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Understanding organisational expression: How brand marks change over time.

Purpose

Corporate brand marks, often referred to as logos, are widely considered to be devices for expressing organisational strategy through the language of visual design (Allen and Simmons, 2003; Olins, 1989, 1995). Yet the creation of such devices remains one of the least understood aspects of corporate branding. This is surprising given the potential pitfalls associated with creating and modifying the visual identities of corporate brands (e.g. British Airways' rebranding fiasco and their shift in emphasis from a values-based expression to a vision-orientated expression). This paper suggests that in order to avoid such branding errors we need to examine how past cases have prioritised brand expression in relation to specific contexts. Therefore the aim of this paper is to examine what types of expressions have occurred over time and explore the significant factors leading to their prioritisation.

Theoretical background

The design of a brand mark is one of the activities in corporate branding that seems to receive a disproportionate amount of public criticism. Yet scholars have directed relatively little attention to this aspect of corporate branding. Studies that have dealt with brand marks have generally focused on either visual consistency (Melewar and Saunders, 1999, 2000; Van den Bosch, et al, 2004), or have examined recipient effectiveness, such as recognition, recall and memorability (Henderson and Cote, 1998), or have typically address component parts, such

as colour (Hynes, 2009) and brand names (Klink, 2003). Consequently less attention has been directed to the aggregate brand expression and how this relates to the underlying brand strategy. As such there appears to be a disconnection in the literature between the strategies of corporate brands and the strategic expression of corporate brands, via the brand mark device.

Our notion of how corporate brands are defined has changed over time. Corporate personality was considered to be the defining characteristic of large organisations (Olins, 1978; Bernstein, 1984). This view reflected the preoccupation with the internal perspective of corporate identity, which, following the convergence of the notion of corporate identity with the branding conceptualisation, subsequently migrated to an externally-orientated view (Knox, and Bickerton, 2003). The convergence of the two domains led corporate brands to place emphasis on identifying and expressing a competitive advantage and the concept of differentiation (Balmer, 2001; Murphy, 1990; Olins, 1989, 1995). Meanwhile other scholars characterised corporate branding as being a values and vision-orientated activity (Balmer, 2001; Balmer, and Soenen, 1999; David, 1989; Hooley, et al, 1992). Whilst corporate branding can be based on any of the aforementioned characteristics, there is no research to date that connects these different strategic dimensions to specific brand mark expressions. Yet it can be seen from cases such as BP and British Airways that public criticism of branding programmes is primarily in response to the explicit nature of brand mark expressions rather than the underpinning brand strategies. As such, a greater understanding of brand mark expressions would contribute to the corporate branding literature. The aim, therefore, is that if we can understand from previous cases which expressions have been prioritised and why, we would be better informed and be better equipped to predict which expressions would be better suited at any particular organisational circumstance.

Methodology

This study sought to capture the visual expressions of prominent corporate brand marks in accordance with an earlier outlined conceptual framework (see Marsden, 2015). In order to capture the maximum variation of expressions, a sample of 100 cases were identified from over a 50-year period of time (20 cases from every decade commencing from the 1960s). The cases were selected according to the following criteria: First, cases had to be primarily corporate brands, not product brands. Second, cases had to be monolithic, i.e., visually independent and therefore free of any endorsement by a parent organisation. Third, cases must have involved professional design intervention. Fourth, cases had to have sufficient explanatory documentation publicly available to enable the author to conduct a content analysis of the descriptive accounts.

The author examined 243 documents, primarily consisting of consultancy descriptions of the brand and the intended expressions of the design(s). The analysis of archival data sought to identify explicit references of the intentions embedded within the design of the respective brand mark from each of the 100 cases. The emergent themes from each case were subsequently classified into one of five groupings: (i) Origin/Ownership expressions, (ii) Activity expressions, (iii) Values expressions, (iv) Vision expressions, and (v) Nonstandard expressions. In addition to these groupings, key issues surrounding each case were identified and noted in a bid to provide a richer context of the branding activity (i.e., consultancy responsible for the design input, drivers of branding activity, year of brand activity, etc).

Findings

The analysis of brand activity revealed that brand marks had made a shift from being devices for expressing functional dimensions to being devices for expressing strategic dimensions. In the earlier periods of activity emphasis was placed on the expression of ownership, origin and categorical activity, whereas in later periods greater emphasis was placed on the expression of corporate values and strategic vision. Key to this transition, it seems, was the level of awareness held by a corporation's key stakeholders. In other words, in situations where a primary audience had limited knowledge of an organisation, functional expressions were typically prioritised. By contrast, in situations where a primary audience had a more developed knowledge of an organisation, strategic expressions were typically prioritised.

In addition to this shift in emphasis, the design of corporate brand marks became increasingly more expressive over time. In the earlier decades cases, on average, expressed two types of expression whereas in the later decades cases expressed between three-to-four types of expression. However whilst brand marks were becoming increasingly expressive, they were also becoming more expressively economical. The more recent cases (1990s to the 2000s) featured brand marks that signalled a distinct move towards the design of marks that were less tautological than earlier marks.

A further factor in this transition can be explained by the changing constitution of brand identity council. Individual designers conducted the majority of cases in the 1960s, whereas in the 2000s there were no individual designers responsible for any of the sample of cases. The migration from an individual, strictly design-orientated activity to a team-orientated

multi-disciplinary activity reflects the broader remit of corporate brand activity and the increasingly strategic nature of the activity.

Theoretical implications

The implications are that for newer organisations, where awareness of activities is likely to be low, organisations are better served pursuing functional expressions, whereas established organisations are better served emphasizing strategic expressions. Furthermore organisational activity influences the prioritisation of brand mark expression in two ways: directly and indirectly. Direct influence of activity occurs in the formative years because it provides a foundation for organisational definition; indirect influence occurs when organisations expand and possibly diversify their activities and therefore it becomes increasingly difficult to express the scope of diversified activities, consequently emphasis is placed on the connections of the range of organisational activities.

These initial findings contribute to previous literature from Olins (1989, 1995) by making more distinct connections between visual design and brand strategy. Furthermore this study extends beyond the notions of brand recognition and recall (Henderson and Cote, 1998) and isolated brand identity components, such as colour (Hynes, 2009) and brand names (Klink, 2003) by considering the gestalt of brand mark expression rather than individual and dependent associations of corporate brand marks. The benefit of this approach is that by understanding the links between strategy and expression, our understanding of brand alignment becomes more complete.

Practical implications

The findings presented in this study have two direct implications for practitioners and the education of practitioners. First, there is a need to consider the primary stakeholder's existing awareness of an organisation when selecting the most appropriate and relevant brand mark expression. Second, the primary stakeholder's awareness is to some extent connected to the degree of abstraction in the design of the brand name and the brand mark.

Limitations

This research was restricted to corporate brands, and therefore these findings are less relevant to the product-level brand identity domain. Furthermore the sample of cases used in this study was predominantly constituted by western brands and therefore this research presents a western viewpoint of brand mark construction.

Originality/value

This study is unique in that it features one of the least understood components of corporate branding. In particular this study has offered a brief, preliminary account of a key component in the prioritisation of a brand expression in a corporate branding programme.

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