Company Branding and Company Storytelling
– Corporate Branding, Storytelling and Image
Recruitment in a Reflexive Network Society

By Jesper Højberg Christensen

Abstract
Corporate branding is the keyword in today’s marketing- and communication world. As many other concepts branding also covers different approaches and fields of interest. This article describes an integrated view on corporate branding, which based on the strategic-business branding balances and tells the company’s stories on each field. Subsequently the article will deal with the more neglected side of branding: how the employees of the company brand the company towards the external environment and how this type of branding can be used to image recruitment towards potentially new employees. These very aspects of the branding concept seriously put the network society’s reflexiveness on the agenda.

Towards a More Integrated Branding Concept

Corporate branding has become a buzzword, a catchphrase, like profiling was ten years ago. And though it covers the same phenomenon to a large extent it has become much more versatile and dynamic. I.a. corporate branding covers not only the company itself but also the stakeholder.

The expression branding is derived from the first branding of cattle in the USA. Then, in the 1950s in the USA, branding became a concept of how the company differentiates its product from that of the competitors. And today the concept also covers the more intangible values with which the stakeholders associate the company.
Figuratively speaking we have moved from “it is my cattle” to the conception that “we do not buy jogging shoes to keep our feet warm but to signal youth, robustness or something else” and now to the feeling that “Nike is me.”

**Corporate branding** can and will then again be defined in many ways.

In **Advice A/S** we define corporate branding as “the continued, integrated business-, organisation- and communication processes where a stakeholder differentiates the company by virtue of the fact that it shows the core values and the stories it lives and offers the world through relations, products and communication.”

This is not a very simple or very precise definition, but for us it covers the four aspects, which are connected in the concept:

1. **Strategic branding**
   Must answer the value proposition of the business, i.e. why the business exists and creates value to its owners/shareholders and thereby work out the main strategy for the business.

2. **Marketing branding**
   Must show how the company differentiates itself on a market where not only products but also companies shall differ from each other through their stories.

3. **Employee branding**
   The management and the employees of the company must tell each other who they are and how they will “live” their business.

4. **Stakeholder branding**
   The company must enter into a dialogue with its stakeholders about the social part, the responsibility and the position of the company.

The integrated corporate branding is illustrated in the figure on the following page.

The very visible aspect of the integrated approach is indeed that corporate branding is an actively operating process deeply rooted in management – but nevertheless it cannot be fully managed as no management completely controls public reputation and image, not to mention own culture.

The different branding approaches are also a product of different organisational positions and traditions for which reason the company shall be able to balance between the four practices, which altogether constitute the corporate branding of the company:
Figure 1. Integrated corporate branding. Own production after Hatch and Schultz 2000. © Advice A/S

Branding takes place in the relation between the external environment/the market and the management and the employees of the company (the three vertices). The organisational responsibility and the content assigned to branding are different depending on whether branding is thought of as diversification on business strategy (the management approach), whether it is diversification on the market (the marketing approach), whether it is the special thing about the organisation (the hrm approach) or whether it is the specific stories in the communication with the stakeholders (the communication approach). Seen from the management’s point of view it is about giving latitude to each approach and balance them at the same time. It is the management’s responsibility to create the common denominator for the branding, i.e. to balance what you want (management), what you are (culture) and how you are looked on (the reputation in the external environment) and what you offer (market/image).

1. Cees van Riel has in his great book Principles of Corporate Communication (1992) described the three corresponding areas as management, marketing and organizational communication. The branding concept, which agitates the international discussion these years, and which especially Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz have picked up, is then more relational, holistic and living.
Marketing people, who have dominated the modern understanding of branding are largely only viewing marketing branding by way of positioning and stories that can differentiate one’s own company and its products from those of the competitors. E.g. how Carlsberg can tell a different story than Heineken.

The management consultants, in so far as they have started talking about branding, view the concept more from a brand equity point of view. I.e., should Carlsberg for example create value by branding Carlsberg in Spain or by maintaining the acquired Miguel brand?

Human resource and the culture- and organisation theorists have been the last ones to accept the concept – but in return they have worked with storytelling and the creation of identity for a long time. From their organisational point of view the question will be how Carlsberg and the employees of Carlsberg will get a new identity in the transition from being an industrial company to become a knowledge company.

Finally, the communication people will pinpoint the corporate stakeholder branding and the reputation of the company. Is there a connection between what Carlsberg says about its ethics and the fact that the company is present in Burma? How does it tackle beer in relation to the discussions about health etc.

Image Formation and Interaction in the Branding Process

Seen in relation to image formation with external stakeholders – e.g. applicants, the press or customers – the four branding processes take part in different ways, but still in interaction.

Here I see image as the image formation – the mental template – which individuals have of a company in their minds in advance, and which can be activated by re-confronting them with what the company does, says, thinks, e.g. through the company’s name, logo, building, product or a meeting with a person representing the company. So an image is one’s own view on an organisation.

The rewarding thing about the mental template is that it can reduce
and file lightning quickly. We will typically be able to remember 3-5 corporate brands in a certain area – e.g. think about how many brands you know within supermarkets, business schools or marmalade. At the same time, the selection that takes place will often be so rich that each individual always has a general interpretation of the company. Therefore, in the figure below, I illustrate image as a ‘reverse pyramid’ that reflects the pyramid of the company:

Figure 2. The image pyramid. © Advice A/S

Image is a mental template that reflects the company as if it was a person with a foundation (source), culture (behaviour), distinct core (why it is here) and profile. One’s own picture is always influenced by the view of the others (the public reputation of the company).

The general interpretation of the company is due to the fact that one’s own image formation interferes with the public view or reputation that almost every larger institution or company have. E.g. we know that Told&Skat (the Danish tax authorities) is viewed as bureaucratic and de-
determined though we have personally experienced from a family member that it is actually a developing workplace.

If I mention e.g. A.P. Møller, Danske Bank, McDonald’s and the Copenhagen Business School most Danish people will be able to say something about them. E.g. they will be able to describe what the company does and maybe the basic idea of the company. The descriptions will primarily be based on either what you have seen, heard or talked to persons who have contact to the companies about. Secondarily based on an echo from publicity in the press mixed with marketing. Most people will at least have an idea about these organisations’ culture and e.g. how it must be to work there. Maybe it is not the company’s own view of its identity they will be able to describe. But it will probably be the image that most people have of the company though group decisive attitudes will exist at the same time. (e.g. Attac’s picture of McDonald’s).

In this way image creation will contain elements from:
- **Strategic branding**, e.g. impression of the company’s strategy and management
- **Marketing branding**, e.g. impressions from product development, market communication, sale and service concerning the company and its products
- **Employee branding**, impressions from the employees you know in the company or own meetings with the company at a job interview
- **Stakeholder branding**, e.g. impressions of the company’s social role and attitudes
Branding – More Aspects to One Course

In a natural way the company will try to harmonise and secure the unity formation of the branding processes in the model.

In this article I will not elaborate on the fundamental strategic branding, which the management is typically responsible for. But it is about the company separating itself and being the values that it communicates, including that it is able to create and keep a trustworthy communication with its investors. But central parts of the strategic branding are the basis of the other types of branding. In Advice A/S we use the following model to show how the strategic branding can be used as a foundation for other ways of branding. What is central is that all branding implies a frame or

Figure 3. The image pyramid and corporate branding. © Advice A/S

The branding consists of active, differentiating processes in the interaction between stakeholder and company. The company must create a unity from the strategic branding, the internal branding and external branding pointed towards the market and the surrounding world, respectively. But there are no walls between the internal and the external world. The external branding has an impact on both the strategic branding and the internal branding.
a context in the shape of an analytical dimension (SWOT, market- and competitor analyses etc.) that provides the answer to the challenge in relation to which the branding is to be understood. And a goal dimension (vision/goal), a strategy dimension (mission, strategies, core processes, competencies etc.) and a value dimension (values).

Figure 4. Strategic branding as a foundation. © Advice A/S

Strategic branding is an issue in itself, but to a wide extent it is also the basis of the other types of branding. Therefore it will be useful to describe it as a foundation. The differentiation the different schools can agree on in practice is that the company must have unique vision and mission and core values and an awareness of core competencies and core processes. But it is also the management itself that must be and live strategies and values.

I will come back to the internal branding, where the company becomes aware of its values and creates an identity that ensures that the employ-
ees ‘live the company’. The *external branding processes* that, at any rate analytically, can be divided into the more market-oriented and the more stakeholder-oriented processes are based upon the fact that the company has realised its strategic- and internal branding so they are also reflected in the external branding processes in relation to the market and public.

But is it then not possible to combine the branding processes and deal with them in one? It is a main point of this article to disprove this. Thereby I will be opposed to especially marketing people and advertising practitioners as e.g. Jesper Kunde2.

You cannot just distinguish between – but also differentiate – branding on the four practice fields: strategy, organisation identity, relations to the surrounding world and market relations.

Let us look at an example: We know that A.P. Møller is very well run and has a strategically strong branding. But it is not the same as everybody understands A.P. Møller as a good employee brand. Here the waters separate. Some would love to be “chastised” *with constant care*, others know that they would become losers – or do not want to be a part of such a working environment at all. And again there is a large difference between the understanding of A.P. Møller in the b-t-b market and in the public. But it does not prevent respect of the group’s strategic-business branding and that a general picture of its reputation exists.

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2. Jesper Kunde – whose books are now translated into most principal languages – has to a large extent started the Danish debate of branding based on a perception of marketing economics. The debate has therefore been characterised by the argumentation for or against Jesper Kunde’s version of branding as one corporate brand and one story, which shall saturate all and mark all. Kunde’s view on branding has been criticised in the Danish advertising business for being ”old wine on new bottles”, including being a bearer of an old-fashioned one-dimensional perception that the manager has to spread propaganda truths à la North Korea – there are only employees, no counter workers – and for in practice not to be able to deliver the goods as Kunde’s agency only makes obvious plaster saints. But it is to the credit of Jesper Kunde that he has moved focus from a pure creative storytelling in commercials to base his comments on an actual marketing branding and then carry it through consistently. Focus is just in e.g. ”Unic – Now or Never, 2001” to a very large extent a continuation of the classic Wally Olins (1989) *Corporate Identity* and the discussion is almost only about the relation between monolithic and branded identity. I.e. that focus is on how different product brands are build on in a hierarchy in their visual expression in relation to each other and the total impression of the company. A little tight awareness interest pointed at marketing that is most relevant for large international consumer oriented companies with many products.
From Strategic Branding to Different Branding Stories

Companies are like people bearers of several stories. And the ‘readers’ of the company are able to make out the different stories. Obviously you can try to enforce one branding picture – and you can be the offer of a strongly exposed picture. Presumably it is still difficult for Sean Connery not to be seen in the role of James Bond. Correspondingly, Skoda will for a long time be connected with cheap rather than good cars and Ikea with cheaper but often bad furniture. But even here it is possible to either re-brand yourself as Skoda does in the context of VW, or brand other sides of yourself, as Ikea does with marketing advertisements showing design. The same applies to job advertisements expressing the diversity of shop personnel.

Here we are approaching a decisive difference between corporate branding as it is seen in a marketing approach and as it is seen in an employee- and organisation approach.

Basically, the debaters of branding can agree that the basis is the strategic branding. They can also agree to ‘translate’ the different strategic elements into stories. This is due to the fact that strategy production belongs to a system world-way of thinking that can be strange for the world of life, which consumers and employees live in. But it is also due to the change towards value based management because the tasks have become so complex that external control in the shape of directions and rules is often inappropriate as a management tool. The figure below shows how strategic management in a system world is translated into storytelling in a world of life:

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3. See Gordon S. Shaw in Schultz et al. (2000) The Expressive Organization, Linking Identity, Reputation and Corporate Brand, p. 183: "In contrast to bullet-points, a narrative or strategic story takes advantage of what stories do best: they are more believable, they are more memorable, and they generate more enthusiasm."

4. I here refer to Søren Nymark’s study Organisational Storytelling, which focuses on how the management in Hewlett-Packard uses storytelling to communicate its messages and shape the values of the company.
Where the waters really separate in relation to the three understandings of branding that lie beneath the strategic business branding, is the type, form, status and content of the branding stories. The three understandings of branding can be described like this:

- The success of the marketing people is to create a leading fiction as e.g. the telecommunications company Sonofon’s Numskull Jack-inspired story about Polle from Snave, DSB’s Harry story or the touching story about Marmelade fra Den Gamle Fabrik (“Jam from the Old Factory”), which is of course as modern as other factories but is still able to carry a nostalgic picture fiction. Here the story is characterised as entertaining fiction.

- The communication people’s success is that the company is the bearer of basic values as regards branding, which produces a story. E.g. the story about Novo Nordisk as an ethical company that wants to remedy dia-

![Table](System perspective)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System perspective</th>
<th>Working life world perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Information goes top-down</td>
<td>• Communication goes across</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Information must be communicated formally and effectively</td>
<td>• Communication is informal and circular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The receivers want the information</td>
<td>• The receivers are sluggish of everything they do not see as relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Every step has to work and be repeated</td>
<td>• The basis is own need of every step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure and system:</td>
<td>Values and process:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lines of command and strategic one-way communication</td>
<td>• Stories and tight two-way communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Strategic communication in a system world is translated into storytelling in a world of life. © Advice A/S

The model shows how managers see communication from their own perspective as something that should be repeated down through the organisation or towards the consumers in cascades where every step is a megaphone to the next. On the other hand, seen from below asymmetric one-way communication and branding are estimated very sceptically as one of many influences that is removed if it does not fulfil the receiver’s own criterion of relevance, trustworthiness and comprehensibility. Because in the world of life, communication is not what is written in the staff magazine but what you talk about with colleagues and the nearest boss. And here a large part of the communication is circular small-talk that primarily serves to confirm the social roles in the working place.
betes – a story that positions Novo Nordisk very strongly in all relations, also under external pressure.

- To the organisation people branding is a strategic management tool in the development of the organisation. It aims at bringing together the many voices of the company and reach a common synthesis, a common meaning and direction for the company. I.e. to create identity on the basis of the company’s idea and the development of its context, which means that the branding stories must be told and re-interpreted. So, the common synthesis is not present automatically and in advance,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>External branding/marketing</th>
<th>External branding/organisation development</th>
<th>Internal branding/development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discipline</strong></td>
<td>Is about creating one thorough story</td>
<td>Is about catching and influence stories between stakeholders</td>
<td>Is about mutual storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function</strong></td>
<td>Creates one image</td>
<td>Creates reputation</td>
<td>Creates identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reaction</strong></td>
<td>Something to burn with love for (Pathos)</td>
<td>Trustworthiness (Ethos)</td>
<td>To feel that you are a part of the organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amplitude</strong></td>
<td>One story</td>
<td>Several part-stories</td>
<td>Room for many stories/voices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representation</strong></td>
<td>Links to the products as a mirror of the company</td>
<td>Links to the company’s financial and other results</td>
<td>Links to the organisation and the culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>Focus on result/sale</td>
<td>Focus on relations</td>
<td>Focus on process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genre</strong></td>
<td>Fiction – e.g. Marlboro Man</td>
<td>Faction – e.g. we want to be no. 1 and expect xx to introduce yy</td>
<td>True construction – e.g. when the founder got angry and we could not change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Difference between marketing -, stakeholder - and employee branding.

© Advice A/S

There are essential and natural differences in the branding towards a market and towards a public and inside the company. I will elaborate on the storytelling that is very different below.
but it must be re-constructed in relation to market, competition and social conditions all the time.

The differences in marketing -, stakeholder - and employee branding is summarised in the figure page 36.

**Can the Different Types of Storytelling Be United?**

This article speaks for a total view on corporate branding that based in the branding, as regards to strategy and business, balances and tells the stories of the company in each of their fields. But the concept of ‘storytelling’, which is also among the hot management words, is as wide as the concept of branding. As Gariel expresses it: “At times, the concept and story is stretched to encompass virtually everything that is not a fact.” I will here primarily discuss the approach that understands storytelling as a cultural, meaning creating and developing management tool as opposed to the marketing approach to storytelling. But at the end I will also touch upon the understanding as regards stakeholder or communication.

**The Organisation-Theoretical Approach to Storytelling**

In this approach, storytelling has traditionally, e.g. in continuation of the French anthropologist Clause Lévi Strauss, been used to observe, interpret and make aware of the company's culture and problems. Here the observer is present to listen to stories and thereby gather useful information.

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5. Yianni Gabriel (2000) *Storytelling in Organizations*, p. 2. Most writers think that with storytelling there should be demands to an actual story. I.e. from the classics of the literature theory from Aristoteles and forward they make demands for a narrative course (typically beginning, middle, end and curve of excitement), an element of conflict (so not just a story of joy), and that it can be communicated orally or through media in a code (e.g. irony). This is e.g. the demand for storytelling, which Ralf Lodberg Hansen and Lars Kofoed (2001) state in their study *Storytelling i relation til corporate branding*. Thereby the semiologic narrative theory (see e.g. Jens Berthelsen et al., 1974 *Fortelleteori. Forudsætning og perspektiv*) has had a renaissance in the use of it in the studies of business economics, which were already heralded by Henrik Dahl and Claus Buhl *Marketing og semiotik. En introduktion*. Akademisk Forlag 1993. Personally I think it is useful to keep a broader concept of storytelling too, but then in return to distinguish between actual stories and proto-stories as jokes, exclamations, symbols etc.
According to culture theorists like Edgar Schein and the early Majken Schultz storytelling does not necessarily demand round off stories. All linguistic and visual impressions that contain story elements can compel interest. Below I have stated some of the linguistic rhetorical forms that organisational stories can have.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scripts:</th>
<th>Subjects, attitudes, pictures and messages, exclamations of tradition and 'we do like this here' proto-stories, which a community uses to create conformity and control. Scripts can be filed with a view to understanding the sub-stories and their extension.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rumours:</td>
<td>Are spread and difficult to combat but it is important to listen to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphors:</td>
<td>Say a lot about a group’s self-perception and perception of the company – which universe do they fulfill?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter-stories:</td>
<td>Irony and satire that arise as a contrast to e.g. the management's wishful thinking and as a part of the wish of the Danish who-do-you-think-you-are-attitude to level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anecdotes:</td>
<td>Stories that arise and are told on the web, in the canteen etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myths and fables:</td>
<td>Complex stories with moral (The golden age when...)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7. Observations of stories in the organisation. © Advice A/S

The company’s story and production of expressions can be considered anthropologically or in storytelling courses or groups. E.g. during projects of change it can provide essential information about the employees’ construction of reality and thereby input to management communication and strategic courses of development.

You can make the organisation aware of its stories and use them actively. E.g. this happens with David Snowden from IBM’s Institute of Knowledge Management that uses storytelling to start a deeper discussion in the companies. His basis is the stories of the company as first he moves in the organisation as an anthropologist, classifies the stories and then discusses them. It is a projective technique that can very well be com-
pared to the performance of the Dacapo Theatre of Funen where the audience discuss the continuing story, or to teambuilding where the experiences and the stories create a re-framing of a group or a self-knowledge of a company.

Through many years in Advice A/S we have used these types of storytelling. Especially *Appreciative Inquiry*, where everyone in the company tells when he/she e.g. experiences the most success in the work and from that constructs his/her own future⁶ or where you with ‘feed forward backwards’ shall imagine the future and therefore tell it in the present. To the management of a bank or a railway it could be a fruitful procedure to imagine the company in five years and from what is imagined and the goal construct the centres in each year along the way. This process can also involve the employees. E.g. Spar Nord Bank has implemented such a process for 1000 employees where they go on an expedition and tell and realise a quite different local bank model that has the approach *from customer* and instead of the traditional *from the head office and out*.

With Appreciative Inquiry the interest is displaced towards the more strategic-active use of stories, which is also general in the literature of the international organisation theory about storytelling.⁷

**The Marketing Dominated Approach to Storytelling**

In the marketing approach it is regarded to be less trustworthy with different stories. Therefore there should be one story about one company, which can then be told creatively different – this is the practical experience behind all branding from the Marlboro cowboy to Coca-Cola. And this experience is obviously relatively imperative when it is aimed at pushing through with advertisements.

The most remarkable about the more marketing-oriented approach is that here storytelling builds strategically on separation of corporate core stories that are not necessarily actual unfolded stories.

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⁷ E.g. Stephen Denning and Søren Nymark.
If we take the example of A.P. Møller again, the corporate story or core story has long been ‘with constant care’, while to Lego it has been and still is ‘creative play’. These general statements are defined as storytelling by e.g. Rolf Jensen in *The Dream Society*. Naturally, you can call it a core story or a corporate story, especially because in the two cases mentioned here it is realised in a number of stories. But it is not a story on its own because it does not have the character of the story, i.e. chronology, conflict etc. It is more like, as Majken Schultz and others call it, a fixed place (i.e. a strategic centre of rotation). van Riel calls it common starting points and Wally Olin *a fundamental idea*, a kind of symbolic expression of the strategic value proposition.

It is obvious, if we look at earlier illustrated image pyramids, that here we are close to expressing the core of the identity of a company rather than a corporate story. Furthermore, we have to do with stories formed by the management of the company and which they thereafter try to roll out and vary both internally and externally.

As Søren Nymark (2000) does, you can distinguish between the marketing-oriented and the organisation-oriented approach as a difference between formal and informal storytelling:

- **Formal stories** that ‘translate from the system’, i.e. communicate the management’s visions about the company’s future and its basic values to external and internal stakeholders. The objective is internal and external management influence.

- **Informal stories** that create identity and meaning of the working life. Their character is more uncontrollable and underlying. The objective is to provide meaning to otherwise paradoxical and ambiguous events in the organisation to every single employee. They maintain and revise the organisation culture.

8. A core story is value-born like the core in the New Testament – "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" – and not rule-born like the Ten Commandments of the Judaism are otherwise. And the core story can be the occasion of a lot of stories, metaphors, parables, myths, pictures etc. in the same way as the Christian core story has done for more than 2000 years. But it is more an undertone, an expression of the group’s ways than it is necessarily an explicit story in customer- or stakeholder relations.

9. Correspondingly, by presidents of Danish advertising agencies such as Mogens Larsen it is called *The unifying principle*, Jesper Kunde calls it either *Corporate concept* or *Corporate religion*, and Hans Prehn calls it *it the Mission*. The symbolic examples of stories are typically expressed with Ecco’s "Let gang på jorden", Astra’s "Viden læger bedre" and B&O’s "A life less ordinary".
A company has – often half deliberately – and should have a formal core story about itself. And I will add that this core story should not be as much pure fiction or a slogan as it should be a strategic common construction maintained by being tested and developed in an internal and external interplay.

This symbolic expression of the strategic branding can often, with advantage, be the basis of the marketing story. But the danger is that it could end up being only filmed strategies as when we see milk picture collages from Arla or cocoa pictures from Toms. Therefore the strategic branding should be understood rather as an undercurrent than an explicit story that should be told.

Can the Two Perspectives Inspire Each Other?

It can be a long process to become aware of the core story of your company. The exciting thing is that the different branding processes and the formal and informal stories can be united in the process.

We can take an example from a medium-sized company where interviews with the management and the employees could uncover three organisational stories as the bearing stories where the core was: That the company was a pioneer as regards engineering, that there was freedom and free space to develop and that there was a spirit of solidarity like in a family.

To new generations in the company there were also contrasting stories about the ‘reverse of the medal’. The crusading spirit could lead to ‘garden milling’, i.e. to drive over the employees and lack of planning. The feeling of freedom had its limits because you did not contradict the brethren, i.e. the founders. And the spirit of solidarity could also lead to a preserved 68-monk attitude, which counteracted more professional relations in a now larger company.

The stories can be seen in the figure next page:
The process resulted in a core story about the fact that the company was and would be good at exceeding limits but under full control. They used the picture of the mountain climber who does not challenge death but tries new challenges under control.

The core story, which this company constructed and found, is primarily a translation of the company’s business strategy. Risk taking is calculated extremely high in the company and this is very important for the things the company develops, markets, sponsors and tells. But the core story about ‘exceeding limits under full control’ is not necessarily the actual story, which is told explicitly and every time in every single advertisement or brochure – it is more the foundation of the many types of stories.

The Polyphonic Communicative Branding Approach

On a level that is a little higher, corporate branding can be seen as a way for the company to reflect on itself, analysing, describing, mirroring, differentiating and expressing its uniqueness.
In this way branding is a process of strategic self-observation, development and maturing for the company.

Hereby the actual branding process implies that the company shall not only act as it is used to, but turn its own value creating process into studies. I.a. it can do that by observing itself and explicating “what we can be to whom”.

The strategic relation to itself, its production and professional standards will naturally happen with more than one voice, because there is not one single language covering all of the company. Different understandings and descriptions of what you do exist side by side – typically ways of understanding yourself as regards engineering, law, economy sale and employees. As the language is spoken in different codes the company does not automatically have – but has to work itself through to – a common identity and common branding.10

The External Stakeholder Communication

In relation to external stakeholders storytelling is both a symbolic way of talking to the individual stakeholder and a way to give the many different relations a certain common denominator.

The analysis of the stakeholders is complex because the company has different and unique relations to and issues with every single group of stakeholders.

10. See Luhmann’s work in Danish, which is wonderfully introduced by Lars Qvortrup (1998) in Det hyperkomplekte Samfund.
The company can simply experience to be stretched out between different kinds of logic, which it has to relate to and argument from. E.g. it can be a businesslike and ethical logic or discourse. We see an example when ISS has to explain its operation of kindergartens. Here ISS is in a cross field between business, pedagogy and a political play of negotiation about inviting tenders for. This makes it necessary for ISS to relate strategically to these very different kinds of logic, i.e. the impressions and branding pictures that others have or create of ISS. This means that ISS cannot just present its ‘own’ story but has to relate strategically to the different stories of the opponents.

At the same time, stakeholders relate reflexively to the company. They do not only observe the company but also the company’s relations...
to the employees, to NGOs, to customers etc. and create their attitude towards the company from these observations.

This means that a monitoring of the stories of the company is relevant, e.g. customers’ and NGOs’ stories on the Internet. In 2001 we developed e-monitoring in Advice A/S. This is an analysis tool that based on search machines on the Internet catches the storytelling, which customers, NGOs etc. have with each other with the intention to map issues and themes – preferably before they become explosive and communicated in the press. This type of monitoring will be a natural part of public relations and is connected to the global use of the Internet as a means of communication for discussion of the company’s governance, ethics research etc.

The consequence of the public’s different kinds of logic and the fusion between the interests of different groups of stakeholders is that in a hyper complex society it becomes much more difficult to establish a corporate branding. A company’s branding must necessarily be of many voices or polyphonic. But it does not exclude that in some situations the management should be able to express a main story that gathers up the threads and combines the pictures just as there should be chronology and thematic coherence in a novel for the novel to be experienced as a novel.

If we stay in the idea of the novel, the company branding could be compared to the task of a novelist. You should be able to relate in an organised way to the many voices and sub-stories and at the same time establish an epic current, which – though with many possibilities of interpretation – creates a tendency and a keynote.

Such an approach is necessary seen from the point of view of a communication approach to storytelling. Hereby this had the last word because it is also the management’s general approach to the area.

11. In e.g. his marketing approach Wally Olins touches upon the fact that the stakeholders today are overlapping each other: “Corporations have always dealt with a multiplicity of audiences: employees, shareholders and the financial community, suppliers and collaborators, and government and other regulatory bodies. Each of these was traditionally treated more or less separately. Different messages, or messages with a quite separate emphasis, were sent to each. Today this is no longer possible. Each of those audiences overlaps. Suppliers can also be partners or customers or shareholders. Employees can be shareholders too.” (Olins in Schultz et al. 2000, p. 60) – The expression of the polyphonic branding and story comes from the Russian literary scholar Mihail Bakhtin’s works *Rabelais and His World* and *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*.
Image Recruitment as Part of Employee Branding

After this more general frame around corporate branding and storytelling I will concentrate on the *employee branding*. In my opinion it is the most overlooked discipline, which is in a cross field between organisation and human resource disciplines and the communication theoretic branding considerations that have had apparent difficulties in gaining a foothold.

Actually, employee branding is a very broad field. Generally speaking it can include all types of value processes and organisation development processes where the management and the employees become aware of their direction and meaning of their common organisation and working life.\(^\text{12}\)

Seen from a communication perspective, employee branding is very interesting because the mobilisation of the employees’ skills, energy and competencies is what make the difference in knowledge companies today. It demands much more personal communication competencies in oral communication and in development processes than mass communicative competencies, which are typical for advertising people, journalists and designers. This is why it is also quite a different field of development and practice.

Instead of discussing employee branding more broadly I have chosen to focus on one of the communicative expressions which is most mass communicative. And at the same time an expression which will be of increasing importance to the companies’ employee branding. Here I think of the attraction of future labour which is called *image recruitment* in Advice A/S.\(^\text{13}\)

Compatible Process

Image recruitment is a *process that joins recruitment, communication and the company’s values in the use of different media and storytelling dialogue processes.*

Where *employee branding* is aimed at present employees and stresses

\(^{12}\) I have described this field as “organisation communication” in the article “Mod et nyt paradigme for organisationens kommunikation” in the anthology *Modtageren som medproducent* (1999).

\(^{13}\) See also Maria Sennels in “Imagerekruttering med dobbelt effekt” in Henrik Holt Larsen (red) (2001) *Noget for Noget? Rekruttering og fastholdelse af unge højtuddannede*. 

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value and changing processes, including storytelling, coaching etc., *image recruitment* aims at future candidates. Often with a communicative aim of involving the internal stories, e.g. through recruitment sites and pre-dialogues with potential candidates within the educational establishments. But image recruitment also covers the actual reflection of which recruitment values should be the basis of the dialogue with future candidates.

In definitional terms you can discuss whether branding towards potential future employees is part of the communication department’s stakeholder communication or a part of the staff/hrm department’s recruitment processes.

When I have chosen to place image recruitment more as a variety of employee branding than of stakeholder branding it is not least due to the fact that the employees here is the bearing element in the communication. Another reason is that recruitment communication – besides aiming at new employees – returns to the company’s own employees who have the possibility of relating to the company’s basic values and basic attitudes, convert them and be a part of the stories themselves by participating in the story. The company’s recruitment site can become a tool where the company can tell its ‘good stories’.

**Recruitment Values Can Create a More Authentic Branding**

Recruitment is to many companies, and especially public organisations, one of the few possibilities to communicate the values and attitudes and at the same time avoid that they seem hollow and postulated in the same way as traditional image announcements. The approach to the job-seeking candidates is namely aimed at a purpose and is thereby legitimate, also to a broader circle of persons.

With a new viewing of the company’s values in a recruitment context the company can target and fulfil its external profiling with a purpose.

Instead of a surface-aesthetically polished plaster saint it is possible to contribute with information, involvement and interactivity. The media used in the communication can combine advertising-borne, attention creating communication with the relation-borne communication that creates relations of loyalty between the company and the students.
Example: People@ericsson.dk

There is a large potential in image recruitment. Thus Ericsson Denmark has never had more visitors and more traffic on their many sites that in connection with the 'human' recruitment site people@ericsson.dk. It is a site, which was created when Ericsson wanted to recruit 208 developing engineers in 208 days in the spring of 2000. They succeeded in recruiting 213 in 178 days.  

Communication of the values that the company would like to signal can, with image recruitment, be supported by stories and examples, which become meaningful and present. E.g. the recruitment value ‘innovation’ is reflected on people@ericsson.dk in stories told by the employees about how Ericsson gives room for developing work and new thinking, that it is possible to win prizes internally for brilliant ideas etc. Truistic values of a research department as e.g. ‘innovation’ and ‘competence’ thereby become alive and trustworthy by virtue of the employees’ own stories and not least the possibility of the future candidates to enter into a dialogue with them.

At the same time the values of image recruitment had a clear effect to Ericsson in relation to the employee brand. The employees were reminded of the values and the stories in the working place where the campaign was highly exposed via posters, on the Intranet etc. and the employees were encouraged – in an informal way – to relate to and discuss them with colleagues. At the same time they were principals in recruiting and talking to candidates and thereby they got the task of formulating the values in interviews. This way Ericsson’s massive external communication in connection with the recruitment campaign not only had a developing effect on the employee brand of the company but it also added human dimensions to the marketing brand.

The Continuous Change

The values of the company that guide the organisation’s direction in its daily work are not complete, and in a process where they are discussed with the external stakeholders they cannot be complete. They are dis-

cussed continuously, turned and re-formulated. Every time a stakeholder relates to the company, and especially when a new employee is employed in the company, a mutation might take place – a new input to or an angle on the organisation’s culture and internal life.

Thereby the recruitment branding is part of making the company observe itself and continuously ask questions to its own way of working, developing and managing.

In connection with a task for F.L. Smidth we deliberately tried to produce this. The recruitment gave rise to a group of managers, seniors and younger employees, respectively joining a seminar to formulate what F.L. Smidth should change to become an attractive employee brand. This happened quite deliberately instead of producing a ‘cool’ advertising campaign from the self-observation that the ‘concrete dusty’ company would reform itself to meet a gap between words to the recruitment public and the practice in the culture and management of the company. Similarly it becomes untrustworthy when Ericsson profiles itself on having an innovative environment if normal days are characterised by a “we usually do” culture.

These are examples of the fact that also traditional companies can create room to move from the domain of production to a domain of reflection where you ask the questions whether the organisation “does the right things” instead of just “doing the things right”. This phenomenon has also been called double loop learning (Argyris 1990: 93-94) and corresponds to Luhman’s self-observation.

This type of image recruitment can deliberately or not make the company reflect in another order whether it is in balance with its stakeholders. And it is in this very “relation to” that the values, which are told in the stories, become a daily tool for the individual employee to prioritise and interpret his or her own way in the daily work and the solution of tasks.

It can be compared to the well-known Oticon-case where importance was attached to communicating to the press how the company would change and work together in a new way. At last the employees had read and seen the company being mentioned so often in both the national and the international media that they themselves trusted in the vision and thereby helped creating the change themselves. This phenomenon has also been called the media boomerang by Mette Morsing.15

The Image Recruitment Chain

When image recruitment is on the agenda it is:
- To attract the best candidates from a group, which becomes smaller and smaller and which e.g. reject Denmark to get international experience
- To be at the leading edge and strategically choose the combination of employees instead of filling up gaps. Otherwise you put yourself behind in the fight for the best candidates
- To match the candidates’ demands of openness. The company can make itself accessible in an interesting way

If we consider image recruitment as a value creating chain it would typically consist of the following:

1. Image recruitment strategy with reflection and clarification of recruitment values, communication including the digital communication with a recruitment site and potential changes in the company.
2. Attention to the company and the recruitment site with the choice of media and activities, e.g. contact to educational establishments (student branding) and participation in relevant activities here. E.g. in the shape of events, competitions, radio spots and sites (own and others’) that lead dialogue towards own site or create possibilities of dialogue among the target group.
3. Pre-dialogue on the recruitment site, partly as e-learning about company related knowledge conditions and project possibilities, partly as a meeting place between the internal and external sphere with the good stories, interviews with employers and employees, management (video spots) etc.
4. Pre-recruitment with match of competencies, job ads, demands of competencies, questions/answers with possible candidates, information about the recruitment process.
5. Accept of relation with the possibility of job application (form, e-mail, letter), registration for newsletter, registration for magazine until after employment.
6. Recruitment and e-recruitment (which can come years after the process has started) with appointments.
7. Follow-up – also internally in the company.
Pre-Dialogue and Recruitment Site

The core of image recruitment is the pre-dialogue, and the centre of rotation is the recruitment site.

The recruitment values of the company, see the next page.

To the young applicant the company’s recruitment site provides a larger range of possibilities than earlier. When applying for a job the candidates want to find information about the social commitment, employee policy, possibilities of professional and personal development, remuneration, pension schemes and other employee benefits of the company. More companies think of building knowledge portals, maybe in cooperation with partners to create a site – a place – where students and “ordinary” readers can find information within their own line of business and where it is possible to enter into a dialogue with others to discuss relevant subjects and solutions.

The web provides – seen as a step in the recruitment process – the company with the possibility of entering into a pre-dialogue with candidates and at the same time be at the disposal to answer the many questions from the candidate before the actual job interview. This will also mean that the actual recruitment process becomes more effective because the web provides the possibility of getting in contact with the candidates on quite another level than earlier, see the comments on Ericsson’s great success with their site.

The recruitment process begins “a step earlier” and both parties
achieve a sort of screening effect where it can be settled early in the process, whether the wishes and demands of the company match those of the candidate. At the same time the company sends a signal of giving willingness of dialogue the pride of place. An obvious example is the site www.career-space.com, which is a digital network cooperation between IBM, Nokia, Siemens, Microsoft and others and which aims at people in the digital business. Here, as a candidate, you have the possibility of be-

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ing informed about job vacancies and which qualifications are in demand. By answering a few questions you can find out which type of position matches your profile.

The site separates itself from other sites partly by being a cooperation between otherwise competing companies, partly by being an information forum where you have free access to a lot of information and have the possibility of entering the universe of the companies mentioned. I.a you can read interviews with a large number of employees from the different companies where they tell about their jobs and share their experiences.

By making use of e-recruitment the company gives every single candidate the possibility of exploring the company via webcam, looking around, meeting the president & CEO who talk about the company’s vision and you can read stories written by the employees who at the same time can be contacted directly for further explanation. Furthermore, they can find information about conditions of employment and perhaps investigate them further by contacting a person in the HR department who is ready to provide answers and who is used to being contacted. At the same time it will change the notion of being a little too aggressive when you ask additional questions about salary, employment conditions, pensions, flexibility of the employment etc.\(^\text{16}\)

**Storytelling as a Tool of Dialogue**

Despite the tough battle for the best highly educated young people it is important that the management of the company does not exaggerate the “sales arguments” in its effort to attract the candidates’ attention. It is partly important in relation to the inappropriate thing of giving the candidates an impression of the company that the company cannot live up to in reality when the candidate has been employed. The present employees of the company should be able to recognise the stories from the

\(^{16}\) Recent surveys show that the possibility of being able to seek information about the individual company is important when the candidate is going to choose. At the same time it demands openness and honesty from the company – and tests the fear of especially the competitors’ access to too much information. Mandag Morgen Strategisk Forum: "Guide til næste generation. En analyse af fremtidens medarbejdere", *Huset Mandag Morgen*, March 2001.
company on the recruitment site so the common identity among the employees can be consolidated:

The company’s “good story” is therefore best if it does not consist of the company’s core story – not to mention the company’s marketing branding. The stories that drive a recruitment site and build up image recruitment are the types of stories that the target group tells itself. It is the stories, which potential and present/existing employees are familiar with and which therefore give them meaning though they may not have experienced them themselves.

The types of stories that can be explored in this connection can be defined as a way in which meaning arises in the interplay between the interpretation of the company’s past events, the understanding of the present and the candidate’s expectations of the future. The recruitment site is the meeting place of that type of exchanges. Thereby storytelling not only becomes a tool to facilitate the initial phase of the new employees and to introduce them to the new organisational culture. It also becomes a way of bringing you in phase with the company – and the company’s way of adapting to the next generation of employees.

Figure 12. Image recruitment also has an effect on the employees. © Advice A/S

Image recruitment returns to the employees of the company, just as the employees can be the best ones to enter into a dialogue with the potential candidates.

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Reflexiveness and Measurement of Branding

In the modern knowledge and network society the company must be reflexive, i.e. see the company through the eyes of other people and learn from it. It is not sufficient to base the view on own wanted sender values. You will also have to look at the observations that both different internal actors and different external stakeholders make. From here the company can choose a strategic integration and a differentiation of its branding, respectively – and express them in the different stories that the company tells about itself.

In this article I have especially differentiated four types of branding and in conclusion I will outline how you can measure the four corporate branding dimensions:

Figure 13. A model for measurement of corporate branding. © Advice A/S
A diamond model of four dimensions of a corporate brand. On a scale from 1-5 stakeholders can be asked about the experienced strength of the branding dimensions. The examples are not tested but are imaginary of how four different companies – for an external observer – have prioritised the weight of their branding.

In interviews with stakeholders (internal and external) you can test strength and character of the four branding dimensions: strategic brand-
ing, marketing branding, employee branding and branding in relation to the stakeholders. You can then see that Irma is seen as strong in marketing branding (the Irma girl) and stakeholder branding (environment) but maybe weaker as a business brand and employee brand. Novo Nordisk is generally strong in all fields but if there is a point of weakness in the eyes of the surrounding world it is marketing branding because they prioritise a business-to-business approach. McDonald’s is strong in strategic- and marketing branding but will probably be seen as very weak in stakeholder branding and employee branding though they have been working with environmental and globalisation problems and their image. And Jubii is strong as a workplace and in relation to marketing but as regards business and in relation to other stakeholders it might be judged more critically.

The analysis model can be used to prioritise the weight in the company’s total corporate branding performance and to look at both which stories are told in each dimension of the company and at prioritising own stories.

The model can thus be considered a help to choose. And this is relevant because a company lives reflexively. The company can – like people – all the time choose between directions and ways of expressing its personality and values. The company must however take into account to see itself in the many mirrors, which internal and external stakeholders are holding up in front of it. Therefore the company must also perform openness towards the many stories and voices in- and outside the company that want to participate. The way in which it goes on is only being invented these years of the new millennium.

**Literature**


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www.advice-analyse.dk