Chapter aims

A strong corporate identity and positive corporate image are believed to deliver tangible bottom-line benefits for a wide range of organisations. But how easy are they to achieve? This chapter will explore the meaning of corporate identity and image and consider some critical approaches. It will then consider ideas affecting identity and image management and consider how concepts dominating PR thinking (such as stakeholderism) can be incorporated into corporate identity (CI) management – an area often informed by a marketing paradigm. It concludes with a case study exploring an identity change programme to demonstrate the application of many of these ideas.

From a communications management and public relations perspective, corporate identity management can be defined as the strategic development of a distinct and coherent image of an organisation that is consistently communicated to stakeholders through symbolism, planned communications and behaviour (Cornelisson and Elving 2003: 116).

This definition, building on van Riel’s (1995) conceptualisation by introducing the ideas of coherence and consistency in communication, encapsulates current thinking in effective CI management.

Nike is tough, aggressive and trendy. The Co-operative is socially responsible and ethical. The term ‘corporate identity’ refers to the combination of ways in which an organisation’s personality is expressed. Red flag or red rose? Rule Britannia or cool Britannia? Identity includes design aspects such as logos, colour, typeface and architecture but also embraces less tangible elements such as behaviour, culture, values, mission, communication style and associations (with personalities, charities, political parties or other organisations via donations or sponsorship). CI management is considered by many to be a vital aspect of motivating stakeholders (including voters, employees, shareholders and consumers) and securing a host of benefits ranging from recruiting top employees and attracting consumers to products, brands or services, to helping companies manage issues and recover from crises.
Corporate identity vs corporate image

The terms ‘corporate identity’ and ‘corporate image’ are sometimes confused with each other. 1 Corporate identity is what the organisation communicates (either intentionally or unintentionally) via various cues, whereas its image is how its publics actually view it. An image is a perception and exists only in the mind of the receiver. To formulate an image, publics interpret an identity in a wider context with broader frames of reference.

For example, Nike’s corporate identity is a carefully managed amalgam of associations (with fashionable sports personalities, major sporting events such as the Olympics as well as local and charitable events), clear design and mission. Many people exposed to these aspects of its identity may well formulate an image of Nike as a high-quality and fashionable arbiter of good design. Others, aware of some negative media coverage of Nike’s manufacturing policy in third-world countries (interpreting the identity in a broader context), may form an image of Nike as exploitative and thus boycott its products. 2

Clearly, then, organisations cannot construct a corporate image because they cannot control the context in which their communication is received, interpreted or understood. Nevertheless, a clear, well-managed corporate identity can go some way to effecting a strategically important image, and a neglected corporate identity may send out all the wrong messages: ‘An organisation may commonly assume that it only communicates when it wants to, but unfortunately for many companies, a failure to control communications results in a confused image’ (Ind 1990: 21).

But managing an identity well means embracing all aspects of what van Riel (1995) calls the CI mix – symbolism, communication and behaviour. The Nike case illustrates this well. Despite well-managed symbolism and communication, perceptions of aspects of its behaviour (reported treatment of third-world workers) have affected some publics’ image of the company.

So, can corporate identity be effectively managed? And, if so, how?

Key concepts of corporate identity

Corporate identity management commonly involves:

- conducting research to determine senior management and a range of stakeholders’ views on an organisation’s actual and desired image;
- an audit of all elements of corporate identity to determine if they are congruent with the desired image;
- formulating a plan to adjust the corporate identity if necessary.

It all seems simple enough. Clearly though, controlling identity is not simple or straightforward. So, before considering the management process, it is important to consider a range of questions and issues.

Corporate strategy

One of the key issues of corporate identity management is its role in achieving overall organisational strategic objectives. 4 The aim of a corporate identity plan is to determine and communicate a corporate identity to meet these future strategic objectives. For example, the Labour Party’s introduction of a new corporate identity in the 1990s (involving the
introduction of a new logo, a red rose, and a new name, New Labour) was linked to its overall strategic plan to modernise the party to make it electable. Interestingly, immediately after Tony Blair’s resignation announcement on 10 May 2007, the Labour website dropped the term ‘New’ from the party’s name and reverted to the designation ‘Labour’. It also changed the dominant colour on the web pages from red to purple. The end of the Blair era was swiftly indicated in the these new visual identity signifiers. It is also worth noting that the Conservative Party has also recently abandoned the blue torch of freedom, its logo from the days of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, and replaced it with a green oak tree. This is meant to symbolise the embracing of environmentalism as a key policy by the party.

However, a number of thinkers in this area, most notably Grunig, would argue that the corporate identity management process should not just be designed to help implement a predetermined strategy. Instead, strategy should be formulated partly in response to stakeholders’ needs and views. ‘Excellent’ organisations (Grunig 1992), practising a two-way symmetric approach to communication management, should adapt their corporate strategies according to publics’ opinions identified through research. Indeed, many would argue that the Labour Party’s strategic objective to modernise was formulated in response to research conducted into publics’ perceptions of the party’s image.

Symbolism

Using cultural codes and associated meanings, designers choose particular colours, shapes and typefaces to provoke particular emotional responses or to connote particular meanings. For example, a serif typeface such as Times New Roman used in broadsheets (the ‘quality’ press) has connotations of tradition, longevity and quality. A sans serif typeface, favoured by the tabloids, is often deemed to invoke modernity.

The controversy triggered by Labour’s adoption of the red rose logo to replace the red flag illustrates the power of the symbol. The change in visuals was interpreted as symbolising a major ideological shift from hard left to centrist politics. A semiotic analysis would infer that ‘Labour abandoned the symbolism of the red flag (viewed by the leadership as a sign with negative connotations of bureaucratic, Soviet-style socialism) in favour of the red rose, a logo first successfully employed by the French socialists’ (McNair 2003: 150).

Olins (1999: 73) suggests that:

The problems in developing symbols are complex. In addition to avoiding negative connotations, technical, creative, fashion and cost requirements all have to be considered. Creating something which will encapsulate the idea behind the organisation, that won’t go out of date, that is flexible and cheap in use and that will evoke strong, positive emotional feelings in all those who come into contact with it, is actually a very difficult thing to do.

Of course, the significance of symbols within an organisation goes beyond aspects of design, such as the logo. It includes the existence (or absence) and distribution of status symbols such as executive washrooms, plush carpets and parking spaces. This aspect will be referred to later as part of a consideration of organisational culture.

Consistency

To ensure that a visual identity communicates the messages for which it was painstakingly designed, it must be applied consistently across all media. So ‘house style’ manuals are
developed to control every aspect of application, from Pantone number (representing exact colours) to typeface. But not all organisations want to represent themselves as a homogenised unit. Some are decentralised and a corporate identity should signal this.

Olins (1999) specifies three categories to encapsulate different structures of identity:

1. **Monolithic** – where one name and visual identity are used throughout (e.g. IBM);
2. **Endorsed** – where an organisation has a group of activities or subsidiaries which it endorses with the same name and identity (e.g. Chanel);
3. **Branded** – where an organisation operates through a series of brands which may be unrelated (e.g. Procter & Gamble).

This seems relatively straightforward, but can, and should, other aspects of identity, such as communication and behaviour, be homogenised? Markwick and Fill (1997) argue that ‘it is important to establish consistent and sustainable internal images among all employees in order that this consistency be projected as a positive cue to other stakeholder groups’. Clearly, organisations should involve a range of stakeholders in determining core philosophies and values and clearly communicate the agreed goals. But different stakeholder groups often have differing needs and expectations of single organisations, so expecting uniformity seems an unrealistic goal. This demonstrates the importance of defining what is meant by the term ‘consistency’.

Van Riel (1995) overcomes the problematic notion of imposed uniformity with his concept of ‘common starting points’ (CSPs). CSPs are central values developed by communications staff from research into an organisation’s desired corporate identity and image. Examples of CSPs include reliability, innovation, quality, profit-making and synergy (ibid.). CSPs function as ‘wavelengths’ or ‘parameters’ to guide communication activity. The concept of CSPs fosters a notion of an organic process of developing and communicating organisational images rather than a top-down approach which limits staff to static, agreed perceptions. As Leitch and Motion (1999: 195) explain: ‘An organisation may present multiple images to its various publics provided that these images are consistent, not with each other, but with the organisation’s CSPs. The corporate identity task is to manage the multiplicity rather than to suppress it.’ This approach has more recently been progressed in relation to developing a ‘sustainable corporate story’ (van Riel in Schultz et al. 2000).

A corporate story is a comprehensive narrative about the whole organisation, its origins, its vision, its mission. However, the emotionally formulated core story is much more than just a vision or mission statement. By incorporating elements such as competencies, fundamental beliefs and values, it mirrors something deep within the organisation and provides a simple yet effective framework guiding the organisation in all its actions.

(Holten Larsen in Schultz et al. 2000: 197)

Perhaps it is important to note that the source of these carefully constructed stories is an issue: ‘To have employees internalise corporate narratives requires a more direct involvement of them in the articulation of the organisation’s identity’ (Christensen and Cheney in Schultz et al. 2000: 256). Christensen and Cheney (ibid.) critique the creation of corporate identities on a number of levels – an important one being that over-enthusiastic CI zealots can get carried away with their mission and only pay lip service to employee involvement. Another dimension of their criticism is the level at which employees want to become involved; they argue that managers can misinterpret the importance of the intricacies of corporate identity to most employees.
Corporate culture

An organisation’s behaviour reflects, or is reflected in, its culture (sometimes referred to as ‘the way we do things around here’). Changing organisational cultures to improve performance in our global economy is the subject of an entire industry of ‘culture change’ gurus. And a plethora of recipes for changing organisational cultures is currently on offer. Known as ‘culture change programmes’, Wilson (1992) explains that these often offer ‘generalised templates’ developed from analysis of a handful of ‘successful’ processes observed in particular companies (or sometimes productive national cultures such as in the Far East).

These approaches indicate that strong unified cultures can be created through strong leadership. The ‘recipes’ promise that cultures will become more effective by re-engineering particular aspects such as leadership styles or communication techniques.

Space precludes a lengthy analysis of the concept of organisational culture and attempts to change it, but Wilson (1992) offers an interesting critical appraisal of many ideas and approaches.

Johnson and Scholes’ (1999) cultural web is a useful tool for mapping and understanding organisational culture (Figure 7.1). The cultural web illustrates the complexity of organisational culture and, in practical terms, the areas that should be investigated as part of any attempt to audit culture as part of corporate identity. For example, Johnson and Scholes detail a whole range of appropriate research questions investigating areas such as the type of behaviour encouraged by particular routines; core beliefs reflected by stories; ways in which power is distributed in the organisation; and the status symbols favoured.

Figure 7.1  The cultural web

Source: Johnson and Scholes 1999. Used by permission of Prentice-Hall/Pearson
Understanding the realities of a corporate culture, revealed through research, will influence the CI management process. Johnson and Scholes’ model refers to an organisation’s paradigm which can be explained as its ‘taken for granted assumptions’ (Johnson and Scholes 1999) or the link between structure and culture (Grundy 1993). It could also be argued as being a similar concept to corporate personality...

Corporate personality

Many approaches to corporate identity management are informed by the concept of corporate personality.

Corporate personality is made up of the organisation’s history, culture, values and beliefs (which drives its philosophy, mission and strategies) as realised through its staff, structures systems, its products and or services. (Gregory 1999: 1)

Bernstein (1989: 56) talks about stakeholders’ experiences of an organisation building into a mosaic: ‘the picture is that of an individual, a corporate portrait of a “Mr Cadbury” or a “Mr Shell” or “Ms Avon”’.

Olins (1978: 82) links the notion of corporate personality to an actual human personality: ‘The carefully cultivated corporate identity becomes the substitute for the personality of the entrepreneur, just as the carefully planned marketing policy is the substitute for his intuitive feeling for what the market wants.’ Markwick and Fill (1997) argue that the strategic management process, the way in which strategy is formulated, is a significant component of the corporate personality. Van Riel (1995: 34) explains that personality is displayed or revealed by corporate identity: ‘unique corporate characteristics’ are ‘revealed in the company’s products and buildings, in the nature and scale of its communication, and in its behaviour’.

Those that view an organisation as a collection of individuals may find the concept of a corporate personality difficult. In terms of trying to effect a particular corporate image, however, the notion of a corporate portrait (not an actual personality but a carefully constructed replica of a personality) is useful. In the same way that an actor would express human personalities through cues such as body language, tone of voice and choice of clothes, the public relations strategist highlights cues via ‘behaviour, communication and symbolism’ (van Riel 1995) to express a desired personality.

However, this notion becomes problematic if the projected personality does not reflect reality.

Reflecting reality?

Our preoccupation with, and reliance on, images has important implications for the study and practice of corporate communications. The image without any clear or certain relation to ‘reality’ is perhaps becoming the dominant form in both external and internal corporate public communications. (Cheney 1992: 173)

The media revelled in ridiculing the BBC for spending reputed millions to adjust its logo from a slanting to an upright typeface. They gloried in maligning the Labour Party for replacing the red flag with a red rose. The source of the criticism was the perception that highly paid ‘spin doctors’ were concentrating on style as opposed to substance –
trying to gloss over the problems both institutions were experiencing by creating an illusion of sleek professionalism. Whether this perception was fair or not will be debated elsewhere. The point here is that public relations practitioners must carefully consider the motives and ethics of their practice.

As Cheney points out:

Contemporary public relations is fundamentally concerned with representing major organisations and institutions of our society with values, images, identities, issue positions and so forth. Thus, it is crucial that we probe the structure and meaning of that process of representation. (Cheney 1992: 170)

In constructing carefully planned corporate identities, the practitioner must not lose sight of whose interests are served. The practitioner truly committed to the notion of a stakeholder society (which in this context emphasises employees’ interests in particular) should strive to ensure that identity reflects, rather than conceals, reality. And if an organisation’s ‘reality’ is too undesirable to promote, a two-way symmetrical practitioner would set about counselling management to change the reality rather than designing a corporate identity plan to mask it.

**Researching corporate personality**

Identifying reality and a ‘real’ corporate personality can be problematic.

To know the identity of a person is to be able to identify him or her – to distinguish him or her from others and to recognise him or her as a unique individual. Addresses, nationalities, ages and physical features are observable data, which are frequently used to identify an individual. Does this mean that one person really knows the identity of another person after having read his or her passport? Simple observation quickly becomes an insufficient method for understanding identity. Truly to know the identity of people, we must go much further. We must have long discussions with them, we must ask them about their tastes and convictions, and we must learn their histories. (Moingeon and Ramanantsoa 1997: 1)

To gain a real insight into a personality, it is also important to talk to a whole range of friends, family and acquaintances to assess their views and experiences. In the same way, when attempting to determine an accurate picture of the corporate personality, a range of stakeholders’ views must be sought. Stakeholder analysis techniques (discussed in Chapter 6) should be used to identify the relevant stakeholders to be used in the research. So how can we engineer ‘long discussions’ to learn more about an organisation’s tastes, convictions and histories?

As with any research, triangulation is essential to ensure validity. So a combination of research methodologies must be adopted, targeted at a range of stakeholders. These could include content analysis of corporate documents, surveys, focus groups, interviews and critical incident analysis.

**Researching actual and desired corporate image**

**Identifying the desired corporate identity**

From a public relations perspective, this is one of the controversial aspects of CI management. This is because much of the literature has emerged from a marketing paradigm
and often considers an ideal identity as being determined by senior management and communicated to an audience (often of consumers). A public relations perspective may well consider that formulation of a desired identity should involve a range of stakeholders in a dialogic (or two-way) process. In other words allow key stakeholders (including employees) an influence.

‘Large organisations have become so preoccupied with carefully crafted, elaborate and univocal expressions of their mission and ‘essence’ that they often overlook penetrating questions about stakeholder involvement’ (Christensen and Cheney in Schultz et al. 2000: 265).

In addition, public relations planning involves issues management, and therefore consideration of the environment (often encompassed in an EPISLTER analysis) informs public relations aims and objectives. It could be argued, then, that appropriate methodologies should be devised to ensure that identification of a strategically important identity is informed by an organisation’s current and projected situation within its broader environment as well as stakeholder expectations.

**Auditing existing corporate identity**

Van Riel’s (1995) CI mix (behaviour, communication and symbolism) provides a useful guide to the aspects of identity to be audited.

**Communication and behavioural audits:** behavioural audits, more commonly known as attitude surveys, measure job satisfaction, gather feedback on the effectiveness of internal policies and provide insight into the attitudes and behaviour of staff at all levels. The term ‘behaviour’ also refers to consequences for external publics, however, and implies aspects such as the manifestation of an organisation’s corporate social responsibility. As discussed in Chapters 6, 9 and 12 a comprehensive audit of ‘behaviour’ would include analysis of an organisation’s impact on the environment as well as a full range of stakeholders.

Communication audits survey the ‘communication climate’ including communication style and structures as well as content.

Clearly communication and behaviour are ‘inextricably linked’. Communication must be defined as more than merely communication techniques or styles of delivery. Organisations must not see the introduction of a team briefing system and some presentation training for managers as the panacea for all the problems identified through a communication audit or attitudes survey. As Grunig and Hunt (1984: 248) explain: ‘Too often, management wants an easy way to gain the loyalty of employees and get more work out of them. And it’s much easier to change the methods of communication than it is to change the organisational structure and role relationships – more realistic ways of affecting performance and satisfaction.’

This raises broader issues relating to organisational structure and power. For example, if an organisation professes innovation as a core value, but has a highly bureaucratic structure involving layers of decision-making and centralised power, then innovation will not be fostered. A corporate identity analysis must address corporate ‘behaviour’ in its broadest sense and embrace all aspects of corporate culture discussed in the previous chapter, as well as structure and power. Johnson’s culture web (Figure 7.1) and Lewin’s (1935) force field analysis are useful for mapping a number of dimensions of corporate behaviour.

**The visual or design audit:** ‘The design audit is led by one of the designers on the corporate identity consultants’ team. Its task is to study and document the way in which the different parts of the organisation present themselves in terms of the three traditional
areas of design – factories, showrooms and so on; product, packaging and information material; vehicle liveries, signs, brochures, advertising, instruction manuals and every other form of graphics. What does it all look like? What message is it meant to convey?’ (Olins 1999: 162).

A visual audit is not superficial and should reveal more than where a new coat of paint is needed. Baker and Balmer (1997: 378) illustrate the value of the visual audit as a research tool and its contribution to strategy formulation at Strathclyde University, for example, where ‘the visual audit revealed important characteristics of the University’s identity i.e. the University was highly decentralised and had fragmented corporate communications’.

However, the design audit is only one aspect of the research into an organisation’s corporate identity. ‘The design audit is in a sense both complementary to, and an integral part of the communications audit, and both are inextricably involved with the behavioural audit’ (Olins 1999: 162).

**Corporate identity planning**

The purpose in the process outlined above (researching the actual and desired image and identifying which aspects of corporate identity should be changed to connote appropriate meaning) is to use this information to formulate a corporate identity plan. Such a plan would often aim to manipulate the variables of corporate identity to ensure they suggest a coherent and desirable personality. But is it really possible to manipulate the appropriate variables (symbolism, communication and behaviour) effectively?

Corporate identity is such a complex concept, it is difficult to imagine that it is easily manipulated and controlled. However, consultants sometimes claim just this. Schmidt (1997), for example, promotes an approach to corporate identity management involving five dimensions: ‘products and services, communications and design, corporate behaviour, market conditions and strategies and corporate culture’. He claims, ‘our successful holistic approach made it possible to analyse, structure and control all relevant dimensions, including culture’ (1997: 40).

Others hold conflicting views, Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue:

> strategies and visions are created and interpreted through culturally-mediated language such as metaphor, stories and humour and demonstrated by material artefacts of culture such as products, buildings and physical arrangements. Corporate identity can, therefore, never be wholly managed.

Although perhaps not ‘wholly managed’, important inroads can be made into identifying and communicating a strategically important corporate identity. Provided readers retain a realistic mindset about what can really be effected, a number of useful multistep corporate identity management plans are available in the literature: Dowling (1994), Olins (1999), Bernstein (1989), van Riel (1995), Abratt (1989) and Ind (1997). Van Riel’s contribution is among the most useful.

Comprehensive research (of the type investigated above) affects the corporate identity management plan. It should be conducted among a range of stakeholders; include environmental monitoring to identify any emerging issues, trends or policies and enable the following questions to be answered:

1. What is our current image?
2. In order to meet strategic objectives, what do we need our image to be?
3. What is the difference between 1 and 2?
Figure 7.2 Adapted version of van Riel’s model of corporate identity management

Source: Adapted from van Riel 1995
Figure 7.3  Adapted version of Melewar and Karaosmanoglou’s revised categorisation of corporate identity dimensions and their sub-items

Source: Adapted from Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006)
4. What changes must be made to our corporate identity to help narrow any gap between 1 and 2?

The objectives of the corporate identity policy programme (van Riel 1995) could be:

- to maintain an organisation’s current position (research shows that 1 and 2 are the same), or
- to adjust its current position (1 and 2 are slightly dissonant), or
- to determine an entirely new position (1 and 2 are vastly dissonant).

The design of a corporate identity plan involves consideration of a range of ‘companants’, ‘dimensions’ or determinants’ (Cornelisson, and Elving 2003, Melewar 2003, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). These are perhaps most usefully represented in Figure 7.3, an adapted version of Melewar and Karaosmanoglu’s (2006) revised categorisation of corporate identity dimensions and their sub-items.

Melewar and Karaosmanoglu’s very useful model is based on a thorough examination of the literature to identify theoretical dimensions of corporate identity which are then tested against practitioners’ experience to identify an ‘operational definition’. It is a fairly comprehensive guide to the dimensions which could be considered by practitioners in the formulation of a CI strategy and is useful for academics in helping to establish some common ground in defining what is meant by corporate identity.

It has been adapted here as we feel that Melewar and Karaosmanoglu’s original (2006) model does not give enough weight to the impact of external environmental factors such as political thinking and legislation (areas represented in EPISTLE analysis: environmental, political, information, social, technological, legal and economic) which will affect the strategic design of corporate identities. For example, many mission and value statements involve concepts such as sustainability and social responsibility – would this have been the case if Thatcherism and Reaganomics had continued to dominate political thinking in the UK and US? It is often strategically important for organisations to project a ‘responsible’ identity to negate the need for legislation. And surely organisations’ approach to communication has changed as a result of developments in technology, particularly the internet - a phenomenon known as technological determinism (Somerville, Gillham and Wood, 2007).

Melewar and Karaosmanoglu do recognise environmental forces as influencing identity but represent this in their model only as the influence of sectoral responses to external elements in the ‘industry identity’ dimension but do not reflect the source of these influences in detail. Perhaps this is because their research has been developed within a perspective which views public relations as part of the ‘4Ps of product, price, place and promotion . . . aimed at supporting the sales of an organisation’s products’ (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006 :850). This has been called a marketing-centred conceptualisation of public relations: ‘In what can be termed a marketing-centred approach to corporate communication, which is evident throughout much of the literature, significant stakeholders such as politicians and local communities are routinely absent and public relations is represented as promotion of a product or service’ (Wood 2006: 544). We do not share that perspective and prefer a public relations-centred conceptualisation which regards environmental scanning, issues management and lobbying as major imperatives in corporate communications practice. Even though practitioners may not always recognise the pervasive influence of political thought or social policy on their decision-making, we argue that issues management and environmental forces – including political, social,
environmental and economic – should be recognised as influencing and shaping corporate identities (Gregory 1999, Cornelissen and Elving 2003) and have adapted Melewar and Karaoğlan’s model to reflect this.

So what does all this mean in practice? An example of an organisation acting on feedback from extensive research into its corporate identity is given below. The Queen Margaret University College case study illustrates many of the points made in the text. It shows the value of research and how organisations can react to research findings, and provides a valuable insight into a comprehensive corporate identity management programme involving key stakeholders.

**Case study: Queen Margaret University’s corporate identity**

Queen Margaret College was founded in Edinburgh in 1875, a time when women were excluded from most universities. At the forefront of women’s fight for access to higher education, it was originally a cookery school and then became known for health education. At that time, research was just beginning to demonstrate the link between poverty and ill health. The college worked to improve standards of health and living conditions and campaigned for the introduction of district nurses to care for women in their homes. Within a generation, infant mortality in Scotland was reduced by 50 per cent. QMC’s contribution is still a source of pride, an important aspect of its culture often emphasised in speeches (which is interesting in relation to Johnson and Scholes’ (1999) stories and myths and the idea of corporate storytelling (van Riel et al. in Schultz et al. 2003)).

Now the much-expanded Queen Margaret University (QMU) has some 5,500 students from some fifty countries worldwide studying a wide range of subjects, from dietetics to drama, from radiography to retail business and public relations.

Despite these developments, QMU’s history still influences its corporate personality, as its mission statement makes clear:

To enhance the quality of life and serve communities, through excellence and leadership in vocationally and professionally relevant education, research and consultancy, as an university which is outward looking and committed to innovation, participation and life-long learning.

**Strategic aims and objectives**

In 1999, the Privy Council awarded Queen Margaret College the title *University College*. The full ‘university’ title could not be conferred because the college had fewer than 4,000 students (full university status was conferred in 2007).

The addition of the word ‘university’ into Queen Margaret College’s title meant that its visual identity had to be updated. Rather than simply inserting the new word into the existing logo, however, the Principal and senior management recognised the necessity of a more fundamental and wide-ranging corporate image audit to help the University College achieve its future strategic aims. As Marketing Manager Gregor McMeechan explained: ‘We took an integrated and holistic approach and considered our identity in its fullest sense. Not just thinking about how we look, but about our culture, our values, and how we communicate an accurate image of who we are.’\(^4\)
Corporate identity plan

The aim of the corporate identity programme was to ensure that Queen Margaret University College’s (QMUC’s) corporate identity consistently communicated QMUC’s university level status (’universityness’) to all of its stakeholders.

The plan was also informed by a number of organisational objectives outlined in the University College’s strategic plan. Primarily:

• To extend and develop the profile and reputation of the University College, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally;
• To continue to review organisational systems and structures to secure improvements in corporate policy formation and implementation, operational efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness to change and opportunity.

(QMUC Strategic Plan 1999–2000)

The corporate identity plan also underpinned objectives highlighted in the strategic plan relating to high graduate employment rates, international student recruitment and the development of strategic links.

Research

Several qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed to identify a range of stakeholders’ views on QMUC’s current and desired image:

• content analysis of documents ranging from prospectuses and strategic plans to media coverage and the internet;
• surveys and questionnaires;
• corporate personality mapping exercise with senior management;
• semi-structured interviews;
• focus groups;
• visual audit.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure sufficient disclosure from a range of key stakeholder groups. These included the following.

Internal publics
• Academic staff (course leaders, admissions tutors, lecturers involved in seeking research funding and/or commercial consultancy, heads of research institutes or commercial centres).
• Administrative staff from areas such as business development, commercial services, marketing, student services, students’ union.
• Governors and students.

External publics
• Prospective undergraduate and post-graduate students.
• Professional and industrial contacts such as research sponsors and partners, placement hosts, members of advisory panels, commercial consultancy clients and the funding council.
Research questions

The problem with focusing a discussion on corporate identity is that most people associate corporate identity with design, which is often judged according to personal taste with everyone having views on what they like or dislike. The facilitator’s major task in the focus groups was to explain the concept of corporate image and the role of corporate identity and keep the discussion focused on QMUC’s corporate identity in relation to its strategic objectives. When staff considered a desired image for the University College, for example, conversations were steered towards what needed to be achieved over the next ten years and how a particular corporate positioning could contribute to success, rather than becoming stuck on favourite colours and preferred typeface.

That said, asking for views on the existing logo and the image it communicated served as a useful icebreaker. Having expounded often dearly held opinions, participants could then be led through the group processes up the conceptual ladder to a stage when valid and interesting views were proffered.

The research mapped participants’ views on current and desired corporate image in relation to other universities and against expectations of what a university should be like.

Key findings

A number of attributes were identified. Some were commonly well regarded by participants while different publics held distinctive views about some important aspects. A summary follows.

Attributes valued by all constituents

- The name ‘Queen Margaret’, with its connotations of credibility, authority and prestige often associated with the old established universities.
- QMUC’s Edinburgh location (although an overemphasis on Scottishness should not imply parochialism and obscure QMUC’s international status).
- The use of the crest in QMUC’s visual identity, with its connotations of longevity, tradition, quality and learning.

Attributes valued by staff and professional contacts

- Quality teaching, research and consultancy and distinctiveness of character. Perceptions of quality include issues such as the high grading obtained in the independent quality assessment exercise, high level of individual attention given to students and the high graduate employment rate (the highest in Scotland).
- The relatively small size of the University College is an important aspect of staff perceptions of a friendly, caring and supportive nature.
- QMUC’s strong research culture and history of academic achievement make staff feel more aligned with ‘old’ universities than with the ‘new’ university sector.
- The ‘applied’ nature of QMUC’s academic expertise and strong vocational links with a range of professions.
- Caring and community values linked to concepts such as ‘serving society’, ‘enhancing quality of life’ (particularly for health faculties) and ‘life-long learning’ were also highlighted.
Problematic areas identified by staff
- Confusion regarding a clear strategy to manage increasingly conflicting demands (such as the need to earn income to offset government cuts, meet research targets, manage increased competition while still meeting student needs).
- Poor internal communication.
- The perception that QMUC’s strategy to purchase a new campus had resulted in lack of investment in existing facilities and buildings.

Attributes valued by students and prospective students
‘Specific attributes chosen as being particularly motivational showed students are looking for: quality and up-to-date teaching provision to make the most of their abilities, relevant knowledge and skills, a degree that is well regarded by employers, high level of individual attention and support, a pleasant environment and exciting social life.’

Conflicting perspectives
Staff deemed concepts of ‘serving society’ and ‘lifelong learning’ as important attributes of the corporate personality, whereas students rejected this image. Students were motivated by elements that would benefit them as individuals rather than notions of universities being about enhancing public quality of life. (This is particularly interesting in relation to the discussion of consistency above.)

Recommendations
Having considered the range of views expressed, researchers System Three 17 made the following recommendations:

- ‘The desired identity for QMUC is one that effectively communicates: the key areas of activity, product quality in terms of established and independent endorsement (heritage, Quality Assessment ratings, graduate employment rate), a caring and supportive environment, as well as excitement and dynamism.’
- ‘The desired tone of QMUC both on behalf of staff and students is a stamp of established quality and prestige, as well as modern relevance, advancement and innovation.’
- ‘The high number of pressures placed on the University College necessitates a clear strategy for prioritising demands on staff and establishing a logical way forward guided by meaningful and non-conflicting objectives.’

Implementation of the new corporate identity
Symbolism
From the sea of research findings, the designers distilled the following desired perceptions to inform the new visual identity:

- heritage and established quality;
- Queen Margaret title;
- Innovation;
- modern relevance of courses;
- quality of teaching;
Figure 7.4a  Queen Margaret University College, old logo
Used with permission

Figure 7.4b  Queen Margaret University College, new logo
Used with permission

Figure 7.5  Queen Margaret University College campus
Used with permission
individuality of the organisation;
• Edinburgh location;
• friendly, supportive approach.

The single most important message was identified as ‘established quality’. So, how
could design communicate these attributes? Figure 7.4 shows the old and new logos for
QMUC. Lauren Rennet, Creative Director of Graphicpartners, explains the design concept:

The concept of a crest was retained to communicate QMUC’s heritage but was
simplified and up-dated to reflect the current and future offer of the University College,
not that of its early years when the original crest was drawn.

With this in mind the symbols within the crest were adjusted to more distinctively
represent the University College. The main focus, Queen Margaret’s crown, provides a
memorable symbol of power, leadership and excellence. Vibrant royal blue, futuristic silver and timeless typography complete this modern,
streamlined crest without losing the valuable sense of established quality.

Staff have unique access to a corporate identity manual available solely online. The
new visual identity is consistently used across applications ranging from letterheads to
vehicle livery, uniforms to websites. Figure 7.5 illustrates the application of the new identity
at QMUC’s Corstophine campus.

The corporate identity mix
Van Riel (1995) highlights the importance of all aspects of the CI mix. Symbolism has
clearly been affected by the QMUC corporate identity plan. But what about the other
important aspects, behaviour and communication?

Research conducted among QMUC staff indicated a need for improved communication
and leadership in prioritising and balancing demands on lecturers. A number of initiatives
were launched in response.

An improved career development and appraisal scheme provides a structure for staff
to agree individual objectives within a framework which clearly connects with organ-
isational aims and objectives. Staff are involved in determining their own criteria for
success.

Dorothy Wright, Director of Human Resources, planned more far-reaching cultural
developments: ‘The strategic plan specifies flexibility, commercial awareness, quality,
innovation and creativity as key attributes of the culture we need to foster in order to
achieve our corporate aims and objectives. My job is to look at the way we need to behave
in order to deliver in these areas.’

Her first task was to run a facilitated session with senior management, using tools such
as force field analysis, to identify changes that need to be made. Then, a full attitudes
survey was commissioned to determine staff views.

Part of the attitudes survey was designed to audit communication, and resources were
made available to implement more effective two-way communication systems. However,
more profound behavioural changes were planned echoing Grunig and Hunt’s (1984)
sentiment that instead of merely altering communication tactics, ‘changing the organ-
isational structure and role relationships’ are more realistic ways of affecting performance
and satisfaction.
In 2007, now a full university, the corporate logo will remain with us (with only the word ‘college’ being removed) but QMU will soon move to an entirely new campus. This latest development reveals other aspects of corporate identity management in practice, as architecture is commonly identified as a significant aspect of symbolism. Part of the vision for the new building is identified as ‘to create an attractive, distinctive campus that represents the unique characteristics of QM’. It remains to be seen how these characteristics are embodied into the final functioning building. An artists’ impression is all we have to go on as this new edition of The Public Relations Handbook goes to press.

Questions for discussion

1. Can a carefully managed corporate identity affect a strategically important corporate image?
2. What ethical issues should be considered when formulating and managing corporate identity?
3. How can stakeholders be involved?
4. Critique the assumption that corporate identity can be ‘wholly managed’?
5. What is the effect of a marketing centred perspective of corporate identity management as opposed to a public relations-centred approach?
6. To what extent is issues management part of CI management?
7. Specify how an existing corporate identity can be audited.
8. Critics such as Christensen and Cheney consider CI management to be the domain of a small elite within organisations who become self-absorbed and deluded about the role and importance of identity: ‘In a world saturated with symbols, where there is a great demand for every organisation to keep communicating, it is easy to think that each message and every campaign are taken seriously and received in the ways designed. But such meanings are often malleable, unstable and of only ephemeral interest. In fact in many cases, cynicism may be the most prominent outcome’ (Christensen and Cheney in Schultz et al. 2000: 267). How could this view influence approaches to CI management?
9. How would you justify the resources necessary for the introduction of a CI management programme to a sceptical CEO?
10. To what extent is consistency important to managing corporate identity and how does it differ from homogeneity?

Endnotes

1. Gregory (1999) provides a useful summary of current thinking:

The two concepts of identity and image have suffered from a lack of clarity stemming partly from confusion between and conflation of the terms. Broadly speaking, corporate identity was originally seen as the visual symbols an organisation used such as logos, house style and other representations associated with design . . . For some practitioners, that view still persists . . . However, more recently the concept of corporate identity has been broadened to include linkages between corporate strategy and communication . . . In Margulies’ (1997) terms ‘identity means the sum of all the ways a company chooses to identify itself to all its publics’.
2. Nike has launched a number of initiatives to overcome this image which can be explored via its website.

3. The term ‘stakeholder’ refers to groups of publics (typically employees, suppliers, shareholders, customers and the local community) who have a significant effect on, or are affected by, an organisation. For a more detailed consideration of the concept, see Chapters 4 and 6.

4. For an explanation of corporate strategy and the strategic role of public relations, see Chapter 4.

5. For explanations of Grunig’s (1984) symmetric and asymmetric models, see pp. 42–43.

6. For further discussion, refer to Franklin (1994) and McNair (1994).

7. The semiotic approach is outlined in Chapter 2.


9. Triangulation refers to the combining of at least three research methodologies. Cross-referencing of findings will improve validity.


11. EPISTLE analysis encompasses research into an organisation’s macro environment under the headings Economic, Political, Information, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental.


14. Unless otherwise stated, quotes are taken from interviews with the author.

15. QMUC’s strategic plan is available online at www.qmuc.ac.uk/stplan.html.

16. Social scientists often refer to groups moving through several stages (forming, storming, norming) before they ‘perform’ and contribute more truthful and useful opinions. For further information refer to Vernelle (1994: pp.28–29).

17. Research was conducted by a number of consultants, including research company System Three and the author.

Further Reading


