

# The corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to introduce a new integrated strategic framework entitled, “The corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum” and elucidates the central and strategic importance of corporate identity apropos corporate communications, corporate image, attributed stakeholder identifications and resultant behaviours. The strategic importance of corporate identity is noted. The continuum incorporates a variety of disciplinary/theoretical perspectives.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper/framework is informed by corporate marketing and strategic perspectives; legal theory of the firm; social identity branch theories; and stakeholder theory. The effects and management of corporate identity are seen as a continuum. The framework accommodates Tagiuri's (1982) scholarship on corporate identity.

**Findings** – This paper formally introduces and explicates “The corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum”. Corporate identity management is an on-going strategic senior management/strategic requisite. Notably, the legal theory of company law – routinely overlooked – and its impact on corporate identity management is accepted, acknowledged and accommodated. The importance of stakeholders and stakeholder identification (a derivative of social identity theory) is underscored.

**Practical implications** – Via the explication of the continuum, managers can comprehend the nature and importance of corporate identity; appreciate that corporate identity adaptation/change is on-going; comprehend its interface/s with corporate communications, stakeholder attributed identities, identifications and the business environment; understand the need for on-going fidelity to an institution's legally based core purposes and corporate identity traits (juridical identity); cognise the efficacy of constant stakeholder and environmental analysis. Corporate identity sustainability requires corporate identity to be advantageous,

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This article is dedicated to the memory of the late and great Professor Renato Tagiuri, (1919-2011), who was Professor of Social Sciences in Business Administration, Emeritus, at Harvard Business School (HBS). The author was privileged to discuss his work on corporate identity with Professor Tagiuri throughout the 1990s-2000s. Professor Tagiuri was an academic of considerable intellect and refinement. Our meetings – of which there were many – were always stimulating, challenging and agreeable. It is the author's ambition that his working paper on corporate identity (Tagiuri, 1982) will become better known. *Fama semper vivat!* (May his fame live forever!).



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beneficial, critical, differentiating and effectual. Stakeholder prioritisation is not solely dependent on power, legitimacy and urgency but on legality, efficacy, ethicality and temporality.

**Originality/value** – The resultant framework/approach, therefore, aims to make a meaningful advance on the territory and, moreover, seeks to be of utility to scholars and practitioners of corporate marketing, strategy and company law. Arguably, therefore, the framework is more ambitious than extant framework on the domain. The resultant framework/approach, therefore, aims to make a meaningful advance on the territory and seeks to be of utility to scholars and practitioners of corporate identity, communications, images, identification, stakeholder theory, company law and, importantly, corporate strategy.

**Keywords** Corporate identity, Corporate communications, Organizational identity, Company law, Corporate image, Stakeholder identification

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

The heart of scholarship is not only vision but revision: re-vision. [McCraw \(2008, p. 226\)](#).

## Introduction

Corporate identity, for all its strategic significance, is habitually overlooked, disregarded or narrowly conceived by scholars and managers alike. Adopting a broad revisionist scholarship agenda, an explicit aim of this article is to further elucidate the strategic and pivotal utility of corporate identity and, additionally, to explicate the corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum.

As such, the ambitions of this article/schema are broader than hitherto seems to be the case apropos corporate identity scholarship. The article aims to be of scholarly and instrumental utility.

The notion of a continuum is noteworthy because this refers to a continuous sequence. This is highly salient in relation to the above because it emphasises the on-going interactions of the above areas and highlights the perpetual nature of corporate identity/corporate marketing management ([Balmer, 2011a](#)).

The approach adopted herein is in accordance with the precepts of the corporate marketing paradigm ([Balmer, 1998](#); [Balmer and Greyser, 2006](#); [Balmer, 2011a](#)), which marshals multidisciplinary standpoints apropos corporate identity, total corporate communications, corporate image and reputation, and stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours.

This article and resultant schema is mindful of the tripartite nature of scholarship as advocated by [McCraw \(2008, p. 226\)](#) in terms of vision, revision and re-vision:

- *First*, this article/schema is informed by the *vision* of Renato Tagiuri<sup>1</sup> (†2011) vis-à-vis his corporate identity management framework ([Tagiuri, 1982](#)). Tagiuri was a celebrated Harvard Business School Professor. Although renowned for his scholarship on family businesses. Moreover, he was also a pioneering scholar and advocate of the corporate identity field. In several important ways, his framework along with his reflections on corporate identity presaged [Albert and Whetten's \(1985\)](#) organisational identity notion and [Ashforth and Mael's \(1989\)](#) organisational identification concept. See [Appendix 1](#) for a tribute and overview of Tagiuri's contribution to corporate identity scholarship in terms of his article and framework.
- *Second*, in terms of *revision*, this article/schema updates Tagiuri's model and may be deemed to be expedient in that it considers the territory via the lenses of corporate marketing and stakeholder orientations. Whereas Tagiuri places "the corporation" at the centre of his framework, in this article "corporate identity" is positioned at the heart of the continuum.

- *Third*, and finally, there is a degree of *re-visioning* the corporate identity field by means of noting the diverse philosophical and theoretical perspectives which inform the various facets of corporate identity management as reflected in new schema detailed herein. As such, the new schema takes account of legal theory, total corporate communications, stakeholder theory and the branch theories of social identity theory apropos company–customer identification and organisational identification. As such, this article is mindful of the importance of theory to marketing scholarship and practice (Lee and Greenley, 2010). Expansive in scope, the new schema is also innovative because it draws on and seeks to advance corporate identity/corporate marketing scholarship via instrumental and theoretical perspectives.

Whilst this article celebrates and develops the work of Tagiuri (1982), it is important to note that in the annals of corporate identity scholarship, other notable scholars, in varying degrees, have discussed the significance of corporate identity including Larcon and Reitter (1979a, 1979b); Edwards *et al.* (1982); Hoffsteter and Ramanantsoa (1981); Gagliardi (1982, 1986); and Downey (1986).

For a more-detailed examination of corporate identity contexts see Appendix 2, where the following themes are discussed:

- 20 years on: re-assessing corporate identity;
- orthodox and heterodox perspectives; and
- corporate identity indifference in organisational behaviour.

The conceptual scheme (the continuum) detailed herein is informed by diverse theoretical, disciplinary and instrumental perspectives. Owing to the complexity of the territory, the article and schema are pragmatic in character and, for the sake of expediency, marshals a good deal of the author's work on the field. Of course, the broad ambitions of this schema/continuum simply cannot capture every nuance – let alone the totality – of corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholder attributed identities, identifications, behaviours, environmental analysis and the strategic management of corporate identity. This is not to say the schema/continuum is without utility. Tagiuri (1982), tellingly, advanced the following argument for his framework, and hopefully, it applies to the schema/continuum detailed in this article. He said:

A conceptual scheme that corresponds well to a phenomenon is not an academic luxury; it is a practical tool for action (Tagiuri, 1982, p. 19).

### **Corporate identity adaption and change**

Corporate identities are never entirely “fixed”: they are in a constant state of flux. They are not immutable. Internal or external change often has a domino effect in terms of an entity's corporate identity traits and corporate marketing activities, viz: “*the corporate identity wheel of change*” (Balmer, 2001a). This is especially apparent in terms of key identity interfaces:

Because of rapid institutional and environmental change the resolution of one identity interface invariably means that another interface requires attention: identity change is, it would appear for many organisations, a constant feature of organisational life. The author has called this phenomenon the identity wheel of change. (Balmer, 2001a, p. 19)

This principle underscores this article and schema and, as such, speaks to the potential efficacy of the approach undertaken here.

The magnitude and critical importance of corporate identity comes to the fore, and its nature is made apparent, when organisations reach a fork in the road (Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Balmer *et al.*, 2009): for instance, when senior managers are confronted with a crisis (e.g. *reputational loss*); an external threat (e.g. *a hostile takeover bid*); or when embarking on major institutional transformation (e.g. *the internationalisation of the firm*). At such junctures, board-level comprehension and management of corporate identity come to the forefront.

However, given the above, it is also clear that corporate identity management should *not* just emerge as a senior management concern during situations of major organisational change. This should come with a recognition that constant identity adaptation (and change) is a *sine qua non* of organisational life and is an on-going institutional characteristic. Therefore, corporate identity management and maintenance should be a senior management constant and should always be on a senior managers' agenda and radar.

In managing corporate identity senior managers need to be able address questions of considerable consequence including – but not limited to – the following:

- “What is the organisation’s purpose?”
- “What is the firm’s business?”
- “What are the institution’s distinguishing and differentiating traits?”
- “What is the entity legally allowed or obliged to do, or how is it constrained in what it can do?”
- “For whom – and for whose benefit – is the organisation primarily acting in legal, realistic and pragmatic terms?”
- “What value does the organisation accord to customers and other key stakeholders?”
- “What is the nature of the mutual profitability of the company –customer/stakeholder relationship?”

Coupled with the above other questions are attendant considerations which can also be of import:

- “What is our corporate image and reputation among customers, employees, shareholders and other key stakeholder groups?”
- “What do we communicate and to whom apropos corporate communications?”
- “What changes in the competitive and business environment should the organisation be mindful of?”

Broad in scope, but profound in nature, addressing these fundamentals requires managers to uncover its *raison d’etre* and take account of both internalities and externalities to either articulate and reinforce the extant identity or enunciate and effect a modified – or *in extremis* a radically different – corporate identity.

The importance of managers in shaping corporate identity represents a significant tenor within the literature and comes with a recognition that corporate identity management is a profound and consequential senior management issue (Tagiuri, 1982; Gagliardi, 1986; Balmer, 1995, 2001a; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Stuart, 1999; Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Abratt and Kleyn, 2012).

For instance, Gagliardi (1986) found corporate identity maintenance to be a dominant strategic imperative, whereas Tagiuri (1982) and Kotter (1990) argued that it was the role of senior managers to ensure that an organisation’s corporate identity is strategically sound,

reflects corporate aims and meets stakeholder needs. Balmer (1995, 2001a) acknowledged the significance of corporate identity to the management of change. Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) stated that organisational meaning is contingent on corporate identity.

Finally, whilst the author concurs with the following assertion by Roberts, albeit with one vital caveat. Roberts (2004, p. 9) opined:

The most fundamental responsibilities of general management are setting strategy and designing the organisation to implement it.

What, precisely, is the vital caveat?

It is this: the strategic stewardship of an organisation's corporate identity.

Thus, the most fundamental responsibilities of general management are setting strategy and designing the organisation to implement it and this necessitates the on-going strategic stewardship of an organisation's corporate identity.

### **The corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum**

The remainder of this article discusses the constituent parts of the schema/continuum which is shown in diagrammatic form in Figure 1.

#### **Corporate identity**

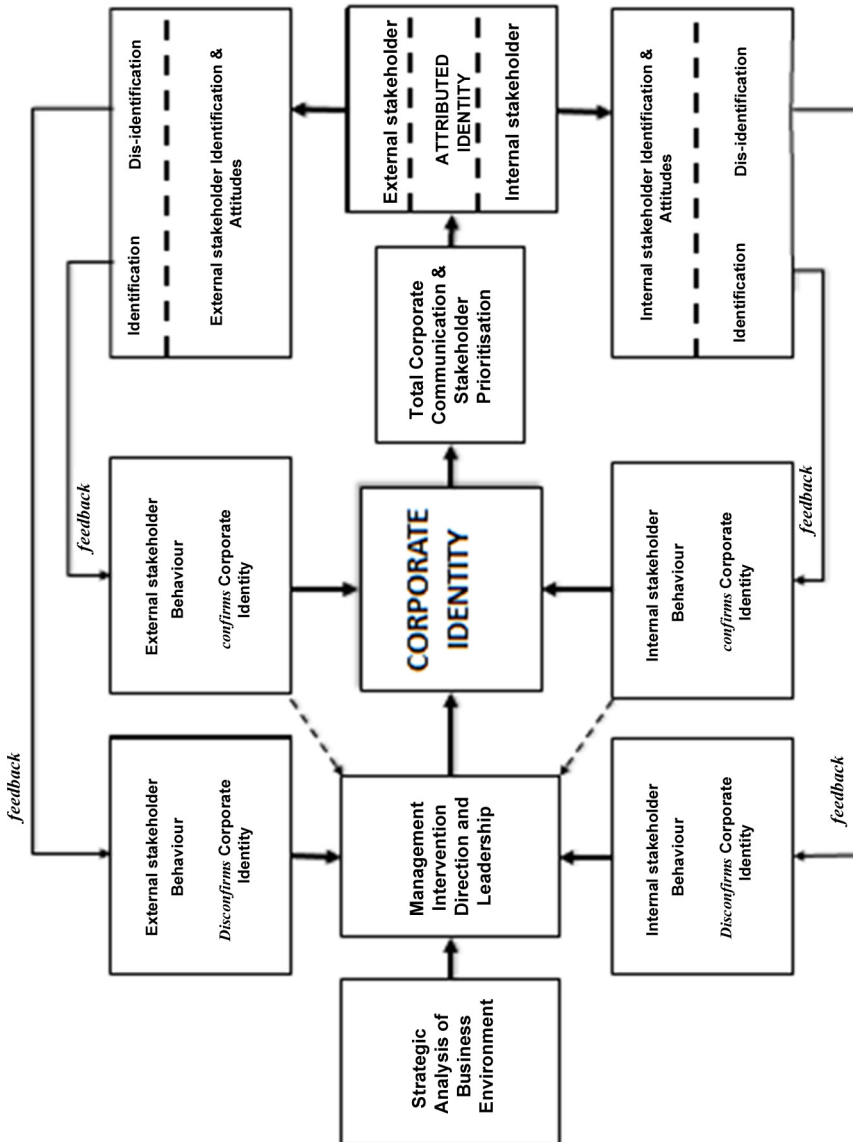
The first part of the schema, and the cornerstone element of the continuum, is the corporate identity. This section explains the orthodox school of thought (*vis-à-vis* corporate identity); discusses the nature and importance of corporate identity traits (the author outlines five criteria by which to assess corporate identity trait determinants); and briefly explains the fundamentals and importance of the legal theory of the organisation apropos corporate identity.

From the outset, it should be noted that the orthodox school of thought regards corporate identities as having manifestly discernible traits: they are seen to have stand-alone existences beyond organisational members and have "lives of their own". Correspondingly, the legal theory of the company takes a similar philosophical stance. Company law regards companies as having separate legal realities and legally enforceable traits. It is illegal for senior managers to abjure these legal obligations. Clearly, there is a similarity and synergistic relationship between the above which, to date, has seemingly been overlooked. As such, this article seeks to re-address this imbalance.

Adopting the orthodox school of thought apropos corporate identity (Balmer et al 2016), organisations are viewed as having a tangible essence and distinctiveness, and this perspective informs the schema. This perspective has long characterised the literature which stressed that organisations have a personality or essence (Newman, 1953; Martineau, 1958a, Harrison, 1972; Golden, 1975; Nolan, 1975).

This institutional essence is to be found in the mix of corporate characteristics/traits which define and realise the company's mission and legal requisites. Moreover, in accordance with a corporate marketing perspective, importance is accorded both to corporate identity and to stakeholders (Balmer, 1998, 2011b). As such, senior managers need to ensure that an entity's corporate identity traits are meaningful and attractive to customers and stakeholders, mindful of the need for bi-lateral stakeholder-company value.

Thus, following and building on the work of Albert and Whetten (1985), an organisation's identity traits should be not only central and distinctive but also – as argued here – *valuable* in stakeholder terms.



Notes: The new schema is, in part, inspired by Tagiuri's (1982) conceptual framework

Figure 1. The corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum

*Determining an organisation's key corporate identity traits*

An organisation's corporate identity traits are many. Some (sometimes many) are established by law and, as such, senior management have a legal obligation in this regard. *Significantly, it would be illegal not to do so.* This aspect will be discussed a little later on. Typically, key corporate identity traits encompass (but are most certainly no limited to):

- an institution's organisational type;
- its purpose(s);
- activities;
- ethos and values;
- market position;
- markets and customers served;
- product and service quality;
- management and employee behaviours; and
- geographic scope, etc.

The ethos and vision of company founders can also inhabit an entity's formative identity and, sometimes, may endure (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Balmer 1994, 1995; Kimberly and Bouchikhi, 1995).

Usefully, Larcon and Reitter (1979a, 1979b) noted that core identity traits relate to those institutional characteristics that confer *specificity, stability and coherence*. For their part, Albert and Whetten (1985) averred that the essential requisites of core identity traits should be conceived as *central, distinctive and enduring*.

Melewar (2003) provided a multi-faceted taxonomy of corporate identity traits.

The above being noted, given the legal imperatives apropos an organisation's corporate identity traits, it is the role and responsibility of senior managers to also take cognisance of strategic, stakeholder, corporate marketing, corporate positioning and environmental requisites.

Thus, taking account of the aforementioned, there is a need to provide more detailed instrumental guidance in finalising/confirming an entity's most meaningful identity traits. Specifically, therefore, key corporate identity traits should – in the author's estimation – meet five criteria which take account of a corporate marketing philosophy. As such, in establishing key corporate identity trait determinants senior managers should assess whether they are:

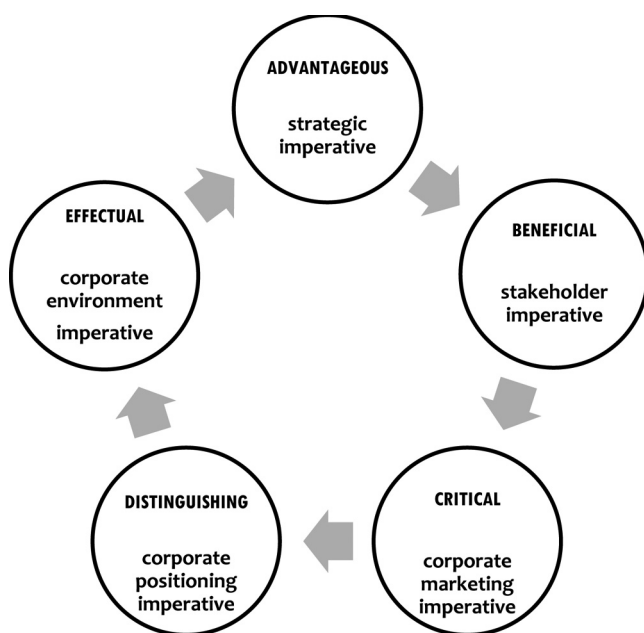
- *advantageous* (from a strategic perspective);
- *beneficial* (from a key stakeholder perspective);
- *critical* (from a corporate marketing perspective);
- *differentiating* (from a corporate positioning perspective); and
- *effectual* (from a corporate environment perspective).

Figure 2 reproduces the corporate identity criteria in diagrammatic form. Table I explains each criterion in greater detail.

*The legal theory of the organisation and corporate identity*

The juridical (legal) theory of the corporation is of importance to senior managers in comprehending both the orthodox understanding of corporate identity and represents a key philosophical perspective apropos the nature of organisations (Balmer, 2008).





**Figure 2.**  
Key corporate identity trait determinants

Trait classification (A-E)	Trait foci	Corporate identity management responsibilities
A: ADVANTAGEOUS	<i>Strategic imperative</i>	Substantiate identity traits which are advantageous in supporting the organisation's aims and obligations
B: BENEFICIAL	<i>Stakeholder imperative</i>	Substantiate identity traits which are mutually beneficial to both customers and other key stakeholders and the organisation
C: CRITICAL	<i>Corporate marketing imperative</i>	Substantiate identity traits which are critical to the firm's core activities <i>vis-à-vis</i> product/service/brand quality and which also deliver the corporate brand promise
D: DISTINGUISHING	<i>Corporate positioning imperative</i>	Substantiate identity traits which meaningfully and favourably distinguish your organisation from competing/challenger organisations
E: EFFECTUAL	<i>Corporate environment imperative</i>	Substantiate identity traits which are in effectual alignment with the current and future corporate (business) environment (political, economic, ethical, social and technological forces)

**Table I.**  
Key corporate identity trait determinants



This because the legal theory of the corporation and the orthodox school apropos corporate identity both view organisations to be real, have a tangible essence and legal corporate personality and have the same rights and obligations as individuals. They can sue, can be sued and hold property. As with the legal right of individuals, they can create their own progeny – subsidiaries, for instance (Maitland, 1908; Micklethwait and Wooldrige, 2005; Kraakman *et al.*, 2009; Kershaw, 2012).

Importantly, in law, they are regarded as stand-alone entities (identities): they are independent of their members.

Significantly for managers, an organisation's key identity traits are often determined by law (Kraakman *et al.*, 2009; Kershaw, 2012). Senior managers, therefore, may have a legal duty to maintain these designated identity traits.

For example, an organisation's articles of association/constitution invariably determine its organisational type (plc, partnership, charity, etc.), ownership and habitually regulate its business scope, mission, markets served and modes of operation, along with legal requisites demanded of senior managers *vis-à-vis* governance, stakeholder prioritisation and relationships.

Moreover, an institution's legal bases often reflect the sentiments and organisational objectives of an entity's founders. They are likely to have carefully deliberated on and defined an entity's purposes, activities and scope in their founding legal documents (articles of association/Royal Charter).

As such, the legal theory of the organisation is important and may offer a powerful navigational tool for managers. Recently, the British Council placed an advertisement for the position of a new Chairman/Chairwomen which stated:

He/she will play a prominent role in representing the British Council's interest to key stakeholders in the UK and across the 110 countries in which it operates. The successful candidate will be comfortable with the ambassadorial element of the role, *and identify closely with the values and mission set out in its Royal Charter.* (The Economist, 2015)

For further information of the legal theory of the organisation and corporate identity see [Appendix 3](#).

### **Total corporate communications and stakeholder prioritisation**

The next part of the schema/continuum focuses on two critical concerns: total corporate communications and stakeholder prioritisation. Because of their critical importance, senior managers need to be regularly appraised of both areas. Understanding and meeting the needs of customers and other key stakeholders is a cornerstone of corporate marketing and a requisite for business success and survival.

As with corporate identity and other parts of the continuum, total corporate communications are *not* subject to unqualified management *fiat*; corporate identity and the entire continuum cannot be entirely managed.

However, this is different from saying there is no need for management: some aspects of total corporate communications and the continuum most certainly *do* require on-going management. Moreover, all facets of total corporate communications (and the continuum *per se*) require senior management understanding and vigilance.

#### *Total corporate communications*

It is important for senior managers to appreciate how total corporate communications represent a nexus – a tripartite bridge – between an organisation's corporate identity and the perceptions (corporate images, corporate reputations and attributed identities) assigned to the organisation's stakeholders (Balmer and Gray, 1999).

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Moreover, the total corporate communications approach differs from the standard corporate communications logic in that it is informed by a panoptic approach which recognises the importance of both “controlled” (integrated) and “uncontrolled” corporate communications. This approach is based on an institutional logic whereby institutions emit not only intended but also unintended expressions of themselves. As an aside, [Goffman \(1959\)](#) noted much the same in his cornerstone study of individual character. For a discussion of total corporate communications, corporate communications and corporate marketing, see [Illia and Balmer \(2012\)](#).

To more comprehensively understand the dimensions of total corporate communications, the author has given additional labels to each of the total corporate communications dimensions which he calls *latent*, *overt* and *tangential communication*.

As such, the total corporate communications approach takes account of:

- *latent* (primary communications);
- *overt* (secondary corporate communications); and
- *tangential* (tertiary corporate communications) influences.

Details of the component dimensions of total corporate communications are as follows:

- *Primary communications (LATENT COMMUNICATIONS)*: The communications influences of an organisation’s corporate identity traits (viz.: the corporate communications impacts of corporate activities and behaviours, product and service quality, management and employee behaviour etc.).
- *Secondary communications (OVERT COMMUNICATIONS)*: the communications influences and effects of integrated (planned and controlled) formal corporate communications (viz.: the corporate communications impacts of corporate advertising, corporate design, corporate public relations, etc.).
- *Tertiary communications (TANGENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS)*: the communications effects of third-party “uncontrolled” communications (viz.: the corporate communications impacts of word-of-mouth communication (on social media, for instance), government/legal pronouncements, commentary on broadcast and in printed media, competitor communication, commentary on the industry/sector, commentary on organisations in the supply chain/business network, etc.).

Whilst it is apparent that senior managers should take cognisance of total corporate communications, it is also transparent that it cannot be fully managed.

Importantly, a failure to adopt a total corporate communications perspective can mean that there is a considerable risk of inconsistent, contradictory and even false manifestations of their corporate identity. For instance, word of mouth, media commentary or employee behaviour may convey a somewhat different identity canvas from that conveyed in officially sanctioned corporate communications campaigns and initiatives ([Balmer, 1995](#)).

The total corporate communications notion is based on the logic that:

Everything an organisation does will in some way communicate the organisation’s identity ([Balmer, 1995](#), p. 35).

As such, total corporate communications (which encompasses discourses between stakeholders and others) will communicate an organisation’s identity and, moreover, will

influence perceptions (and ultimately behaviours) of an entity. See [Appendix 3](#) for further reflections on total corporate communications.

*Stakeholder prioritisation: power, legitimacy, urgency, legality, efficacy, ethicality and temporality*  
As previously detailed, another key aspect of this schema/continuum is to have a stakeholder focus, and to this end, senior managers must engage in stakeholder prioritisation.

Stakeholder theory ([Donaldson and Preston, 1985](#)) is a core dimension of a corporate marketing logic whereby not only customers but also stakeholders generally are deemed to be of importance for institutional continuity and success. Stakeholder theory defines a stakeholder as any individual or group who can affect or is affected by, the achievement of any corporate purpose ([Freeman, 1984](#)). Within the corporate marketing field, however, there has been a long realisation that corporate publics can also be institutional actors.

A key concern within corporate marketing/stakeholder theory is the prioritisation of stakeholders.

Mindful of, and building on, [Mitchell et al's \(1997\)](#) stakeholder prioritisation framework, a new stakeholder prioritisation approach is introduced, which seeks to take account of both corporate marketing and corporate identity fundamentals. As an aside, it should be noted that there are differences between large organisations and small companies, especially small family-owned businesses, in which there is likely to be a close alignment with board and shareholder interests. Such companies are also often imbued with a distinctive character and ethos which is easy for stakeholders to discern ([Lee, 2011](#)). Also, it is important to realise that managers are constitute a distinct stakeholder group ([Balmer and Wang, 2016](#)).

[Mitchell et al. \(1997\)](#) argue that stakeholders can be prioritised on a scale by considering three criteria: *power*, *legitimacy* and *urgency*. As such, stakeholders possessing power, urgency and legitimacy are designated as the most important stakeholder group, and those lacking the legitimacy criterion are accorded the least importance. [Mitchell et al. \(1997\)](#) note the dynamic nature of stakeholders. For instance, stakeholder groups can gain (as well as lose) legitimacy and power.

However, in the author's assessment, four other considerations may be taken into account *vis-a-vis* stakeholder prioritisation in corporate marketing/corporate identity, namely:

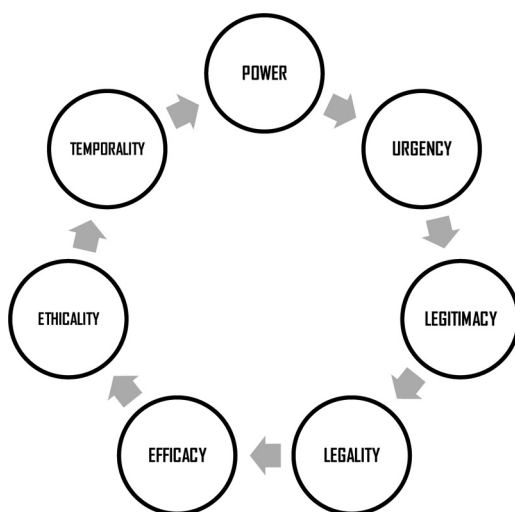
- legality;
- efficacy;
- ethicality; and
- temporality.

As such, senior managers clearly need to make a judgement about which criterion to apply, and it is not suggested that all four should be applied but that all should at least be considered in terms of their utility.

[Figure 3](#) shows the author's expanded stakeholder prioritisation criteria.

The logic of the aforementioned additional criteria can be briefly explained as follows:

- *Legality*: Takes account of an organisation's juridical identity. For instance, an organisation's legal articles of association (or similar) not only will detail ownership (in terms of shareholders whilst recognising employees, customers and other organisations that can also be owners) and may also stipulate which groups are to be prioritised.



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**Figure 3.**  
An augmented  
stakeholder  
prioritisation  
framework

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- *Efficacy*: In certain circumstances, it may be prudent to adopt a broader approach to the “stakeholder” notion and to be mindful, for instance, of groups with discretionary power: the Communist Party in China is a case in point or, in western democracies, opposition parties which may form a Government.
- *Ethicality*: Corporate marketing has an explicit ethical/corporate social responsibility (CSR) remit, and therefore, in appraising stakeholder groups, consideration should be given to the ethical and CSR dimension (Sometimes a judgement needs to be made as to which criterion takes precedence: for instance, issues of efficacy might conflict with the ethicality criterion).
- *Temporality*: Again, corporate marketing is informed by an Omni-temporal perspective. In stakeholder terms, therefore, consideration should be given to key stakeholders of the past (those who may have established and financed an entity or have meaningfully contributed to its success (co-operatives, partnerships and mutuals are cases in point). Also, adopting a prospective stakeholder perspective, there may be utility in identifying and giving consideration to key stakeholder groups of the future.

### Attributed identities

This part of the schema/continuum notes the saliency to senior managers of attributed identities and also notes the significance of corporate images and corporate reputations. Corporate images and corporate reputations being the building blocks of attributed identities.

Following [Tagiuri \(1982, p. 12\)](#), the author makes a distinction between “internal” and “external” stakeholders. Whilst Tagiuri’s model gives prominence to internal stakeholders (and employees in particular) publics in the author’s model accords equal importance to both external and internal publics. Individuals can belong to several stakeholder groups and, therefore, can boundary span the often problematic internal/external divide.

For the main, the aforementioned will have been shaped by total corporate communications: “the total corporate communications effect”. Management comprehension of attributed identities is important because these represent a “reality” to stakeholders and beliefs not only affect identification with the organisation but also influence stakeholders’ responses including their behaviours.

The importance of perception and their effects (images, reputations and attributions) *vis-à-vis* the management of companies has been stressed by authors for some considerable time (Abratt, 1989; Dowling, 1993; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Gray and Smeltzer, 1985; Gray and Balmer, 1998; Kennedy, 1977; Tagiuri, 1982). Thus, issues of perception are accorded importance. Whilst the framework accords importance to attributed identity this is not, in any way, to disregard the significance of corporate image and reputation. Indeed, the contrary is the case.

#### *Corporate images and corporate reputations*

Corporate images and reputations are primarily established as a consequence of total corporate communications effects (societal and religious norms, etc. may also have an impact). As noted by Gray and Balmer (1998) a corporate image is the immediate mental picture which comes to mind of an organisation, whereas a corporate reputation emerges in a stakeholder’s mind over time where a thread of consistent images result in a clear set of expectations about a firm in terms of what it does and/or how it behaves and/or what it says and claims. Corporate reputations are moulded from by a variety of factors (broadly equating to total corporate communications). Social, cultural, and religious mores and precepts can also have a bearing on the above.

#### *Attributed identities*

On the basis of corporate images and, moreover reputations, among others, stakeholders will discern what they believe are an organisation’s identity traits and, as such, attribute an identity to the form (attributed identity). As noted by Tagiuri (1982, p. 18):

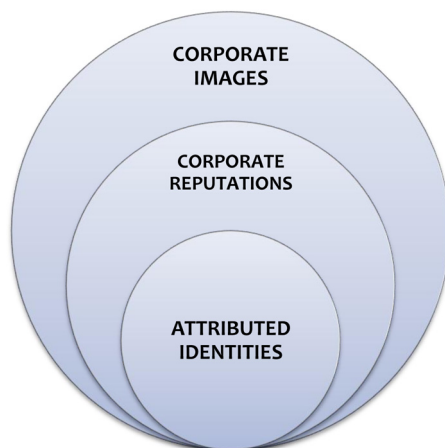
[...] the behaviour of both employees and other stakeholders inside and out depend to a large extent upon the identity they attribute to the company. These behaviours, in turn, can mean the success of failure of the firm.

As such, corporate images, reputations and attributed identities, as modes of organisational perception, are intertwined. This is shown in Figure 4.

### **External and internal stakeholder identification and attitudes**

The nature and strength of key stakeholders’ identifications with an organisation is another key senior management concern. In corporate marketing contexts, stakeholder identification relates to how stakeholders define themselves (or not) in terms an organisation and this will inform their attitudes towards a company.

Stakeholder identification extends the customer-company identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and employee-company (organisational identification) notions (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) notion so that it has a broader applicability to stakeholders. The aforementioned can be considered as *branch theories* of social identity theory self-categorisation theory which are well-known social-psychological theoretical perspective/s (Turner, 1975; Tajfel, 1981, 1982; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). Arguably, stakeholder identification represents a logical dénouement of social identity/self-characterisation theories.



**Figure 4.**  
Corporate images,  
corporate reputations  
and attributed  
identities

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In this part of the schema/continuum, the importance of stakeholder identification is detailed. Stakeholders' attributed identities are a precursor to their identification, or misidentification, or ambivalence, towards an organisation. Occasionally, too, there can be schizo-identification as well: this is where an individual both identifies and disidentifies with an organisation (Dukerich *et al.*, 1998).

#### *Positive identification*

In corporate marketing contexts, identification broadly equates with a positive stakeholder identification to an organisation's corporate identity.

Positive stakeholder identification is where stakeholders – informed by their attributed identities – accept and internalise an organisation's corporate identity traits. This is because an organisation is seen to meet an individual's life tasks (Tagiuri, 1982). As such, the organisation becomes part of a stakeholder's persona, and this may result in a stakeholder having a strong, enduring and committed relationship with an organisation which may be emotional/affective in character (Tagiuri, 1982; Albert and Whetten, 1985; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003).

A sense of positive identification, customers may become corporate champions (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and organisational members may have enhanced work satisfaction (Tagiuri, 1982).

Where a corporate identity is viewed to be salient, stable and internally consistent, the identification/internalisation of the identity will be greater (Tagiuri, 1982; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Alvesson, 1990; Bouchikhi and Kimberly, 2003).

At its most positive, identification can result in stakeholders becoming devotees (it should be noted that in extreme forms of positive identification a stakeholder can be unbalanced or "brainwashed": this sometimes occurs in political and religious organisations).

However, in a corporate marketing context, both branch theories are deemed to be salient to social identity theory. Employee identification, for instance, is important because corporate marketing is characterised as a company-wide philosophy.

As such, positive staff identification towards an entity is important; this is of particular germane within service industries, where employees represent the front-

line (the face) of the organisation. As noted by Tagiuri (1982), positive employee identification expedites an organisational member's integration with a firm. Importantly, senior managers can be viewed as a distinct stakeholder group (Balmer and Wang, 2016), and issues of identification are equally germane for them and for the company (He and Balmer, 2007b, 2013).

*Ambivalent identification and the three psychological approaches of identification*

Whilst recognising that there can be numerous modes of stakeholder identification, the framework only refers to positive identification (*identification*) and negative identification (*disidentification*), but there can be ambivalent identification too, where a stakeholder has a vague or undefined sense of identification with a firm (Tagiuri, 1982; Pratt, 2000).

By means of context, "positive" identification is characterised as one of three psychological approaches: *compliance*, *identification* and *internalisation* (Handy, 1993, pp. 144-145). In the context of the framework, compliance, identification and internalisation explain the various degrees by which a key stakeholder/stakeholder group associates – or has a meaningful affinity – with a corporate identity. The three psychological states of positive stakeholder identification (derived from Handy, 1993) are as follows:

- (1) *Compliance*: It is a psychological mechanism where a key stakeholder has an association with a corporate identity (compliance can be a short-term and expeditious association with a corporate identity; it may be tactical rather than a meaningful, sincere or committed response on the part of a stakeholder).
- (2) *Identification*: It is a psychological mechanism where a key stakeholder meaningfully identifies with a corporate identity.
- (3) *Internalisation*: It is a psychological mechanism where a stakeholder has powerful feelings of belonging to a corporate identity, so much so that it becomes part of a stakeholder's persona.

*Disidentification (negative stakeholder identification)*

Disidentification broadly equates with *negative* stakeholder identification to an organisation's corporate identity. Disidentification, using Tagiuri's (1982a) terminology, is where stakeholders – informed by their attributed identities – reject an organisation's corporate identity traits. This may be because an organisation is not felt to be meaningful to an individual's life tasks. As such, the organisation does not become part of the stakeholder's persona, and this may result in the stakeholder having a weak, transitory and indifferent relationship with the organisation.

At its extreme, disidentification can result in a destructive, enduring and hostile relationship with an entity. Where there is disidentification, there can be stakeholder resentment and dissatisfaction; stakeholders will distance themselves from a firm and may, *in extremis*, become visible and vocal corporate detractors: in short, adversaries.

Sometimes, disidentification occurs because a stakeholder's primary loyalty might be to a subsidiary or to a business unit rather than to the organisation *per se* (for instance, an academic's primary loyalty might be to Harvard Business School rather than to Harvard University).

Issues of identification have a causal impact on the behaviour of stakeholders, and this is taken into account in the schema/continuum. The schema shows "feedback" arrows between identification/disidentification and behaviours owing to the implicit correlations between them.



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### External and internal stakeholder behaviour confirms corporate identity

From a senior management perspective, the translation of a positive external/internal stakeholder identification with a corporate identity invariably translates into positive behaviours towards an organisation. Thus, the link between identification and behaviour is likely to be palpable. Stakeholder behaviours, clearly, are of important, viz., customer, employee, shareholder loyalty and a willingness of governments, local communities and suppliers, etc. to support the organisation. [Tagiuri \(1982\)](#) notes how internal and external identification confirms a corporate identity. Understandably, positive stakeholder behaviour towards an entity is a key consequence of effectual corporate identity management.

As the literature attests, positive identification can result in supporting/beneficial behaviour towards an organisation in terms of attracting new customers, favourable word-of-mouth communications and increased loyalty ([Bhattacharya et al., 1995](#); [Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003](#)). For instance, customers may feel that an organisation's corporate identity, as evinced in its products, service, expressions and ethos, conform to their values and needs in terms of quality, reliability and social responsibility: consumers will often use an organisation's products, brands and services to "define the self" ([McAlexander et al., 2002](#)). Other external stakeholders, such as business partners, governments, the local community, etc. having positive identification with an organisation may have a strong sense of loyalty to the firm and might, for instance, feel that their own corporate identities are burnished by their associations with a particular organisation.

Much has been written about positive employee identification too, and it has been shown to have a positive impact on employees' work, including work motivation and satisfaction, and to decrease employee turnover because its significance meaningfully informs their work ([Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002](#); [Pratt, 1998](#); [Cardador and Pratt, 2006](#)).

More work needs to be undertaken apropos other stakeholder groups, but it seems probable that there is a similar, positive, correlation between positive identification and positive behaviour.

There is one very important caveat regarding the above in terms of corporate identity management. As such, because the resultant attitudes and behaviours of key stakeholders are based on attributed identities (corporate identity perceptions), there may be a discrepancy between their *perceived actualité* and the *organisational réalité*. Hence, although key stakeholders may believe that their attitudes and behaviours support the corporate identity, they may not. Senior managers need to take cognisance of this phenomenon, and this explains why there are dotted lines from the two corresponding boxes in the model to the box entitled "Senior management intervention, management and leadership" because such a misalignment may well be prejudicial to an entity's core purposes, activities, on-going success and, ultimately, its survival.

### External and internal behaviour disconfirms corporate identity

Senior managers also need to be appraised of the effect of disidentification (negative stakeholder identification) and its possible bearing on the behaviour of customers and other stakeholders. This may lead to disconfirming of the corporate identity ([Tagiuri, 1982](#)).

This is because stakeholders may perceive that their self-characterisation – and moreover, their behaviours – are not in calibration with, and are not empathetic of, the

corporate identity. For would-be customers, this may well result in less favourability towards, or avoidance or rejection of, an organisation's products and/or services. For other external stakeholders, there may be an unwillingness to support the organisation. For internal stakeholders, a repudiation of a perceived corporate identity may be disagreeable, and this lack of calibration may result in low esteem/low job-satisfaction and, perhaps, in behaviours that are antagonistic towards the organisation. External stakeholders may occupy a middle ground and be ambivalent. Senior managers need to be sensitive where there is stakeholder disinterest or estrangement from the firm in terms of their identifications, because this may impact on their (negative) behaviour towards a firm and undermine an organisation's purpose, mission and, therefore, its viability.

### **Strategic analysis of business environment**

The efficacy of strategic analysis of the business environment is a necessary dimension of the schema and account should be taken of this as well as issues of stakeholder attributions, identification and behaviours and the total corporate communications effect, etc. As noted by the celebrated business economist and strategist, [Roberts \(2004\)](#), both strategy and an organisation's activities/design are important. Moreover, he avers that there needs to be a fit between strategy, the organisation and the technological, legal and competitive environment ([Roberts, 2004](#), p. 11).

Analysis of the business environment is a strategic imperative ([Andrews, 1987](#); [Kay, 1995](#)). Such analyses shape corporate strategy and changes in strategy and will, by default, modify an organisation's future corporate identity. Moreover, senior managers should take account of the current identity in terms of strategy design. Owing to the vital importance of corporate identity as detailed in earlier, it is negligent, if not reckless, to ignore corporate identity as part of an entity's strategic deliberations.

Increasingly, the volatility of the contemporary business environment means that on-going monitoring of the aforementioned and its impact on corporate identity is a strategic necessity. As such, senior managers need to take cognisance of, among others, regulatory, competitive and technological change and to respond to shifts in public mores and precepts, etc.

Changes in the business environment can be evolutionary and progressive but can also be drastic and sudden. A failure on the part of senior executives to accommodate environmental changes apropos corporate identity may lead to organisational stagnation and, *in extremis*, failure. Tellingly, corporations which were once household names but which failed to adapt to environmental change – such as Olivetti and AT&T – have been consigned to the annals of historical memory.

Sometimes too, whilst an entity may have strong and positive identifications among key stakeholders, it may need to reappraise its key corporate identity traits in light of its legal identity and corporate mission. Such analyses may reveal that its activities are not sustainable if, for instance, they are not economically profitable. For scholars, the above reinforces the perspective that in their totality, an organisation's corporate identity traits are dynamic. However, this is not to say that certain traits are not constant: at its most powerful this can be seen in relation to corporate heritage institutions ([Balmer, 2011b](#)).

### **Management intervention, direction and leadership**

Following an explicit corporate marketing logic and the establishment of company-customer value, a key strategic senior management task is the determination,

modification, alteration and termination of corporate identity traits. Another is to ensure that corporate identity traits are comprehended by customers and other key stakeholders but area also meaningful and for them. As such, a key senior management function is for senior executives to regularly appraise the saliency, sustainability and profitability (from company-stakeholder perspectives) of an entity's corporate identity attributes.

A key principle of the schema outlined here is that corporate identities are not invariable but are dynamic in character and can be shaped by external triggers (government interventions, economic and technology changes, shortages in high-quality personnel, an intensified competitive environment, etc.). However, this does not vitiate the fundamental responsibilities of senior managers apropos corporate identity stewardship.

As such, senior managers may deem there should be a major repositioning of the corporation *vis-à-vis* corporate expansion, retraction or retrenchment; when core activities and competencies and markets served are altered; where there is a decision change of institutional type and ownership (from a publicly-owned to a private entity; where there is a merger or when there is an acquisition by another corporate identity); where core activities are outsourced, etc.

However, whilst this article stresses the significance of senior management roles and responsibilities apropos corporate identity, *it does not follow that senior managers are omnipotent* in terms of shaping identity or can shape the attributed identities, identifications and behaviours of key stakeholder by management fiat.

#### *Stewardship*

Indeed, the label "stewardship" is a more apposite one than manager. This is because in addition to their magisterial role, senior managers also should be aware of their analytical, legal, consensual, socially responsible and Omni-temporal responsibilities viz:

- *Magisterial*: Senior managers have responsibilities and considerable authority which should be used-albeit wisely.
- *Analytical*: Senior managers need to regularly and methodically appraise and analyse the various dimensions of the continuum.
- *Legal*: Senior managers have legal responsibilities and obligations apropos the legal theory of the firm (juridical identity).
- *Consensual*: Senior managers as the servants of stakeholders and following a corporate marketing logic, need to be mindful of stakeholders' images, attributed identities, identifications and behaviours.
- *Socially responsible*: Senior managers should be mindful of the organisation's ethical/social responsible responsibilities-this is in accordance with a key precept of corporate marketing.
- *Omni-temporal*: Senior managers should be attentive to the past, present and prospective future apropos the organisation/stakeholders: for instance, to take account (where appropriate) of the organisation's roots, founder's wishes and long-term obligations for stakeholders of the future (this is in line with a corporate marketing philosophical approach).

#### *Strategy and complexity*

As the schema reveals, corporate identity management should be viewed as a continuum; albeit a complex continuum. It is a necessary and multifaceted senior

management task. Seemingly here there are ostensible linkages with strategic management. For example, [Roberts \(2004, p. 282\)](#) notes that creating an effectual strategy is immensely complex. It requires a holistic mind-set; one that has regard for not only numerous organisational choices but also their interdependencies. As such, senior managers need to decide the scope of a corporation-what it is going to do, where, how and for whom. For the author, the linkages with corporate identity management are palpable.

#### *Corporate identity appraisal*

Corporate identity trait saliency not only waxes but also wanes. Over time, identity traits can atrophy. For instance, identity traits that were once core to an organisation's mission and meaningful to customers and other stakeholders can become peripheral or redundant to an institution's aims and strategy and may become inconsequential or viewed in a negative light by key stakeholders. A failure to evaluate identity attributes may result in multiple identity weaknesses going over undetected, and this may, over time, prove to be perilous. It is the responsibility of senior managers to decide what identity characteristics should or should not be maintained, changed, ended or abandoned. Moreover, senior managers need to decide how and when the above should be effected. Arguably, the longitudinal case study of British Airways corporate identity/corporate brand is an exemplar of the above ([Balmer et al., 2009](#)). Hence, to effect to corporate identity change, it is imperative for senior managers to understand the current identity along with an entity's total corporate communications; stakeholders' images, reputations, attributed identities, identifications and behaviours and to take account of changes (and anticipated changes) in the business environment. This explains why the schema may have utility.

#### *Robust, meaningful and mutually profitable corporate identity traits*

Moreover, senior executives need to ensure that an institution's key corporate identity traits are robust, meaningful and mutually profitable:

- robust (aligned with the legal identity, corporate mission and the business environment);
- meaningful (to customers and other key stakeholders); and
- mutually profitable (in the broad meaning of the word, to create value for customers/key stakeholders and the organisation).

An analogous perspective has been given by [Kotter \(1990\)](#), who argued an organisation's corporate identity needs to be strategically sound, serve key corporate constituencies and meet a company's aims. As a corollary, it also their task – taking an explicit strategic and future-orientated corporate marketing focus – to introduce, nurture and bring to the fore new corporate identity traits which are deemed to be salient, sustainable and profitable. Sometimes too, this requires secondary identity traits to be amplified so that they occupy a more important position. In very general terms, the above approach owes something to contingency theory/rational adaption theory ([Miles, 1984](#)).

Moreover, senior managers should ensure (whilst recognising the limitations of management fiat) a degree of dynamic calibration between and amongst corporate identity and total corporate communications, attributed identities, stakeholder identifications and behaviours and the business environment too. Such a premise

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underscores the ACID Test alignment approach of corporate identity management (Balmer, 2001a).

### *Leadership*

Corporate identity management not only necessitates intervention but also requires an organisation's CEO to have leadership and visionary qualities. Therefore, corporate identity management should ideally be viewed as a function of both strategy and leadership. Coping with corporate identity complexity and with the regular, often numerous minor/moderate changes to a corporate identity is a key senior management task. This requires both analytical and general management skills.

However, the initiation and oversight of significant corporate identity change is a strategic requisite a CEO should have clear leadership skills and, usefully, have a vision underpinned by a corporate marketing philosophy, corporate identity, and a smart strategy. It should be delivered with clarity, conviction and energy.

### *Importance of guardianship: "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" (Juvenal circa 55–127)*

Juvenal's celebrated phrase, "But who will guard the guardians?", is often used today to question the efficacy of guardianship of corporate leaders (Hurwicz, 2007). Whilst senior managers are first tier guardians of corporate identity, sometimes, they are miscreants.

Where this is the case, it is the task of second tier non-senior management guardians (Chairmen, Non-Executive Directors, Boards of Governors/Overseers or, in Germany, the Aufsichtsrat, etc.) to intervene. However, there is a quandary here in that second-tier guardians might require monitoring too. As Hurwicz (2007 p. 286) noted in his Nobel Prize Lecture, guardianship is both useful and problematic. As he remarked:

The need to guard second-level guardians conjures the image of an infinite regress of guardians.

In short, mindful of the limitations of corporate identity management, there is no fail-safe method of ensuring effective guardianship of identity. However, awareness of the importance of corporate identity and the requisite for its on-going management are key guardianship imperatives which should, perhaps, be accorded greater import. Imperative which should also inform courses in corporate marketing and strategy.

### **Reflection**

The heart of scholarship is not only vision but revision: re-vision. McCraw (2008, p. 226)

In the introduction, the author explained how this article aimed to speak to the above scholarly sentiments. It was explicated how this commentary was informed by the *vision* of Tagiuri (1982) apropos his corporate identity management framework. In terms of *revision*, this article/schema updates Tagiuri's model and may be deemed to be expedient in that it considers the territory via the lenses of corporate marketing and stakeholder orientations. Finally, this essay *re-visions* the corporate identity field by taking account of legal theory, total corporate communications, stakeholder theory and the branch theories of social identity theory.

As such, a key aim of this article has been to advance the territory by speaking to the aforementioned cerebral objects.

The practical and instrumental intents of this article/schema were also expounded. Mindful of the above, this commentary, with its managerial ambitions, also aims to progress the field.

As such to particularise and augment McCraw's (2008, p. 226) statement *vis-à-vis* this tract's normative contribution, the author resolves:

The heart of corporate identity management and is not only vision, revision, re-vision but also termination.

For instance, the article showed how the *vision* of company founders can find voice in the legal theory of the company. It has revealed how key corporate identity traits require constant scrutiny and frequent *revision*. Moreover, the article has shown how, to remain sustainable, a corporate identity may need a radical re-vision: and, quite often, termination. Corporate identity cessation is a necessary, commonplace and occurrence often harrowing-management task. This is often overlooked in the literature.

Sometimes the winding-up of identities is because of environmental factors beyond the control of managers. Regularly, however, corporate identities are euthanised because, senior managers have been negligent in their corporate identity management responsibilities.

Occasionally, corporate identity expiration is a moment of celebration.

For instance, when an organisation has achieved its purpose: where a charity established to combat a disease is wound-up because the disease has been eradicated.

Consider the real-life example of The First Salisbury and District Perfect Thrift Building Society. Established with the aim of securing home-ownership for all its members, and having met its corporate and legal objectives (all its members had become home-owners), it was closed-down in 1980 (Balmer and Wilkinson, 1991).

In this and in analogous circumstances, strategic corporate identity management can be seen to have reached its apogee: where managers have fulfilled the vision of its founders; have met their organisation's legal objects and have successfully served the wants and needs of customers and other key stakeholders.

A case of a vital senior management responsibility which has been competently and admirably done, namely, the strategic management of corporate identity.

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### Appendix 1. Professor Renato Tagiuri's working paper "managing corporate identity: the role of top management" (1982)

#### *Appreciation*

This article is dedicated to the memory of Professor Renato Tagiuri. Today, the late Renato Tagiuri (1919-2011), Professor of Social Sciences in Business Administration *Emeritus* at Harvard Business School (HBS), is widely recognised as a leading scholar of his generation *vis-à-vis* family businesses, interpersonal relations and the human aspects of management. However, his single contribution to the corporate identity field – his HBS working paper (Tagiuri, 1982) is also of note and, in the author's estimation, should be better known. The framework expounded in this article take account of the above.

#### *Conversations*

During the early 1990s, as part of his PhD studies, when the author made several research visits at HBS (in part to hold meetings with Professor Stephen A. Greyser) that he unearthed Tagiuri's working paper in HBS's Baker Library. This led to a number of meetings with Professor Renato Tagiuri, and these continued in many highly fruitful meetings with Professor Tagiuri at Harvard and also in the UK over the intervening years, until his sad death in 2011.

#### *Significance of Tagiuri's framework*

Tagiuri's working paper is significant because it is the first corporate identity framework of its type, and it foreshadowed what eventually became known as organisational identity/organisational identification. Arguably, Tagiuri's framework is the first conceptual corporate identity model of its kind. In a radical departure, his model not only stresses the pivotal importance of employees but also emphasises the central role of senior managers in managing and effecting corporate identity adaption and change. Such themes will be familiar to corporate marketing scholars today. For organisational behaviourists too, his work is of pivotal importance. This is because his observations on *attributed*

*identity* presaged Albert and Whetten's theoretical insights (1985) on organisational identity, whereas his reflections on *employee identification* prefigured the formal introduction of the *organisational identification* theoretical notion (Mael and Ashforth, 1989).

#### *Key contributions*

The author has been mindful of Tagiuri's framework in the schema outlined here, and scholars will wish to scrutinise, compare and contrast both frameworks and descriptions. For the author, Tagiuri's (1982) framework is distinctive in that it:

- focusses on senior management roles and responsibilities apropos corporate identity and emphasises the importance of employee identification;
- differentiates between employee identification, disidentification and ambivalent identification and notes how this influences employee;
- notes the influence of social and environmental contexts; and
- whilst having a resolutely employee and management focus, the article and framework also notes the importance of other constituencies but accords external constituencies and customers in particular little attention.

## **Appendix 2. Corporate identity contexts**

### *20 Years on: re-assessing corporate identity*

There is another reason why a reconsideration of corporate identity and its import and its impacts can be viewed as opportune, timely and necessary. This is because 2017 marks the anniversary of the ground-breaking *European Journal of Marketing* (EJM) special edition devoted to corporate identity (Van Riel and Balmer, 1997). As such, this is a providential moment to revisit the corporate identity construct to re-asses its theoretical and strategic utility and take account of developments within the canon.

The above being noted, it is clear that an increasing number of marketing scholars view corporate identity to be a pivotal, powerful and profound dimension of organisational life and management. In corporate marketing contexts, corporate marketing is of critical import to the philosophy and the attendant theories of corporate marketing. Moreover, the literature exemplifies the critical importance of corporate identity to the theoretical and instrumental understanding of key corporate marketing concepts.

For instance, Van Riel (1995) noted the centrality of corporate identity apropos corporate communication; Fombrun (1996) acknowledged its significance to the understanding of corporate reputation; Gray and Balmer (1998) recognised its consequence to both corporate image and corporate reputation; and Balmer (1995) found that it was imperative in comprehending corporate brands. Following the above, corporate identity can be viewed to be of equivalent significance in instrumental and, moreover, strategic terms.

20 years ago, it was still common for corporate identity to be narrowly conceived (and all too often narrowly constrained) by its close association with graphic design (Henrion and Parkin, 1967; Blake, 1971; Pilditch, 1971; Selame and Selame, 1975; Margulies, 1975; Olins, 1989; Stewart, 1991; Schmitt *et al.*, 1995) or a by a constricted conceptualisation in terms of corporate communications (Van Riel, 1995). The work of Wally Olins was of seminal importance (Balmer, 2014, 2015). Whilst the insights associated with visual identity were noteworthy (Baker and Balmer, 1997; Henderson and Cote, 1998; Melewar *et al.*, 2001) and the significant of visual identity should not be disregarded, this tended to disregard a more holistic, strategic and multi-disciplinary understanding of corporate identity which was starting to transpire (Balmer, 1995; 2001a).

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Thus, 20 years on from this special edition, there is a logic in scrutinising and comprehending corporate identity via the broader visor of corporate marketing in philosophical and instrumental terms. Corporate marketing recognises organisations and their corporate brands (and not just products and services) are critically important platforms via which mutually beneficial organisational-stakeholder relations take place (Balmer, 2001b, 2011a, 2011b).

#### *Orthodox and heterodox perspectives*

Whilst recognising that both orthodox and heterodox perspectives can substantively inform the corporate identity field (Balmer *et al.*, 2016), it has been decided to pursue an orthodox and strategic perspective. Such an approach is appropriate owing to the emphasis accorded to strategic and legal perspectives of corporate identity management in this article/schema. Whereas the orthodox standpoint adopts an endogenous and institutional approach to corporate identity and focusses on an organisation's inherent identity traits, ethos and capabilities the heterodox approach, in contrast, reflects a constructionist and critical viewpoint where corporate identities are deemed to be co-created by organisations and stakeholders.

Balmer's (1995, 2008) understanding of corporate identity often equates to an orthodox perspective whereby he regards corporate identity as equating to an organisation's distinct and differentiating and defining – and more often than not tangible – identity traits. However, the schema also requires senior managers to take cognisance of stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and resultant behaviours. This is in accord with a core precept of marketing/corporate marketing (Balmer, 2011a, 2011b).

#### *Corporate identity indifference in organisational behaviour*

For all the importance attached to corporate identity by corporate marketing scholars, it has to be acknowledged that scholars outside the marketing discipline frequently show indifference to, and sometimes studiously ignore, the corporate identity concept.

Regrettably, this sometimes results in a partisan, constrained and at times myopic identity perspective. Moreover, it tends to privilege organisational behaviour theoretical and scholarly perspectives, gives undue attention to employees and can result in the strategic management of corporate identity from corporate marketing and stakeholder perspectives being discounted or conceived via a narrow organisational behaviour/human resources lenses. Unfortunately, the privileging of the scholarship of organisational behaviour has led some to credit organisational behaviourists Albert and Whetten (1985) as the founding architects of the identity domain in business studies.

Yet whilst acknowledging the import and the magisterial nature of Albert and Whetten's (1985) scholarship, it is bewildering why no mention is made of corporate identity: a concept which was well-developed by the mid-1980s. However, notably and importantly, leading organisational behaviourists Hatch and Schultz (2004) concede the seminal importance of the corporate identity concept and the work of marketing scholars and practitioners (albeit in the briefest of asides) in "leading the way" apropos business identity studies.

Arguably, however, collaborative initiatives by marketing and organisational behaviour scholars provide more-balanced overviews of the domain with initiatives taking place both in the UK (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007) and in the US (Brown *et al.*, 2006; Cardador and Pratt, 2006).

However, US scholars give little attention to the non-US literature and thus has resulted in different and narrower conceptualisations of corporate identity and, therefore, the broader identity territory.



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Notably, reviews of the identity literature by European-based marketing scholars strive to give a more balanced assessment of the corporate identity/organisational identity fields (He and Balmer, 2007a; Balmer, 2008; Perez and Ignacio Rodriguez del Bosque, 2014).

### Appendix 3. Further deliberations on the legal theory of the organisation and corporate identity, total corporate communications

*The legal theory of the organisation and corporate identity: Some further deliberations*

*The legal corporate personality: a difficult notion.* Many students of marketing (as well as in law) find the legal theory of the organisation, and, moreover, the legal concept of the legal corporate personality to be difficult. Author has found a similar bemusement among marketing and management scholars.

*Roots in canon and roman laws.* This theory has its roots in two ancient legal systems: Roman law and Canon Law, (Micklethwait and Wooldrige, 2005; Balmer, 2008) and is both philosophical but also practical in nature. At the heart of theory is the legal concept of the *corporate personality* (*persona ficta*).

Notably, this juridical theory is a cornerstone of the Canon Law of the catholic church. As such, it underscores the legal theory of the Catholic Church's corporate identity, along with its constituent entities (religious orders and affirming churches and ordinaries).

*The origins and importance of the corporate personality legal notion.* A key aspect of canon law and, now, a key component of many of the world's legal systems *vis-à-vis* company is the legal notion of the *corporate personality* (Machen, 1911; Radin, 1932; Ireland, 1996).

The establishment of the corporate personality in canon law was the result of an intense philosophical debate surrounding the day-to-day practicalities of codifying the relationships of the clergy and the church including the status of their appointments.

For instance, if a Abbot acting on behalf of his Abbey held land would this mean at his death the Abbey would no longer hold legal right to the land (Dignam and Lowry, 2010 p[0].16)?

This conundrum was deliberated over for some time but, in the end, the Church held the answer was no. The Abbey (or religious order) was found to be a distinct legal entity that was separable from its members. In short, it was deemed to have a "life of its own".

As such the establishment of the legal corporate personality enabled the organisations of the church and the Church itself had analogous legal rights as individuals. Over time, this legal theory was applied to organisations *per se* and, today, is viewed as a cardinal precept of company law.

*Legal theory of the corporation: similar to the orthodox school of thought apropos corporate identity.* The doctrine of the legal theory of the corporation is, in many, ways analogous to the orthodox school of thought apropos corporate identity. As pointed out by Balmer *et al.* (2016) this philosophical perspective accords an endogenous and institutional approach to corporate identity and focusses on, and recognises, that organisation have inherent identity traits, ethos and capabilities. In short – as with the legal notion of the corporate personality – for legal and for practical reasons corporate identities are deemed to be real.

Company/Corporate Law, typically, allows for organisations to exist in perpetuity will sometimes also prescribe the time period a company may exist; more usually this is "in perpetuity". Some organisational forms came to an end once certain objectives had been met: Terminating Building Societies were a case in point (Balmer and Wilkinson, 1991).



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Failure to take account of an entity's juridical entity may well vitiate a defining corporate marketing precept (where account is accorded to issues of Omni-temporality *vis-à-vis* the past, present and prospective future, especially in relation to key stakeholders) in terms of an entity's founders who deliberated on and defined the entity's purposes, activities and scope in their founding legal documents (articles of association/Royal Charter).

*Total corporate communications: Some further deliberations*

A corporate marketing orientation is mindful of the total communications logic which recognises that everything an organisation says, makes and does – as well as what others say about a firm – communicates (Balmer and Gray, 1999) and also accords importance to a stakeholder orientation, whereby significance is given not only to customers but also to other key stakeholders. In short, it comes with a realisation that a stakeholder perspective is important for an entity's on-going survival and success. Notably, the corporate marketing doctrine takes account not only of stakeholders of the present but also those of the future. It is mindful of the legacy bequeathed by earlier stakeholders: this is especially the case with mutual and not-for-profit entities.

The total corporate communications approach (Balmer and Gray, 1999) epitomises a much-expanded theoretical perspective relating to corporate communications, as evinced by the approaches of Aberg (1990), Van Riel (1995) and the integrated marketing communication approach of Schultz *et al.* (1994). Total corporate communications also represent a radical departure from traditional one-way communications models which emphasise “controlled communications” (Shannon and Weaver, 1949).

Whilst total corporate communications cannot be entirely managed, it should, nonetheless, be completely understood and taken into account. In addition, senior management cognisance of total corporate communications *vis-à-vis* strategic corporate identity formation, management and maintenance avoids a narrow conceptualisation of corporate communications in terms of “integrated/controlled corporate communications” which, arguably, is myopic and potentially perilous because corporate communications may be narrowly conceived.

Where the effects of total corporate communications on stakeholders represent an inaccurate, out-dated or confused image of a firm's corporate identity, this may result in confusion and may result in weak or prejudicial stakeholder-company identification and in behaviours which are not supportive of corporate identity.

Whilst the total corporate communications approach is seemingly applicable to developed, Western economies, there are other factors to consider in other countries. For instance, in China (and no doubt other countries), consideration must be given to *Party* (the Communist Party of China), *Guanxi* (the critical importance of business and personal networks) and *Family* (the importance attached to Family): see Balmer and Chen (2015).

### **About the author**

John M.T. Balmer is a Professor of Corporate Marketing at Brunel University Business School London, quondam a Professor of Corporate Brand/Identity Management at Bradford University School of Management and a Director of the Marketing and Corporate Brand Research Group at Brunel University. He took his PhD at Strathclyde University in 2006 and within three years was elected to a personal (full) chair as a Professor of Corporate Identity at Bradford University School of Management. Subsequently, he was conferred the title of Professor of Corporate Brand/Identity Management at the same institution in recognition of his pioneering scholarship in these fields. In 2007, he was appointed to a personal chair at Brunel University London where and was conferred the title Professor of Corporate Marketing. All three professorial appointments are understood to be the first of their kind. Recognised for his scholarship on corporate identity, he is credited with writing the first articles on corporate brands (1995) and corporate marketing (1998) and co-developed the corporate heritage notion (2006). He

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is the Chairman of the Board of Senior Consultant Editors of the *Journal of Brand Management*; sits on the senior advisory board of the *Journal of Product and Brand Management* and has served on the editorial board of the *European Journal of Marketing* for 20 years. He has edited/co-edited well over 20 special editions of academic journals. His articles have been published in *California Management Review*, *British Journal of Management*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Long Range Planning*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *International Studies of Management and Organizations*, *Journal of Brand Management*, *Journal of General Management* among other journals. In 1994, he established the International Corporate Identity Group (ICIG). Launched in the House of Lords (*Palace of Westminster, London*) he is the Chairman and Conference Organiser of the ICIG: symposia have been held in Denmark, Malaysia, South African, Spain, Switzerland as well as at the Universities of Oxford, Strathclyde, Brunel, Essex and at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in London. He established the International Corporate Heritage Symposium in 2011 and is its Chairman and Conference Organiser. John M.T. Balmer can be contacted at: [John.Balmer@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:John.Balmer@brunel.ac.uk)

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