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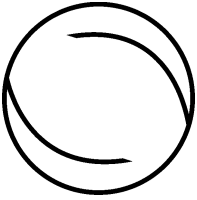**Email Alerts:** http://oss.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

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Managing Meaning through Branding — the Case of a Consulting Firm

Dan Kärreman and Anna Rylander

Dan Kärreman
Lund University,
Sweden

Anna Rylander
Göteborg University,
Sweden

Abstract

The current interest in organizational culture, identity, image and reputation and in orga-
nizational discourse points towards the pressure on contemporary organizations to focus
attention on the symbolic dimensions of their activities. The phenomenon of branding,
while originally portrayed as a marketing tool, can also be understood as an exercise in
management of meaning. Branding does not only inform external stakeholders, such as
customers and investors, about the values of the organization. It also potentially instructs
and directs organizational members. In this sense, branding can be viewed as a manage-
ment and leadership practice. Drawing on a longitudinal case study, this paper illustrates
how these practices are played out in the particular context of a management consulting
firm and explores the relationship between branding and organizational identity and
identification. The study highlights the shortcomings of the strategic marketing perspec-
tive on brands and the need for further empirical studies that examine the role of brand-
ing from different perspectives and in different empirical contexts.

Keywords: brands, branding, management consulting, organizational identity, identification

Introduction

The recent rise and expansion of so-called 'knowledge work' has prompted spec-
ulation whether society, the context for all organizational activity, has changed fun-
damentally. An emphasis on qualified individuals to perform knowledge work puts
the individual in focus and calls into question traditional bureaucratic organiza-
tional forms and management practices. Organizations are increasingly adapting to
flexible and decentralized work schemes, at least in certain sectors (Thompson
1993; Klein 2000). Concepts such as temporary work and temporary organizations
(Lundin and Söderholm 1995; Castells 2000) and virtual, or 'imaginary' organiza-
tions (Hedberg et al. 2002) have received increasing attention, underlining the frag-
mented and uncertain context of contemporary organizations. The importance of
normative (Kunda 1992), or social-ideological (Alvesson and Kärreman 2004),
forms of control over bureaucratic forms of control has been emphasized.

These trends also seem to have contributed to, or stimulated, the emergence of
new ways of understanding organizational activity, as displayed in the current
interest in organizational culture (Alvesson 2001a), identity, image and reputa-
tion (*Academy of Management Review*, special issue 2000), and organizational

discourse (*Human Relations*, special issue 2000; *Organization Studies*, special issue 2004). Scholars have spent much effort on trying to clarify how constructs such as culture, reputation, image, and corporate and organizational identity are conceptually related (e.g. Dutton and Dukerich 1991, 1994; Hatch and Schultz 1997, 2000, 2002; Christensen and Askegaard 2001). Yet, the notion of branding has only recently entered the discussion in the organization studies literature, in spite of its obvious affinity to those same concepts. This is perhaps because branding as a scholarly concept has its origins in the field of marketing. As opposed to image and reputation, which are traditionally defined as the views held by the organization's 'others' (Dowling 2001; Hatch and Schultz 2002), the notion of branding relates to the practices of attempting to emphasize specific values to be associated with the organization and/or its products and services.

However, the practice of branding, while widely understood as a marketing tool, can also productively be understood as an exercise in management of meaning (Smircich and Morgan 1982). Branding does not only inform external stakeholders, such as customers, investors and suppliers, about the values to be associated with the organization; it also potentially instructs and directs organizational members. In this sense, branding can be viewed as a management and leadership practice.

Based on an extensive case study of a management consulting firm, this paper explores how the practice of branding contributes to the processes in which meaning in and about the organization is shaped. In contrast to the great majority of the literature on the pros and cons of brands and branding, we will only take a cursory interest on the effects of branding on external stakeholders. Instead, we want to focus on the intra-organizational effects of branding. More specifically, the paper illustrates the discursive universe constructed through efforts of branding, and the effects on shared understandings and organizational practices. We will discuss the influence of the brand and branding on organizational members through the lens of theories on organizational identity, an increasingly important framework in organization studies for studying how meaning is created within organizations. After a brief review and critique of relevant literature on brands, we look at how different potential audiences for the branding discourse interpret the brand of our case organization. Finally, we discuss the relationship between branding and organizational identity and identification.

The Concept of the Brand: A Critique

The bare bones definition of a brand within the marketing literature is that it is something that identifies a product or a service, be it a name, a symbol or something else (cf. Keller 1993). In this sense, the brand has obvious appeal as a marketing tool and has also long been recognized as such. As Mollerup (1998) has pointed out, trademarks have existed for at least 5,000 years as a means of establishing the distinguishing character of something, whether to confirm social identity (e.g. heraldic marks) or to denote ownership (e.g. farmers marking their cattle) or origin (e.g. ceramic marks). However, the recent interest in the concept of the brand, which at least partly can be related to the socio-economic trends outlined in

the introduction, has focused on the capacity of the brand to create distinction from other brands (cf. Rossiter et al. 1991; Keller et al. 1998; Bottomley and Holden 2001) and thus contain value, so called brand equity (Keller 1993; Aaker and Jacobson 2001; Dillon et al. 2001; Kapferer 2004).

The idea of brand equity is, according to Keller (1993), typically understood from either a financial or a strategic point of view. The financial perspective focuses on various ways of providing more accurate measurements of brand equity for accounting purposes (e.g. goodwill). The strategic perspective views brand equity as a way of increasing marketing productivity, in particular regarding decision processes on the marketing mix. From this perspective, 'brand equity occurs when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand association in memory' (Keller 1993: 2). The underlying assumption is, of course, that this will lead to increasing sales.

A problem with this perspective on brands is that it typically fails to recognize that social processes affect brand recognition, knowledge and association. For example, Keller (1993) is at pains to give his theory on customer based brand equity some grounding in the psychology of the customer, but disregards the social and communicative processes that make it possible for the customer to establish contact with the brand. As social psychologists (cf. Asplund 1987), sociologists of knowledge (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966) and, indeed, organization theorists (cf. Salancik and Pfeffer 1978; Weick 1995) have pointed out numerous times, perception, memory and knowledge are shaped in social processes. In black-boxing the social processes that affect brands and branding, the strategic marketing perspective is unable to provide insights into how brands are socially constructed, maintained, consumed and resisted.

On a related note, the 'strategic' marketing perspective on brands, represented by Keller (1993), draws mainly on functionalist assumptions about the nature of the social world and knowledge. Consequently, it assumes that the social world, such as brands, exists in a real and objective sense, and that it is possible, given sufficient methodological sophistication, to determine the impact and effects of brands in an objective sense (cf. Burrell and Morgan 1979). What this subjective–objective distinction fails to recognize is that the researchers' tools — ideas, methodology, theories — as well as the marketing managers' tools — brands, price, products — are necessarily human inventions (Deetz 1992) and thus always 'subjective'. Thus, the strong functionalist assumptions impair the strategic marketing perspective from observing, commenting on and illuminating potential important phenomena.

Recently, other perspectives on branding have emerged, focusing more on the relationship between brands, consumers and consumer behaviour than the strategic utility of the brand. There are studies investigating themes relating to the origins of brand commitment (Coulter et al. 2003), metaphors for the brand–consumer relationship (Fournier 1998), the emergence of brand communities (Muniz and O´Guinn 2001, McAlexander et al. 2002) and critical analysis of the relationship between consumer culture and branding (cf. Holt 2002). These latter perspectives have a strong affinity to our approach. We share the understanding of brands as vehicles of meaning that may deeply affect interpretive communities.

However, the perspectives on brands mentioned above, although different in research focus and assumptions about social reality, tend to neglect internal organizational processes, thus making branding a concern primarily for the marketing department, top management or consumers. In this paper we argue that organizational members may also be an important target audience for branding efforts. This is particularly true for professional service firms such as accounting firms and management consulting firms. Here, the professionals are in a sense what constitutes 'the product' — and therefore represent the brand. The values to be associated with the brand need to be connected to the employees (and their capabilities and characteristics) rather than a physical product (and its capabilities and characteristics).

In this respect a third perspective on branding that has received increasing attention in recent years is of particular relevance to this paper: the perspective of corporate branding. Scholars adopting this perspective argue that in today's fast-moving global economy it makes more sense to direct marketing and communications efforts at the corporate level rather than to stick with the traditional focus on product brands. The literature on corporate branding draws on the traditions of product branding in that it shares the same objectives of creating differentiation and preference (Knox and Bickerton 2003).

The emphasis on branding at the organizational level has two major implications that make the branding activities more complex: a) a shift in focus from branding as a marketing communications issue handled by middle managers (with functional responsibilities, relating to the short product life cycle of a product) to strategic corporate communications issue, which is the responsibility of the CEO; b) a shift from a narrow focus on customers as audience to a broader focus on all stakeholder groups, and in particular on internal audiences (De Chernatony 1999; Balmer 2001; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Knox and Bickerton 2003). This shift is reflected in popular catchphrases encouraging companies to nurture a 'brand culture' (Schröder and Salzer-Mörling 2006) such as 'living the brand' (Ind 2001) or 'brand religion' (Kunde 1999), based on the assumption that a well managed brand is the key to success and that the brand values need to be enshrined in the organization and lived by the employees. This is particularly important in the service sector, it is argued, as the brand is often difficult to separate from the organization, and it is people rather than machines that are to fulfil the brand promise. 'Within the company, people must recognize the brand values as their own. The internalization process is crucial' (Kapferer 2004: 52).

While acknowledging the complexity of branding practices and their interdependence with intra-organizational processes, this perspective on branding still reflects its heritage from the strategic marketing perspective on brands. Notably, an instrumental/functionalist view of brands can be traced in the many models and tools advocating an integrated communication strategy, sending a coherent message to all audiences (cf. Balmer and Soenen 1999; Hatch and Schultz 2001; Balmer and Greyser 2002). However, in spite of the growing consensus among marketing scholars about the benefits of corporate brand management, much of the work on corporate brands has been conceptual and there has been little empirical investigation into the activities of successful corporate brand management (although a notable exception is Schultz and Hatch 2003).

Considerable uncertainty remains regarding what corporate branding means in terms of management practices and of the study of this emerging phenomenon (Knox and Bickerton 2003).

Understanding Branding as Management of Meaning

Corporate branding can be conceptualized as an element in an overarching system of persuasion that, among other things, attempts to influence the way organizational members enact a socially constructed reality. As Alvesson (1995) points out, even a formal reorganization of a fairly simple kind, such as the introduction of new departmental boundaries, new routines or new lines of communication, call for some adaptations in the mindsets of those involved. Their ideas about formal structure must change or be changed. Thus, significant managerial activity may be focused on affecting meanings and interpretations of the symbolic environment organizational members operate in. Cultural organizing processes constitute a crucial element in organizations. Such processes are often referred to as 'symbolic management' (Pfeffer 1981; Alvesson and Berg 1992), 'normative control' (Etzioni 1960; Kunda 1992) or 'management of meaning' (Smircich and Morgan 1982).

In this paper, we understand brands and branding activities not primarily as marketing tools, but rather as a way of expressing preferred values and meanings. We understand brands as symbols that have undergone attempts to be charged with a particular meaning and a preferred interpretation. Hence, we focus on the brand as a vehicle for management of meaning and its internal effects among organizational members. We argue that a better understanding of branding from an intra-organizational point of view could benefit from being investigated from the perspective of organizational identity (see also Schultz and Hatch 2006).

Organizational identity is typically defined as 'the set of beliefs shared by top managers and stakeholders about the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics of an organization' (Scott and Lane 2000: 44, drawing on Albert and Whetten 1985). While this definition might seem confusingly similar to the previous descriptions of the corporate brand, this likeness remains superficial. The theoretical roots of organizational identity are derived from the field of social psychology, and build on the idea that identities are forged in social processes (Albert and Whetten 1985; Ashforth and Mael 1989; Dutton and Dukerich 1991). The key theoretical influences are symbolic interactionism, stating that the identities are created in social interactions (Mead 1934), and social identity theory (SIT) set out by Tajfel and Turner (1979), who suggested that individuals order the social environment by classifying people, as well as themselves, into social groups to which certain characteristics are attributed.

Herein lies also part of the attractiveness of the concept: the implied link to behaviour. In the words of Haslam et al. (2003: 364), 'shared organizational identity is a basis not only for people to perceive and interpret their world in similar ways, but also for processes of mutual social influence which allow them to coordinate (and expect to coordinate) their behaviour in ways that lead to concerted

social action and collective products'. In this sense, organizational identity is a concept that probes further and attempts to capture more complex phenomena than the brand — at least according to the conventional definition of the concept of the brand, which views the brand as an identifier. Organizational identity includes this aspect but also attempts to capture identifiers that are inert, resist change and have emerged over time (Ravasi and Schultz 2006).

To summarize: drawing on recently developed understandings of the brand as a vehicle of meaning that influence interpretive communities, we suggest that branding practices may be usefully understood as management of meaning, i.e. systematic efforts from top management to influence and shape frames of references, norms and values among organizational members. Of particular interest here, we argue, is the relationship between the brand and organization identity. Below we present a case study where the relationships between the brand, branding, management of meaning, and organizational identity are analysed. We conclude by framing branding as an ambiguity-coping practice and discussing the implications.

Method

The empirical foundation for this particular article draws, draws on two studies of the same management consulting firm. While the two studies were conducted separately, and had somewhat different research objectives, the methodology applied was similar and organizational identity was a central theme in both studies.

The fieldwork of the first study started in September 1999 and the last interviews were conducted in 2003. The empirical material consists of transcripts from 52 interviews with 45 persons, as well as notes from participative observation in several organizational gatherings. The participative observation includes following a team for two work days, participation in training sessions, in various settings where organizational members communicated internally, such as in competence group meetings and the annual meeting for all managers, and externally, such as when presenting the company to students. The empirical material from the second study was collected from May through December 2004 and consists of transcripts from 42 interviews with 41 persons as well as participant observations within the office environment. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and quotes have been translated to English for the purpose of this article.

In both studies, members from all parts of the organization have been interviewed: the CEO, partners, employees in managerial positions, support staff, newly recruited organizational members and so on. There was a bias towards the upper echelons in the company: in relative terms, we focused more on experienced people with a couple of years in the firm than on fairly junior people, which, in numerical terms, dominate the firm. We believe that this approach is better equipped for generating relevant and insightful material.

Fieldwork was conducted through an open and emergent approach (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). More specifically, this means that we have not restricted ourselves to a strict interview protocol. Instead we have based interview questions

on a set of common themes, which consequently have been adapted to the particular development of each interview. As our understanding of the field has developed, our lines of inquiry have been adapted. For example, findings and understanding from the first 20 interviews of the first study were organized in emergent themes that were used as input in new interviews, both in terms of questions asked and whom to talk to. In this way, we were able to refine our understanding of the emerging themes without excessive a priori closure to field-work practices. The second study then built partly on some of the insights from the first.

The analysis of the material has proceeded from a perspective that may be labelled *discursive pragmatism* (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000a, 2000b). In practical terms this means that we primarily draw upon discursively produced outcomes, such as texts and conversations. However, in contrast to certain versions of discourse analysis (cf. Potter and Wetherell 1987), it was assumed that our material allows interpretations beyond this specific level. The approach also differs from Foucauldian-style discourse analysis, which tends to take an interest in phenomena that have impact at societal level (e.g. sexuality, gender, governmentality). This version of discourse analysis draws on the idea that discourse and texts are important in their own right, but also as clues to extra-linguistic issues. The study of discourses (i.e. verbal interactions or written accounts) provides an opportunity to gain insights into issues more or less loosely connected to the discourse. Such issues may include symbolic aspects of organizational realities (corporate culture), structural aspects of organizational work (division of labour) and interactive aspects of the construction and reproduction of particular selves (social identity).

We have used abduction (Peirce 1978) as the primary inference mechanism to guide our analysis. Abduction typically consists of three steps:

1   the application of an established interpretive rule (theory);

2   the observation of a surprising empirical phenomenon;

3   the re-imagination of the interpretive rule (theory) that resolves the surprise.

By necessity, we can only display a small fraction of the actual empirical material that supports our claims. Although we have access to data from interviews and observation, only interview data is represented in the analysis due to space constraints. Interview excerpts have been chosen to the extent they a) highlight a pattern, or b) contradict or complicate a pattern.

The Case

DeliverIT Consulting is a multinational IT/management consulting company. The company has demonstrated sustained capacity for growth and profitability and has developed long-term and lasting business relationships with several big Swedish, European and American multinational companies. Consistently high ratings in student polls (in Sweden) indicate that the company is perceived as an attractive employer, at least among graduate students.

The DeliverIT brand name may not be a household name but it is fairly well known in the business sector and among students of business administration and engineering. The company has attempted to strengthen its brand recognition through various advertising campaigns, which indicates that the brand per se is viewed as an important asset among decision-makers in the company.

Constructing the Brand

In recent years we have seen many professional services firms spend large amounts on traditional branding activities such as advertising and sponsoring of sports and other consumer-oriented events. This is certainly true also for DeliverIT; as one consultant put it, 'we're displayed everywhere, look at [the airport], it's plastered with our ads'. He continues: 'the brand is cultivated externally, but also very much internally'. If so, what really is the message? What is the meaning to be conveyed by these advertisements? The head of marketing explains Deliver IT's latest advertising campaign featuring a well-known sports star:

'You can see clearly from the ads coming from the head office: they ask if you are a bold leader or a follower. Well, you are supposed to be the one running the game, you are supposed to be [a well known Sports Star]. And that is really what we sell, [the help] for their company to become a Sports Star. And that is really the same message we sell when we recruit consultants; so it is that we only hire Sports Star people. You are supposed to be something extra, something out of the ordinary. That is the message.'

'And what about values internally?'

'We have this slogan about delivery, and that is the same thing, that it should always be high performance and always be delivered at the right time to high quality. And I mean, if that runs through everything, it has the consequence that you have to be conscientious, you have to be reliable.'

An analyst interpreted the advertising messages in the following way:

'Our latest advertising slogan is about being a winner. So in general there is an incredible focus on excellence in life and all that stuff. And in all internal communication, "we are the best people" and so on. So there's a lot of focus on this; that we are actually the best. Which you obviously take with a pinch of salt. But it is good that they communicate it, because if you think you're the best you do a good job.'

'So what is it that they want to say with this new slogan?'

'Well, from what I have understood, they have done some market research which indicated that the role model that particularly men in powerful positions in the US have as role model is Sports Star and therefore you want to associate DeliverIT with Sports Star. Because that is perceived as positive by potential clients. That's how I understood it. And then it is of course that Sports Star is really good at what he does and he is famous for being able to focus totally and achieve maximum results. That is what you want to be associated with, that we also focus totally and deliver a maximum result. So, that is also a bit of a statement saying that we are the best.'

Both the head of marketing and the analyst make the connection with the internal side — the message is that the consultants are Sports Star: the best in their league. Neither of them seems to make much of a distinction between internal and external messages. In this respect, it can be said that DeliverIT have been successful in their corporate branding strategy; the internal and external perspectives seem to be perceived as integrated by the respondents – indeed they

even blend together. As opposed to product brands, corporate brands are experienced and communicated through total corporate communication (Balmer 2001), what we will call the 'branding discourse' in this paper, rather than via advertising or sales promotion. As the analyst quoted above noted, DeliverIT take their internal communication very seriously. DeliverIT's 'core values' are readily available on their website and are communicated as often as possible. Yet, none of the interviewees were able to recall all the official 'core values' when asked (there were five of them). Some remembered one or two, but most seemed to think that they didn't really matter or had made that much of a serious impression. This is perhaps because they do not come across as particularly distinctive in the branding discourse. As Maister (2003) notes, every professional services firm in the world seems to have more or less the same mission statement; with varying refinements of language it is:

'To deliver outstanding client service; to provide fulfilling careers and professional satisfaction for our people; and to achieve financial success so that we can reward ourselves and grow.' (Maister 2003: 3)

This certainly applies to DeliverIT — but also to their competitors. In a similar vein, Christensen and Cheney (2000) have argued that, ironically in this age of 'over-communication', professionally planned communication is becoming increasingly similar. Competitors seem to follow each other's moves very closely. Not surprisingly then, many professional services firms have recently invested heavily in campaigns to position their brand in association with a star in sports or entertainment in one form or other. The underlying message is, of course, similar to that of DeliverIT: 'We help you win the business game'.

Whereas in theory creating distinction from other brands is argued to be a main point of branding, in practice the way brands are positioned in the professional services sector is not all that distinct. So is branding in these firms really about creating awareness? The link between brand awareness and sales is not always clear within consumer marketing, but there is a rather straightforward argument (i.e. pick the most well-known brand on the supermarket shelf when passing by). However, as argued by our informants (see below), this argument is hardly relevant for the purchasing process of multimillion dollar professional services projects. That leaves us with the values/identity argument: i.e. associating certain desirable values with the brand that the target audience want to be identified with themselves. Who, then, is the audience for DeliverIT's branding discourse?

Audiences for the Branding Discourse

From an organizational point of view, the brand has external and internal effects. The external effects concern the impact of the brand on stakeholders outside the company, such as clients, competitors, suppliers and shareholders. It is often emphasized that consulting firms compete in two markets, the market for selling their services and 'the market for talent' (e.g. Maister 2003). As a partner-driven firm, the main groups of 'outsiders' that DeliverIT may wish to influence through branding can thus be expected to be clients and prospective clients as well as prospective employees.

Outsiders' Meanings

According to our informants, the DeliverIT brand is powerful and emotionally charged and elicits strong reactions from outsiders.

'My experience is that they have an enormous cadre of young and competent people. Now, competence may always be a contested issue but their analytical skills, their fast understanding of our situation has been absolutely fantastic. But they cost a helluva lot of money.' (Client)

From outsiders it's anything from admiration to, oh well, there you really work a lot. That I don't know if it's because people are jealous because they did not get in themselves or because they think people at DeliverIT are too strict and businesslike. So, different reactions, but mostly some kind of fearful admiration. But strong reactions. A charged brand.' (Head of marketing)

'It's still a company that everybody knows what it is and has preconceived opinions about. When I started here everybody had an opinion. Either good or bad, nothing in between. And it's still that way.' (Consultant)

This view is fairly consistent with the view that competitors, another external group, typically voice:

'I think that they have a very good reputation. If I would buy consultancy services, where I want somebody with a good reputation, and where everybody is more or less the same, there is no other company I would use. They are a bit square, guys wearing suits. Well, business-casual nowadays since the introduction of the new dress code. They are competent but square. The bottom line is that they have a positive reputation, which means that they can afford to be expensive.' (Former employee, manager at a competing consultancy firm)

'The really good and big consultancy firms, such as ThinkIT, DownsizeIT and, to a certain extent, DeliverIT, whose reputation steadily is on the rise, their strength is that their brands are so strong that their partners and senior consultants matter less. And we aim for that, too. If you look at ThinkIT, a guy that is part of a team multiplies his worth compared to if he were to defect and start his own company.' (Partner, competing consultancy firm)

In this sense, it can be argued that DeliverIT's brand is a success. There are certainly some meanings attached to the brand, which can be seen as positive to the extent that competitors see them as role models. Yet, at the same time, some client stakeholders see them as a threat:

'I experience some sort of fear from clients who think DeliverIT are a little scary. At [client] they were very sceptical, as if DeliverIT would come in and then in some magical way grow attached to the company and eat themselves in and in the end you are completely dependent on them. And there is something to it because that's how we work: [we] try to get the foot in through the door and then the client is supposed to become dependent on us. So that's true. So there's some fear of that. And that is also a little hard as a consultant. Don't come here and think you are cool just because you work for DeliverIT. So you can get a real "slap in the face" the first time you meet someone, that they have to make some kind of statement, show who's in charge. So there's some kind of fear. That's a bit of a pain. Not fun.' (Manager)

Organizational members also indicate that prospective clients are sometimes found lacking in terms of brand knowledge:

'I believe that clients know much less about DeliverIT than we desire. They really can't experience anything when they see our brand. The firms we haven't worked with don't know much about DeliverIT. Nice logotype, cheesy TV commercials. Appears to be

expensive. The commercials too. High production values. They know that we are expensive.' (Support staff senior manager)

'I guess we are pretty bad at communicating what we do, because people really do not have a good idea at all. Nor did I when I started here.' (New analyst)

A theme throughout these accounts is that the brand gives rise to very strong reactions from outsiders — positive or negative but, according to our informants, never neutral. It does seem that the brand is charged with meaning — but not in a consistent and coherent way, and not attached to particular characteristics of the services performed for clients. The meaning(s) seem to be highly ambiguous, abstract and emotional and relate more to some kind of elitist notion of the consultants. There is a certain mystique attached to the brand (the people and the culture), which is emphasized even more in the accounts relating to the role of the brand in attracting new employees.

Interestingly, this indicates that while clients may be a target for the brand, they may be less affected by it than other stakeholders. Apart from clients, the main external stakeholder are prospective organizational members. As one organizational member put it:

'To attract people, of course. Recruitment. The brand helps. It is important for our ability to recruit people. We are always in the top of the lists of the most attractive firms. And that's good for our little group, too, that the brand attracts good people.' (Support staff manager)

Recruitment is a key activity for management in a consultancy firm for achieving growth, but also for securing capable employees. A strong and well-known brand facilitates recruitment, thus potentially having impact not only on sales and market share but also in securing key resources — in particular for organizations competing for a highly qualified workforce. This aspect of the versatility of brands also hints towards its internal uses, from a management point of view. Such internal uses will be developed below.

Insiders' Meanings

According to organizational members, the brand may be equally or even more important internally than externally. For example, members sometimes perceive that certain advertising campaigns focus on organizational members, rather than other stakeholders, such as existing and prospective clients:

'The brand is very important for us. Of course, the value of exposing it at airports might be debatable, but it is important for us who work here, that we work in a firm that puts an effort into being visible and articulate in the public eye. It is important to the labour market, in particular to students and other potential employees. It is probably not as important to our clients. Personal relations matter more there.' (Consultant)

Actually, several organizational members indicate that the brand is probably more important internally than externally. For example, one member claims that the brand is probably the most obvious indicator of a common identity, and is worked upon as such by management in various ways:

'[The brand] is very important internally. We gather around our DeliverIT affiliation. Our membership in the club. For example, we have recently conducted an employee satis-

faction-survey. The first question is — it is a five grade scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree — is 'DeliverIT a great place to work? That is the first question. I mean, the alternative is, how would you objectively rate DeliverIT as an employer? Even in this context one tries to strengthen and enhance the affiliation to and the identification with DeliverIT.' (Support staff senior manager)

'I felt it very strongly when I started to work here, to be included in some large sect almost. You entered through a huge doorway … [laughter] an order of some kind. I don't think the attraction is quite as strong anymore. I remember that I felt incredibly exclusive and selected.' (Manager)

The brand thus plays an important role in attracting employees according to these accounts — also focusing on the elitist and mysterious dimension of the brand, although noting that this dimension has been fading recently in line with the changing market conditions. The brand is often assigned great importance by consultants and is considered very 'strong' and 'charged'. But what the brand actually 'means', or what values are attached to it, is less clear apart from some vague 'elitist' and somewhat 'mysterious' notion of the organization and its employees. Part of the mystery lies in not knowing 'what they do' and 'how they do it'. This abstract elitist notion of the brand seems to be in line with the branding strategy; it is about being the best, not about how to be the best or what DeliverIT will do to take the client there; i.e. positioning DeliverIT *as* Sports Star rather than communicating the capabilities or the qualities of what they *do*.

The Brand and Organizational Identity Construction

The question of how organizational identities are constructed and developed to a large extent remains an open question. There have been relatively few empirical investigations of identity construction processes as compared to the vast theoretical interest. The complexity of the topic is illustrated by the typically broad definitions. For example, Scott and Lane (2000: 45) define organizational identity construction as 'the processes, activities, and events through which organizational identity becomes specified in the minds of organizational managers and stakeholders'. They thus suggest that the construction of organizational identities lies in the hand of management: organizations impress desired images on their stakeholders through managerial action. Importantly, however, although management typically have high stakes in forging a good/successful/persuasive organizational identity, and often engage in activities to sponsor a preferred identity (e.g. PR activities, kick-offs, customer meetings), they rarely — if ever — control the identity ascribed to an organization (cf. Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Indeed, organizational identities are inert by definition and thus leave little room for continuous manipulation. As Gioia et al. (2000: 64) put it: 'Core features of identity are presumed to be resistant to ephemeral or faddish attempts to alteration because of their ties to the organization's history.' This does not mean that organizational identities are completely stable and eternal; they may be viewed as stable but still possible to reframe, re-enact and re-interpret. Gioia et al. (2000) thus suggest that organizational identities may be better seen as continuous rather than enduring, as an identity's interpretation and meaning might shift while retaining labels for core beliefs and values that extend over time and context.

The theoretical framework dominating theorization and empirical investigation of the processes of adoption of organizational identities on an individual level is derived from social identity theory, and thus concerns our relationships to social groups (i.e. the organization). Organizational identification is defined as the perception of oneness with, or belonging to, an organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bartel 2001) that occurs when members' perceptions about its defining qualities become self-referential or self-defining (Dutton et al. 1994; Pratt 1998; Bartel 2001). Social identity theory posits two underlying processes of identification: *categorization* and *self-enhancement* (Pratt 1998). Social categorization involves clarifying in-group/out-group boundaries and is a process central to social life that, as such, is subject to the pressures and distortions of the rich and varied culture within which it arises (Tajfel and Forgas 1981). Self-enhancement involves making favourable in-group comparisons and is based on the argument that positive social identification affects self-esteem (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Accordingly, organizational identification is more likely to occur when organizations have high prestige (Ashforth and Mael 1989), when organizations have attractive images and when the perceived organizational identity enhances members' self-esteem (Dutton et al. 1994).

Organizational Identity in DeliverIT

Within DeliverIT we found a surprisingly coherent discourse among organizational members about 'who they are' as DeliverIT consultants and the organization's 'central and distinctive' characteristics — i.e. its organizational identity. Notably, respondents emphasized that they are 'professional' (which has a particular meaning for them) and always deliver quality on time, and the strength of the 'team work culture' which entails always supporting each other and never turning down a request for help no matter how late in the day it is. People just 'do what's right'. As noted previously, these dimensions are not unique to DeliverIT, but most professional services firms would probably argue that these are their distinctive features as well. What is perhaps unique to DeliverIT, however, is the internal discourse, i.e. the actual words they use, how they are used and the meaning they convey among organizational members. This, according to our interviewees, is all learnt in social interactions, predominantly on project site, rather than through corporate communications.

'We can just look at each other and then we know what to do. Interesting how a company can be formed like this. I remember my first project at [client] where we were thrown directly into the project where we were formed in the way of doing and being.'

'So is that how you are formed, out there on the project site, doing the grunt work?'

'Yes it is, that's when all this with framework and structure comes in. It is like father to son, the whole system is built on learning from the older [consultants] and then you do the same thing.'

'A bit like apprenticeship?'

'Yes, sort of … not the social heritage, but almost. That's how it works in practice. Then it doesn't matter with all these mails [corporate communication] and training courses, but it's out on projects [that you learn]. And everybody is aware of the high profile and that it is really tough, so everybody gets in line quickly.' (Manager)

This 'internal discourse' also seemed to stay relatively stable during the five years this study covers (September 1999 to December 2004) in spite of the turbulent market conditions plaguing the consulting industry during this period. The branding discourse, however, changed considerably.

'There have been substantive global changes during the time I have worked here, there's been a lot of talk about different visions. But the actual daily work has been the same all the time. So it feels pretty stable somehow. DeliverIT is a company you hire when you want to get something done, you know that you get what you have ordered and you know that you will get it in time. Not much happens, it's not that damn creative.'

'So it's rather the packaging that has changed than the work itself?'

'Perhaps. I'm a little cynical, but that's how I've experienced it. At least that's how it's been for me.' (Consultant)

'I think a lot of our core values are good and positive, but you can't take them too seriously. They are American, some partners in the US sit around and think about some formulation. Like our corporate slogan that was just changed … they spent several days figuring that out. Sure, it's important, you have to cultivate your brand and so on … but I think if you sit here it feels a little strange that they spend several days on that.' (Consultant)

There is thus somewhat of a discrepancy between the branding discourse (reflecting corporate communications) and the internal discourse (reflecting the organizational identity); in answering the question 'who are we?' consultants paint a surprisingly coherent picture, but one that differs from the branding campaigns. Some aspects are overlapping, or perhaps better expressed are complementary, but others even come across as contradictory. In particular, a social and collegial side that was emphasized by the consultants during the interviews is not part of the branding discourse but seems to be very important to employees, especially to the younger consultants, and, they argue, it is instrumental to the success of their work in projects. Yet, the branding campaigns feature a lone star, a single hero. Many of the interviewees also emphasize the 'softer side' of the organization and its people and underline that the reputation about 'walking over dead bodies' is not true. As one consultant explained:

'When I was looking for a job, I chose between DeliverIT and other companies. But I picked DeliverIT because the people I met here were really nice. And I got the feeling that there was a companionship here and that, well, even if it seems like a really hard company from the outside, on the inside it is not.'

In line with the central tenets of organizational identity theory referred to above, these accounts indicate that it is in social interactions that the internal discourse is shaped, and that it is in this process that meaning relating to attitudes, values and behaviours is created for organizational members. This internal discourse is related to the everyday work in projects and is more stable than the branding discourse. The latter is only partly represented in the internal discourse. This is perhaps not as intriguing as it may seem at first sight, because the two discourses have different influences and seem to play different roles in how members create meaning about the organization. The branding discourse is wholly controlled by corporate management through the total communications mix and seems to adapt to the more 'general business discourse', following the business cycle as

well as general management fads. It is probably no coincidence that DeliverIT changed their slogan right after a market downturn in line with the more general business discourse. Interestingly, over the data collection periods the internal discourse changed considerably less. The organizational identity (as portrayed in the internal discourse) is based on common values about 'what a DeliverIT consultant is like' and is thus more likely to have an effect on conduct internally and in interaction with clients. It is also interesting to note that the internal discourse seems to influence the interpretation of the branding discourse. Respondents tended to use words and expressions from the internal discourse, not part of the branding discourse, when explaining the meaning of the brand.

The Brand and Organizational Identification

Whereas the brand does not seem to be crucial to the *content*, i.e. the social construction of 'who we are', of organizational identity, it may be critical to its *strength*, i.e. the attractiveness of belonging to the firm as well as how others (outsiders) react to people belonging to the firm (insiders). In other words, the brand feeds organizational identification. As one organizational member put it:

'The DeliverIT brand stands for professionalism. It means that I'm serious and professional in my work. I must confess that I like the aura of the DeliverIT brand. I know that I was recruited to an elite and that I am still considered to be worthy an organization that recruits the best students, has the best clients and makes a lot of money. We employ one out of a hundred that apply for work here. We have long and trying tests and evaluations and I have passed them all. DeliverIT is successful. We have surpassed ThinkIT as the most attractive employer among students at Stockholm School of Economics. It is a charmed and self-sustaining loop. But it also makes DeliverIT vulnerable, because if the brand ends up under a cloud, the charmed loop can quickly be transformed into a vicious one.' (Consultant)

Thus, the brand provides elite confirmation: a symbol of belonging to 'the best and the brightest'. The idea of an elite, as summarized by the brand, is justified and reinforced through extensive recruitment procedures, rich opportunities for competence development, cooperation with bright people, continuous evaluation and feedback procedures, high wages and career prospects (either within or outside the company), and the up-or-out promotion system associated with the firm. The brand informs the member that he or she is successful as a member of a successful firm; that he or she has the right stuff in terms of being bright, ambitious, and capable; and that what makes the firm great also makes him or her great.

Social categorization also involves stereotyping effects affecting behaviour in relation to out-groups (Tajfel and Forgas 1981). The DeliverIT brand evokes images of an elitist firm (a collective of elitist individuals) for outsiders. We explored earlier how the brand, and the inferences outsiders make from it, seem to affect social interactions with consultants. While some organizational members said this bothered them and described this as a negative aspect of the brand, they also highlighted that the elitist brand image also implies a positive aspect for their career development from an instrumental point of view:

'But it affects me on a personal level, that's clear. Future career prospects is one important aspect. It is most certainly not bad to have been working here a couple of years, if

one would want to move on to another company. In that sense, it affects you. And that's probably good for the company as a whole.' (Support staff manager)

In fact, there are claims that the brand can operate as a substitute for a CV:

'Our people have a very good reputation. If you have a CV that says that you have worked at DeliverIT for five years, they simply don't give a damn about other qualifications, such as academic merits and exams. They don't look at anything else. They just make you an offer. They know that we have rigorously tested people before they were offered anything here, and that we also have developed and educated them. Our people are very attractive. It makes us a bit exposed.' (Senior consultant)

Ironically, the brand is becoming a potential liability for DeliverIT. The flip side of an attractive brand that signifies a competent and capable workforce is that it makes employees attractive on the labour market. Thus, the brand does not only create value for DeliverIT. It also creates value for its organizational members on an individual level, making it possible for individuals to leverage the brand for their own personal purposes. This effect is probably most acutely felt in firms that are highly dependent on a qualified workforce. But it can be assumed that this is a general effect of the brand: it provides leverage for individuals. This helps us to understand why it is almost always the most attractive people that leaves troubled firms. The brand association no longer provides leverage. Rather, it has become a liability.

Branding as an Ambiguity-coping Practice

As a management consultancy firm, DeliverIT primarily employs qualified professionals with university degrees. DeliverIT claims to provide advanced expertise and sophisticated solutions in several areas, such as business strategy, system development and system integration. In this paper, following Alvesson (2001b), we will view management consulting firms as organizations that claim particular knowledge. Such knowledge claims are defended, not because organizations actually have to demonstrate that they have superior knowledge, but rather because they operate in ambiguous circumstances that make knowledge claims difficult to test. Ultimately, knowledge-claims are here better understood as ambiguity-coping strategies than knowledge in any conventional sense.

Ambiguity makes its presence felt in several ways for consulting and other professional service firms. The concept of knowledge is highly ambiguous, thus making both the product in consulting firms — knowledge — and its production processes — knowledge acquisition, development and integration — ambiguous in character. Although consultants claim to have particular knowledge, it is often difficult to evaluate whether application of this particular knowledge is a significant part of what organizational members actually do. Tasks are uncertain, unique, unstable and complex, thus making it difficult to apply appropriately codified expert knowledge. They may vary from time to time and are often distributed to organizational members with little relevant experience.

The work results of consulting firms are, by nature, characterized by uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Alvesson 1995; Clark 1995; Sturdy 1997; Glückler and Armbürster 2003). Expertise presupposes difficulty, which by definition will not

exist if tasks are easy to master and include standard solutions. Customer interaction and learning processes typically fuel task uncertainty and complexity, thus adding to existing ambiguity. Hence, work results from consultants are difficult to evaluate and compare, and sometimes even to clearly identify.

Branding can be interpreted as an ambiguity-coping strategy towards external stakeholders. It provides a way of powerfully communicating certain qualities. In the case of DeliverIT, it communicates values, albeit on an abstract and esoteric level, and certain capabilities, such as global reach, financial strength, and depth and breadth of competence. In short, it pre-empts and details expectations, suggesting the nature of the service, the delivery and the price in advance, thus reducing ambiguity and complexity, at least on a perceptual and superficial level. The strength and allure of the DeliverIT brand reduces uncertainty and perceived risk for clients. As one of our informants put it: 'you don't get fired for hiring DeliverIT'.

Interestingly, the brand also tends to increase ambiguity among organizational members. In this context it makes more sense to understand branding as an *ambiguity-increasing* strategy rather than *ambiguity-reducing* strategy. The brand becomes a 'counter force' to the pressures towards the low-end of the market, such as the trend towards outsourcing and so-called offshoring, which are currently threatening the industry. This allows the organization to continue to attract qualified employees, and perhaps also to charge premium rates. High-end management consulting is associated with a certain mystique, presumably because of outsiders' limited insight into what consultants actually do, how they come up with the 'bright solutions'. Positioning DeliverIT (and thus DeliverIT consultants) in this way (alluding to some abstract notion of being the best) thus emphasizes the ambiguous nature of the firm, offering some unique expertise rather than the (ambiguity-reducing) characteristics that might set it apart from the competition or that makes it distinct according to the external discourse.

Viewing the practice of branding as an ambiguity-coping strategy in DeliverIT helps us understand the steadily increasing investments in branding among large consulting and professional services firms. By inference, competing for stakeholders' attention and interest in the increasing blur of a fast-moving 'attention economy' requires a message that is simple and appealing. The construction of 'a brand' provides management with the opportunity to create a symbol for the organization that can be easily communicated and recognized and 'charged' with a particular meaning.

Whether the messages are interpreted as desired remains an open question. This study indicates that the interpretation, and perhaps more importantly the evaluation, of the DeliverIT brand values seems to be dependent on a complex collection of influences such as personal experiences with the organization and social context. However, while the interpretation of what the brand stands for stays at a fairly superficial and esoteric level, the summarizing power of the brand as symbol for the organization should not be disregarded. It allows for a seemingly coherent portrayal of the organization (as successful in the case of DeliverIT) in spite of the ambiguities surrounding their activities. As a coherent symbol, the brand enables stronger reactions towards the organization, which reinforces the processes of social categorization previously discussed. In this

sense, branding influences social interaction; the ideas and expectations about DeliverIT members evoked by the brand tell the client more or less what he or she can expect from the consultants — but also what is expected from the client. This aspect of branding is particularly important for DeliverIT because of the service nature of the consultancy business. Service providers have to deal with the fact that they sell an act, rather than an artifact (Clark 1995). As an act, it is typically manufactured more or less in interaction with the client, and thus also typically includes the client's cooperation.

As noted above, this may not always be a positive thing. The stereotyping influences of the brand can also backfire and create prejudices that constrain rather than enable organizational members. This points to an important theoretical aspect of brands as symbols. They are discursive terminals: they open up avenues of meaning, as developed above, but also provide discursive closure — the suspension of dissent, difference,and discussion (Deetz 1992).

Conclusion

Although the concept of the brand typically is used from a marketing point of view, this study demonstrates that the concept has potential to illuminate organizational phenomena. However, the concept suffers from the shortcomings of its strategic marketing conceptualization. More specifically, it is undersocialized, behaviourist and functionalist — and there is scant empirical investigation when applied to an organizational level. In this paper, we have argued for a constructionist understanding of the concept, with a specific intent of illustrating how branding can be understood as a practice for management of meaning.

To this end, we explored how the brand is constructed from the perspective of organizational members and how these constructions compare to members' views of 'who we are' as DeliverIT consultants, i.e. the organizational identity. The data revealed that the brand and organizational identity represent two complementary, but different, discourses that have different influences and implications and thus serve different purposes for organizational members. The 'content' of organizational identity (i.e. the response to the question, who are we?) is not directly influenced by branding activities, but is learned/shaped in social interactions in the workplace. Nevertheless, the brand is important, as it contributes to the attractiveness of belonging to the firm and thus supports the processes of organizational identification (the 'strength' of organizational identity). We also noted that organizational identity influenced the interpretation of the brand and the branding practices.

The empirical material from the case study thus supports theories on organizational identity, but suggests that there are several mismatches between the branding literature and empirical reality for our case company, consequently calling into question some of the underpinning assumptions of the branding literature. The role of branding in DeliverIT is not so much about creating distinction from other brands in the sense of attaching certain values to the brand; creating a 'brand promise' in marketing lingo. Instead, it seems, the brand works as a reminder, evoking associations and emotions that are already attached to the brand derived from previous experiences of social interactions

(with organizational members or through word-of-mouth). Nor is the primary audience necessarily clients or prospective clients, but is more likely to be employees and prospective employees. In addition, while DeliverIT is no doubt exemplary in terms of successful corporate branding (external and internal communication is well aligned and messages are perceived as integrated), the corporate brand is clearly different from the values that are 'lived' by organizational members.

For DeliverIT, it seems that the brand is more important for internal than external audiences, while the organizational identity might be more important for the sales process than the brand. It is organizational identity that guides values of relevance for social interaction and 'how the work gets done' — which is why clients actually choose DeliverIT, according to our respondents.

Finally, we argued that branding can be interpreted as a means to influencing and channelling the ambiguity in knowledge work. In this sense, branding reinforces the processes of social categorization. As such, it provides interpretive and behavioural cues through summarizing and stereotyping events, persons and recipes for action. In the summarizing mode, the brand expresses certain values. In the stereotyping mode, the brand cues templates for action and conduct in interaction.

Although this study demonstrates the value of using the concept of branding to illuminate organizational phenomena, it hardly exhausts the topic. On the contrary, it can be argued that the study creates more questions than it answers. In particular, it has highlighted the need for further empirical studies to examine the role of brands and branding in different empirical contexts and from different perspectives from those provided by the traditional marketing literature. The current, somewhat simplistic, theoretical understanding of brands, in conjunction with the lack of empirical studies of corporate branding practices and their internal as well as external effects — and the dynamics between them — implies a risk of confirming assumptions that might actually be inherently flawed, yet have become so widespread as to become truisms.

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Dan Kärreman   Dan Kärreman is Associate Professor at Lund University, School of Economics and Management, Sweden. His research interests include knowledge work, organizational control, identity, research methodology and critical management studies. He has published in *Academy Management Review*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies* and numerous other journals. He is currently working on a book on research methodology together with Mats Alvesson.
Address: Department of Business Administration, Lund University, Box 7080, 220-07 Lund, Sweden.
Email: dan.karreman@fek.lu.se

Anna Rylander   Anna Rylander holds a Research position at the Business and Design Lab at Gothenburg Research Institute, Göteborg University. She received her PhD from the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. Her current research interests revolve around the role of design and the physical setting in knowledge work and identity construction.
Address: School of Business Economics and Law, Göteborg University, Box 600, 405-30 Göteborg, Sweden.
Email: anna.rylander@gri.gu.se