whether image and identity are synonymous, or whether they differ starkly". In this connection, there is a useful role for the academic community to spread contemporary academic interpretations of and approaches towards identity management among senior PR practitioners. Further research is required into the mechanisms whereby academic developments relating to corporate identity are disseminated to PR executives "in the field".

Over and above these, however, the wider significance of this research is that it is one of only a small number of inquiries into the use of PR as a source of corporate identity communication. At a time when academics and practitioners alike have an increasing awareness of the value of corporate identity, this study will interest all those concerned with corporate identity, organisational communications, and hospitality scholars and practitioners of PR in particular. The authors hope that this article has made a contribution to the general discussion regarding corporate identity and PR.

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