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# Organizational dynamics and complexities of corporate brand building—A practice perspective

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## KEYWORDS

Corporate brands;  
Strategy-as-practice;  
Practice-theory;  
Brand management;  
Strategic;  
Change

**Summary** The paper introduces a *marketing-as-practice*-approach to the domain of corporate brand management and presents findings from an empirical study that illustrates this approach in the context of a large transnational corporation. Conceptualizing corporate branding as something that occurs within and as part of a field of socially instituted practices, the paper focuses on the patterns of routinized activity through which corporate brands are built in organizations. By means of a 5-year ethnographic study, the aim is to identify a set of trans-subjective organizational practices that govern the praxis of brand building as well as to analyze the steering effects that these practices may have on the collaborative production and delivery of the brand promise in the day-to-day of organizational activity.

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## Introduction

In the contemporary global competitive environment, corporate branding has become an important source of sustainable competitive advantage and a central element of corporate strategy (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Hatch & Schultz, 2003, 2008; Knox & Bickerton, 2003). Despite the perceived strategic importance of corporate brands there appears to be a lack of empirical research that focuses on the praxis of corporate branding, i.e. on the ways in which brand strategies are managed in the day-to-day of the organization. Much of the current research on corporate branding is conceptual and typically takes the “content perspective” (Whittington, 2007: 1576) on brand strategy, discussing

the nature and dimensions of different types of brand strategy (e.g. Aaker, 2004; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Knox & Bickerton, 2003). Relatively little empirical research has been focused on the specific activities, processes and routinized practices through which corporate brand strategies are developed and implemented in the organization. Consequently, there appears to be a need for empirically well-grounded research on the praxis and practices of corporate brand building as well as on the managerial challenges that it involves.

In this paper, our aim is to respond to these research needs. Drawing on the practice turn in contemporary social theory (Schatzki, Cetina, & Savigny, 2001) and the emerging strategy-as-practice tradition (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Whittington, 2006, 2007), we build a practice-based approach to corporate brand management to shed light onto the day-to-day activities and organizational practices through which corporate brand strategies get managed in business organizations. More specifically, we extend the post-processual approach to theorizing

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strategy-as-practice (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008; Chia & MacKay, 2007) to the domain of brand management (Hatch & Schultz, 2003, 2008, 2009; Knox & Bickerton, 2003), to contribute to a better understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics and intra-organizational complexities of corporate brand building.

Conceptualizing corporate brand building as something that occurs within and as part of a field of socially instituted organizational practices, we focus on the trans-subjective practices (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002) through which brand strategies get developed and implemented in the organization. By means of a 5-year ethnographic study, we elaborate and illustrate the ways in which these practices of corporate brand management are enacted and reproduced in various brand-building activities as a large transnational industrial company is trying to create and establish a new corporate brand. We also explore how and to what extent the immanent logic of each of the identified practices serves to support the collaborative production and delivery of the brand promise in the organization.

The paper contributes primarily to the literature on strategic branding (Balmer, 2001; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Bick, Jacobson, & Abratt, 2003; Hatch & Schultz, 2003, 2008, 2009; Knox & Bickerton, 2003) by introducing a *marketing-as-practice*-approach (Araujo, 2007; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007; Schau, Muñoz, & Alnould, 2009) to the domain of corporate brand management, which shifts the analytical attention from the content and process of brand strategies to the everyday activities of brand alignment (Hatch & Schultz, 2003) as well as to the trans-subjective organizational practices (Schatzki, 2005, 2006) that govern brand building and eventually also the delivery of the brand promise in organizations. Overall, we argue that corporate branding needs to be viewed and analyzed as a socially situated strategic activity that is governed by the structures of the organizations' practices. Therefore, to be able to manage the implementation of brand strategies in ways that support the organization-wide delivery of the brand promise brand managers need to be aware of and take into account the existing organizational practices that govern the everyday "doing" of the corporate brand.

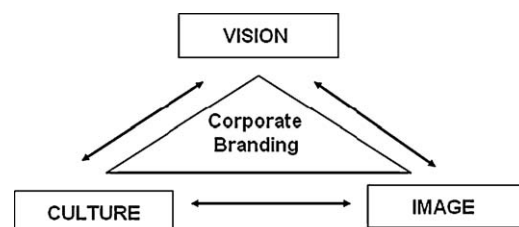
## Practice-based perspective on corporate branding

Corporate brand is usually conceptualized as the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of an organization's identity and its unique business model (Balmer, 2001; Knox & Bickerton, 2003). Drawing on the mission and vision of the organization, a corporate brand strategy articulates the way in which the organization sets out to provide value to its key stakeholders in a manner that outperforms the competition. It is typically represented as a proposition, a "brand promise", that represents the organization and reflects its heritage, values, culture, people and strategy (Aaker, 2004). It thus serves as a crystallization of the company's competitive advantage in the market and may be viewed as a strategic tool (Hatch & Schultz, 2003), with which the organization seeks to generate and support value creation to create difference and preference within its target markets.

In much of the existing literature, corporate branding is discussed in terms of conceptual models and frameworks that provide brand managers with analytical frameworks and practical tools for building successful brands (Balmer, 2001; Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006). These managerially oriented contributions typically identify and articulate a set of key strategic elements and dimensions that managers need to consider when designing the *content of brand strategies* (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Some authors also conceptualize and suggest feedback mechanisms that are needed for effective implementation of the strategies (Bick et al., 2003; de Chernatony, 1999). These models tend to be based on the principle of a gap-analysis, and are thus offered as strategic tools for corrective brand-building activities (Balmer, 2001; Balmer & Soenen, 1999; Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

Hatch and Schultz (2003), for example, theorize corporate branding in terms of a set of brand alignment tasks through which the value of the brand asset base is continuously produced and sustained. Corporate branding, in their theory, is based on collaborative activities through which the strategic vision, organizational culture, and brand image are aligned and linked together, so as to ensure that the brand promise is delivered in the day-to-day activities of the organization (see Fig. 1). Strategic vision refers here to the central idea behind the company that expresses top management's aspiration for what the company will achieve. Organizational culture encompasses the internal values, beliefs, and basic assumptions of the company, as well as the ways in which this culture manifests itself to the members of the organization. And finally corporate image refers to the ways in which the organization is viewed and perceived among its different stakeholders.

Overall, however, the conceptual models of corporate branding that are offered in the literature seem to offer little practical guidance for corporate brand-building activities and brand alignment in the day-to-day of organizational life. In focusing primarily on the content of brand strategies, the models typically provide few insights into the practical process of corporate brand management, i.e. into the ways in which managers are to apply the models in praxis. Echoing these concerns, some scholars have emphasized the importance of focusing more attention to the practical *processes of corporate brand management* through which brands are built in organizations (Bick et al., 2003; Knox & Bickerton, 2003). Knox and Bickerton (2003), for example, have offered a diagnostic framework, the "Six conventions of corporate branding" (p. 1006), through which the senior management teams of the organization can build corporate brands.



**Figure 1** Corporate branding as interplay between strategic vision, organizational culture and corporate image (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

In conceptualizing corporate brand management as a top-down planning and implementation process, however, both the content and the process models of corporate brand strategy that are offered in the literature tend to downplay the strategic role of employees and the intra-organizational complexities that brand alignment involves. Top management teams are self-evidently assumed as the locus of corporate brand-related strategizing, and the role of the other members of the organization is primarily to implement strategic plans. To illustrate, Knox and Bickerton (2003: 1012), for example, emphasize the need for a “clearer focus on the mechanisms and processes that enable the senior management team to develop their brand more effectively”. Bick et al. (2003: 850), in turn, highlight the importance of designing the brand management-related communication processes so that the employees “can absorb and accept the desired norms and values of the senior management”. We argue, however, that while the analytical frameworks and practical models undoubtedly support the definition, rollout and measurement of the corporate brand-building processes, many of the established models of corporate branding come to focus inadequate attention to the organizational and social dynamics, such as implicit norms and routines or industry recipes, that either support or slow down the corporate brand-building process.

In this paper, therefore we wish to problematize such straightforward views of corporate brand building and brand management. Drawing on the recent literature on strategy-as-practice (Balogun, 2006; Carter et al., 2008; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2004; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), we argue that brand strategies emerge and are created in organizations through a myriad of human action carried out by numerous different “strategy practitioners” (Whittington, 2007), ranging from board members and executives to middle managers and shop-floor employees as well as different strategy professionals and stakeholders outside the company. Corporate brands are thus not only something that an organization has but rather something that is continuously “done” in organizations (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007) by multiple branding practitioners. In the course of various organizational activities and contexts, the different branding practitioners may well harbor different and competing competences, methods, mindsets, and routines, which complicates the cross-functional integration and coordination of efforts to implement the brand strategy (Schultz & Hatch, 2005). Hence, besides carefully crafted brand strategies and roll-out plans, a successful execution of a corporate branding project would seem to require a better understanding of the social practices that guide – and possibly constrain – the day-to-day activities through which branding is carried out at different levels of the organization (Tienari & Tainio, 1999; Tsoukas, 1996).

From this perspective, we therefore conceptualize corporate brand building as a historically situated activity that occurs within and is part of a field of socially instituted practices (Schatzki et al., 2001: 2). More specifically, we conceptualize and analyze the various single brand-building activities that are performed in organizations by various organizational members on different organizational levels as constitutive elements or components of particular trans-subjective social practices that cannot be reduced to the

motivations and intentions of individual agents (Carter et al., 2008; Chia & MacKay, 2007).

The term “practice” here refers to embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity that are centrally organized around a shared practical understanding (Schatzki et al., 2001: 2). According to the practice theories (particularly Schatzki, 2002) that we draw on, a practice consists of particular (hierarchically organized) bundles of activities or basic actions, which at a lower level of abstraction may constitute practices as such. As Schatzki (2002: 73) explains, “a basic action can be simultaneously performed in multiple contexts and it can constitute multiple higher order actions”.

Practices are thus coherent and consistent patterns of purposive activities, which are performed in the organization through several interconnected mental and bodily behaviors that are grounded in and guided by particular collective structures of knowing, reasoning, and understanding that transcend the individual (Reckwitz, 2002: 249–250). These collectively shared codes and knowledge schemes constitute a trans-subjective background understanding of what constitutes a normal, intelligible, appropriate, and desirable course of action – in terms of thinking, feeling, and doing – in specific situations. Consequently, we assume that in performing their daily tasks, the executives, brand managers and other branding practitioners draw upon particular socially instituted practices and collectively shared understandings or trans-subjective codes of knowledge, which enable particular ways of making sense of the world and which sanction particular behaviors as appropriate, worthwhile, and desirable in particular contexts.

## Methods and materials

To illustrate and elaborate on the practice-based approach to corporate branding that we propose in this paper, we report findings from an ethnographic study of a brand-building-project in a large industrial, transnational company. The empirical materials used in the study consist of participant observation, interviews and informal discussions with various members of the organization as well as documentary materials over a period of 5 years. In analyzing the empirical data our aim was to identify a set of activities that constitute coherent patterns of routinized organizational activity, i.e. the organizations’ practices (Schatzki, 2006), that govern the brand-building process (Carter et al., 2008; Chia & Holt, 2006; Reckwitz, 2002).

## Research site

The research site in this study is a large transnational industrial company, Alpha Corporation, which at the time of the fieldwork was carrying out a top-down initiated process of strategic change to create and establish a new corporate brand. Alpha operates in a Business-to-Business market, in a capital-intensive industry, which is characterized by technology driven product development and a high dependency on the availability of raw material. Alpha represents the smoke-stack industry, yet in the third-party surveys it is often considered “*primus inter pares*” based on its product quality, reliability, and customer service. The professional profile of

the personnel is characterized by technological education and expertise on project management. The median age of the personnel is relatively high and employment relationships in the organization are usually fairly long lasting.

The corporate brand-building-project was initiated as part of the post-merger activities. The restructuring of the brand was started by redesigning the brand architecture from a multi-brand house of brands-structure to an umbrella-brand structure, based on the philosophy of a branded house (Aaker, 2004). The new brand architecture paved the way for a more fundamental process of strategic change, which eventually took the form of a corporate brand-building-project, in which answers were sought to fundamental strategic questions concerning the value proposition that the corporation wanted to make to its stakeholders.

When initiated, the aim of the brand-building-project was first and foremost to establish a shared culture with a common way of operating for the post-merger organization of Alpha, so as to better amalgamate the merged companies with each other. But corporate branding was also seen as means of creating a strong competitive positioning for the newly formed corporation, as the following data excerpt, taken from the employee magazine of the corporation, illustrates:

Creating a strong Corporate Brand identity aims at differentiating the company and its offering from the competition in order to create a unique positioning externally and a motivating philosophy internally. (Employee magazine 2002)

Moreover, the new “internal philosophy” of the Alpha Corporation emphasized the role of every member of the organization in brand building, encouraging everybody to give a concrete content to the corporate brand promise when carrying out their daily activities.

The brand-building process proceeded in a number of distinct phases over a period of 5 years. It was carried out through interaction between the executives and experts of the corporate center, who initiated the project, and the company’s middle managers, i.e. the local heads of production sites and sales units, who were expected to induce the change in the organization. At the corporate center, the responsibility for the branding process was assigned to the executive team as well as to a number of marketing and communication experts, who planned, coordinated and communicated about the process. The middle managers, for their part, had two simultaneous roles: they were both recipients and expected implementers of the change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). As the initiator of the corporate branding process, the corporate center sought to involve and engage the middle managers in the corporate brand-building work, expecting them to take on the task of introducing the corporate brand to the rest of the organization. The focus of analysis, in this study, is on the daily interaction between these two groups.

The corporate brand-building process started with a thorough “as is”—analysis of the company’s current strengths, weaknesses, and future challenges. Based on the analysis, seven corporate brand identity concepts were defined, referred to as the “alternative, future reputations” of the company. The core elements of the corporate brand identity statement were determined based on testing these alter-

native reputations among representatives of Alpha’s most important stakeholder groups. A new visual and verbal expression was created drawing on the core elements and the final definition of the corporate brand—after which the corporate brand was ready for an internal and external launch. The internal launch was carried out relying on a network of middle managers, the “brand champions” (Ind, 2004), who were responsible for the local rollout. The brand champions were given a 1-day training for their task. During the forth period, the corporate brand was further embedded in the daily operations of the company — e.g. by introducing a new approach to measuring customer satisfaction — and during the fifth phase the corporate brand was re-tested for relevance.

## Empirical materials

The empirical materials used in the study were obtained by means of ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation in particular, conducted by one of the authors (Järventie-The-sleff) over a period of 5 years. The material consists of process data generated in vivo and collected in real organizational context (Langley, 1999; van Maanen, 1979). Three different types of data were obtained: (1) field notes and journals of participant observation in events, workshops, and meetings that dealt with the development of the corporate brand; (2) corporate brand-related documentary and archival material and (3) contextual data. The analysis is primarily based on the participant observation data and on the documentary and archival material. The contextual data is used mainly as complementary material, to support and illustrate the interpretations we make.

*Participant observation* was carried out in a wide array of corporate brand-related events, workshops, and meetings, such as training and development events and the launching event of the corporate brand. Fourteen interviews were conducted and numerous informal discussions carried out, usually during lunches and coffee breaks, with various members of the organization. Careful fieldnotes were made in all events. Overall, the use of ethnographic methods provided us with a rich data set, allowing us to note many small and seemingly insignificant goings-on at the research site, including the suppressed, the marginalized and the unacknowledged (Rasche & Chia, 2009).

*Corporate brand-related documentary and archival material* consisted of internal surveys, PP-presentations, articles in internal magazines, info bulletins, and internal launch and training material. The majority of the brand-related archival material was prepared by the corporate center, but the data also includes three internal surveys, carried out among the middle management, which also contain of open questions that had been designed to invite the respondents to express their feelings about the process of brand building.

*Contextual data* consisted of external surveys, customer and other stakeholder magazines, company brochures and annual reports.

## Analytical procedures

The empirical analysis of the fieldwork data began with temporal bracketing of the brand-building process (Langley,





Figure 2 Corporate branding process over a period of 5 years.

1999). To identify the central activities and practices of brand building in the organization, we first divided or “bracketed” the observed process into five periods, each of which represented a specific phase in the brand-building process.

Drawing on Knox and Bickerton (2003) we labeled these five separate, yet interlinked periods or phases of corporate branding as (1) testing and definition, (2) expression and launch, (3) local rollout and tracking, (4) further embedding of the corporate brand, and (5) testing the relevance (see Fig. 2). The labeling characterizes the main objective of branding project during the period.

For each phase, we first identified a number of specific corporate brand-building activities, which constituted the praxis of corporate branding in the organization. Then, using the practice-theoretical interpretive framework that we specified above as an analytical lens (Alasuutari, 1996; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), we further explored and analyzed these activities to identify a set of coherent and consistent patterns of purposive activity that constituted the practices of brand management.

In analyzing the textual data obtained, our aim was to identify a set of activities that constituted a coherent pattern of routinized activity, organized around an immanent logic and a shared background understanding (knowledge scheme, code, discourse) of what is appropriate, understandable, and desired in the organization and in the social context of the activity (Carter et al., 2008; Chia & Holt, 2006; Reckwitz, 2002). These activities included, physical and discursive activities, the use of particular tools and techniques, particular material arrangements, visibilities (visible objects) and visual and spatial arrangements.

## Practices of brand management

In the organization that we studied, corporate branding was defined as a strategic change process and thus rendered intelligible and manageable in terms of the basic vocabularies and ideas that typically characterize the discourse on strategy and strategic management (Knights and Morgan, 1991). Understandably, then, the brand-building activities through which the change process was initiated and carried out in the organization appear to be informed by a particular practical intelligibility (Schatzki, 2002: 75) that renders corporate branding understandable as an exercise in efficient project management. From this perspective, corporate branding is essentially about planning and implementing corporate brand strategies top-down, through activities that are geared at making the process manageable and controllable for the top management and their experts. While these activities may help the organization to achieve the desired strategic change, the urge for control that the discourse of strategic management entails might also reduce

practitioners’ abilities to indulge in uncertainty and debate, and thus diminish their flexibility in carrying out the brand-building project (Collinson, 2003; Willmott, 1986).

Next we shall discuss three practices of corporate brand management, which we observed to enfold in the activities through which brand building was carried out in Alfa. We have labeled these practices as the *practice of masterminding*, *practice of calibrating*, and *practice of notifying*. These practices were produced and reproduced in various parts of the organization; in sales offices, production sites, and corporate head quarters. And numerous different branding practitioners acted as carriers of the practices, ranging from top management to brand experts and middle managers, who served as “brand champions” (Ind, 2004) in the organization.

In the sections that follow, we elaborate on the nature of these coherent patterns of purposive human activity as practices of brand management, focusing on exploring how each practice supports strategic change and serves to govern the activities through which brand building proceeds in the organization. For each practice, we first describe the activities that constitute the practice and discuss the particular collective background understandings that underpin the immanent logic of the practice. Then we discuss the practical effects of the practice on the outcomes of the brand-building process in the organization, discussing the ways in which the activities of brand management that the practice entails succeeded in translating the intended brand strategies into realized strategies in the organization that we studied.

### Practice of masterminding

The *practice of masterminding* renders corporate brand building understandable as a process of strategy formulation, as a deliberate process of systematic analysis and conscious thought, carried out by top management teams and their experts. It is performed through typical project management activities, such as analyzing situations, identifying options, choosing optimal solutions, and making decisions.

The practice of masterminding is based on a general background understanding that corporate branding is essentially about creating a “master plan” for the organization to realize. And to be able to create such a plan, all the relevant knowledge needs to be established. In the organization that we studied, for example, the brand-building project was launched by conducting “as-is-analyses” of the company and its marketing environment. A group of experts and brand consultants was assigned to collect all the relevant facts and figures about the company as well as to conduct interviews in the corporate center, production sites and sales offices. Alternative concepts for the corporate brand were then created and subjected to rigorous testing and feedback from various stakeholders. Based on all this information, the top management team eventually articulated a brand vision and a strategic plan for the rest of organization to follow.

The logic of the practice of masterminding, therefore, can be characterized as the logic of formulating and executing strategic plans through rational problem solving. It is based on the presumption that by carefully analyzing the situation, collecting all the relevant information and mapping out available options it is possible for the top management to find optimal solutions and to make right decisions about the content of brand strategy. It also assumes that the delivery of the brand promise in the day-to-day activities of the middle managers and the lower ranks of the organization boils down to a careful execution of the visions and strategic plans of the top management. In doing so, the practice of masterminding thus reproduces and sustains the formulation-implementation dichotomy in strategic management (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998).

As a result, the logic of the practice of masterminding orients the brand practitioners to focus attention to articulating the strategic plan – making the plan explicit and simple enough for their subordinates and collaborators to conceive – instead of facilitating the processes of learning through which brand-related strategic change can be brought about in the organization. During the local rollout-phase, for example, the corporate brand initiative was taken to the production units and sales offices by organizing a series of corporate branding workshops, where the brand strategy was articulated and passed on to the local employees. Little attention was paid to the intangible resources or capabilities inside the organization that would help the employees to produce the desired strategic effects by delivering the brand promise in their day-to-day work.

To sum up, the practice of masterminding ascribes strategic agency primarily to the top management at the corporate center and their experts; the role of the other staff is primarily to implement the strategic plan. As a result, the practice directs inadequate attention to the everyday activities and processes through which the brand promise is delivered in the organization as well as to the long, subtle, and difficult process of learning that building a corporate brand entails. In other words, the practice of masterminding tends to direct inadequate attention to the organizational practices, processes and resources that produce effects—to the capabilities with which the organization constantly works on the value proposition that the brand strategy defines (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Consequently, the practice of masterminding orients the practitioners to deny or ignore the necessarily emerging nature of the corporate brand strategy as well as the strategically valuable knowledge that the rank-and-file members of the organization may have about the resources that are needed to deliver the brand promise. Moreover, in constructing the strategic role of the employees as mere executors of strategic plans, the practice of masterminding may well also serve to hold back the enthusiasm, creativity, and self-directedness of both middle managers and lower ranks of the organization in delivering the brand promise (Alvesson & Willmott, 2006). Overall, the practice of masterminding therefore focuses inadequate attention to the fact that in the day-to-day praxis of branding, thinking and action need to proceed in tandem.

### Practice of notifying

The practice of notifying renders corporate branding understandable in terms of a top-down process of vertical

communication, in which information about the strategic plan is transferred in cascading steps, from superiors to their subordinates down the organizational hierarchy. It is performed through various activities of written and oral communication, such as giving orders and instructions, transferring knowledge and information, as well as sending persuasive messages to shape employee attitudes and behaviors.

The practice of notifying is based on a general background understanding that effective communication is the key to effective brand building and the main pillar of successful strategic change, as it provides the means of creating and implementing behavioral changes. From this perspective, branding is essentially about transferring a fixed set of representations, i.e. articulations of the strategic plan, from one individual to another. In the organization that we studied, the practice of notifying was repeatedly enacted by different members of the organization, e.g. in the communication material created for introducing the new brand identity to the organization as well as in local roll-out sessions and sales meetings.

The logic of the practice of notifying is that of the model of cascading downward information; information about the brand strategy is assumed to cascade down through the organization through the various levels of middle and front-line management until it eventually reaches the front-line operatives (Proctor & Doukakis, 2003: 271). It is based on the presumption that the corporate brand strategy can be clearly articulated and rendered into reasonably unambiguous representations and messages that can then be rolled-down from the top to the lower levels of organizational hierarchy in a cascading manner. It also assumes that during this process of communication, the message about the corporate brand strategy can be kept reasonably consistent—almost as if the essence of the corporate brand could be injected into the organization.

To illustrate, in the organization that we studied, the prime method of giving out information followed this type of a model of cascading downward information. After the top management teams had formulated the corporate brand strategy, a network of middle managers was assigned to serve as brand champions who were to take care of the launch and local rollout of the corporate brand strategy. Towards that end, specifically designed management training, based on a model of “train the trainer”, was organized to provide the middle managers with the knowledge and information that they needed to implement the change in their units. The content and program of the training sessions included general lectures on corporate branding and organizational change management as well as specific presentations on the strategic background and ideational dimensions of Alpha’s newly designed corporate brand identity. During the training sessions, the managers were also led to collaborate in small-scale workshops to elaborate on the probable practical impacts of the launch of the corporate brand as well as to plan the local implementation activities in their units. As brand champions, middle managers therefore played two simultaneous roles; they were both recipients and expected implementers of the change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

In constructing the middle managers and other members of the organization as senders and receivers of cascading communication, the practice of notifying orients the managers to emphasize the importance of explicit plans and clear

instructions as a prerequisite for effective implementation of the brand strategy. In doing so, the practice also functions as a disabling practice that prevents the managers from initiating collaborative activities through which the entire staff can be engaged in the delivery of the brand promise. To illustrate, in the feedback questionnaires on brand implementation that we studied, the middle manager-brand champions expressed their general satisfaction with the content and structure of the brand strategy-related management training, but they also indicated that they felt a lack of direction and thus called for clearer instructions, more concrete guidelines, and practical tools for dealing with the implementation challenge:

“Clear directions on how to proceed would be preferred. We are now, more or less, being asked to figure out for ourselves about the internal implementation”

“How do I align my organization (unit) to make the brand and value proposition in reality”. (Questionnaire on brand implementation 2004)

Our analysis, therefore, suggests that while the process of cascading communication, carried out through training sessions for example, may help the middle managers to make sense of the strategic change that the launching of a corporate brand entails, it provides few tools for translating the brand strategy into activities and principles that help the organization to deliver the brand promise in particular local organizational contexts, as the following quotes illustrate:

“How to translate the promise into practice?”

“I imagine there will be brand guidelines not just for our visual media, but also how we ensure buy-in from all areas of the business”. (Questionnaire on brand implementation 2004)

As a result, the practice of notifying may orient the middle managers to implement strategic plans in a ceremonial manner (Kostova & Kendall, 2002), heedfully making local implementation plans, carrying out local training sessions and reporting back to the corporate center, instead of actively serving as brand champions, developing better practices and processes through which the brand promise can be delivered.

To illustrate, in the organization that we studied, the primary objective of the corporate brand strategy was to establish a shared culture and mode of operation in the post-merger situation. And the formulation and implementation of practical details of the strategy were left to the individual heads of units to work on. In other words, the middle managers were given the freedom and even encouraged to give local content to the brand, so as to find new and better ways of delivering the re-designed brand promise. In the course of the branding project, however, the middle managers repeatedly failed to do so. During the “expression and launch”-phase, the managers resorted to a ceremonial implementation of the strategic plans that were introduced to them in the training sessions. But during the “expression and local rollout”-phase, when the training and instructive communication from the corporate center slowed down and eventually ceased, the brand managers remained largely inactive as brand champions. In the absence of clear

instructions and guidelines from the corporate center, the practice of notifying thus resulted in inaction.

### Practice of calibrating

The *practice of calibrating* renders corporate brand management understandable as a process of formalized performance control, in terms of careful operationalization, monitoring, and measurement of strategic goals. In the praxis of brand building, it is enacted through various activities of monitoring and performance assessment, through steering groups, audits, self-assessment exercises, and surveys for example.

The practice of calibrating draws on a general understanding of management that can be characterized as reductionist in the sense that it makes sense of the organization as a system or machine that can be manipulated and controlled by analyzing, measuring and manipulating the smallest functional units of the system. It is based on the assumption that if an outcome of an organizational process, e.g. a process of strategic change, can be measured and understood as the product of mechanistic interactions among a discrete set of independent variables, it is possible to intervene and thus exercise control over the sequence of activities through which the process proceeds and produces outcomes.

The logic of the practice of calibrating, therefore, can be characterized as the logic of yardstick, in keeping with the dictum “what gets measured gets done” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999). It assumes that a brand strategy can be and needs to be implemented by decomposing and scheduling the strategic objectives into measurable outcomes.

As a result, the practice of calibrating produces a management orientation that objectifies organizational processes, including actors and their activities, as something that needs to be assessed and managed in terms of measurable outcomes. It also orients the branding practitioners to reduce the brand strategy to quantification of goals as means of control, rendering the brand-building process to a “numbers game of performance control” (Mintzberg et al., 1998) In the organization that we studied, for example, the middle managers emphasized the importance of continuous monitoring and regular measurement for a successful implementation of the corporate brand strategy. The implementation of the corporate brand was to be translated into concrete and measurable improvement targets, and these targets were then to be monitored regularly. One of the middle managers even compared and paralleled the brand-building-project with a cost savings program that had been initiated in the organization some time ago, as the following quotes from an internal survey illustrate:

“Strong effort is needed to implement (the corporate brand) in all parts of the company. Continuous follow up, measurement and feedback e.g. quarterly, like Cost Savings program”.

“Annual continual improvement targets should be set. These should be monitored, measured, and reviewed regularly”. (Surveys among Brand champions 2003 and 2005)

Consequently, the practice of calibrating is of kindred spirit with the practice of masterminding and the practice of notifying in the sense that it orients the members of the

organization to perform corporate branding as a carefully planned process. In the organization that we studied, for example, the practice of calibrating served to consolidate the practice of masterminding by engaging the staff in various data collection activities that were designed to produce information for the updating of the “master plan”. It also fed into the practice of notifying by producing large amounts of information to be cascaded down in the organization. Consequently, the communication of various survey results served to misdirect practitioners’ attention, shifting it from the actual brand-building activities (Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999). Hence, it may be argued that the urge for concretization and measurement that the practice of calibration sustains contradicts, to some extent, the metaphorical, qualitative and somewhat philosophical representation of the strategic nature of the corporate brand, which informed the brand-building-project in Alfa.

## Discussion and conclusions

Corporate branding is typically understood as a communication centered strategy that is based on promotion and the creation of visual signs of identity. It is often also viewed as a straightforward top-down process of strategy implementation, in which a carefully designed brand concept is induced into the organization. In this paper, our aim has been to problematize these views by working towards a practice-based approach to corporate branding as a process of strategic change. From this perspective, the corporate brand represents a value proposition – a brand promise – that the organization sets out to deliver in all contact points with its stakeholders. In the delivery of the brand promise, communication or promotion-related activities are but only one dimension of a whole constellation of organizational activities and practices through which a strong corporate brand is built.

To contribute to a better understanding of the intra-organizational dynamics and complexities of corporate branding, we have focused on the *practices of* corporate brand management through which brand managers, and other brand champions, seek to organize and govern corporate brand-building activities, so as to achieve brand alignment (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Drawing from practice-theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001) and the literature on strategy-as-practice (Carter et al., 2008; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Johnson et al., 2007; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Rasche & Chia, 2009; Whittington, 2007) we have conceptualized corporate brand building as a socially situated activity that occurs within and is part of socially instituted, trans-individual practices. This practice-theoretical lens has enabled us to focus attention to corporate branding as something that multiple branding practitioners “do” as well as to elaborate on the governing effects of the structures and logics of the organizations’ socio-historically and culturally constructed practices (Schatzki, 2006) on the development and implementation of brand strategies.

Overall, our study shows how many practices of brand building that seem perfectly normal and professionally adequate, such as the practices identified and articulated here, may in fact produce a corporate brand-building process that

accentuates the execution of a ready-made plan but fails to invite employees to actively co-create corporate brand value. In doing so, these practices of brand management tend to fall short in supporting the activities of brand alignment in the organization.

To illustrate, in rendering brand building intelligible in terms of creating a master plan for the organization to implement, the *practice of masterminding* may orient the entire organization to ignore the necessarily emerging nature of the corporate brand as well as the strategically valuable knowledge that the rank-and-file members of the organization may have about the activities that are needed to deliver the brand promise. While the practice may well enable the rigorous formulation and explicit articulation of the strategic vision that is to guide brand-building activities, it simultaneously constrains the continuous alignment of organizational culture and brand image by fixing the strategic vision and thus rendering it intact to possible changes in organizational culture and corporate image.

The *practice of notifying*, which emphasizes the importance of communicating explicit plans as blueprints for action, may lead to ceremonial implementation (Kostova & Kendall, 2002) of the brand strategy as well as to the treatment of the lower-rank members of the organization as passive targets of cascading information, instead of engaging them in active co-construction of new and better ways of delivering the brand promise. In other words, while the practice of notifying may well enable and support activities that produce coherent communication, and thus an effective rollout of the content of corporate brand strategies, the practice of notifying may also impede the activities through which the rank-and-file members of the organization make sense of and take individual ownership of the corporate brand-building-project. As a result, the practice thus constrains the activities of brand alignment through which the strategic vision of the corporation is linked together with its organizational culture.

And finally, in emphasizing the importance of defining a fixed set of measurable outcomes for monitoring purposes, the *practice of calibrating* may even slow down the brand-building process by excessively relying on survey results instead of encouraging employees to learn through trial and error. As a result, the practice may thus impede the activities through which brand image is aligned with organizational culture.

To conclude, our study suggests that while corporate brand strategies may be intentionally planned and managed, ultimately they emerge in the course of everyday organizational activities, governed by the logics of the trans-subjective practices that are enacted in the organization. Therefore, to turn the intended corporate brand strategies into realized strategies it is necessary that corporate branding be conceived of as a dynamic interplay between the intentional brand-building process and the local “living the brand”.

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