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## Can public sector organizations be coherent corporate brands?

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**Abstract.** *This article discusses the potential challenges of introducing corporate branding in public sector organizations. While the corporate branding ideal is to seek a precise and coherent definition of the organizational identity and achieve message consistency in the organization's self-presentation, public organizations are often characterized by contradictory and inconsistent values and multiple identities. This makes the ideal of consistency difficult to achieve. It is argued that public organizations will benefit more from branding on the basis of inconsistent values and multiple identities rather than trying to promote one set of values and one identity at the expense of others. **Key Words** ● corporate branding ● organizational identity ● organizational values ● public organizations*

Corporate branding is a management concept that has gained increasing popularity over the last few years in the public sectors of the western world. Although not always referred to specifically by that term, clear tendencies of corporate branding are observable across different levels and types of public institutions. Hospitals (Byrkjeflot and Angell, 2007), universities (Bulotaite, 2003; Judson et al., 2006; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2006), and various government and regulatory agencies (Aberbach and Christensen, 2007; Illia et al., 2004; Kvåle and Wæraas, 2006) seek to express their identities and their values through vision and mission statements, core values, slogans, and logos. A new vocabulary consisting of terms such as branding, corporate communication, image, and reputation has emerged in the public sector.

This article will seek to clarify some challenges related to one particular idea often put forth in corporate branding and corporate communication literature, namely the normative assumption that organizations should present themselves with a single identity and communicate it with consistency and clarity (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Argenti and Foreman, 2002; de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo



Riley, 1999; Fombrun, 1996; Van Riel, 1995). This may be a problem for public organizations in general because inconsistencies and multiplicity have been, and still are, fundamental system traits of public sectors in western democracies (Brunsson, 1989; Hoggett, 2006; Rainey, 2003). The question is whether public organizations must change the basic way they function in order to benefit from corporate branding, or if they can continue to be inconsistent and still gain status as corporate brands.

Little is known about the way in which public organizations use corporate branding by capturing audience attention to their name, identity, and values. Most of the published research on marketing-like activities in the public sector tends to focus on the efforts of public organizations at promoting specific issues, such as health care (Scheaff, 1991), military service (Marshall and Fisher, 2005), government reforms (Gelders and Van De Walle, 2005), and urban plans (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990). Extensive literature on political marketing also exists (e.g. Lilleker and Lees-Marshment, 2005; Maarek, 1995). There is a growing consensus that public organizations can benefit from marketing, although some argue that marketing in the public sector will have to be fundamentally different from marketing in the private sector because it takes place in an entirely different context (Walsh, 1994). Some scholars also propose that marketing in the public sector should be more an operational rather than a strategic tool (Kearsey and Varey, 1998). These views have been challenged by others who contend that it should be sufficient to adapt the marketing concept in order to reflect the specific characteristics of public services (Butler and Collins, 1995; Laing, 2003). This article builds on the last view by arguing that the public sector represents a more challenging context than the private sector with corporate branding requiring a different approach. Thus, looking into the challenges of corporate branding in the public sector could reveal how the concept should be adapted and understood within that context.

The article starts out by clarifying the concept of corporate branding and how it results in defining a consistent organizational identity. Then it outlines how public organizations generally are inconsistent and have multiple identities. Finally, it discusses the challenges of pursuing the notion that organizations serving the public interest should have coherent single identities, and suggests some ideas for adapting the concept of corporate branding to public organizations.

## What is corporate branding?

A brand is defined by the American Marketing Association as ‘A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers’ ([www.marketingpower.com](http://www.marketingpower.com)). A similar definition is employed by Aaker (1991: 7) who says that ‘a brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol . . . intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors.’



It follows from the definitions that differentiation and identification are two important aspects of a brand. A product may be very similar to other products, but a brand is perceived as something unique. In fact, a brand is more than the physical product, as the brand does not exist in the product itself, but *in the minds of consumers*. Brands satisfy functional as well as symbolic needs (Park et al., 1986), and often brands permit individuals to define and express themselves (Aaker, 1999). Furthermore, a brand may be perceived as a person with a distinct personality (Aaker, 1997) with whom consumers may develop personal relationships (Fournier, 1998).

Branding is believed to be equally relevant for products, organizations, and services. While product branding refers to the process of creating differentiation and identification on the product level, corporate and services branding both shift the focus of the branding efforts to the organizational level. This is generally seen as more complicated than product branding, as all employees, in a sense, must become 'brand managers', especially in service organizations where the corporate brand is confirmed and reinforced in interactions with customers and stakeholders. Hence, Balmer's (2001: 281) definition of corporate branding puts great emphasis on internal commitment:

[corporate branding is] the conscious decision by senior management to distil and make known the attributes of the organisation's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition. The proposition underpins organisational efforts to communicate, differentiate, and enhance the brand vis a vis key stakeholder groups and networks. A corporate brand proposition requires total corporate commitment to the corporate body from all levels of personnel.

Balmer's definition also points to the fact that the organizational identity is a fundamental starting point for the corporate brand proposition. In contrast to products, the corporate brand is not a tangible entity (Ind, 1997). As products have become increasingly similar in terms of quality and functional attributes, 'the ground on which the corporation traditionally stood is shifting from making and selling to being – to representing a set of values' (Olins, 2000: 61). Organizational values, i.e. the central beliefs that pertain to desirable end states or behaviors (de Chernatony et al., 2004), are used to define and communicate the identity of the organization. In this process organizations seek to establish 'who' they are, what makes them unique, and which characteristics are central and enduring (Albert and Whetten, 1985).

However, similarly to product branding, corporate branding is above all about creating meaning. A corporate brand is a powerful symbolic creation that can act as a 'replacement or supplement to religious belief' (Olins, 2000: 63). Hatch and Schultz (2003) refer to an 'attractive force' of corporate brands that appeals to stakeholders and helps them define and express their own identities. Examples of strong corporate brands are Apple and Harley-Davidson, which are known for their unique style and values, and for their 'fans' who display a remarkable degree of loyalty.

Few public organizations have a recognized status as corporate brands, although there are many types of public organizations that could be attributed a



positive brand strength. Several universities and colleges are good examples, such as the University of California at Berkeley in the USA, Oxford University in Britain, and École Nationale d'Administration in France. Within the telecommunications, transportation, electricity, health, and water supply sectors, a number of strong public brands exist, many of which are in competition with private companies. Examples include mail service systems such as La Poste in France, public TV stations such as BBC (British Broadcasting) in the UK, railroad agencies such as SJ (Statens Järnvägar) in Sweden, and public hospitals such as UCLA Medical Center in the US. In addition, a number of public institutions enjoy high brand awareness by virtue of their *top-of-mind* status. Public health insurance systems such as the British National Health Service (NHS) and the Norwegian labor and welfare organization (NAV), as well as various regulatory and coercive agencies such as tax authorities, national and federal banks, and law enforcing agencies are all extremely well known within their respective countries.

## The quest for consistency in corporate branding

It is one thing for organizations to identify themselves, or be identified, as corporate brands. It is another to implement the concept of corporate branding and follow its normative emphasis on consistency and control. Because the strongest corporate brands are believed to be consistent in terms of their values, identities, and self-presentations, corporate branding entails uniting the organization's different elements and types of communication into one single identity expression, as if it were one 'body' (hence *corporate*). It builds on the idea that it is possible to define the organization's essence and articulate it through clear and coherent messages, making every communication consistent with one official identity definition (Aaker, 2004; Bickerton, 2000; de Chernatony and Dall'Olmio Riley, 1999; Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004). As prescribed by Ind (1997: 72), 'Communication strategy is about integration: the development of a coherent plan based upon the reality of the corporate identity'. Olins (1989: 212) noted: 'Where a corporate identity programme is truly integrated, where it involves every element, where it is communicated with consistency and commitment, it has a chance'. Also, Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000: 61), who in contrast to other writers accept some degree of multiplicity, recommend a common identity as the goal: 'A common identity should be the goal and the baseline strategy. Resist those who claim that their context . . . is different and requires a special identity rather than just a different execution'.

Having a consistently defined and communicated identity is assumed to give a number of benefits in terms of identification and differentiation (Aaker, 1991), increased credibility, and employee commitment (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004; Ind, 1997), and ultimately in creating a strong reputation (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004). As we have moved into an age characterized by increasingly fragmented and complex markets, it is argued, organizations need a great deal of control over their corporate brand in terms of how the



organizational identity is defined, communicated, and understood by constituencies. However, creating consistency may involve a number of challenges (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002), especially as organizations become larger, engage in co-branding, global branding, and/or acquire other organizations or product brands. In these cases, organizations may adopt an endorsed or branded/house of brands strategy (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Olins, 1989) by cultivating consistency within different identity structures rather than across them, or by using some form of combination of product and corporate branding (Urde, 2003).

Despite these challenges, the standard approach to corporate branding generally tends to view inconsistency as a problem. The response to inconsistencies is to redouble the efforts towards consistency and to overcome contradictory views about an organization simply 'by overwhelming them with a single organisational identity' (Leitch and Motion, 1999: 194). This could be done by augmenting control over employees and standardizing internal and external communication, for example through a 'communication czar' – a key executive with sufficient authority to 'orchestrate the total process of business communication so that the corporation itself is communicated' (Kitchen and Schultz, 2001: 72).

Also, in services branding there is a strong focus on how to avoid inconsistencies. The 'company as brand' is used to provide a common denominator for the quality of the services (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999; McDonald et al., 2001). As noted by de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1999: 181), 'the "company as brand" and internal training are especially important means of communicating to both consumers and employees what the brand stands for . . . in such a way that consumers perceive a consistent message across the whole range of services provided'. By implication, as public organizations are typical service providers, they should rely on a consistently defined identity to convey what they are.

However, this article argues that it is difficult for most public organizations to become coherent corporate brands, as they often have multiple identities 'by default' and must retain some level of inconsistency in order to serve the public, which itself is inconsistent. This argument is in accordance with more recent views on corporate branding and corporate communication suggested by scholars who take a critical stance on the notion of consistency. Christensen et al. (2005) claim that organizations need to nurture internal organizational variety and speak with many voices in order to be able to cope with the challenges of our postmodern society. The idea of consistency, they argue, is too 'sender'-oriented and not sufficiently sensitive to diversity among the 'receivers'. In a similar vein, Leitch and Richardson (2003; see also Antorini and Schultz, 2005b) argue that the transition into the 'new' economy requires a new approach to corporate branding. They advocate a relationship-based approach in which the corporate brand is defined in a continuously evolving process that occurs in interaction with the organization's networks. Thus, rather than imposing a single holistic identity and seeing consistency as the primary solution, managers should allow for a variety of interpretations of the corporate brand both internally and externally. This article expands on



these views to develop some more pragmatic and realistic ideas for corporate branding in the public sector.

## Public organizations: inconsistent values and multiple identities

Two general characteristics of public sector organizations complicate the process of defining a coherent organizational identity. First, most public organizations are responsible for carrying out a large number of functions that require the application of inconsistent sets of values (Goodsell, 1989). Second, public organizations are often characterized by several identities and, therefore, are unlikely to be encapsulated by only one identity definition. In making this argument, I do not claim that *all* private organizations have few values or are simple, or that *all* public organizations have many values or are complex. Rather, as Butler and Collins (1995) have argued, the public sector represents a different context than the private sector. While private sector organizations are founded for business reasons and are legally allowed to maximize the interests of their shareholders (Bakan, 2004), public organizations exist to serve the public interest and are obligated to emphasize wider and often conflicting political, economic, and social values and interests. As will be addressed below, these functions turn public organizations into complex entities with inconsistent values and multiple identities.

### Inconsistent values

When scholars in public administration and political science characterize the distinctive character of public organizations, they use words like unclear, vague, multiple, conflicting, volatile, and unstable (Brunsson, 1989; Goodsell, 1989; Gortner et al., 1997; Heffron, 1989; Rainey, 2003; Walsh, 1994). Their observations are due to the fact that all public organizations are required to serve the public interest and to handle various problems that the market has a limited capacity for solving. Some of the most important include providing public goods (i.e. goods that benefit all once provided, for example clean air), problems of monopoly, crime, poverty, ecological crises, and income redistribution (Butler and Collins, 1995; Rainey, 2003). Some problems have no final solution and can only be dealt with, not solved, such as crime and social problems. Other problems are incompatible, such as trying to keep inflation and unemployment at low levels. This conundrum has led Brunsson (1989) to suggest that public organizations are 'depressive' organizations that are largely concerned with dilemmas, entertaining a special affection for insoluble and conflicting problems.

Most public sector organizations face dilemmas caused by their duty to serve the public interest and accommodate individual interests at the same time. To serve the public interest, public organizations must make and implement decisions that benefit all. The public interest, however, does not always coincide with individual interests. As a result, public organizations must balance the need to be authoritative and client- or user-oriented. Coercive organizations such as tax



authorities face this problem, as do social welfare offices, regulatory agencies, and a large number of institutions whose tasks consist of casework. Their authoritative and controlling function must be meticulous, impartial, and rule-oriented, while their assistance-oriented tasks promote and build on the very opposite values: customer and service orientation. As the tension between collectivism and individualism is perhaps one of the most fundamental problems in society, this dilemma will never disappear.

In their daily work, public administrators face a number of contradictory values (Goodsell, 1989). For example, they must respond to elected officials by being efficient, faithful, impartial, and rule-oriented, but they must also respond to a higher morality by emphasizing equality, justice, honesty, fairness, and the protection of individual rights. They must provide social services to people who need help, but they must also control the needs of the same people they are helping, to verify that they qualify for assistance. Furthermore, they must be attentive to the needs and demands of citizens and the market, while at the same time using their own expertise in finding solutions. When dealt with simultaneously, these value orientations contradict each other. All types of administrative units are exposed to such dilemmas, particularly those that work closely with elected bodies and make decisions directly on their behalf.

### Multiple identities

The tension between various value orientations also manifests itself in the fact that different values tend to be cultivated within different institutional structures. Some structural units may operate on the basis of one set of values, while other values prevail in other units. The value tension is then transformed into a tension between different organizational identities. Albert and Whetten (1985) refer to the concept of dual identities to characterize this phenomenon, using a university as an example, which is both like a 'church' and a 'business'. It has a normative identity, oriented towards the values of culture and education, and a utilitarian identity, oriented towards the values of profit and economic rationality. Many public organizations confront the same dilemma – not only government enterprises that pursue the public interest and run a business at the same time. Over the last 30 years, most public sector organizations in the western world have been required to a much greater extent than ever before to cut spending, introduce management by objectives and performance management, compete with each other and with private corporations, and provide evidence of goal attainment – just as if they were for-profit organizations (Boston et al., 1996).

Albert and Whetten (1985) suggest that public organizations are likely to not only have dual identities but also *multiple* identities. This is because they 'become the repository of all things that other organizations will not undertake' (p. 277): they must assume responsibility for whatever function elected bodies assign to them. As a result, public organizations are multifunctional. For example, in city/municipal administrations, responsibilities usually include primary and secondary education, recreational and sport facilities, urban planning and



development, welfare and health care, water and electricity supply, and local infrastructure and maintenance.

Pratt and Foreman (2000) use the concept of multiple identities when there are different conceptualizations about the organization's central, distinct, and enduring characteristics. Such identity differentiation may occur in any formal organization that is characterized by some diversity in terms of functions, structures, values, professions, demographic variables, and geographical location. It has been observed in private companies (e.g. Albert and Adams, 2002; Corley, 2004) as well as in non-profit organizations (e.g. Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997). However, because of their multiple functions and inconsistent values, public organizations are particularly exposed to the formation of contradictory identities. Even though all are involved in the same mission of assuring the public interest, employees may answer very differently to the question 'Who are we as an organization?'. For example, members of units who primarily perform regulatory, controlling, or coercive functions may see themselves primarily as caseworkers operating on the basis of values such as law and rule orientation, justice, and equality. In contrast, members who provide help and service, and primarily relate to values such as customer, service, and client orientation, are likely to downplay the bureaucratic aspects of the organization considerably.

To summarize, the public sector must deal with a wide range of goals, values, and paradoxes, some of which have no apparent solution. In order to carry out their basic functions as providers of common goods and services, public organizations have developed a capacity for the simultaneous balancing and handling of many competing value orientations and identities. Public organizations are inconsistent 'by default', as inconsistencies and multiple identities are *system traits* of the public sector, not anomalies (Christensen et al., 2007). More importantly, these traits challenge the possibility of finding a precise and consistent definition of what public organizations are and do.

## Branding public organizations

The idea of consistency in the corporate perspective on branding directs public managers' attention towards imposing and promoting a single overarching organizational identity through a consistent set of values. In this section of the article, problematic aspects of this approach are discussed, followed by a more pragmatic view on how to handle corporate branding in the public sector.

### Branding on the basis of coherent values

As most public organizations are likely to contain a wide range of values, it seems obvious that not all of them can be used for purposes of corporate branding. Some sort of selection among different values must be made. Although the corporate identity literature suggests a number of methods for extracting central organizational values (for a review, see Van Rekom and Van Riel, 2000; Van Riel and



Balmer, 1997), the guiding principle is usually that the selected values should be those that underpin and are consistent with the overall organizational identity. However, when there is more than one organizational identity and perhaps conflicting values, how does one make this selection? In the case of, for example, regulatory and coercive organizations such as tax authorities, the extraction of core values would imply that some of them are compatible with the bureaucratic and coercive/authoritative identity, but not with the service/customer-oriented identity, and vice-versa. As a result, extracting a few important values from each sub-identity is likely to lead to an inconsistent corporate brand proposition, and therefore to the opposite of what is desirable from a strictly corporate branding perspective. So how can public organizations with inconsistent values and multiple identities encapsulate and articulate an overall identity in a coherent manner? How should they use their values to define the 'true' meaning or totality of the organization without making the definition incoherent?

Evidence from public sector organizations indicates that two options are pursued, both of which are problematic. First, values mainly from one sub-identity are sometimes chosen to represent the whole organization. For example, when the Norwegian tax administration claims to be 'accommodating, professional, and innovative' ([www.skatteetaten.no](http://www.skatteetaten.no)), its values primarily highlight the service aspect of the organization, and to a much lesser extent its identity as a government agency. Another example is the Swedish tax administration, which promotes the values of 'proactive, reliable, helpful' ([www.skatteverket.se](http://www.skatteverket.se)). None of these values really promotes the administrations' identities as coercive, authoritative, regulative, and rule-oriented organizations. In other words, important aspects of the controlling function are left out. Tax authorities are not just service organizations, nor just coercive organizations: they are *both*. As a result, some employees may not identify with the selected values or see their relevance. If employees do not feel attached to the proclaimed identity, they are likely to reject it, especially if the identity is imposed on them (Brickson, 2000). If top management chooses to ignore this problem, the result is that the organization uses several sets of values for its daily work and a different, single set for its external self-presentation. The organization will thus construct a corporate brand image of itself as a consistent organization, but its branding proposition is not likely to be followed by all employees – however clearly defined and communicated. In theory, top management can decide to correct this problem by repressing one set of values while promoting the other (e.g. achieving 'total corporate commitment'), but this is not likely to succeed in public organizations where multiple identities are indispensable. It will not only lead to resistance, but will also go against the very mission of the organization of providing different services and performing different functions at the same time.

Furthermore, external observers may be confused by the one-sided focus on only one identity. In the case of coercive and regulatory organizations presenting themselves as 'helpful' and 'accommodating', customers may get the wrong idea about the nature of these organizations and feel that they are misrepresenting themselves, especially when dealing with their 'other' identity as regulative and



coercive agencies. This is hardly an ideal situation, as it represents a gap between the actual and the communicated identities.

The second option is to choose a set of values 'from scratch'. It would imply selecting values that are compatible with all the organization's values and identities, resulting in rather general values. A number of Norwegian public organizations have chosen this alternative (Kvåle and Wæraas, 2006), including the Food Safety Authority which presents itself as 'open, generous, vigorous, honest' ([www.mattilsynet.no](http://www.mattilsynet.no)), the Pollution Control Authority which claims to be 'clear, future oriented, credible' ([www.sft.no](http://www.sft.no)), and the University of Oslo which promotes the values of 'challenge, attention, energy, responsibility' ([www.uio.no](http://www.uio.no)).

The problem with these values is that they are too general for purposes of differentiation and identification, as they could be used to describe any organization and any sub-identity. This is a phenomenon which Antorini and Schultz (2005a) refer to as 'the uniqueness paradox'. Despite the fact that most organizations have unique organizational values, they are often surprisingly similar and clichéd when they are expressed. This phenomenon occurs in organizations in both the public and the private sectors, and prevents them from truly expressing who they are and their reason for existing.

Hardly any research has been conducted on the self-presentations of public organizations. The little evidence that exists indicates that public organizations also suffer from the uniqueness paradox (Kvåle and Wæraas, 2006). Thus, perhaps a different and more pragmatic approach to corporate branding should be considered.

### Branding on the basis of inconsistent values

Since public organizations are often complex organizations with multiple values and identities, the pragmatic solution should be to brand on the basis of an inconsistent presentation of the organizational identity. Thus, an adapted version of corporate branding calls for ambiguity and a realistic focus. This approach goes against the 'textbook' understanding of corporate branding as emphasizing consistency, and, some will argue, it is highly questionable whether conflicting values and multiple identities could be used to promote a brand. However, there are good reasons to examine the relevance of this pragmatic approach more carefully, especially in the case of public sector organizations. The following discussion relates to the questions of how inconsistency can (1) promote uniqueness, (2) give flexibility, and (3) contribute to a positive image or reputation.

### Inconsistencies and unique characteristics

Using inconsistent and conflicting values to define and articulate the identity of a public organization is a better way to match realities than consistent values. As discussed earlier, in contrast to most private sector businesses, public organizations have multiple and often inconsistent values and identities. By articulating their actual identities and values, public organizations have a better potential for communicating who and what they are and what makes them unique.



As the branding literature points out, having unique strengths is essential in order to create differentiation. So, if a unique strength of public organizations is their various functions and values and their capacity to work with them simultaneously, they should be better represented in the organization's external self-presentation. While the idea of consistency would imply a reduction of organizational complexity by conveying, for example, only a sample or the least common multiple of the diversity, the argument here is that public organizations will have a better chance of becoming strong brands if they are more successful in communicating their strengths – even if the strengths represent different and perhaps contradictory attributes.

This reasoning implies that public organizations present their identities through values that need not be internally consistent, but are consistent with (and relevant for) at least one of the identities in such a way that when combined, all identities are represented. For example, coercive and regulatory agencies such as tax administrations, food and drug authorities, pollution control authorities, as well as social welfare agencies, may promote themselves both as service organizations *and* as authoritative organizations. Government enterprises and profit-oriented public institutions such as those within the telecommunications, mail, health, water supply, and power industries may present themselves both as bureaucracies *and* as businesses, etc. By doing so, these organizations avoid a potential gap between their actual and communicated identities – a gap that it is considered essential to close in order to build a strong corporate brand (Balmer and Greyser, 2002).

In addition, the assumption that organizations will have an advantage over their rivals by having a single, unique, and coherent identity can be challenged by the idea that multiple identities and values are even more unique and difficult for rivals to imitate (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). In this line of reasoning, public organizations do not need to reduce the number of identities in order to be perceived as unique. Their inconsistencies 'by default' are also likely to make them *unique* 'by default', which means that the potential for becoming a strong brand is already in place.

### Inconsistencies and flexibility

Controlling employees and lower-level units regarding their communication practice is a necessary prerequisite for achieving total corporate commitment. However, it may prevent employees from thinking creatively and independently. Balancing multiple and competing values and goals, as well as responding to different and inconsistent demands and needs – which is essential for all public sector organizations – requires a high degree of flexibility. Along with influential writers in the field of cybernetics and systems theory (Buckley, 1968; Conant and Ashby, 1970), Weick (1979) has shown that systems need many elements that operate flexibly and independently of each other in order to accurately discern inconsistencies and ambiguity. Weick's point is inspired by Ashby's principle of requisite variety (Conant and Ashby, 1970), which states that 'the variety within a



system must be at least as great as the environmental variety against which it is attempting to regulate itself. Put more succinctly, only variety can regulate variety' (Buckley, 1968: 495). Applied to the field of formal organizations, the principle of requisite variety implies that the organizational response to complex and ambiguous inputs must itself be complex and ambiguous (Christensen et al., 2005).

An interesting example illustrating the flexibility benefits of retaining and presenting multiple organizational identities is provided in a study of a Norwegian public university (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2006). While the institution originally set out to define and convey a coherent corporate identity, in the course of the process the project group came to understand the breadth and variety of the university as its main strength. As explained by the University President:

. . . if I give a presentation to an audience where I am promoting our marine activities, I do it, this is a marine university . . . If I give a presentation in a context where our peace studies are in focus, I promote it as a peace university, and so on. . . . I can just pick from a menu. It is a good thing not to be confined under one umbrella only . . . [we are] the red university, the green university, and the yellow university. . . . We have many profiles. (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2006: 27)

Thus, organizations that define themselves in multiple ways may be more appealing to external stakeholders, who have multiple needs and interests. As public organizations have a responsibility for serving the entire population, not just selected market segments, they should be able to match the environments' diversity far more efficiently by being diverse themselves than by relying on one single, overarching organizational identity.

### Inconsistencies and corporate brand image

The benefits of flexibility are closely related to the possibility of enhancing a positive brand image or reputation. From the perspective of a public organization, which must relate to a variety of external groups and their respective demands, the environments are unclear, inconsistent, and complex. Rather than requiring a single organizational identity, this issue calls for a more realistic self-presentation where different identities and values are displayed to different audiences.

Brunsson (1989) argues that this type of conduct may be a necessary organizing practice for a public organization. Referring to it as 'organizational hypocrisy', he contends that it is a natural and efficient way of acquiring legitimacy in a world where organizations are increasingly exposed to inconsistent demands. The hypocrisy implies developing a pragmatic ability to continually differentiate the organization's communication and behavior in relation to these demands. By doing so, varying values and identities are displayed to the environments, allowing for different parts of the environments to focus on the messages that they feel have relevance, or with which they may identify, in such a way that different impressions of the organization are formed. Although these messages may be ambiguous in the sense that they may lead to multiple interpretations of the organization's identity, the recipients may still perceive them as clear and positive. Eisenberg (1984: 231) points out the relevance of this insight by noting that ambiguity may



be a political necessity and that it 'is essential to organizing because it allows for multiple interpretations to exist among people who contend that they are attending to the same message – i.e., perceive the message to be clear'.

Thus, by presenting different identities and inconsistent self-presentation messages, an organization is not necessarily discredited, as assumed in corporate branding literature. Its ambiguity might be precisely why it is seen as valuable: 'instead of building upon the enthusiasm of a few, it builds on the tolerance of many' (Brunsson, 1989: 195). This increases the potential for not only one, but multiple positive brand images.

## Conclusion

Inspired by the concept of corporate branding, many public organizations engage in a search for an exact and consistent definition of their identities. This article has outlined some challenges in this regard. While the standard belief is that organizations are unlikely to succeed in building a strong corporate brand unless they have a consistent identity, the argument put forth in this article is that public organizations are by nature inconsistent and complex entities that are difficult to include under one single identity definition. Because they must attend to and be preoccupied with the governance of a number of often contradictory values and needs in society, public organizations themselves are characterized by inconsistent values and multiple identities. Furthermore, because these characteristics are so central for their multifunctional role, attempting to reduce the inconsistencies and complexities by imposing a single holistic identity and one set of values may downplay their strengths, reproduce the problem of requisite variety, and ultimately diminish their chances of creating positive brand images.

As this article has argued, it is more important for a public organization to respect its internal diversity in corporate branding than to have a consistent self-presentation. This is not to reject the general relevance of corporate branding, but to question the focus on consistency in the complex context of the public sector. Thus, this article concludes that there is a need for an adapted and more pragmatic version of corporate branding that matches the typical characteristics of public sector organizations better. The suggested approach includes the following elements:

- Multiple organizational identities and contradictory values make public organizations inconsistent but also unique. Instead of trying to find the ultimate unique corporate brand proposition, public organizations should draw on their existing attributes and recognize them as a unique assemblage of characteristics that can be used in the branding process.
- Multiple organizational identities and contradictory values give public sector organizations a great deal of flexibility. Instead of reducing multiplicity and focusing on a single, predefined organizational identity, public organizations should draw on the diversity of their identities and values to match the diversity of their constituencies.



- By offering their environments a number of reference points with which the environments may identify and relate to, public organizations increase their chances of gaining different, but strong corporate brand images.

Thus, by following a more pragmatic approach, public organizations do not need to change or relinquish important aspects of their distinctive character or pretend that they do not exist – it is the richness of those characteristics, not the reduction of variety, which is valuable when presenting the organization to external audiences.

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