THE CORPORATE BRAND: FROM CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS TO CURRENT THINKING

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Corporate brands have become a central part of how organizations present themselves to stakeholders and build relationships with them. How they should be developed and managed has been discussed from different perspectives, resulting in a range of concepts and frameworks. This overview explores how thinking about corporate branding has developed, introduces three useful frameworks for corporate brand management, and discusses common pitfalls and challenges in practice.

INTRODUCTION

Put simply, corporate brands are organizational brands. As a practical activity, corporate branding seeks to establish and nurture a single brand that represents an entire organization. Although the term "corporate" suggests otherwise, such brands are suitable tools, in principle and in practice, for a wide range of commercial and noncommercial entities – including family firms, cooperatives, municipalities, museums, universities, charities, unions, and NGOs – not only corporations.

By making the organization identifiable through deliberately chosen tangible and intangible brand elements that acquire symbolic meaning, the brand comes to represent the organization itself, including its culture and identity. In doing so, corporate brands facilitate the organization's strategic positioning and differentiation from other similar organizations and from other societal actors, while also serving as symbols of the organization's actual or perceived consistency and continuity over time.

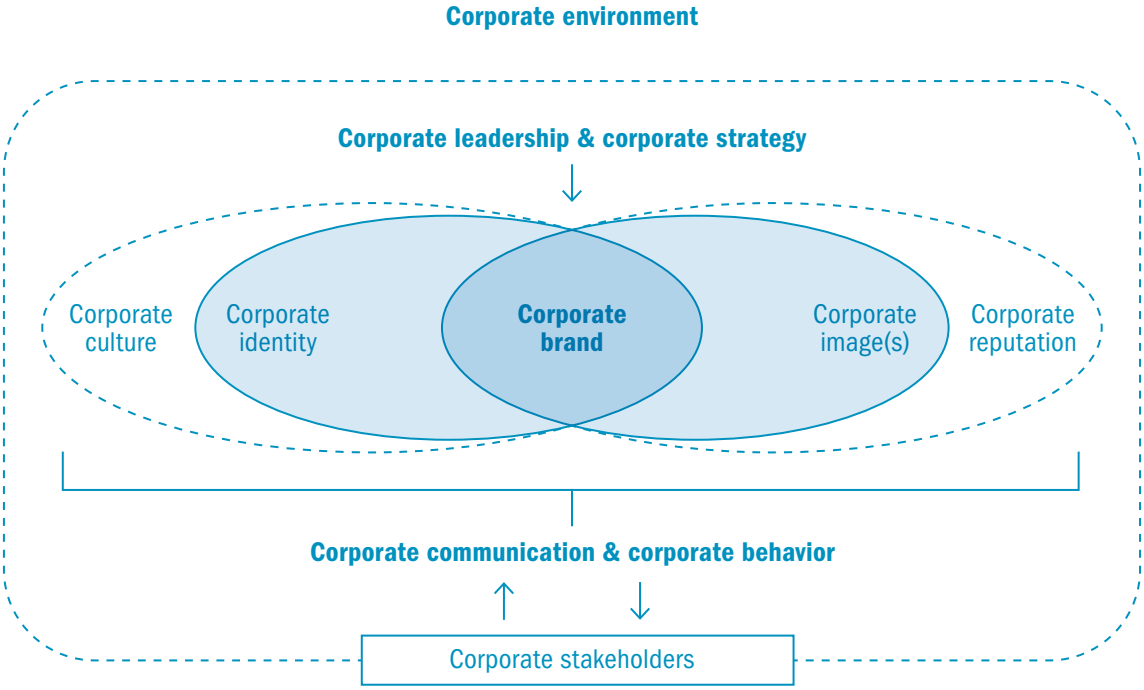
Because a corporate brand stands for an entire organization, this one brand is relevant not only for engaging and interacting with clients, customers, or consumers – as is usually the case with traditional product or service brands – but also for a multitude of internal and external stakeholders.

A corporate brand therefore requires a clear value statement and a concise promise made to these stakeholder groups. Derived from the organization's identity and culture, these should align with stakeholders' expectations and perceptions of the organization, which shape the corporate images and reputations associated with the brand. This alignment hinges on the organization's successful and value-congruent fulfillment of that promise and on how stakeholders experience and interpret its actions over time.

By consistently fulfilling this promise, corporate brands enter into a symbolic covenant with stakeholders, which is an unwritten contract and implicit obligation to continue honoring the promise.

In this sense, a corporate brand resides at the intersection of an organization's culture and identity, on the one hand, and its image and reputation, on the other. It extends beyond the organization's boundaries, serving as a singular symbolic point of reference for all internal and external stakeholders.

The corporate brand and related corporate-level concepts



Related corporate-level concepts

- **Corporate culture:** the shared beliefs, meanings, values, practices, and assumptions that shape organizational life.
- **Corporate identity:** the defining characteristics that make an organization distinctive and coherent as an entity.
- **Corporate image:** stakeholders' perceptions of an organization based on its expressions and representations, including those created by third parties.
- **Corporate reputation:** stakeholders' more enduring evaluations of an organization based on past experiences and expectations of future performance.

Source: Mario Burghausen

As a meaningful and relevant reference point, a corporate brand should guide and influence how stakeholders think, feel, and act in ways that are strategically and operationally advantageous for the organization in achieving its institutional purpose, meeting its strategic goals, and maintaining its societal legitimacy. Yet, internal and external stakeholders are not passive actors in the corporate branding process but active participants who are increasingly involved in "co-creating" the corporate brand and shaping its meaning, relevance, and salience.

Because a corporate brand stands for the entire organization to all its publics and internal constituents, it is of strategic importance, should be a priority for top management, and ought to be managed at the corporate level, with the CEO assuming "custodianship" of the brand, i.e., building, nurturing, and protecting the corporate brand as a strategic concern and responsibility.

Consequently, corporate branding requires coordination and integration across the entire organization as it operates in multiple markets, societal domains, and communication arenas. Although implementing the corporate brand is ultimately an organization-wide responsibility shared by all staff, corporate communication and corporate communicators play a pivotal role in managing the brand successfully and supporting the top management and CEO.

ORIGIN AND FOUNDATIONS

The notion of a corporate brand emerged in the 1990s (Balmer, 1995) and acquired widespread acceptance among academics, consultants, and practitioners after 2000. The concept arose from and now integrates different scholarly traditions, while leading consultants also helped popularize it as a practical tool (see Balmer, 2025). Al-though corporate branding is a multidisciplinary field that integrates various subject areas, theories, and research streams, the following areas of scholarship and consultancy work have been most influential:

- Marketing and brand management
- Corporate identity, corporate image, and corporate reputation
- Corporate communication and public relations
- Organizational behavior and organization studies
- Strategic management and leadership
- Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business ethics

There is still no established consensus on what a corporate brand is or how it should be defined. Most definitions and conceptualizations are either adapted from consumer marketing and product or service branding or are derived from corporate-level concepts such as corporate identity, corporate image, and corporate reputation.The delineation between these corporate-level concepts often remains vague, ambiguous, and open to debate (see Abratt & Kleyn, 2012).

While categorization is always somewhat arbitrary and other delineations are possible (see Abratt & Mingione, 2022), in this article I distinguish two main perspectives: a more traditional and a multidisciplinary perspective.

The “traditional” marketing and brand management perspective

The mainstream marketing and traditional brand management literatures often fail to differentiate consistently between product and service brands, on the one hand, and corporate brands, on the other.

The main reason is that academics and many practitioners with a traditional marketing background or training – often inadvertently and implicitly – assume that the branding practices pioneered for consumer and product marketing by companies such as Procter & Gamble, Unilever, Nestlé, and other fast-moving consumer goods giants constitute a universal tool applicable to other branded entities in much the same way. This remains true even though these companies now pursue hybrid branding strategies that combine corporate and product branding in various ways.

Against this backdrop, corporate brands are often discussed as one option among several in (product) brand portfolio strategy or brand architecture decisions. For example, studies examine the impact of corporate brand endorsements on new product introductions through image transfer and attribute inference, as well as the potential for risk reduction through market-signaling effects (see Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Yet, although these studies address corporate branding at face value, their primary focus often remains on product-level and consumer behavior effects – such as the impact on customer price sensitivity, purchase intentions, or product choice – rather than on genuine corporate-level consequences.

A primary focus on customers and consumers remains, even when academics or practitioners acknowledge the importance of other stakeholders (e.g., employees as key contributors to product and service delivery) or proclaim the growing importance of corporate brands in general.

Thus, most “traditional” accounts adopt an overt or implicit cognitive-behavioral understanding of corporate brands, reducing them to mere corporate associations in customers’ minds. These associations are understood as deriving from external stimuli that effect certain market and consumption behaviors at the product and service level. Even today, very few proponents of this perspective adopt a genuine multistakeholder and organizational perspective (see Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012).

Nonetheless, marketing developments such as relationship marketing, interactive marketing, and services marketing have informed corporate branding, while the brand-management literature has established a variety of new branding domains that depart from the more traditional focus on customers and products only. The most notable are the areas of employer branding, internal branding, ethical branding, place branding, and corporate branding itself, understood as a distinct concept and activity requiring its own set of principles and analytic tools. Whereas the former areas expanded the logic of branding to a new set of stakeholders and societal domains, corporate branding as a specialist field adopts and advocates a genuine organizational focus and multistakeholder approach.

The "multidisciplinary" corporate branding perspective

This leads to the second major stream of literature on corporate brands that is multidisciplinary and holistic in nature. A combination of theories and insights from disciplines beyond consumer marketing and product branding has influenced this perspective. This research stream is based on scholarship and consulting practice concerned with corporate image and reputation, corporate identity and organizational identification, corporate culture, and corporate communication. More recently, debates on corporate branding have also incorporated questions of CSR, sustainability, and ethics, as well as societal, process-oriented, and historical-temporal perspectives (see Iglesias et al., 2022). This perspective now dominates contemporary scholarship on corporate brands, although it has not necessarily become dominant in organizational practice yet.

According to this contemporary perspective, the following nine principles of corporate branding can be identified:

1. Corporate branding has a clear **organizational focus**, with the organization understood as a discrete yet embedded, open socioeconomic and sociocultural entity that serves as its focal concern.
2. Corporate branding acknowledges and seeks to manage the multidimensional nature of **affiliations and identifications** with the corporate brand within and outside organizations.
3. Corporate branding assumes that corporate brands constitute a **strategic resource** that the organization can potentially leverage as a positive asset and use as a strategic and operational tool.
4. Corporate branding pays attention to the **multiplicity of stakeholders** who actively affect the organization and are affected by it, while recognizing their heterogeneity in terms of differences in expectations, interests, power, and relevance within and between stakeholder groups.
5. Corporate branding operates across multiple markets, societal domains, and communicative arenas with the aim of **positioning and positively differentiating** the organization as a legitimate actor, while furthering its institutional purpose, strategic objectives, and maintaining its societal legitimacy in relation to stakeholders and other actors in these contexts.
6. Corporate branding stresses the **importance of multiple (exchange) relationships** with stakeholders and society at large, which should be ongoing, multilateral, positive, and mutually beneficial.
7. Corporate branding requires **managerial custodianship** of the corporate brand – building, managing, and safeguarding the corporate brand covenant over the long-term as a responsibility of top management – as well as **identity-based leadership** within and beyond the organization. It requires leaders to not only define, represent, and drive a corporate brand externally but also facilitate brand-appropriate behavior among employees through leadership, communication, and negotiation, thereby fostering a shared commitment to the corporate brand covenant.
8. Corporate branding is an **organization-wide task** involving all organizational members and is grounded in a corporate brand orientation that treats the corporate brand as a common reference point for action, interaction, affiliation, and identification both internally and externally.
9. Corporate branding should take **societal and ethical considerations** into account, irrespective of their immediate instrumental or short-term impact. It should focus on their alignment with the corporate brand covenant to protect and maintain the organization's long-term viability and societal legitimacy, while also meeting instrumental performance expectations.

Potential benefits of successful corporate branding vs. possible drawbacks

Potential benefits

- Builds beneficial stakeholder relationships based on identification and trust, thereby fostering loyalty, commitment, and advocacy.
- Strengthens corporate images and reputations and increases institutional salience, thereby creating competitive advantages across markets and societal domains.
- Maintains organizational legitimacy, including its societal license to operate, act, speak, and be heard, thereby supporting long-term viability.
- Protects the organization from long-term damage and mitigates the short-term impacts of crisis situations.
- Reduces marketing and PR costs by focusing on a single corporate brand and generating potential halo effects for product and service brands.

Possible drawbacks

- Increases operational complexity and creates tensions and contradictions by requiring coordination and integration of the corporate brand across operations and stakeholder groups.
- Raises performance expectations as stakeholder affinity with the corporate brand grows, making those expectations difficult to meet across diverse stakeholder interests.
- Increases corporate brand salience, which may invite societal backlash, hostile activism, and media scrutiny, while also generating demands for sociopolitical positions beyond the organization's core purpose or scope.
- Requires greater managerial commitment and expertise, as well as long-term continuity and sustained effort, than product or service brands.
- Makes fundamental changes to a corporate brand more challenging than repositioning or divesting individual product or service brands.

Source: Mario Burghausen

At this juncture, it is important to stress that the decisions to establish and invest in a corporate brand must always be based on a sound strategic assessment and informed deliberations in terms of the organization's institutional purpose, strategic objectives, organizational environment, and competitive context. Although all organizations acquire some form of organizational and corporate identity (or at least a name and some identifier), not all organizations require a fully developed corporate brand to be successful (see Balmer & Greyser, 2003). Some organizational forms may flourish without a salient corporate brand, relying instead on strong product and service brands, and may benefit from remaining less prominent and visible to publics other than customers. Others may be too short-lived to warrant a corporate brand or may exist merely for administrative, legal, or financial purposes, such as holding structures created for legal, investment, or tax reasons.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CORPORATE BRAND MANAGEMENT

Useful frameworks to consider

Contemporary scholarly literature approaches corporate brands and corporate branding in one of two main ways. Scholars either adopt a primarily instrumental-managerial stance, focusing on applied, descriptive, or prescriptive insights, or pursue a theory-driven agenda, focusing on

scholarly, explanatory, or normative outcomes. The former approach aims primarily to provide practicing managers and consultants with tools and recommendations for managing corporate brands more effectively, whereas the latter focuses on understanding corporate brands as an organizational phenomenon in its own right. This article focuses only on the former approach; for a more scholarly account, see Burghausen (2024).

The following three applied instrumental-managerial frameworks each have specific advantages and limitations, and I recommend all three equally to practitioners interested in corporate branding:

- The **AC⁴ID Test** (Balmer, 2012a; earlier versions since 1999)
- The **VCI Framework** (Hatch & Schultz, 2008, earlier versions in 2001 and 2003)
- The **Corporate Brand Identity Matrix** (Urde, 2024; earlier versions since 2013)

The **AC⁴ID Test**, developed by British scholar John Balmer (2012a), is a strategic analytical framework and tool that evolved over more than 25 years to facilitate corporate branding decisions. It is based on the principle of dynamic alignment among seven identity dimensions and on strategic gap analysis between dimensions deemed highly pertinent to successful corporate branding. Balmer's model is a comprehensive yet flexible framework for analyzing the current state of a corporate brand and identifying possible future directions, while capturing all relevant identity dimensions and corporate-level concerns. The model is rooted in what could be called the "corporate identity school" of corporate branding, which emphasizes an identity-based view of organizations as economic and societal actors. The framework is most suitable for periodic top-level strategic diagnosis and planning, but is less useful for operational purposes. Its application may require and allows for the creative use of additional management tools for further analysis and strategizing (also see Balmer, 2012b).

The **VCI Framework** developed by U.S.-Danish scholars Mary J. Hatch and Majken Schultz (2008) represents what might be called the "organizational behavior school" of corporate branding. Like Balmer's model, the framework facilitates a structured gap analysis but seeks alignment between three key dimensions – strategic vision, organizational culture, and stakeholder image – to establish a strong corporate brand centered on the organization's identity. The framework is simpler than Balmer's model, but it may also underestimate the complexity of corporate branding and its multiple manifestations beyond these three dimensions. It is therefore a suitable alternative to Balmer's model, provided this caveat is kept in mind.

The **Corporate Brand Identity Matrix**, developed by Swedish academic and consultant Mats Urde (2024), emerged from long-term scholarly and consultancy work and represents what might be called the "marketing school" of corporate branding. The model helps practicing managers strategize and operationalize key internal and external dimensions of a strong corporate brand by mapping nine different branding elements and assessing their alignment across four branding vectors and eight branding outcomes. It is particularly strong in its practice-tested applicability and its ability to establish what Urde calls a "signature story" for corporate brand communication. The model is a suitable alternative to those discussed above and may be particularly appealing to managers seeking clear guidance and templates for corporate brand development (also see Greyser & Urde, 2019).

It is important to stress that these models are intended to be used flexibly – as intellectual guardrails and sources of general analytic guidance – to facilitate strategic creativity and analytical acumen rather than to prescribe strict steps or produce ready-made solutions for corporate brands. Applying these models always requires adapting them to the organizational realities and institutional contexts of the organization for which a corporate brand strategy is being analyzed and developed.

Pitfalls to avoid

Successful corporate branding requires managers and communicators to avoid common pitfalls and fallacies.

1. **The fallacy of assuming total control over the corporate brand and its meaning, relevance, and appeal for stakeholders.** The corporate brand is not only "co-created" by engaged and active stakeholders in terms of its value, meaning, and relevance (Hatch & Schultz, 2010) but also "co-owned" by them. While the legal ownership of the corporate brand may rest with the organization, its psychological ownership rests with stakeholders (see Balmer, 2025). *In this sense, corporate brands are shared property.*

2. **The fallacy of assuming that the corporate brand has universal and uniform meaning, relevance, and appeal across stakeholder groups.** Corporate brands operate within dynamic, fragmented, and polyvocal communication and organizational environments in which stakeholders actively engage and participate. Stakeholders do not necessarily share the same understanding of the corporate brand and may even contest and challenge it. Corporate brands must navigate such contexts by adapting, negotiating, accommodating, and conciliating often conflicting interests and concerns without losing sight of their covenant with stakeholders. *Corporate brands unify in multiplicity.*
3. **The fallacy of treating a corporate brand as a panacea for all organizational challenges and problems** without considering the strategic and operational context in which an organization operates or whether a corporate brand supports its institutional purpose and strategic goals. *Not all organizations must be a corporate brand.*
4. **The fallacy of reducing a corporate brand to appearances, communications, or perceptions** and neglecting its material foundations and organizational substance. A corporate brand requires the organization to honor its covenant with stakeholders by continually delivering on its promise, fulfilling stakeholders' expectations, and staying true to the core values that underpin it. Yet, far too often, the operational capacities and organizational realities – such as technologies, processes, capabilities, competencies, cultural beliefs, organizational values, and behaviors – that enable the organization to honor the corporate brand covenant are overlooked if a corporate brand is reduced to design, PR, communication, and stakeholder perceptions and images only. *A strong corporate brand also depends on a material foundation.*
5. **The fallacy of overpromising and/or underdelivering,** resulting in corporate dissonance (Bernstein, 2009) and misalignment between the corporate brand's identity and culture and its external images and reputations. A corporate brand must stay true to its covenant by dynamically aligning organizational realities, strategic necessities, and managerial aspirations with stakeholder expectations and broader societal demands. *A strong corporate brand continuously fulfills its covenant.*
6. **The fallacy of organizational narcissism and hyper-adaptation.** Organizational narcissism leads to a misalignment between corporate culture and identity, on the one hand, and corporate images and reputations, on the other, by focusing the corporate brand too much on the organization's internal aspects, affairs, and dealings. Hyper-adaptation produces a similar misalignment by orienting the corporate brand one-sidedly toward every external fad, short-term trend, or the latest craze simply because these are deemed fashionable, without a clear organizational rationale or strategic imperative (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). *A corporate brand must stay dynamically aligned by balancing internal concerns and external demands as it evolves over time.*

CHALLENGES, TENSIONS, AND THE WAY FORWARD

Although issues of identity and identification have grown in importance, unified and uniform identities are more difficult to sustain at the personal, collective, and institutional levels. As symbolic reference points for stakeholders, corporate brands may become surrogate identity markers and sources of meaning for some. However, their universal appeal, relevance, and capacity to provide shared meaning for all stakeholders are becoming less certain. As stakeholders increasingly scrutinize corporate brands not only for their instrumental performance but also for their symbolic and identity "fit," developing an integrated and unified corporate brand that is equally meaningful across all stakeholder groups may prove challenging.

At the same time, although opportunities to communicate with and engage stakeholders have expanded, attracting and retaining attention has become more difficult in increasingly saturated, fragmented, and fast-moving communicative arenas. Corporate brands must therefore position themselves not only against competitors and across markets but also within multiple communicative arenas to secure attention and legitimacy and participate in societal discourses that shape expectations and, ultimately, their own relevance.

Greater visibility also makes corporate brands more vulnerable to stakeholder activism, normative demands, and critical scrutiny. The central challenge is to maintain coordination, integration, and alignment within the organization and across stakeholder groups while adapting to changing expectations, competitive pressures, and organizational contexts.

Corporate branding is now an established field, and corporate brands have become a dominant organizational phenomenon. Yet they remain complex and demanding to manage, shaped by both the challenge of representing an entire organization and by changes in its internal and external environment. Practical frameworks provide useful starting points, but successful corporate branding ultimately depends on the strategic judgment, creativity, and experience of corporate brand managers and communicators.

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MORE INFORMATION

For further details, see the corresponding Burghausen (2024) encyclopedia entry.

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