THE ROLE OF BRANDING AND INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS IN STRENGTHENING CORPORATE IMAGE

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Abstract: *The efforts involved in building a company's image are not just the responsibility of the marketing department or its efforts, but rather cover the entire business. The sensory reflections that define the term company image are characterized by quality, price, product availability, trust, level of service, company history, company reputation, and possibly advertising, which even if it does not have an influence on production quality or price, can shape a presentation of the product and the company to the final consumer. Any company that has interacted with certain stakeholders (e.g., consumers), has communicated its image and the consumer has made their conclusions. Thus, the effort and investment involved in image formation and enhancement is more*

than justified by the negative effect the image can have when the company does not give attention and importance to this aspect. A strategic approach to branding and the use of integrated marketing communications to strengthen the company's image leads to a positive result that materializes in higher profitability in relation to the competition and which essentially denotes its competitiveness in the market.

Keywords: *image, branding, communication, integrated communications, profitability, competition.*

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Introduction

In the Republic of Moldova, most companies approach image reactively, because they consider that image is in the eyes of the viewer (or target group), thus being an external attribute that can be easily modified or cosmeticized. However, this approach is superficial and once appearances are put aside, the consumer is faced with the perceived, real image. Afanasiev argues that "plastic surgery" does not treat the cause and companies not infrequently also need therapy, and in some cases even surgery. Thus, the problem of company image is often the outward manifestation of internal crises and challenges and the role and place of the company in its competitive environment and in society as a whole. If treated superficially by management, these issues lead to a steady reduction in the competitiveness of the company which can eventually result in its disappearance from the market. As mentioned earlier, the process of managing the company's image starts long before the design and creation of the company's visual attributes such as logo, slogan, color palette used, style of the points of commerce, etc. It starts with the vision, the mission of the company which should be reflected in the leadership and culture of the company (figure 1).
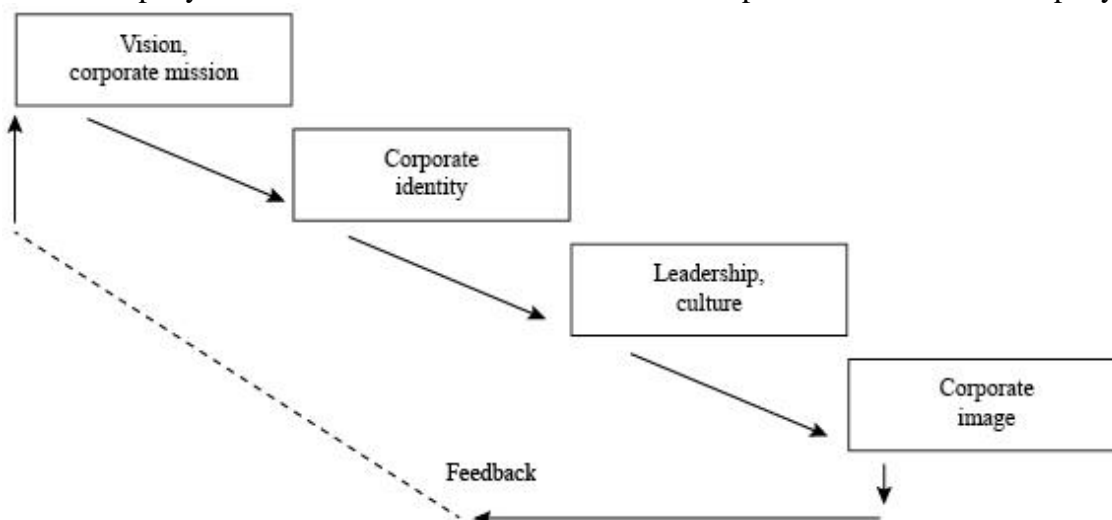

Figure 1. The process of corporate image formation
Source: developed by the author according to Afanasiev S. [1].

The corporate identity or personality of the company emerges from the determination of the company's vision and mission, tangible characteristics that are manifested through the corporate culture, values, and behavioral norms within the organization. Corporate identity also defines the organizational style, which is the way the company conducts its business, how it uses financial, material and human resources in its activities. Corporate identity also represents the system of communication channels, symbols, elements, colors, logos that reflect the personality of the company. The corporate identity must reflect the company's vision and mission. Once the character is defined, the company must decide how and in what way it will communicate this to its target groups. The way it is communicated and the result of the interpretation of marketing communications is the image of the company.

Literature review

In the article The Importance of Corporate Brand Personality Traits to a Successful 21st Century Business published in Volume 14 of the Journal of Brand Management, Keller and Richey argue that "in the context of increased and continuing competitiveness among companies, success cannot be attributed solely to the products and services a company offers" [2]. Thus, in sec. 21st century, a company's success will depend as much on what the company does as on what it stands for. From a historical perspective, a company's identity is a reflection of what it has done in the past. Today, this perspective is changing course, where 'who they are' becomes more important than 'what they do'. In approaching a company's image, it is necessary to distinguish between products and the company itself. Bearing in mind that a company's image emerges from and is a reflection of its identity, when we refer to the concept of personality, we can say that it applies to both products and the company itself with certain specific features. From Keller K.'s perspective, one way in which the company distinguishes itself in relation to the company's products is that "the company encompasses a much wider spectrum of possible associations" [3]. In relation to the company, the public can invoke associations on the basis of the people and the relationships they can form, develop with the company, which does not apply in relation to the company's products. The values, initiatives and causes that are supported by a company are also elements of the company's identity and credibility. As a result, the character traits or personality of a company are much more complex than those of a product. Company personality can be defined in terms of attributes or human characteristics that are intended to reflect the values, words and actions of employees, both individual and collective. A company that aims for success and performance must properly manage its publicly displayed personality which, once interpreted, becomes the image of the company. The personality must reflect those values on the basis of which the company differentiates itself and positions itself in relation to the competition. There must be a direct link between the organization's characteristics and the public's perception of it. Thus, by solidifying those personality traits that define the company and that stem from the values on which it operates, a company can enjoy a sustainable competitive advantage over its competitors.

A company can identify and track several associations that it finds valuable in the mind of the consumer or other stakeholders to differentiate its offering. We can mention elements such as product attributes, benefits or attitudes pursued, people and relationships, programs and values. Regardless of how these values are implemented, a company's image will depend to a significant extent on its products or services, the actions it takes and the way it addresses consumers. Given that personality is a key element of a company's image, personality is perceived through image, i.e. through those characteristics perceived by consumers or those who directly use the product. From this perspective, product personality is seen as a way for consumers to express their actual or ideal self-image.

Company image focuses much more on how employees, both top management and those who directly interact with consumers, are perceived. The personality of the company reflects the values, actions and statements of all employees who are part of the company. A useful way to characterise the dimensions of company personality is through the trilateral of attitudes (figure 2), which contains the affective (feelings), cognitive (thoughts), and determinative (actions) sides.
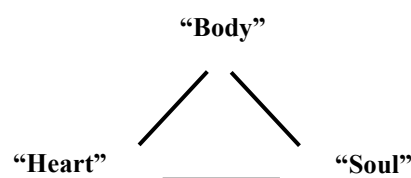

Figure 2. Company personality
Source: adapted by the author according to Keller,K., Richey, K. [2].

Thus, from Keller and Richey's perspective, the characteristic features of successful companies in the 21st century can be grouped on the basis of these three dimensions, namely heart, body, and

mind [2]. These dimensions reflect the three distinct personality traits that can serve as a guide for the company in influencing how it is viewed by its stakeholders.

- The "heart" of the company encompasses passion and compassion. The company must show enthusiasm (passion) for consumers and the market in which it operates and also for employees, shareholders and other members of the community in which the company operates.
- "Soul" implies 2 other traits, namely creativity and discipline. A successful company must be creative in the diversity of ways it serves consumers and captures the market, while at the same time adopting a considerable dose of discipline that ensures consistent and appropriate actions throughout the company.
- The "body" is agility and collaboration. The company must possess the necessary degree of agility that will enable it to act promptly to changes that occur in the marketplace and also incorporate the participatory engagement that ensures the smooth functioning of all the elements that make up the company.

The heart of the organization is characterized by passion and compassion and implies that a successful company must have employees who are passionate about all the elements that make up the company. Thus, the passion shown by employees must be reflected in the business, the industry, and the products they produce. Equally important is the passion that employees show towards the company's customers. Realizing that employees are the essential and central element of any company, employees must show a considerable willingness to support the company in its efforts to be dedicated to its customers. Caring for customers can be manifested through various loyalty programs, improving employee service and responding to the needs expressed by employees when the company launches a new product. Caring for the community can be demonstrated through corporate social responsibility or certain cause marketing initiatives that have the potential for considerable impact among the company's stakeholders. Last but not least, a successful company must show care for the environment in which it operates through various initiatives or programs aimed at reducing resource consumption, thereby reducing environmental pollution. Passion provides the internal stimulus that employees need and which, according to Keller and Richey, "must be tempered by caring for others, by compassion" [2].

The mind, shaped by creativity and discipline implies that any successful business must be creative, but at the same time disciplined. Tackling the challenges of a highly competitive environment is possible through creativity, which in turn requires certain compromises to be made.

Agility and collaboration form the 'body' of the company. In pursuit of success, a company must possess agility and deliver added value to consumers despite the changing dynamics that are witnessed in the marketplace. The marketing environment has undergone great changes in recent times, and with the accelerated development of artificial intelligence (AI), tomorrow's realities will be totally different from todays. Consumer behaviors, competitive strategies, legislation and other things are changing that will have a profound impact on the success of a business. Against this backdrop, effective corporate image management requires proactive strategies designed to enhance a company's brand equity in spite of all the challenges facing the organization. The company must be able to move forward and use all new opportunities offered by the market to its advantage. Innovations, which are so necessary for an organization, require a strong dose of agility to ensure that the company continues to progress in the right direction. In terms of collaboration, a successful company needs to encourage collaboration among its employees and create a collaborative atmosphere with all its business partners. A key objective in marketing is to develop strong, long-term relationships with all stakeholders in the company who will either directly or indirectly affect the success of all the company's marketing activities. Internally, a company needs to strengthen a culture that encourages cross-departmental collaboration where employees voluntarily exploit these opportunities and through this, the company can enjoy agility in overcoming business challenges. Externally, a successful company must continuously develop a network of partners who contribute certain complementary assets and competencies, who have sound principles and values and through which synergy effects can be achieved. Successful collaborations are due to strong and authentic

relationship marketing that cultivates the right relationships with the right collaborators. In marketing these collaborators are consumers, employees, marketing partners (suppliers, distributors, agencies, channels, etc.), and financial institutions (shareholders, investors, analysts). Relationship marketing offers the potential for operations to run efficiently and deliver superior solutions. Kotler argues that "the goal of relationship marketing is to strengthen a marketing network of the company with all its partners through which mutually beneficial relationships are developed" [4].

Thus, the personality that a company has starts with its employees, who give life to this personality and who essentially form the image of the company. It can embed those values and attributes of personality in its employees by establishing values that are promoted within the organisation, by investing in the recruitment and training processes of staff, by communicating honestly and openly the goals pursued by the company, and by listening to consumers. For most companies, employees are the "face" of the company in the eyes of the consumer and for this reason, embodying the company's personality and as a result its image is an imperative. If all the elements that make up a company act with heart, mind and soul, then the company will be much better positioned to achieve success.

Byron Sharp argues that "the central role of a marketing department is to plan and deliver growth and all marketing initiatives must be justified through the lens of growth potential" [5]. The obsession with this growth results from the substantial fixed costs that most companies have, and profitability can increase as sales increase. However, increasing market share under current conditions is a difficult task. At this stage, markets are more competitive than ever and most companies are working hard just to maintain their current market share. Trying to explain the difference between large and small brands, Sharp puts forward a fundamental law of brand size, which assumes that large brands have a large consumer base [5]. The sales volumes of a brand depend on 2 elements:

1. the number of brand buyers;
2. their frequency of purchase.

Referring to the concept of integrated marketing communications, Doorley J. argues that this concept is "the management of all marketing communications coming from the company, aimed at building positive relationships with consumers and other stakeholders" [6]. Integrated marketing communication (IMC) is the result of much research conducted over many years by academics and marketing professionals to improve the effectiveness and impact of marketing activities. With company reputation on one side and branding activities on the other, managing company reputation requires the implementation of ideas, practices and measures designed to support and strengthen the way the company is perceived by stakeholders [8]. Branding activity, on the other hand, is the discipline that deals with defining and managing a complex set of attributes, values, characteristics, and character of the products and services offered by a company. Thus, reputation formation, reputation building, and branding activity largely depend on the same thing: adopting a long-term perspective, an all-encompassing understanding of the consumer, and the development of long-term trusting relationships. The integration of these two dimensions is essential in aligning the company's brand (which emerges from its products and services) with the company's reputation, which is a reflection of organisational values, character and capabilities. Fombrun, cited by Doorley argues that a company develops a good reputation "both by creating and projecting a set of values that consumers perceive as unique" [6, p. 67].

Van Riel argues that consistency and coherence of company-wide communications can be achieved using Common Starting Points (CSPs) [7]. Van Riel's approach is an integrative, interdisciplinary example that encompasses corporate strategy, identity, and image. The process involves representatives from all three areas to ensure a degree of consistency in all communications coming from the company. Achieving this consistency can be achieved through the concept of Sustainable Corporate Story. This concept is the presentation of a comprehensive narrative about the whole organization, starting with its origins and vision and ending with its mission. These narratives are not only authentic, but also memorable among different stakeholders.

Applied methods

In preparing this article, both theoretical and practical sources have been investigated. The author used research methods such as literature review and synthesis in the field of image, corporate identity, and integrated communications.

Results and discussions

In today's context, any company that wants to enjoy a competitive advantage in the marketplace needs to focus on creating and delivering solutions that address the needs of a prospect that the prospect may not yet be aware of. Creating solutions requires a whole network of organizational resources that combined should generate a product that the consumer needs. As a result, these solutions can only be sustainable if there is interaction and fit between the company and the consumer at all points of touch and/or interaction. Another challenge is to maintain that competitive advantage that is closely linked to the concept of brand, which is the medium used by marketers to give meaning to the complex set of attributes, values, characteristics of the company's products and services. Thus, the objective of branding is not only to differentiate the company's products from those of its competitors, but also to create preferences that can lead to maintaining competitive advantage. Brand architecture is the result of a comprehensive understanding of the communications that drive consumers to buy. By understanding why consumers buy a product, brand architecture provides direction in selecting those emotional and functional combinations that can generate the strongest purchase intent. In this vein, brand architecture provides a strategic marketing framework that must be visible throughout the organization, with success dependent on creating a cohesive reputation that is based on two-way communication that supports the architecture and emphasizes the importance of aligning all company employees with the company's purpose, mission and vision. Brand strength is a function of this alignment; the more outsiders believe, think and feel the same as insiders (employees), the stronger the brand. This requires openness and transparency on the part of the organization. Transparency is not just about the ability of outsiders to perceive the organization, it provides the opportunity to reflect the right attitude, responsiveness, dependability, credibility and trust of an organization that supports its marketing. Doorley argues that the concept of integrated marketing communications is largely about the marketing department itself. Taking a more all-encompassing perspective, Doorley advances the idea of integrated communications which entails "dynamic communications focused not just on the execution of the marketing plan, but on the entire operational activity of the company, thereby aligning the brand with the company's reputation" [6].

In the highly competitive environment in which most companies find themselves, integrating communications into marketing is not enough. This integration must include advertising, public relations, consumer service and other things through which the company can build relationships. The concept of integrated company-wide communications involves three components: leadership, vision and culture.

In terms of the leadership component, the significant changes that have taken place in the last 10-15 years have altered the way communications are conducted in the corporate card. The top-down communication model is no longer relevant and is categorized as one-way communication. As Schultz Don, the legendary marketer argued "senior managers are beginning to understand that a consumer is won, kept or lost based on their experience with the brand. And these experiences are not just about products and services, but also inside the company" [9]. In other words, employees are the brand and the strength of the brand depends on knowledgeable and trained employees interacting with consumers.

The second component, the vision, is the roadmap for each employee in the company and is the reference point for decision making. Traditionally, the vision is largely a matter of top management and how managers at the top of the organization are able to disseminate it to the next levels in the hierarchy. But when it comes to integrated marketing communication, a company's vision that is shaped and clarified from the bottom up has a transformative impact on the company's image by delivering coherent and consistent messages through all the tools at its disposal. In today's dynamic environment, many of the innovative ideas for creating added value do not come from top management but rather from front-line employees who have a comprehensive understanding of the

company's capabilities. Knowing what customers need through interaction with them, employees given the opportunity to act on a common vision, shared by all members of the organization, can generate significant added value.

The third component, culture, is the leverage a company has at its disposal in the transformation process. Schein, cited by Doorley argues that the concept of culture is most useful when it helps us to understand the hidden and complex problems of an organization [6]. Culture is the element that explains why people resist change, why departments have communication problems, and why rational, seemingly irrational people behave irrationally. Creating an effective integrated communication environment designed to address a changing environment is a challenge that addresses the realities of organizational culture. Organizational culture can have a constructive or destructive effect on the organization. Companies with a strong culture have a solid foundation in generating support for ideas, strategies and initiatives that create value.

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