

Towards a strong corporate reputation: The mediating effect of identity and image in managing higher education in Ghana

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Abstract

A good corporate reputation is extremely valuable, and confers substantial benefits to the organisation. In order to manage corporate reputation, companies need to align their corporate identity and corporate image. This study explores the phenomenon of corporate reputation management in university settings as this has not previously been extensively researched in a transitional economy context. It analyses corporate identity and image in the corporate reputation nexus. A qualitative research approach was adopted focusing on collecting primary data using an exploratory, phenomenological approach. Five in-depth interviews were conducted with corporate communications directors of five universities in Accra, who were selected through purposive and convenience sampling. We found that corporate communication directors in higher education in Ghana recognize the alignment of identity and image as critical to building corporate reputation. Corporate reputation is also found to be a tool for competitive advantage in higher education in Ghana.

Keywords: corporate identity, corporate image and corporate reputation, higher education and competitive advantage

Introduction

Universities all over the globe lived in a protective world, the system of education in Ghana for instance used to work in a non-competitive situation because there were a few big public universities (Anode & Ivy 1999). In the past student demand exceeded the number of available places at the universities, marketing was considered unnecessary. However in Ghana, government legislations in the 1990s gave way for the emergence of Ghana's new universities (National Accreditation Board, 2013) ^[38]. With increased demand for higher education, there has been a proliferation of private universities in recent times. This has brought a lot of competition among both the private and the public universities. Today's universities are no longer viewed only as institutions of higher learning, but also viewed as business entities competing for share of student enrollment.

According to Eccles (2004) ^[25], universities run as corporate organizations and for this to happen it is effectively institutions of higher education should communicate their messages continually and consistently to create positive image, identity and reputation amongst students and or prospective applicants both external and internal. In this case, it therefore makes sense that universities apply marketing principles as they are faced with competition against numerous available places with other universities.

Over the years, discussions on attaining and retaining customers and other stakeholders by corporate organizations have concentrated on creating customers loyalty through relationship building. Corporate reputation is essential for every organization in this day and age where customers are sophisticated and know what they want and what they want with increased expectations. Reputation is everything, and companies must be prepared to either maintain their reputation

and or do damage repairs. According to Serrat, (2011) 'Reputation is not about likability: it is the aggregate estimation in which a person or entity is held by individuals and the public against a criterion, based on past actions and perceptual representation of future prospects, when compared to other persons or entities'.

One of the most critical strategic and perhaps, the most enduring asset that a firm possesses is largely its reputation (Cravens, Oliver, & Ramamoorthi, 2003, p. 201). Lewis, (2001) ^[36] argues that an intangible asset of immense value that a firm builds up over time is corporate reputation. One difficulty organisations face is how to quantify reputation and understand its exact impact on the business, however, it has been shown that a good reputation lends numerous advantages to an organisation (Boyd, Bergh, & Ketchen, 2010; Dowling, 2006; Firestein, 2006). Whetten and Mackey (2002) ^[10, 26, 23, 47] define corporate reputation simply as what the company is seen to be.

In a fast-changing world where institutions of higher education can easily fall short of promises to their stakeholders, businesses do not need to only intuitively recognize the value of a good reputation, they need also to "systematically and purposefully" manage their reputations (Simazine & Jucevicius, 2010, p. 91). Corporate reputation management has been linked in the literature with the concepts of corporate image and corporate identity (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; He & Balmer, 2007) ^[8, 4]. Balmer (2001) ^[3] defined corporate identity as 'a key element, which gives a business identity its distinctiveness and relates to the attitudes and beliefs of those within the organisation' (p. 254). Corporate image can either be tangible or based on psychological dimensions such as feelings towards a company (Kennedy, 1977) ^[34]. Corporate image thus represents 'the

sum of beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that a person or group has of an object' (Barich & Kotler, 1991, p. 95) [6].

Literature has shown that if reputation is not managed properly it can easily be lost. (Rindova, Williamson, & Petkova, 2010) [42]. Literature also suggests that in order to manage corporate reputation, there is the need to manage and align corporate image and corporate identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2001) [29]. However, research to date has not identified ways to achieve this (Davies & Chun, 2002) [17]. Directors are positioned to uniquely offer insight into both corporate image and corporate identity due to their executive responsibilities. There is therefore the need to solicit their views about the interrelatedness and gap between corporate image and corporate identity so as to manage corporate reputation. Sieghban & Oman (2004) studied identity and Image in a Swedish university and their research concluded that reputation management was important in managing higher institutions since image and identity all affect reputation management. In Ghana for instance research on identity and image as well as corporate reputation are related to mainstream organizations. Though Williams Jr *et al* (2012) looked at branding of higher institutions in Ghana while Akyeampong & Stephens (2002) concentrated on teacher identity and image. This paper looks to fill the knowledge gaps that have been left out in the educational sector most particularly higher education. The research looks at the understanding that directors have about the construct of identity image and its role in managing corporate reputation.

Research Questions

Based on the objectives of this study, the following research questions are posed:

To what extent do directors of institutions of higher learning in Ghana understand the role and interrelationships between corporate image, corporate identity and corporate reputation in higher education management?

What are the perceived gaps between corporate image and corporate identity in relation to reputation management?

Do managers of higher institutions of learning appreciate the role of corporate reputation in adding value?

What mechanisms are put in place by management to manage the reputation of the institutions for competitive advantage?

Review of Related Literature

Conceptual Overview of Corporate Identity, Corporate Image and Corporate reputation

Insert Fig 1 here

Corporate reputation

Corporate reputation has enjoyed wide exposure in the literature, with various writers and schools of thought arguing from different angles to understand corporate reputation and the impact it has on a firm (Fombrun, 1996; Rindova *et al.*, 2010) [42, 27].

Regardless of the theoretical approach or the author undertaking an investigation into reputation management, a general consensus is that corporate reputation is a valuable asset that must be managed properly to serve the organizational goals (Boyd *et al.*, 2010; Ponzi *et al.*, 2011) [40, 10].

The search for a comprehensive definition of corporate

reputation has been going on over decades and continues to gain interest among academics and industry players (Ponzi *et al.*, 2011) [40]. However, literature suggests that there is not one acceptable definition of corporate reputation (Barnett *et al.*, 2006) [7] but rather that each stakeholder group views it differently, as each perceives the company in a unique manner and builds a reputation construct from its perception (Bonini, *et al* 2009) [8]. This is summarized by Whetten and Mackey (2002) [47] who argue that reputation is simply how stakeholders perceive the company.

Corporate identity

Abratt (1989) laid the groundwork for studies into corporate identity. Since then, many studies have looked at the multi-dimensional nature of corporate identity (Pruzan, 2001; Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Balmer, 2008; Otubanjo, 2011; Kantanen, 2012) [4].

Barnett *et al.* (2006) [7] defined Corporate identity as 'the underlying "core" or basic character of the firm ... what the firm actually is' (p. 33). Later studies such as Vercic & Vercic, (2007) supported this.

In 2002, Balmer & Greyser investigated five different identities of the corporation including: *communicated identity conceived identity ideal identity, desired identity, and actual identity*. Subsequently, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) identified seven elements of corporate identity including: corporate culture; corporate communication; corporate behaviour; corporate design; industry identity; corporate strategy and. corporate structure; This provides diverse areas that could be translated into dynamics of management. In the two studies, the importance of *identity congruence* are emphasized.

Corporate image

Every organization comes with different stakeholder groups that have different experiences, knowledge, beliefs, feelings and impressions about a company, so they form different images about it (Dowling, 1988; Abratt, 1989)

Dowling (1993) defined Corporate image as "the total impression an entity makes on the minds of people" (p. 104). Drawing on that definition, Boyle (1996) defined three types of image:

Corporate image – *the way people view the whole corporation;*

Product image – *the way people view a particular product category; and*

Brand image– *the way people view a particular brand which is in competition with other brands.*

Cornelissen (2000) [16] suggested that 'an image is a perception of a receiver of his or her received projection of the corporate identity and own reflections of interpretations of various attributes from various sources' (p. 120). This indicates the multi-dimensional nature of corporate image and sheds understanding on why it is difficult to manage and. define

Relationship between Corporate Image, Corporate Identity and Corporate Reputation

There is an argument in the literature over the difference between the three concepts and how they are related. While

some authors argued for a hierarchy of concepts, Christensen & Askegaard (2001) have postulated that 'identity and image are typically seen as opposite ends of the communication process' (p. 296). It is generally accepted that ideally, corporate image and Corporate Identity should be aligned (Hatch & Schultz, 2001) ^[29] and also corporate reputation. This implies that there should be links in the literature between:

Corporate reputation and Corporate Identity (Fombrun, 1996; Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Balmer & Greyser, 2006;) ^[4] Corporate reputation and Corporate image (Wartick, 2002) Corporate Identity and Corporate Image (Fombrun, 1996; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fombrun & Van Riel, 1998) ^[40, 24, 27]

However, these studies have not addressed the importance to Corporate Reputation management and an understanding of the identity-image gaps and exploring mechanisms to close them. Looking at the definitions of the three concepts one words that runs through is perception (Whetten & Mackey, 2002; Bonini, *et al* 2009) ^[47, 9] on reputation; Barnett *et al.* 2006; Balmer, 2008 ^[4, 7] on identity and Cornelissen (2000) ^[16] on image) which means that there is a relationship between the construct. This argument has been summarized by Doorly & Garcia (2007, p. 4) ^[20] as:

Reputation = sum of images = (Performance and Behaviour) +Communication

Managing Corporate Image, Corporate Identity and Corporate reputation

Literature has shown that corporate reputation is a highly valuable and evolving construct that needs to be managed and not merely a stakeholder view (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Managing intangible assets such as reputation is one difficulty that many organizations face. Fombrun and Pan (2006) ^[40] found that despite progress in the field, firms still require an improvement in their approach to managing corporate reputation.

According to Rindova *et al.* (2005) reputation is formed because of information exchanges between companies, their stakeholders and their market. The perceived quality of an organization's attributes (both products and otherwise) is influenced by signals that the organisation sends, as well as through information exchange among the various stakeholders (Deephouse, 2000; Rindova *et al.*, 2005).

There is much focus in the literature on Corporate Reputation and how it can be managed. However, perceptions of Corporate Image and Corporate Identity also need to be managed and aligned with the organisation (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Wartick, 2002) ^[29]. Currently, the only validated way to measure the identity and image of a corporate brand is by using the Davies, *et al* (2001a) ^[18]. Corporate Personality Scale. Davies & Chun, (2002) ^[17] argue that it is the different experiences each stakeholder group has with a company that result in gaps between stakeholder perceptions which calls for management of the gaps.

Theoretical Foundation

The theory adopted for this work is the Upper Echelons Theory UET was founded by Hambrick & Mason, (1984) ^[30] on the premise that outcomes of organizations are largely and

directly impacted by the experiences, expertise and knowledge of top executives.

Hambrick & Mason, (1984) ^[30] argue that to apply UET effectively to examine organizational performance, it is important to consider the issue of causality. Those top executives with professional experience in an organization come to act in line with these previous experiences more so than on the basis of their individual attributes. In the life of an organization, there are strategies employed which serve as function of executive decision making that are often a function of macro forces driving the achievement of organizational goals which corporate reputation management is part.

The model depicts the main characteristics which may substantially influence university managers' decision on managing corporate reputation. The model proposes that both external and internal factors (situational conditions) as seen in identity and image management can influence decision-makers' and their decision.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative paradigm which seeks a better understanding of complex situations and phenomenon such as corporate image, corporate identity and corporate reputation; and to discover the differences between them, from the standpoint of the directors of the institutions. The research design focuses on collecting primary data using an exploratory, phenomenological approach. In-depth interviews were carried out with the target participants, to better understand from their point of view on how the constructs relate to each other. The target population for this study consisted of corporate communications directors of private universities in the Accra Metropolis. The study employed purposive and convenient sampling technique.

A sample size of five (5) participants from five (5) private universities were accessed to be able to provide the richness of data envisioned for this research. The research used common themes and content for the analysis described as a method for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning in a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006) ^[12].

Results

RQ1: what is the differentiate Between Corporate Reputation, Corporate Image and Corporate Identity?

To clarify a precise definition of the constructs, for the purposes of this research, interviewees were asked to define corporate reputation. The same exercise was repeated for both corporate identity, and for corporate image. Finally, interviewees were asked whether they experienced ambiguity when dealing with the concepts of corporate reputation, corporate image and corporate identity.

Corporate reputation

While each interviewee had a general idea of corporate reputation, it was felt necessary to clarify a definition to position the rest of the information gathered. As such, the respondents were asked for a definition of corporate reputation. While the concept of corporate reputation seemed easy to access, a concrete definition was not. The definitions volunteered are laid out below in Table.

Definitions of corporate reputation

Definition

'How stakeholders of the company view the company... which includes the understanding of our values, the way we operate' (Interviewee 1)

I think it's something that external people, clients or non-clients perceive that company to stand for, so reputation is around what is the company actually projecting about themselves into the market or internally to their staff as well as their clients

"Corporate reputation is the way people view a company" "reputation is I think the way people feel about the company, rather than what they see" (Interviewee 2)

"It is reflecting the DNA of the organisation" "the visible part of the organisation" (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees also found corporate reputation to be multi-faceted:

"Perceptions from the outside" "the ability to deliver on promises" (Interviewee 5)

Corporate identity

Each interviewee had a general idea of Corporate Identity and Corporate Image and their importance to Corporate Reputation. However, they found it harder to provide a concrete definition of the terms.

Definitions of Corporate Identity

Quotes

"identity is an internal thing" "an identity of an organization would include things like its history, it is almost like a personality, it is the way if you had to compare it to a person, it is the way the organization would deal with the things that are its challenges and opportunities that it would be faced with" "how you identify yourself" (Interviewee 1)

"I think it would be very individual, I think it is how I perceive myself in relation to the image that I project" (Interviewee 5)

It can be seen from above that, according to the respondents, there is not one standard definition of corporate identity. Indeed, there was considerable ambiguity in definition between of constructs.

Corporate image

Each interviewee had a general idea of Corporate Image and Corporate Identity and their importance to Corporate Reputation. However, they found it harder to provide a concrete definition of the terms.

Definitions of corporate image

Quotes

"Image I think is reflected by the activities the company undertakes in the media, in social media as well; while reputation is I think the way people feel about the company, rather than what they see" what other people think of you as an organisation" (Interviewee 2)

"Image is clearly how one is perceived - it is like a light source generated but going through a filter of some sort, what the people perceive that side is not necessarily the light there, it is how it has been filtered out, so they look at the filtered image of the company" (Interviewee 5)

It can be seen from above that, according to respondents, there

is not one standard definition of image. While the interviewees seemed to innately understand the concepts of Corporate Reputation, Corporate Image and Corporate Identity, there was considerable ambiguity in responses when articulating a concrete definition.

Inter-relationship between Corporate Reputation, Corporate Image and Corporate Identity.

As mentioned above, in the interview discussions around Corporate Reputation, Corporate Image and Corporate Identity, it was evident that there is often an overlap and an ambiguity between these constructs. Corporate Identity has been described as both a physical attribute, as well as a personality. Contradictorily, Corporate Image has also been likened to the persona of the company. Further, how can Corporate Image be both external, and created by the company? And finally, is it possible for Corporate Image to be both a projection and a perception? Key quotes to exemplify the inter-relationship between constructs are shown below:

"Okay, it sounds like we are talking about all the same things now..." "I would say it is all the same family" (Interviewee 2)

"The two are totally interconnected" (Interviewee 3)

"I understand what image is but I don't know what the definition of identity is, it's a little bit vague for me" (Interviewee 5)

RQ2: What is the perceived gaps between how the company views itself corporate image and corporate identity how it is viewed by its stakeholders?

In order to manage corporate reputation better, it is necessary to understand whether there is a gap between corporate image and corporate identity. All interviewee were unanimous in their view that there are gaps in how a company views itself and how it is viewed by its stakeholders.

A key quote from illustrates this:

"What we are and what people think we are, there is already a difference there, and then obviously there is also a difference in the way we view ourselves, ... [and] the way we want our stakeholders to experience the engagement with us, as opposed to the way they actually experience it" (Interviewee 1)

All the interviewees acknowledged the existence of an identity-image gap and argued that such a gap should ideally not exist in an institution. Key quotes to this effect are noted below:

"What you want the image to be and what you want the image to be perceived to be should be the same" (Interviewee 3)

"The aim of the corporation should always be to make sure that they are aligned" (Interviewee 4)

There was also a general consensus that the identity-image gap is about stakeholder perceptions:

"As far as I am concerned life is not about fact it's about perception and perception is really what motivates everything - so how you [are] perceived in the workplace is very much a matter of what you project out there and it might not reflect what is actually happening within the company" (Interviewee 5)

Another area of agreement for the interviewees was that, given the existence of an identity-image gap, attempts should be made to address that gap:

“and that I would suggest is where the work always has to be done, in that gap between what you want it to be and what it is perceived to be - that is where the gap is and that is where all the work has to be done” (Interviewee 3)

In addressing identity-image gaps, a key point that was raised was to determine whether the identity-image gap was significant to the organisation:

“My answer is there is a disconnect and the breadth of the disconnect will vary from immaterial to significant” (Interviewee 4)

Using the ‘dimensions of corporate reputation’ as a departure point; if the disconnect is in a dimension that is material to your organisation then it is vital to address it.

What is the role of corporate reputation in creating competitive advantage?

Interviewees were asked about their appreciation of the role that corporate reputation plays in creating competitive advantage.

Each of the interviewees was of the view that corporate reputation plays a vital role in creating competitive advantage.

The following are the quotes for interviewees Role of corporate reputation

“I think corporate reputation is very essential in the growth of an organization as most students will want to be admitted to a school that has a good reputation.” “it will interest you to know that most of the applicants to this school come here as a result of student referrals and it gives us the advantage over our competitors and it only because we have a good reputation” (Interviewee 1)

“Corporate reputation is very good and it allows a company to have access to more finances from financial organizations. No institution will advance a loan to a company that has a bad reputation”. (Interviewee 2)

“it adds up to the image of the organization. It enhances the status of the organization. More customers are coming because of our reputation.” (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees also found corporate reputation to be multi-faceted:

“since reputation is all about. The reputation of the company needs to be good so that we can always use it against our competitors.” (Interviewee 5)

RQ3: What mechanisms are put in place by management to close the gap between Identity and Image which can lead to the management of reputation of the institutions?

The complex and multi-causal nature of identity-image gaps was outlined above. In order to reconcile and close those gaps, directors need to employ a number of mechanisms. A consolidation of the data from the 5 depth interviews yielded five main themes under which mechanisms of reconciliation can be grouped.

Mechanisms to close identity-image gaps

Insert Table 1 here

Knowledge management

It is essential in an organisation to understand the context in which you operate, and the players in that field. It is necessary

to be cognisant not only of your stakeholders but also of the external market environment and the influences it has on your organisational performance.

Stakeholders

All of the interviewees were of the opinion that each stakeholder group has a specific set of needs and criteria on which they evaluate a company:

“they [stakeholders] are going to assess the organisation’s reputation in light of what’s important for them” (Interviewee 4)

It is essential that institutions make an effort to understand exactly what their various stakeholders think of them, and what needs should be addressed, as it is impossible to manage what is not understood.

“One of the problems though I would imagine is, and I have experienced that as well, is that quite often people won’t tell you what they really think. So you have to try and use the evidence that is available to you through correspondence, through meetings, what you hear from other people, to really find out what your customers think about you. Quite often what they tell you is not necessarily the same thing” “certainly we were very focused on trying to understand what they [the customer] needed from us, and how we could address that” (Interviewee 2)

This can only be achieved by active dialogue with stakeholders. Additionally, if the firm’s impact in the market is not understood, it will be difficult to recreate successes, and the firm will be unprepared to address reputational risks as they arise:

“I think the point of the matter is companies probably do struggle with that [corporate reputation] and I think a lot of companies that succeed probably are not absolutely sure why. I know one of the things is that you build on your strengths - well if you misread people you are going to go off at a tangent” (Interviewee 3)

Current world context

Considering the relative importance of the five dimensions of corporate reputation, it was noted by four interviewees in particular, that the current world context dictates how important a dimension of Corporate Reputation will be to the company. Adjustments in emphasis will need to be made, relative to current market forces. By taking into account the current trend of green behaviours; ‘social and environmental responsibility’ as a dimension of Corporate Reputation is likely to increase in prominence and relevance to the organisation, in the future.

Trade-offs

Given the complexity and multidimensional nature of corporate reputation, it is unlikely that firms can adequately address all the salient dimensions, and keep all the stakeholder groups satisfied. In order to address the needs most pressing to the organisation, it is inevitable that trade-offs need to happen. *“it is impossible to balance all the stakeholders’ expectations equally or fully per stakeholder ... so you meet what you have to and beyond that you meet it how you think it is appropriate”* (Interviewee 4)

Conversely, Interview 2 and 3 were of the opinion that the

needs of all stakeholders need to be addressed in a balanced manner, allowing prioritisation of key dimensions:

"I think there is a trade-off. I think it is possible to satisfy all stakeholders to some extent, but you do have to prioritize and I think it depends on the type of company you have and what type of service you sell, where you want to position yourself" (Interviewee 2)

Relationship management

The management of relationships – with employees, partners and customers – emerged as a strong mechanism to address identity image gaps. The importance of relationship management is represented by this quote:

"I think it all comes down to relationships, because at the end of the day companies don't do business with companies, people do business with people" (Interviewee 2)

Employees

The importance of employee engagement and of the employee-customer relationship to a positive Corporate Reputation surfaced in all of the interviews. It was argued that if employees seemed happy in their work environment, then other stakeholders would have a better perception of the company.

"Do the people working there look happy?" "They are doing something internally which allows people to believe in themselves and to project that to the market" (Interviewee 1)

Partners

As corporate reputation is based on perceptions that stakeholders have of a company, it is wise to consider the impact that collaborations with partners will have on the company's reputation. This was highlighted in Interview 2 where a reputational impact was experienced due to the actions of a partner-firm:

"That [our good reputation] was not enough to save us from the consequences of poor performance of our partners ... So we got thrown into the pot with our other partners" "certainly our good reputation with the customer was tarnished quite heavily by the bad reputation of our civil partners" (Interviewee 2)

Customers

Customers are a key stakeholder group and require stringent management to ensure their interests are met and that the products/services of the firm are purchased. In order to really understand what the customer needs, the firm needs to adopt a customer centric orientation.

As it is easy to doubt the integrity of a company given that one of the organisational goals is to profit from the customer-interaction, it is essential to assure the customer that their interests are a priority for the company. In doing so, goodwill is created that can be used as a reputational buffer in times of crisis:

Communication

A key theme that emerged from all the interviews was the value of communication in building reputational capital. Especially if the firm is facing a crisis, clear and consistent communication is vital. This was articulated by Interviewee 5:

"[in a crisis] the worst thing you can possibly do is keep quiet ... you can't really over communicate enough ... because then people start talking about it and word of mouth is still the strongest form of any communication ... so often if you handle that area really well, it can turn into positive PR as opposed to negative [PR]"

Education

Education of both internal and external stakeholders emerged as a mechanism to reconcile identity-image gaps. Customers need to understand what it is the firm can deliver for them. By managing customer expectations, the firm can ensure it delivers on value promises:

From an internal dynamic, employees need to understand their role in the organisation and how they contribute to the value-adds the customer receives.

"it was drummed into employees as well, to always have the customers' needs first and understand what the customer wanted" (Interviewee 2)

Social media

It was recognised by the majority of the interviewees that social media can have a profound impact on the reputation of the firm. The power of the individual is magnified in social media contexts, and so is their ability to influence others:

"Social media make things 100 times worse" "you see the problem with social media is it just snowballs so fast, and if you don't respond to it quickly then you are in trouble" (Interviewee 1)

Some suggestions for the specific management of social media that surfaced through the interviews were:

Keep communication lines open

Make sure all social media platforms carry a consistent message

Be real with the client and interact on a personal level

Make it easy for stakeholders to communicate via social media – this gives the firm a real-time opportunity to see what conversations are taking place and what the current perception of the firm is

Stakeholders will be forming perceptions of the firm through social media interactions whether the firm is engaged there or not:

Emotional appeal

Interviewee 1 made special mention of his opinion that if stakeholders feel good about the company the perceived corporate reputation is likely to be higher:

"Emotional appeal for me is very important and that is around people understanding why we do something" (Interviewee 1)

Trust

The concept of trust in terms of corporate reputation management was essential for the interviewees. The positive consequences of trust in a company were noted as:

Ease of doing business

Positive word of mouth

Customer satisfaction

Repurchase behaviour

Referral business

Positive relationships

Confidence in expectations being met

Forgiveness of transgressions

"I think generally if you are able to engender trust into your customers then a lot of other things flow from that, customer satisfaction and word of mouth and everything else flows from that trust that you build up with your customer"(Interviewee 3)

The importance of sound relationship management has already been established. Those relationships are built on trust and if that trust is broken, it is very difficult to re-establish.

Leadership

Thought and trusted leadership is seen as an essential element of trust in the firm. Stakeholders need to trust that the executive team will act in their best interests and quickly move to redress shortcomings in the stakeholder perceptions.

In reference to one of the causes of identity-image gaps, 'bad apples': Leadership needs to be aware of false representation and ensure that the good of one stakeholder group does not override the needs of others. A quote to this effect is shown below:

"eventually what happens, people around, we all knew what was going on except the man at the top [CEO], blind, didn't want to notice it, result he is going to end up with a disaster on his hands, unless he wakes up" (Interviewee 5)

Promises Kept

Just as consistency is key to communication; so is the keeping of promises key to trust. Whether it is a psychological employment contract, a customer-relationship contract or a service-delivery agreement, firms must do and be seen to do the things they promise to stakeholders.

"So there was a strong connection there and that was the message we sent out to our customers. And we were always consistent in that, all correspondence backed that up" (Interviewee 2)

Implementation

While mechanisms to reconcile identity-image gaps have been identified, the strategy implementation still needs to be mapped out and measured.

"The problem I think is in the execution of the rollout of this stuff" (Interviewee 4)

Key steps identified in this process by interviewees were:

All the areas of the business need to work synergistically together

Identity-image congruence enhances existing reputation and so internal operations must reflect the reputation and values of the organisation

The orientation of the business (i.e. customer-centric) must be supported by operations

A good reputation must be backed up with the ability to deliver technically

Good products or services cannot make up for poor internal implementation

Break mechanisms down into performance criteria and build it into individual's assessment criteria.

Management

Where there are identity-image gaps, they cannot be solved quickly or reactively. Rather, they require an action plan to deliver results. Quotes in support of that are:

"it is not just something that is going to be fixed tomorrow by advertising ... it will take a long, long time, and start doing things, maybe really start doing things that people will see" (Interviewee 3)

Measurement

Measurement is a way of enforcing quality. By measuring outcomes, it ensures that they will be acted upon and the results can be quantified.

"It is exceptionally important that you and your people understand that that is what you are striving for, and the measuring stick obviously has to come from the other side." (Interviewee 3)

Recommendations and Conclusions

The following recommendations on the basis of the findings of this study are made for practical application by managers of higher institutions:

Managers should make efforts in knowledge management by being aware of the needs of stakeholder groups. As every group has unique experiences with the firm, they have different perceptions of Corporate Reputation. It is therefore important to decide where to focus, in order to generate maximum return on Corporate Reputation.

Managers and leaders should realise the importance of communication to corporate reputation management. Proper communication with stakeholders will ensure the build-up of reputation capital for use in case of a reputation-related crisis.

Managers should focus on building trust. The ethics and value statements of a firm must have substance and be verifiable by stakeholders. Organisations need to do what they have said they will do and ensure that any gap between promises and performance is addressed.

Conclusion

The value of a good corporate reputation is undeniable and confers substantial benefits to the organisation. In order to manage corporate reputation, institutions of higher education need to align their corporate identity and corporate image. Where gaps are identified, directors need to reconcile those identity-image gaps. Drawing from industry, this paper contributes to knowledge gap in higher education management in Ghana as a framework is developed to link positive institutional image and a positive identity to a positive corporate reputation for institutions of higher learning and organizations in general to adopt for competitive advantage. The proposed framework that emerged from this study, will practically assist directors to build a stronger positive corporate reputation that is relevant to stakeholders and results in better organizational performance.

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