A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract- Organizational image management is a theoretically-driven process model, which postulates that organizations must create, maintain, and in many cases regain a legitimate image of themselves in the eyes of their stakeholders. The theory is explicated and important variables in the process are examined, including organizational credibility, identity, image, and reputation. The model provides integrated marketing communication (IMC) scholars and practitioners a theoretical model on which to base their work.

Keywords- Image, Legitimacy, Reputation, Integrated Marketing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizational image management refers to the actions taken to create, maintain, and when necessary, regain a desired image in the eyes of organizational stakeholders (Willi, Nguyen, Melewar & Dennis, 2014). An organization's image "is a holistic and vivid impression held by an individual or a particular group towards an organization and is a result of sense-making by the group and communication by the organization" (Hatch & Schultz, 1997, p. 359). Research demonstrates that organizations must sustain a desirable image in order to be successful (Fariaa & Mendes, 2013). Furthermore, organizations that do not engage in successful image management increase the chances for failure (Gilpin, 2010; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). The importance of image management will be highlighted throughout this paper, and the process of organizational image management will be examined. Before presenting the theoretical model, a review of relevant literature is necessary. The literature review provides an examination of the concept of organizational image by comparing and contrasting it to related concepts such as credibility, identity, and reputation. Once the review is complete, the paper moves to an elaboration of the model, and concludes with a discussion of the implications of the model for researchers and practitioners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have demonstrated increased interest in the public perceptions of organizations, including such concepts as credibility, reputation, identity, and image (van der Merwe & Puth, 2014). One problem for research in this area is that all of these concepts have, at one time or another, been treated synonymously (Erdem, 2013). Of course there are similarities among the concepts, and there are interdependencies as well. However, there are important differences between the concepts that must be understood if research and theory in the area is to move forward (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). The goal in the current manuscript is to define the concepts of organizational identity, reputation, and image, and to examine the differences between them.

The study of image, identity and reputation has historical roots in studies of the credibility of persons and institutions that dates back at least as far as Aristotle, who wrote about ethos, or source credibility in his book On Rhetoric, in the 4th Century, B.C. (Galbraith, McKinney, DeNoble, & Ehrlich, 2014). The interest in organizational credibility has increased dramatically in recent years because of exposed unethical practices, organizational crises, and the increased role of the media as organizational watchdog (Mason, 2014). Corporate credibility, "the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the firm," is defined as "the extent to which consumers feel that the firm has the knowledge or ability to fulfill its claims and whether the firm can be trusted to tell the truth or not" (Newell & Goldsmith, 1997, p. 235). What makes the investigation of these concepts relevant today is the increased importance given them by academicians, practitioners, and the media.

2.1. Organizational Identity

The identity of an organization is closely tied to its core values (Pérez & del Bosque, 2014). Dutton and Dukerich (1991) state that organizational identity is "what organizational members believe to be its central, enduring, and distinctive character" (p. 520; cf. Albert & Whetten, 1985).

An organization's identity is its personality; what makes it unique. According to van Riel and Balmer (1997), "identity refers to an organization's unique characteristics which are rooted in the behaviour of members of the organization" (p. 340). Identity is not just "how members perceive their organization" (Gioia & Thomas, 1996, p. 371); an identity "is a subjective, socially constructed phenomenon" (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000, p. 64). Organizational identity is "what the organization is, what it does and how it does it and is linked to the way an organization goes about its business and the strategies it adopts" (Markwich, & Fill, 1997, p. 397). Organizational identities are created by organizational members, based on organizational values. Because identity is so closely tied to the organization's core values, most

authors argue that it is a relatively stable concept (e.g., Albert & Whetten, 1985). Identities are not, however, immutable. Rather, they are dynamic, and can be changed, although they are not as malleable as either reputations or images. Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) argue that "organizational identity, contrary to most treatments of it in the literature, is actually relatively dynamic and…the apparent durability of identity is somewhat illusory" (p. 64). This illusion is created because of the interdependencies between organizational identities, reputations, and images.

2.2. Organizational Reputation

Organizational reputations are based on organizational actions, and those actions are based upon organizational members' co-creation of the organization, based upon their perceptions of what the organization is—its core values (van der Merwe, & Puth, 2014). Whereas organizational identity is based on internal stakeholder actions and perceptions, organizational reputation is based on external stakeholder perceptions. An organizational reputation "is a stakeholder's overall evaluation of a company over time. This evaluation is based on the stakeholder's direct experiences with the company [and] any other form of communication and symbolism that provides information about the firm's actions" (Gotski & Wilson, 2001, p. 29). Notice that time is a key component of the concept of organizational reputation. This will become important in the discussion of organizational image. Organizational reputations "represent publics' cumulative judgments of firms over time" (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990, p. 235).

Organizational reputations can be an asset or a liability (van der Merwe, & Puth, 2014). Organizations that have positive reputations are able to attract higher-quality job applicants, experience greater market share, are able to charge higher prices, and are more attractive to potential investors (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). In short, "a favourable corporate reputation gives an organization a competitive advantage" (van Ries & Balmer, 1997, p. 341). Furthermore, a favorable reputation increases the quality of organizational performance (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990).

Gotsi and Wilson (2001) state that there are three schools of thought in the research literature regarding organizational reputation: (1) the analogous school of thought; (2) the differentiated school of thought; and (3) the interrelated school of thought. The analogous approach treats organizational reputation and organizational image as identical, the differentiated school of thought treats them as totally separate, and the interrelated school of thought argues that "there is a dynamic relationship between corporate reputation and corporate image" (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001, p. 28). The third approach is taken here; while reputations and images are not identical, they are also not totally different from one another. Rather, organizational reputations are dynamic constructs which share interdependent relationships with organizational images.

Recall that organizational identity is based upon the core values of the organization, and that it is a shared construction expressed through internal stakeholder perceptions of "who we are." Once expressed, the organizational identity gives rise to the development of an organizational reputation, which, in contrast to organizational identity, is the perception of the organization on the part of external stakeholders (Pérez & del Bosque, 2014). Recall also that organizational reputation, while stable, is a fairly dynamic construction that is built over time.

2.3. Organizational Image

In comparison to organizational reputation, organizational image is a much less stable concept and therefore much more amenable to change (Langer, Anderson, Furman & Blue, 2006). Some argue that organizational image is therefore so ephemeral that to consider it at all is a waste of time, and to consider its management is foolish at best. Scott Cutlip, professor and author of IMC research and teaching materials has been quoted as saying, "I loathe the word image" (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001, p. 27).

It is argued here, however, that the concept of organizational image is very important to IMC researchers and practitioners. The dynamic nature of organizational image makes its management easier than the management of organizational identities and organizational reputations. Before discussing the process of organizational image management, it is first necessary to define the concept of organizational image.

There are two definitions of organizational image that are most prevalent in the research, one focusing on the perceptions of internal members and the other focusing on the perceptions of external members (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). The first, sometimes referred to as "the construed external image" is a descriptive view, and refers to how insiders believe external audiences view their organization (Gioia, & Thomas, 1991; 1996). The second is a projective view and is defined as "outsiders' beliefs about what distinguishes an organization" (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994, p. 243). Gioia and Thomas (1996) argue that this "projective view" encompasses the "characteristics organizational elites want stakeholders to ascribe to the firm," and refer to this definition of organizational image as the "communicated image" (p. 371).

An organizational image is the "shared meanings, attitudes, knowledge, and opinions" of organizational stakeholders, influenced, at least in part, by strategic communications emanating from the organization (Moffitt, 1994, p. 166). An image is "something projected" by the organization, and "something

perceived or interpreted by others" (Cheney & Vibbert, 1987, p.176). Organizational images are therefore created and sustained by both organizations and stakeholders; while the organization is actively attempting to project a particular image of itself, stakeholders are forming perceptions of the organization (Willi, Nguyen, Melewar & Dennis, 2014). This duality is what produces the organizational image, and it is an important aspect of the definition of organizational image presented here. An organizational image is the product of discourse between organizations and stakeholders, not simply the result of one-way communication that ipso facto produces a desired image in the minds of the target audience (Erdem, 2013).

Because of the dialogic nature of organizational images, organizations must strategically communicate with stakeholders to foster certain images and discourage others. As Garbett (1988) argues, "although the company image portrayed must reflect reality, it is entirely possible as well as desirable to select and promote those characteristics that harmonize with the strategic plans of the company. The characteristics should also be those deemed desirable by the publics important to the company" (p. 7). Development of the firm's image therefore requires that the organization look to its mission statement and overall purpose, and promote desirable characteristics of itself to its stakeholders--desirability defined by both the organization and its stakeholders. This process is critical to an organization's success, and is what is referred to here as organizational image management.

2.4. Summary

In this section, literature on organizational identity, reputation, and image were reviewed. These theoretical concepts all share a fundamental grounding in the long-standing theory and research on source credibility. Organizational identities are based on the core values of the organization, and are the actions taken and perceptions held by internal stakeholders. Organizational reputations are developed by external stakeholders and are based upon organizational actions, among other things. Organizational reputations are not static, they are dynamic, but they are less mutable than organizational images. Organizational images are the perceptions of stakeholders of organizational actions, and are less durable than organizational reputations. According to Stuart (1999), "corporate reputation is the perception of the corporate identity built up over time, making it much more stable than corporate image" (p. 205).

It is also important to note that organizational images are not based upon organizational reputations—rather, they share a dynamic, interdependent relationship. According to Gotsi and Wilson (2001, p. 28):

In this relationship, corporate images that stakeholders form can be influenced by their overall evaluation of the company, i.e., its corporate reputation and at the same time a firm's corporate reputation is largely influenced by the corporate images that stakeholders form every day for the organization.

Much literature has been written about organizational identity management and organizational reputation management. The concern in this manuscript, however, is in organizational image creation and maintenance. The management of organizational images is more possible than reputations because of the malleability of images (Gilpin, 2010). According to Fombrun and Shanley, reputations tend to act as a hindrance to change. They state that "if firms value their reputations, the desire to protect them can inhibit them and their managers from engaging in activities constituents deem unacceptable. Established reputations may, therefore, impede managers' strategic responses to environmental events" (1990, p. 235). Organizational image management is a necessary component in IMC activity and a key to organizational success (Fariaa & Mendes, 2013).

III. A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE MANAGEMENT

The theory of organizational image management argues that a primary goal of IMC is the creation and maintenance of an organization's image (Massey, 2011, 2010). Organizations communicate strategically with stakeholders to encourage desirable images and discourage undesirable ones. Organizational image management theory is developed from theories of image management and self-presentation at the level of the individual (see, for example Goffman, 1959; Tedeschi & Riordan, 2013). Although organizations are different from individuals in important ways, organizations can be and are treated in the same way as individuals by many theorists and practitioners.

The view taken here is that an organization's image is the perception that stakeholders have about the organization (van der Merwe, & Puth, 2014), so it is aligned most closely with the "communicated image" of Gioia and Thomas (1996). This is an important distinction in that it suggests that a dialogue is necessary for the creation of an organizational image. Specifically, an organizational image is developed dialogically by the organization and its stakeholders over time.

Organizations must sustain an effective image with their stakeholders in order to maximize their chances for success (Garbett, 1988; Mason, 2014). Although failure is not inevitable when an organization's image is tarnished, it is more likely, as many studies have demonstrated (Englehardt, Sallot, & Springston, 2001; Massey, 2001).

What is effective, however, is constantly in flux. Changes in the organization's environment, and changes in the organization itself make image management challenging. The concerns of both organizations and stakeholders are affected by a host of variables, including market dynamics, technology, and contemporary social and political issues, among others. The challenge for organizations lies in being able to understand these changes and continually adjust the organization's image in anticipation of and/or response to environmental change (Fariaa & Mendes, 2013). Furthermore, the multiplicity of organizational stakeholders demands a strategic approach to image management in which the organization attempts to present itself in terms relevant to all stakeholders, both internal and external (Garbett, 1988). Although challenging, organizations must engage in image management in order to be successful. Organizational image management is important for at least two reasons. First, images determine cognitive, affective, and behavioral stakeholder responses toward the organization. Second, shared images make possible the interdependent relationships that exist between organizations and stakeholders (Treadwell & Harrison, 1994). Although each person's perception of an organization is subject to idiosyncrasies, the collectively shared image of an organization held by most stakeholders, when managed properly, allows for coordination of organizational activity that is consistent with stakeholder expectations. Organizational image management is a dialogic process in which organizations and stakeholders communicate with one another to co-create the image of the organization. Moffit's (1994) work provides support for the argument that image management is a dialogic process—indeed, she argues that sometimes organizations have little influence over the images held by organizational stakeholders. Ginzel, Kramer, and Sutton (1993, p. 248) further clarify the dialogic process of organizational image management:

Thus, an organization's image represents a collaborative social construction between organization's top management and the multiple actors who comprise the organizational audiences. A particular interpretation of an organization's image may be proposed by top management, but that interpretation must in turn be endorsed, or at the very least not rejected, by their various audiences if it is to persist.

3.1. A Model of Organizational Image Management

Organizational image management is a three-stage process that involves creating, maintaining, and in many cases regaining an effective organizational image. First of all, when an organization begins or is unknown, it must create an image of itself with its various stakeholders (Massey, 2010). According to Garbett (1988) this is difficult since most people have a certain amount of skepticism of the unknown.

Second, if an organization is able to successfully create an image, it must work to maintain that image (Gilpin, 2010). Image maintenance is an on-going process that requires communication with organizational stakeholders. To successfully maintain an effective image, organizations must seek feedback from stakeholders and adjust their branding as well as their communication strategy accordingly. Again, the process is dialogic: while organizations are strategically communicating with stakeholders to influence perceptions, stakeholders are forming their own ideas about the image of the organization. If an organization fails to monitor and adjust to the feedback provided by stakeholders, successful organizational image management is threatened.

The third stage of the process is restoration, and usually occurs because the organization has experienced some sort of a crisis. Not all organizations experience the third stage of the model, but because of the increase in the number (Barton, 2008) and magnitude of crises (Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2014), many organizations must restore legitimacy. If an organization moves to this stage, then it must engage in strategic communication to restore a successful image. If successful, the organization will return to the maintenance stage of image management, but if unsuccessful, the organization could fail or be forced to restructure itself (Massey & Larsen, 2006). At a minimum, organizational restructuring involves the development of a new identity, and in extreme cases can result in merger, name change, and other end results that require movement back to the image creation stage of the process. Organizational image management is therefore a cyclical, rather than a linear process, as Figure 1 illustrates. As many organizations have come to realize, the principal management problem in today's marketplace of goods and ideas is not so much to provide commodities and services or to take stands on the salient issues of the day, but to do these things with a certain distinctiveness that allows the organization to create and legitimate itself, its particular 'profile,' and its advantageous position (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Deephouse & Carter, 2005).

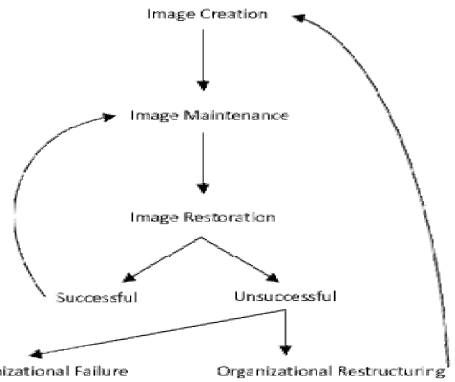


Fig.1. Theoretical Model of Organizational Image Management

Cheney and Christensen (2001) argue that there are at least two reasons organizations engage in image management. The first reason for engaging in image management is that organizations must attempt to differentiate themselves from the rest of the pack. Differentiation is not easy, but it is increasingly necessary in a global marketplace in which products and service are duplicated and advertising and other corporate communication messages clutter the landscape.

The second reason organizations must engage in image management is to maintain the stakeholder perception that the organization is legitimate. Legitimacy can be defined as "the degree of cultural support for an organization" (Meyer & Scott, 1983, p. 201). To achieve legitimacy organizations must develop congruence between their own actions and the values of the social system in which they operate (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Another way of thinking about legitimacy is offered by Bedeian (1989), who defines legitimacy as a summary or global belief among stakeholders that an organization is good or has a right to continue operations. Meyer and Scott (1983) put forth a continuum of organizational legitimacy, ranging from completely legitimate to completely illegitimate. Completely legitimate organizations have no threat of external (or internal) evaluation, while completely illegitimate organizations potentially face these threats both internally and externally (Oleksiyenko, 2013).

When legitimacy is defined as congruence with the values of the society in which an organization is embedded, then the role of IMC is to achieve that congruence. As Suchman (1995) states, "legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (p. 574). Thus, the purpose of organizational image management is the creation of legitimate images. Organizations that successfully create legitimate images are more likely to survive than those who do not (Oleksiyenko, 2013). Only through organizational image management are organizations able to successfully create, maintain, and in some cases regain, successful legitimate images of themselves.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper has made a modest attempt to develop theory in IMC research. Much more work needs to be done, but organizational image management is an area that is rich for IMC scholars as they attempt to move away from mere description of IMC activities towards real IMC theory.

The definitions of organizational credibility, identity, reputation, and image will be helpful to researchers as the differences and similarities of these concepts have been muddled in the research literature (Pérez & del Bosque, 2014). Also, the theoretical model of organizational image management should assist researchers as they develop more theory in IMC. This model has not encapsulated all there is to IMC research and activity, of course.

The hope is that it will serve as a catalyst for future research and theory-building in IMC. Also, by providing a process model, the dynamic nature of image management has been illustrated.

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