The management of corporate personality: An IMC perspective

The symmetry between internal marketing and external marketing communications has been of interest in the Integrated Marketing Communications literature for some time. Kliatchko (2008) states that the culture of marketing needs to be communicated internally at all levels of the organsation including areas outside of the marketing domain such as HR and Finance. Fill (2009) talks about employees 'living the brand'. The purpose of this is to ensure that an organisation is communicating the same values and culture internally and externally (Luck and Moffatt, 2009). However Laurie and Mortimer (2011) discovered that one of the main differences between IMC theory and practice was that practitioners placed less emphasis on the role of internal communications.

The purpose of this study is to examine how corporate personality and culture is managed internally and externally in the UK communications industry. This industry is currently going through fundamental changes due to the influence of digital media and the development of integrated marketing communications (KeyNote, 2012). Although much is written about the industry and how it is changing in publications such as Campaign and Brand Republic, the author is unaware of any studies that have applied the academic theories of corporate personality and corporate identity to this particular industry. Such a study is worthwhile in that, not only does it provide an insight into how corporate personality is utilised in a highly competitive industry to achieve differentiation, but it also provides a picture of how these agencies may approach this issue when working with clients. Do they "practice what they preach", in terms of IMC, or say one thing to clients and do another themselves.

Corporate personality

Corporate personality has been defined by Fill (2009) as the main contributor to corporate identity which is described by Fill and Roper (2012) as the way an organisation is presented and differentiated. Just as individuals have personalities, so do organisations and just like individuals, organisations may have different personalities. Corporate personality is what gives a business identity its distinctiveness and relates to the attitudes and beliefs of those within the organisation (Balmer, 2001). There is a variety of opinions on the elements constituting a corporate personality. The majority of writers identify corporate culture as being the main element of corporate personality and almost synonymous to the concept (Balmer , 2001; Balmer and Greyser , 2006) . However, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) debate that corporate personality is a reflection of strategy as much as culture and is based on both mission and values of an organisation. Fill and Roper (2012) summarised these two opinions by stating that the two key facets of corporate personality are the corporate culture that may already exist within the organisation created by like-minded people working together and/or a clear planned strategy to create a certain culture. Both of these constructs will therefore be examined.

Even though corporate culture is a widely discussed topic, academics still argue about its components. Fill and Roper (2012) simply define corporate culture as "the way we do things around here". Greenberg and Baron (1997) provide more detailed explanation where corporate culture consists of the way an organisation operates in terms of its behaviour, how it treats people and its expectations. Van Riel and Balmer (1997), on the other hand, suggest that corporate culture is guided by the beliefs within an organisation. Organisational values and beliefs are seen by some as being the clearest manifestation of culture (Parker & Bradley, 2000; Temporal, 2010). Furthermore, values have critical importance to the corporate brand as it is a clear point of differentiation (Fill and Roper, 2012). Values can be expressed externally and be a unifying force internally. When employees identify with the culture, the

work environment tends to be more enjoyable, which leads to increased levels of teamwork. This is further emphasised as a competitive advantage by Deal and Kennedy (1982) who reports that consistently high performance is a trait of companies with strong cultures.

If one agrees that corporate personality just evolves from the type of people who are working in the company, this then implies that it cannot be managed but needs to be intuitive (Olins , 1995). However, Balmer and Gray (1999) argue that companies have to think strategically about their company´s identity and how it is being communicated. Competitive advantage can only be achieved if businesses apply the corporate personality elements strategically to everything they do. Temporal (2010) agrees with this, stating that corporate personality has to be very carefully defined not just at the higher levels, but be understandable and brought to life by every employee, which is only possible if employees know how to apply the values to their own job. Internal corporate communications can be utilised to teach staff how to behave within the firm and the same values can then be communicated to others through corporate communications, the overall purpose of which being to establish favourable reputations with all stakeholders (Fill and Roper, 2012). Ingenhoff and Fuhrer (2010) suggest that companies choose to communicate corporate personality traits with external audiences through various symbolic cues such as positive publicity, social responsibility and corporate policy. Considering the fast development of digital media, these statements are often included in an organisation's website that creates online corporate personality (Ingenhoff and Fuhrer, 2010).

The two main components of corporate strategy are corporate mission and vision. Vision is more forward looking than mission and specifies the desired status of the company in the future (Ingenhoff and Fuhrer, 2010). While mission and vision are often referred to as internal management tools (Ingenhoff and Fuhrer, 2010), according to Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) it is also related to differentiation and positioning strategy. Fill and Roper (2012) suggest that if an organisation can produce a coherent mission statement it has a necessary strategic and operational expertise. If this mission and vision is understood and carried out by all employees, it can increase competitive advantage of an organisation. Indeed, they propose that effective management of corporate identity results in a favourable corporate image, which will result in a positive corporate reputation. A similar outcome is presented in earlier work by Fill and Markwich (1997) who developed the Corporate Identity Management Process (CIMP) which is based on three elements - corporate personality, corporate identity and corporate image/reputation, which are connected by linkages of both internal and external communications. A strong identity and personality leads to a unity of opinion between the employees and other publics, and further helps in developing positive corporate reputation which leads to a competitive position (Ingenhoff and Fuhrer, 2010).

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the relationship between these various constructs and how corporate personality manifests itself in the UK communications industry. More specifically it will explore how:

1. Corporate personality is developed through corporate strategy
2. Corporate personality is communicated internally and externally
3. Corporate personality is utilised as a positioning strategy to provide a competitive advantage of competition.

Methodology

The primary research consisted of two elements. Firstly, to establish how advertising agencies were presenting themselves to their external stakeholders, a content analysis of their

corporate websites was undertaken. Content analysis is a popular and reputable research tool (Cutler and Javalgi, 1992), which facilitates the observation of marketing communications and can provide scientific rigour to the data generated (Kassarjian 1977). Websites were chosen as it was expected that they would present a strong corporate identity and have been recognised as an important connection with the customers (Rocha, 2011).

The websites were coded using a coding framework to provide consistency. Firstly, the holding company of an agency was recorded to allow comparison and investigation of its impact on results. The concept of corporate personality was explored through the two elements identified in the literature i.e. culture (values and beliefs) and strategy (vision and mission) statements of the company. Their importance was judged by their presence, location on the website and time needed to find these elements. Statements were also analysed to establish whether they were presented as providing competitive advantage i.e. comparison, differentiation, and glorification. A purposive quota sampling technique was used to select the websites as it was important that the companies fitted the following criteria: had offices in the UK, offered services including advertising and were members of the IPA. The sample consisted of five companies from each of the five main holding companies and five independent agencies, to get a real cross-section of the industry. A total of thirty websites were analysed which represents 10% of the IPA membership.

In order to understand the role of corporate personality within an agency five exploratory in-depth interviews were conducted with staff from a medium sized independent integrated communications agency. This approach was taken so that the results would reveal whether a consistent message was being communicated at all levels of an organisation, as discussed in the IMC literature. Access to the personnel was gained by an initial contact with a senior member of the agency who then, through a snowballing process, provided access to four other staff members who worked at different levels and in different client facing departments in the agency. The interviews were semi-structured and based around a topic guide which consisted of ten questions based on the literature. For example the participants were asked how important culture and the vision of their agency were in day to day activities, how they were managed and what role they played in creating a competitive advantage for the company. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis and coding. These categories were theory driven and were developed with the research question in mind. Codes identified how corporate personality was managed externally and internally, if communications of the personality was strategic or intuitive and how it linked with competitive advantage. . For example, any reference to Corporate personality management was coded MGMT and this was coded further into internal (IN) and external (EX).

Findings

Due to space limitations the quantitative results from the content analysis of websites are presented in Appendix 1 and incorporated into the discussion on the interview findings. These findings are presented under the four main themes identified in the transcripts.

Intuitive vs. Strategic management of corporate personality
The interview respondents acknowledged that their agency has people responsible for training new employees and ensuring that they know how to apply the company's values and vision to their work. This supports Temporal's (2010) view that corporate personality can only be achieved if employees know how to apply the values to their own job. The interviewees stated that "*(personality) permeates to the structure of any pitch, any public*

speaking opportunity, any kind of PR piece that we do" and "*we have recently refurbished our building to try and incorporate more of our culture things. So when clients come to see it, they actually think, these are interesting, inspiring, fun people that we might want to work with*". It would seem that the agency is strategically managing the corporate personality of the business.

However, there is a suggestion that this management of personality and culture can go too far. Some interviewees felt that the corporate personality works better when it is less managed and is more intuitive. "*I think if it's too constrictive the culture and the vision, you can end up making people kind of robotic in a way they work – clients don't buy that*" said one of the respondents. This would suggest that corporate personality management can assist in guiding employees and external publics about how to behave work and perceive an agency (Temporal, 2010). However, it is possible to lose the organic and natural growth of a corporate personality which may be detrimental to employees and the business as a whole.

The analysis of the websites indicates that 19 out of the 30 websites (63%) contained some corporate personality elements i.e. values and beliefs, that contributed to creating an online corporate personality and communicated this personality to external audiences. For example, one of the websites stated "*our values drive us, define us, create our culture and differentiate us*". However, there was more evidence of corporate strategy being communicated, with 26 of the agencies (87%) referring to missions and visions of some sort, suggesting a more strategic approach to corporate personality. For example on one website it states, "*to be our clients' most important partner, we begin with a mission*".

Internal versus External management of corporate personality
The interviewees saw the management of corporate personality as being fundamentally an internal communications management tool. This links with the views of Temporal (2010) who stated that corporate personality characteristics has to be understandable and brought to life by every employee in an organisation. An interview respondent explained that "*you trust the vision of the agency and you feel that you're on the same page...is absolutely key to maintaining good quality work, retain talent and create better output in terms of what you're offering to your clients*". This statement illustrates how the interviewees did not distinguish clearly between internal and external communications in the same way as the literature does. As one interviewee stated *"personality is very important but only as much as it allows the people within the agency to be themselves and develop meaningful relationships with the client*". However the content analysis does indicate that corporate personality is being communicated externally through the website by 63% of the agencies, as stated above.

Competitive advantage in the communications industry
One of the main similarities across the interviews was agreement that the communications industry is a cluttered market and gaining competitive advantage is challenging. As one of the interviewees said – "*there are not a lot of differences between agencies so it's ultimately about how we are going to have a clear identity and do our work very well*". This belief about combination of good creative work and a strong corporate identity comes through all of the research. Practitioners seem to agree that the easiest way to get clients is to do good advertising e.g. "*the right way it (agency) should stand out is by doing a good work, right?*" This emphasis on output is also apparent from website content analysis that showed that most of the analysed websites are focused on explanation of work patterns rather that corporate personality as a whole. However, the results also indicate that doing good work alone will not ensure success for the business. It is important to differentiate and this can be achieved

through communicating the culture of the organisation. Academic literature indicated that organisational values and beliefs are seen as being the clearest manifestation of company's culture (Parker & Bradley, 2000; Temporal, 2010). Interview respondents stated that *"Culture is something that the clients buy into"* and *"standing out (in the market) is about having a very clear and definite opinion, positioning and set of beliefs, values"*.

The content analysis indicates that 50% of the websites were using corporate personality as a positioning strategy to provide an advantage over competition. Most of these fell into the Differentiation category (27%) where the organisation is compared with competition e.g. *"While other agencies scramble to reverse engineer themselves for the age of collaboration, XXX was born with collaboration at its core"*. 13% were attempting glorification and 10% were undertaking some comparison.

Conclusion

This study has brought together two areas that have not been previously looked at together from academic perspective – communications industry and corporate personality management. The task was set to explore the role of corporate personality management internally and externally and how it was utilised to gain a competitive advantage in communications industry. This included review of academic and practitioner literature, analysis of corporate websites of communications agencies and interviews with employees of a communications agency. One of the main findings is that corporate personality is identified as being important in the communications industry and ties in closely with the culture of the organisation, as suggested in the literature. Internal staff perceive it as mainly as an internal motivator and stimulating force which then influences how employees work together and the kind of work they produce which then may influence how they communicate with clients. However, the results indicate that corporate personality is being strategically managed through contributing to the corporate identity of the organisation. Indeed, it is suggested that it may be managed too strongly in that is can seem rather manufactured and thereby lose its element of spontaneity and evolution that may keep it fresh and unique. This finding requires further research into the origins of corporate personality and how intuitive a company can allow it to be. The temptation is to encourage it and "bottle it up" so that it can be used as a strong differentiator in a competitive market. However, by doing so, it can be damaged. This insight into the way it is managed is supported by the website analysis which indicates that the majority of external corporate communications refer to elements of personality such as values and beliefs although a larger number refer to strategic elements such as mission statements. Lastly, the research found that some agencies are using these strategic elements in their external communications i.e. websites, to attempt to differentiate the agency and provide them with a competitive advantage. Consistency across both internal and external communications is key to an integrated marketing communications approach and is particularly important in a service industry where there is constant interaction between staff and clients. The communications industry talks about the importance of the chemistry between the agency and the client and creating a meaningful relationship. This study would suggest that there is some inconsistency across the internal and external communications of communications agencies. All things being equal, does corporate personality in one agency differ enough from another to give it the edge and it so how can it be maintained and how can it be communicated without spoiling it? It is important for the agencies to answer these questions so that they can advise clients who face the same challenges in terms of creating a consistent corporate or brand message.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Summary of the results of qualitative context analysis of websites

Agency name	Holding company	Holding company identified	Time needed to locate	Number of clicks needed to locate	Culture elements explained	Strategy elements explained	Presentation of elements
AIS London	Havas	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	None
BETC London	Havas	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Glorification
Havas Lynx	Havas	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	None
Havas Worldwide	Havas	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	No	Yes	Glorification
Health4Brands	Havas	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	No	Yes	None
McCANN	Interpublic Group	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	None
DRAFTFCB	Interpublic Group	No	30 sec to 1 min	1-2	Yes	Yes	None
LOWE + Partners	Interpublic Group	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	No	Yes	None
R/GA	Interpublic Group	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Differentation
AFG&	Interpublic Group	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Differentation
DDB	Omnicom Group	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Differentation
TBWA	Omnicom Group	Yes	30 sec to 1 min	1-2	No	Yes	Differentation
BBDO	Omnicom Group	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	No	Yes	None
PHD	Omnicom Group	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	None
Ketchum	Omnicom Group	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Glorification
Karmarama	Privately owned	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Differentation
Imagination	Privately owned	No	More than one min	5 and more	Yes	No	None
Factor 3	Privately owned	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Differentation
Recipe	Privately owned	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	No	Yes	Comparison
VCCP	Privately owned	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	None
Saatchi & Saatchi	Publicis Group	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Differentation
Leo Burnett	Publicis Group	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	No	Yes	None
Fallon	Publicis Group	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	No	None
BBH	Publicis Group	No	30 sec to 1 min	3-4	Yes	Yes	None
Atelier Ib	Publicis Group	Yes	Less than 30 sec	1-2	No	Yes	None
Ogilvy Group UK	WPP	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	No	Yes	Comparison
Grey	WPP	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Glorification
JWT	WPP	No	not present	not present	No	No	not present
Y&R	WPP	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	Yes	Differentation
Blue Hive	WPP	No	Less than 30 sec	1-2	Yes	No	Comparison