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Ambiguity and Authenticity: Managing hybrid reputations.

ABSTRACT

Purpose:

Research remains silent on how ambiguity in external communications can create a consistent brand position and corporate reputation. Specifically we investigate the case of hybrid organizations—organizations that need to act commercially to pursue non-profit or social goals—and how they retain consistency in their positioning of authenticity through ambiguity in planned, inferred and maintenance messages.

Method:

Twenty-five depth-interviews were conducted in the Trappist beer market using projective techniques to explore Trappist communications. The informants represented members of the Trappist Order, secular employees, business customers, distributors, retailers, end consumers, and industry representatives.

Findings:

Authenticity is promoted in multiple forms in Trappist advertising and promotion so that multiple interpretations of the brewery’s reputation are unified around the idea of

authenticity. In this context, Trappist breweries use multiple messages to reinforce a deliberately ambiguous strategic position.

Research Limitations:

The findings are derived from a single industry case study involving organizations with unique values and marketing problems. The research does not provide insight into transferability to other contexts nor the ethical implications of using ambiguity in communications. Finally, research needs to look at how far one can stretch the ambiguity of the organization's image without diluting the organization's reputation and meaning.

Practical Implications:

It appears that hybrid organizations are using strategic ambiguity for maintenance of organizational reputation or image so that they improve stakeholder impressions. This paper demonstrates how hybrid organizations apply communication ambiguity at an organizational level to retain credibility so that stakeholders selectively interpret information to support existing attitudes about the organization.

Keywords: Stakeholder Management; Corporate Reputation; Ambiguity; Communications; Authenticity.

Paper Type: Interpretive Research, Case Study.

1. Introduction

An organization, it is said, derives its reputation from consistent external messages across a variety of media that reinforce the organization's core values over time (Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Deephouse and Carter, 2005; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Glynn, 2000; Markwick and Fill, 1995; Suchman, 1995). Maintaining adherence to core values, however, becomes challenging when an organization is communicating with multiple stakeholders given it is probable that they have differences. While clarity in these messages is customarily accepted as the cornerstone of best quality communications (see Eisenberg and Witten, 1987 for review), it is an oversimplified perspective, particularly in contexts where organizations face a variety of stakeholders since an organization's reputation is (1) "given" to the organization by its stakeholders, (2) partially shaped by formal communications, and (3) influenced by wider socio-cultural changes (Beverland, 2005; Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg and Witten, 1987).

The rationale for managing stakeholder relationships is twofold. First, there is potential for tension where stakeholders can impact, directly or indirectly on revenues, and stakeholders wield influence through the use of proxy resolutions, boycotts, modified vendettas (Harrison and St John, 1996), the withholding of resources, and/or the stipulated resource usage conditions (Frooman, 1999). Second, the rationale for balancing stakeholder interests shifts beyond their ominous power to the notion that managers also are responsible for organization-stakeholder considerations given that many stakeholders rely on the focal organization for social or economic viability (Fry and Polonsky, 2004).

Research to date identifies that balancing competing views among stakeholders is a fine line, and involves intensive use of resources (Koll *et al.*, 2005). This paper addresses the question of whether an organization can successfully balance these tensions, and whether communication ambiguity allows for desired consistency in reputation. These questions are

addressed through an examination of hybrid organizations—organizations that need to act commercially to pursue non-profit or social goals (Young and Salamon, 2002). Core values that are central to these hybrid organizations relate to authenticity and passion for their social mission. These organizations are not commercial entities by choice but are engaged in commercial activities to pursue their non-profit objectives. As such, they seek to create or retain a position of authenticity. That is, they seek to ‘backstage’ commercial intentions so as to appear to reinforce authenticity given that non-commercial brands seem to be more sincere and authentic (Beverland, 2005; Holt, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). The importance of non-commercial motives as part of brand authenticity is linked to the morality of the brand (Fine, 2003), and delineates authenticity as purity, tradition, and aura (Postrel, 2003). That is, the brand is viewed as being sincere.

In this study we are interested in corporate reputation and specifically the projection of authenticity and the management of authenticity through communication ambiguity. Our central proposition is that ambiguity created through external communications impacts perceived authenticity and corporate reputation as it promotes unified diversity. For managers, the results of the study will serve to provide insight in relation to external message development and role of ambiguity in retaining hybrid authenticity.

2.0. Literature Review

2.1. Corporate Reputation Management

Corporate reputation in its simplest form refers to judgments made about an organization over time (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Corporate reputation is formed because of subjective interpretations evoked from consistent external messages that represent an organization’s corporate identity and image (Alessandri, 2001; Deephouse and Carter, 2005; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Glynn, 2000; Markwick and Fill, 1995; Suchman, 1995). Despite an

organization's best effort to communicate a brand identity that will impact corporate image, and consequently corporate reputation, stakeholders make subjective evaluations so that corporate image and reputation are variable (Barich and Kotler, 1991; Boulding, 1956; Cable and Graham, 2000; Dowling, 1988). That is, images that are retained by various audiences are not necessarily accurate and are difficult to manage because evaluations are skewed by the assessor. Dowling (1988) notes that an organization does not have a single image, rather, it has multiples images because stakeholders ascribe the image to the organization based on individual interpretations.

Certainly, definitions of corporate identity are still arguable given the multidisciplinary nature of the concept albeit it was Olins who first defined the concept and suggested that image is a central element of corporate identity (Olins, 1979). More recent research does however note that the visual element is just one aspect of corporate identity with a corporate identity mix being more encompassing of the concept. This corporate identity mix broadens the concept to include behaviour, communication and symbolism (Melewar and Jenins 2002; van Riel and Balmer 1997; Abratt 1989; Dowling 1994) with the intention to lead the evaluator toward an overall corporate image (Abratt, 1989; Alessandri, 2001). There is recognition that organizations craft brand identity through knowledge structures so that mental images are formed as a consequence of purposeful corporate actions (Dowling, 1986, 1988; Kennedy, 1977; MacInnis and Price, 1987). In essence, organizations develop corporate identity through communications with the intent to fashion knowledge structures (Dowling, 1986, 1988; Kennedy, 1977) that create a favorable corporate image (Alessandri, 2001) and ultimately reputation (Urde, 2001). It should however be noted that this interrelationship between corporate reputation, corporate image, and corporate identity is much debated (Abratt, 1989; Balmer, 2001; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Dowling, 1988, 2001) and even criticised because the organization is managing itself as a "brand" (Olins, 2000),

and as such is contrived (Alvesson, 1990; Berg and Gagliardi, 1985; Campbell *et al.*, 2006; Olins, 1979, 1989).

Fundamentally, corporate image and corporate reputation management are about corporate level marketing where an organization manages relationships with stakeholders (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Urde (2001) describes that an organization's identity is inclusive of core values that are the foundation of the corporate brand and this is managed through communication. The corporate brand is a projection of the corporation's values, and these are managed with the intent to impact stakeholder perceptions (de Chernatony, 2006). To manage this corporate brand among multiple stakeholders, organizations can use a variety of communication touch points that include planned messages (public relations, advertising, packaging, signage, sales promotions), inferred messages (stock lists, price), maintenance messages (attitudes of staff), and unplanned messages (crisis events, consumer advocate groups) (Markwick and Fill, 1995). Using open communications, however, may be overly explicit, with potential for plans to be jeopardized because stakeholders may hold views of the organization inconsistent with marketer intentions that nevertheless impact on the organization's reputation (Bok, 1983; Edelman, 1977; Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg and Witten, 1987; Thompson *et al.*, 2006). That is, corporate communications can only go so far in shaping the organization's reputation.

2.2 Hybrid Reputations—Projecting Authenticity

The application of strategic ambiguity to hybrid organizations such as university institutions, religious organizations, museums and arts groups, and community news organizations is relevant as they are experiencing the effects of conflict arising from having to respond to multiple stakeholders, particularly as they implement market-oriented strategies that may conflict with their traditional mission (Glynn, 2000; Hutton, 2001). Positioning the relationship between the realms of 'for-profit' and 'non-profit' carries much reputational risk.

Hybrid organizations operate between cultural orientations and are positioned between the sphere of public and private sectors and consequently, tensions arise. For example, in the context of arts management Voss *et al.* (2005) identify that placing too much emphasis on either artistic or commercial goals can result in lost moral legitimacy among critics and peers, or lost revenue from consumers (see Hutton [2001] for a similar example from religion). The tensions in walking this fine line are acute, yet practices associated with managing such tensions remain under explored (Donaldson and Preston, 1995), and organizations are unlikely to be able to rely solely on passive compliance or manipulation (Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995).

While hybrid organizations may vary in their purpose and social passion, what they commonly seek when they use business practices to achieve their social passion is retention of their reputation because it is a key asset. That is, they seek to retain legitimacy in their sector and as such, authenticity is a valid positioning device that enables these hybrid organizations to sculpt reputation. Commonly, authenticity is used to refer to the genuineness, reality, or truth of something (Bendix, 1992; Costa and Bamossy, 1995; Goldman and Papson, 1996; Kennick, 1985; Peterson, 1997; Phillips, 1997) albeit this can mean different things to different people (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Research also reveals the promotion of authenticity can refer to factual commitments to tradition and place, an overall feeling or impression of connection to a particular historical era (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), moral claims, and an emotional connection between producer and the consumer (Beverland, 2005). Simply claiming to be authentic is not going to make a hybrid organization successful in terms of this positioning. Authenticity needs to be demonstrated as central to the brand and can be created through communication touch points that inform external stakeholders that passion for their social mission is very much central to all their efforts—commercial and social.

2.3. Strategic Ambiguity

The traditional view of how to manage corporate image and reputation has relied on conscious communications, whereby an organization communicates clearly with stakeholders. Amid competing stakeholder perspectives, clear communications may not necessarily be the best strategy. Strategic ambiguity is a strategy that can minimize tensions among stakeholders because it provides a win-win situation for both the focal organization and stakeholders. Multiple stakeholders feel satisfied and empowered because ambiguity allows multiple and even contradictory interpretations to coexist with the intention that conflict is avoided (Davenport and Leitch, 2005). That is, stakeholders focus on the abstract rather than specifics of a message whereby they selectively interpret information to support existing attitudes (Eisenberg, 1984; Goss and Williams, 1973). This allows each stakeholder to be united around commonalities rather focusing on their differences.

Given that a hybrid organization exists in two spheres that each have competing stakeholders, the role of ambiguity in managing tensions while still retaining a unified positioning of authenticity is of interest. Ambiguity can be deployed through the use of planned, inferred, and maintenance messages. Is a hybrid organization able to support its positioning of authenticity where they use these messages to manage tensions among stakeholders through unified diversity?

3. Method

This study applies a case study design for several reasons. First, a lack of research on managing the tension between multiple stakeholders suggests that a more exploratory approach is appropriate. Second, it is recognized that research on responsiveness to stakeholders should take place in single industries because many stakeholder tensions are industry specific (Koll *et al.*, 2005)—that is, a single industry case study allows us to account for an entire network of stakeholders (Voss *et al.*, 2005).

Trappist breweries comprise the research setting for this study, and provide a rich context for understanding stakeholder conflict and brand image projection in a hybrid context. First, alcohol is subject to restrictions on promotion (in some countries), “sin taxes” to discourage consumption, and scrutiny from multiple stakeholders including health advocacy groups, government agencies, and prohibition advocates. Also, some alcohol products are the subject of bitter debate about authenticity and globalization, where passionate experts and long-time consumers challenge the dilution of traditional styles to accommodate modern consumer demands (Beverland, 2005). As such, the Trappist beer market provides a natural context within which to study the management of multiple stakeholder views (Voss *et al.*, 2005).

Trappist monks belong to the order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance. To be self-sufficient, Trappist monks are allowed to sell excess production not needed for personal consumption. To differentiate their products from competitors, the orders developed a unique label for their products. To use the label “Authentic Trappist Products”, monks must produce the products within the confines of a Trappist monastery, and the majority of profits must fund the monastery and its social programs. Trappist beers are a high alcohol style of beer, produced by craftsmen (monks), and limited solely to darker styles (rather than white beers, blonde beers, or fruit beers). As sales have grown, market pressures on Trappist Orders have come from four sources: internal marketing staff (employed by the Trappist breweries), retailers and trade buyers, new consumers, and competitors. The first three are pressuring for greater entrepreneurship while competitors seek to trade on the image of Trappist beers by developing Abbey beers that refer to tradition and religion in their imagery for commercial gain. These beers are not brewed by monks in a Trappist monastery, and are purely commercial products. That is, large commercial breweries often license the name of an existing abbey, use names from abbeys that no longer exist, or simply invent a name, such as Grimbergen (brewed by Alken-Maes), to suggest a monastic origin (Hieronymus, 2005).

The main stakeholders in the Trappist beer industry are identified using Freeman's (1984) definition, according to which, stakeholders are any group or individual who can affect or are affected by the achievement of the organizations' objectives. This definition accounts for a wide variety of stakeholders that need to be considered when undertaking external communications. The following stakeholders are relevant to the Trappist beer setting: members of the Trappist Order (i.e., the monks), secular employees that oversee the breweries' marketing operations, business customers such as café owners, distributors and retailers, end-consumers, beer critics, representatives from the industry organization, and members of government agencies.

Interviews of all stakeholders, except beer critics and members of government agencies were conducted. In relation to the views of the critics the authors relied on secondary information, including a recently published book by Hieronymus (2005) that provides extensive detail on their views. The authors also drew on other published sources and web-based material (including the web page of renowned beer critic Michael Jackson). Due to space limitations, and the widespread availability of material detailing restrictions on the sale of beer and concerns about negative health effects, government agencies were not interviewed; the authors do not focus on their views here because Trappist Orders restrict their advertising, and have policies against encouraging alcohol abuse.

Five sources provide data for this paper: consumers, monks (who may be marketers), secular marketing staff employed by the Trappist Orders, five trade buyers, and a representative with the industry organization. In total, 25 interviews were conducted: 12 with consumers (two females and 10 males aged between 20 and 54) of Trappist beers, all of the six Trappist breweries (Achel, Chimay, Orval, Rochefort, Westmalle, and Westvleteren), one recently former Trappist brewery (La Trappe), five trade buyers, and one with the director of the industry organization.

The consumer interviews, each lasting for one hour, used projective techniques (Zaltman, 2004) to explore reactions to Trappist communications. The 12 informants were asked to first pick from 45 images including pictures of production plants, advertisements (including Trappist ones), social situations (people together), old and new products, and marketing materials. Following this, informants were presented with 24 different beers (including Trappist and abbey beers such as Leffe, as well as other beers such as Heineken, Grolsch, and Corona) and asked to comment on each one's messages. Interviews conducted at the seven breweries (five cases are believed to be necessary in studies of highly complex cases and to improve certainty [Yin, 1994]), involved questions on each brewery's guiding philosophy, marketing practices, positioning, and competitive pressures (future concerns and aims). Informants were also asked to describe areas of difficulty or concern relating to their role, the Trappist practices and values, and other relevant issues. Further interviews on desired content and levels of marketing activity by the Trappists were carried out with retailers and the industry organization. Interviews were conducted at the informant's place of business and on average lasted for two hours. All interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed. Following this, interview data were integrated with secondary information from the specialist brewing media, news media, specialist beer books, and secondary data gained from the breweries to provide further background information. This included brochures, company reports, advertisements, in-store trade promotions, and Internet sites. In all, 56 sources were reviewed.

The authors conducted the analysis independently, and their interpretations were then compared. Disagreements between the authors were explored in detail until agreement could be reached (this process often resulted in more nuanced insights). The analysis follows standard interpretive practice. Theoretical categories were elaborated on during open and axial coding procedures (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Throughout the analysis the authors

tacked back and forward between the literature on stakeholder management and the data (dialectical tacking), which led to the development of a number of theoretical categories and sub-categories (Spiggle, 1994).

Throughout the study, a number of methods for improving the quality of the research were adopted. First, data were triangulated from multiple primary and secondary sources, three researchers provided independent interpretations of the findings, the second author read widely about the industry, and respondents were given the opportunity to provide feedback on initial findings, all of which reinforced reliability and construct validity. Also, colleagues performed independent coding of the transcripts, and the same researcher (third) conducted all interviews, thereby reducing the role of bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4. Findings

The findings are presented around the two research questions. First, the authors identify the source of stakeholder tensions. Second, the authors identify the Trappists' solution to these conflicts—namely ambiguity of corporate reputation as they seek to project authenticity.

4.1. Stakeholder Tensions

4.1.1 Religion and Tradition Meet Modern Commerce

The first conflict occurs between stakeholders and involves tensions between a desire to retain Trappist traditions and adapt to current trends. This conflict operates primarily at the product level, although it also affects the level and content of communications. This conflict is driven by tensions between the following stakeholders: the monks, retailers, consumers, and beer critics. Failure to effectively manage this tension has important implications. The desire to retain continuity of traditional beer styles on behalf of monks, older consumers, and beer critics clashes directly with retailers' desire for improved consistency of taste and product performance, and younger consumers' desire for sweeter, lower alcohol beers. Also,

this has important implications for the ongoing viability of the Trappist Orders (and their attendant social obligations) because retailer / new consumer support is necessary for continued, or even maintenance of growth in sales. Additionally, this preference for continuing tradition places limitations on the ability of the Trappist breweries to meet global demand, and produce more beer to fund social programs.

First, pressure is placed upon the Trappists to invest in modern technology to improve the consistency of the product. Interviews with consumers and retailers, and secondary sources from critics note that these organizations have in the past been plagued with product inconsistency. In particular, traditional production methods often result in large quality and taste variations between batches (Hieronymus, 2005). This is particularly a problem for mass retailers who deal with younger consumers that are intolerant of such variation. Based on the authors' observations of production sites, and secondary information, it is evident that the Trappists had invested significantly in new technology (in one case, an 80 million euro investment). Nevertheless, the Trappists did not wish to communicate these changes, nor did consumers respond well to advertisements or images (although the outcome of such investments in terms of quality improvements were appreciated), which identified these investments. This desire for the retention of traditional styles and the suppression of modern production investments is identified in the following passage.

Yeah you want to appeal to a general group of people... this would change the authenticity a bit because to appeal to a bigger public you need proper industrial processes to maintain and deliver products to the market and that loses some authenticity because the beer is not produced in an old fashioned way, people who are dealing with the beer are not brewing it but sitting behind a computer... they need not know anything about the beer, accountants for example are not working in the brewery, they're not

working with it in that they don't know all the steps in the process, it's not the old way of brewing as it used to be (Consumer: Bram).

Bram's passage identifies concerns about how responding to market concerns may undermine the status of the Trappist organizations, because responding to a broader segment would by necessity require changes in traditional methods and would no longer be produced by monks. A further tension arising from the dual pressure from retailers and new consumers is the need to produce new styles of beer targeted directly at the mass market. As well, the need to respond to mass retailers in order to ensure survival results in concerns from consumers and the monks (and their marketing staff) because these customers require extensive marketing support that clashes with traditional practices and older consumers' view of these breweries (read: monasteries). For example:

When you have the Trappist beers in the supermarkets this will not have a positive effect on the image of the beers. But if we are not presented in the supermarkets we are dead. The café are not enough to survive. And in Belgium the volume of the specialist shops is not enough to take our production. We need to be present in the supermarket (Marketer: Case 2). You do not buy it in a supermarket you go to a specialized store, and that would give an air of authenticity, that it is special. It could be sold in a supermarket only if it is with the other Trappists, in its own place that does not change.... it looks like the supermarket has paid attention to the type of beers it is displaying, the Rochefort number 6, 8, and 10, like a collection, it's complete and the owner is responsible for the shop and loves the product and shows it, no advertisements, just here are these special beers, with care (Consumer: Hans).

The passages above reveal concerns over the cost of dealing with mainstream, mass retailers. The passage from the marketer identifies the tensions between requiring this channel's support for survival and their personal belief that using such channels will undermine the brewery's reputation. Hans, a long-time consumer of Trappist beers, echoes this concern, but notes that the Trappist reputation may not decline if it is promoted in the supermarkets in the right way, although advertising would undermine this strategy. The interviews with retailers and restaurant buyers identify the need for proactive investments in promotion on behalf of the Trappists. For example:

Westmalle is increasing a little bit because of the contacts with Heineken; they have outside announcement boards and parasols. But the rest is minimal.

When we look to Orval they only have boards. We had an idea of making a replica of their old crate but they don't want that. This crate the café owner can put in their café. Considering the price they don't do any action. The only thing we sometimes do is with a glass. For the rest we don't use discount. We don't say when you put Westmalle in your assortment you get this and this for free. That we don't do. We don't have the budget for it.... With the abbey beers this is done (Retailer: Case 3).

Westmalle's marketing investments are in direct contrast to the previous approach used by the Trappists who invested in marketing support at retail only when they experienced continued decline in sales. Thus, the Trappists face conflict between the demands of business customers for more advertising and promotion activities, the concerns of older consumers that advertising will reduce the Trappists reputation and status, and the marketers themselves who feel they have to sell out to some extent in order to survive. Failure to adequately balance these concerns is recognized as having the potential to undermine the social obligations of the monks to their local communities.

The village is there because of the monks, they have at this moment a lot of laymen who live in this village there, so it should stop production the whole village would not have any work. So the monks have their weaknesses for the people who work for them (Marketer: Case 7).

In summary, the need to successfully navigate the modern market results in concerns being raised by some stakeholders that this could undermine commitments to tradition. Also, the inability to manage this conflict has potential negative consequences for the Trappists' traditional social commitment. This conflict arises from the need to support the products at retail through advertising while simultaneously allaying older consumers' fears that this will undermine authenticity. Market pressures also give rise to concerns that traditional religious values are being infringed upon by commercial considerations.

4.1.2. Religion and Religious Imagery in Marketing

Consumers value the connection between the beer and a living religious community. The projective techniques identify that advertisements drawing upon this connection are particularly valued. For example:

They are all connected because the monk is living in his abbey and producing the beer with this text in it, this picture of the monk drinking his beer is the most appealing, it is the first connection when I think of Trappist beer, the monk drinking and enjoying it. The monks are living there, it is their home, and they are growing up making the beer and growing ingredients, other companies the workers just see it as a job, whereas the monks are really seeing it as part of their life work, when you have a lot of experience then I think you can brew it in an old fashioned way, and every time a new monk enters, there is a long time they can exchange ideas and experiences between old and new people, whereas in Heineken this is not possible, people work their four or five years they take their knowledge with them, whereas in an abbey that is not the same. It [Trappist beer]

could be brewed by someone else but it would feel like a little disappointment, it would feel it would be brewed by Grolsch's production line [*I: So if Heineken bought an abbey and used exactly the same old methods?*] If the Heineken beers and the Westmalle beers are produced in the same factory and the same kettles, and transported the same way, then no it is not the same. (Consumer: Tim).

Tim's passage identifies the value he places on images that reinforce an ongoing connection between the Trappist order and beer production. For Tim, and for our other informants, this ongoing connection is central to their understanding of the Trappist image, and drives their continued loyalty. As well, this connection is the key point of difference between the Trappists and other producers, including abbey beers that traded on religious imagery for commercial affect. Tim's view is not lost on business buyers and the marketers.

An abbey beer wants to be a Trappist beer. For someone who does not know the difference, it is the same, because such a person only knows the taste. For such a person the abbey beers and Trappist beer is the same. Only is it mostly about the real usp [unique selling point]. You could say that an abbey beer is a 'B' brand and that the Trappist beers are the real ones. And that you can communicate better if you were a marketing bureau of a Trappist brewery. But the [Trappist] monks don't want their abbey communicated" (Retailer: Case 5).

The large abbey, the beautiful building is our unique selling points; we receive about 25,000 visitors a year. When you come inside in here, this of course makes a large impression. That is also what we have to sell. We are going in our new campaign focus on the abbey. Everything is located at the abbey, always the abbey on the background. That you have to communicate to your customers. The monks don't like to use religious symbols - churches, crosses, monks. We have to deal with this (Marketer: Case 3).

The quotations above identify the desire to leverage religious imagery and connections between the beer and monastic life for commercial effect. Critical to this is the belief that unless this is done, novice consumers will not understand the difference between a Trappist beer and an abbey beer because retailers believe Trappist inaction has led to a blurring of the lines between the two. However, as the marketer quoted above note, they face real restrictions in the religious content that they can communicate, creating tension between the objectives of various stakeholders. The monks have four reasons for not wanting to engage in promotions using religious images: a desire not to be seen to promote alcohol consumption, promoting religion, the belief that such promotion could undermine self-image, and the encroachment on religious life. For example:

Of course we don't like to see this—the main issue was the publicity that connected the drinking of a beer with the erotic, and that we don't want. This is a manner not connected to our lifestyle and our beliefs. When you use a slogan such as “taste the silence”, then you absolutely use the peaceful and silence in our lives to connect to the product and thereby sell more beers. This connection we also don't like (Monk: Case 1).

We are not advertising much, which is a major difference with the commercial breweries. We have advertising material. This material escorts the selling of the beer. An example is the glasses. We want that our beer is drunk in our glasses, we have coasters, we have cards but also material around the drinking of beer. You will never see us on television or some advertising. The community wants to be very careful to support the consumption of alcohol.

We have to be careful (Monk: Case 4).

The above quotations identify concerns about communication activities (run by the distributor group Bavaria) that increase consumption and links Trappist beers with values that

are inconsistent with those of the Order. Such concerns are driven by a desire not to increase alcohol consumption among younger people (Trappist beers are much higher in alcohol than other mass-marketed beers; Hieronymus, 2005).

Another reason why the Monks do not want to associate religion with beer consumption (through advertising) is because they do not want to be seen as promoting religious values.

For example:

The religion is quite important because otherwise I would not be here. The religion is not communicated to the customers. It is not the intention to stimulate that people are coming to life in the abbey. No, no, this is not the intention (Monk, Case 5).

The quotation above identifies the desire not to use beer advertisements as a vehicle to recruit new monks, attracted to monastic life for the wrong reasons. This desire to downplay links between religion and the Trappists reflects a desire to disassociate their beer from religion. It is the link between religion and the beer that provides the basis for the image to both consumers and distributors, and which leads to tensions for Trappist marketing staff.

The third reason for not leveraging religious symbols and images for commercial effect concerns the notion that such strategies undermine the monks' self-image. That is, these links are seen as antithetical to the solemnity of monastic life. For example:

We never use, for instance, the image of the monks in our communication. No, because we have to respect the monks. And they don't want us to use them. I think it should be an error to use a monk in our communication because they are not there to make promotions; they are there to pray and live in a certain way. (Marketer: Case 2).

The quotation above identifies the tension between the monks' desire to downplay religious imagery (a belief shared by the marketer) and the need to increase sales and build a differentiated story through public relations in order to provide the funds for social programs.

Such restrictions on communicating religious imagery applied to advertising as well as all other communications. For example:

You see this also on the label of the abbey beers, with a cross. The monks do totally not agree with this, the Trappist beer would never advertise with their abbey or with something else from their lives. And absolutely not advertise with a monk who is making a beer.... We also have about 10,000 visitors a year, which is special because we have strict opening times. The abbot is saying that everybody who is ringing the bell of the gates you have to receive very nicely, so this led to some problems in the past because the monks did not want to be disturbed (Marketer: Case 7).

The quotation above identifies the tension faced by the sampled cases. In this case, the desire by consumers to form closer links with the brewery, and see behind-the-scenes conflicts directly with the values of religious life. The Trappist Orders face real problems in balancing these two sets of values (commerce vs. religion) because consumers have become more interested in links between their food and beverage products and the place of origin. The Trappist Orders cannot completely downplay religion and religious life in their communications because that would reduce the point of difference between them and abbey beers (many of whom just use images of non-existent abbey's in their advertising) and, as a result, must make some effort to interact with customers.

The final conflict between stakeholders arises due to the tension between consumers, marketers, and the monks. This conflict occurs because consumers, attracted by the imagery of monks producing beers, desire more behind-the-scenes experience of monastic life and want to meet those directly responsible for producing the product (i.e., the monks).

Westmalle, there is no doubt it's authentic, I've been there and tasted the beer and seen the fathers brewing the beer and all the pictures, and there was a man who could tell us about his predecessors and that to me is authentic (Consumer: Tim).

The above quotation identifies the value consumers receive from being able to directly connect with the place and processes of production and the creative individuals behind this process. The ability of consumers to visit the orders, and undertake public relations tours is an essential strategy in reinforcing key attributes of the Trappist brands. Importantly, the ability to visit the Trappists and see behind the scenes is essential in lending the breweries a sense of authenticity, leading to a strong point of difference between the specialist Trappists and generalist mass-market strategists seeking to compete with them. In particular, Tim (and the other informants) value meeting the monks, hearing their personal stories about previous colleagues or the brewery's (and monastery's) history, drawing connections between the image and monastic life, and seeing behind-the-scenes. This includes a behind-the-scenes look at production process, as well as understanding how the product connects with the day-to-day running of the abbey. Knowing this, marketers desire to respond to this consumer interest as a means of enhancing corporate reputation (through a point of difference). For example:

Orval is a good example of trying to pick everything they can concerning free publicity. In the abbey of Westmalle we are not so good in this, we miss opportunities. We try to pick all the press but don't let TV team's film. The monks don't have a good feeling about that, they are a little bit older, and you have to imagine that they come to your home to film you all week long. What you do, what you eat. I can imagine that that is not so fine. We respect the fact that the monks don't want that, ok sometimes we think it is a shame (Marketer: Case 6).

The quotation above identifies the difficulty faced by marketers in exploiting this consumer interest in the day-to-day operation of the Trappist Order, and the desire to interact with the craftsman (monks) responsible for production, without impinging on the monks' desire for privacy (at one extreme, one brewery had 80,000 visitors to the monastery per year,

as well potentially intrusive media interest). These marketers face a further problem. Within the confines of Trappist Orders (in contrast to others), monks follow a practice of strict observance where they only speak when necessary because they prefer to spend their time contemplating god. Although the marketer quoted above understands the need to manage public relations tours, communications about religious life, and the use of religious symbols in brand advertising (see section above) responsibly, he also recognizes that this is a missed opportunity to reinforce corporate reputation.

This conflict between consumers' interest and the monks' desire for privacy has real implications for the competitive positioning of the Trappists because the sampled consumers often had difficulty in telling Trappist products apart from abbey beers, unless they had actually visited the Trappist monasteries. For example, the projective techniques involving discussions of advertisements by Trappist and abbey beers reveals that all informants (especially those without prior brand knowledge) have real difficulty in differentiating between the two categories. Failure to deal with this could undermine the long-term viability of the Trappist image, thus placing social commitments and the future of the Order in question. A refusal to allow consumers behind the scenes means that the experience of visiting the Trappist monastery is little different from the highly stylized tours offered by commercial brewers. For example:

Trappist beers are brewed in an abbey in a real old fashioned way. You can really dive into the process, you can see the process when you visit the abbey, you don't see that with Grimbergen. The people who brew the beer, in the Trappists are the monks who make the beer, the large companies just have production employees, not in old fashioned clothes, in the Trappist you see how they live there, they really live for the product, with real addiction for the

product, in Grimbergen, they just work there for the money, they have no connection to the product (Consumer: Peter).

Peter's passage reinforces the importance of behind-the-scenes tours and advertising of the Trappist story to his impression of authenticity, and, more importantly, a sense of difference between the Trappist beers and the more commercial abbey beers seeking to position themselves as *faux* Trappists.

4.2. Managing Tension through Ambiguity

The previous discussion identifies the conflicts arising from tensions between multiple stakeholders. The Trappist marketing staff has to manage these conflicts carefully when they engage in communication, lest they raise the ire of the monks, older customers, and critics. Yet, failure to engage in some form of promotion results in loss of retailer support, lost opportunities with younger consumers, and potential decline in the point of differentiation between Trappist and abbey beers, all of which can effect the viability of the Trappist Orders and their ability to meet social obligations. To manage these multiple stakeholder conflicts the Trappist marketers engaged in a strategy of deliberate strategic ambiguity across their communications (Eisenberg, 1984; Suchman, 1995).

This tension necessitates some degree of ambiguity in external communications to enhance effectiveness. In practice, organizations confronted with conflicting stakeholders can engage in "strategies that do not minimize ambiguity but are nonetheless effective" (Leitch and Davenport, 2002, p. 130). In the context of communications, this strategy is believed to result in downplaying certain details of the organizations' operations that conflict with the desired image (Beverland and Luxton, 2005), having vague mission statements (Leitch and Davenport, 2002), and adapting messages for alternate audiences (Kates and Goh, 2003).

Critics also affirm the importance of authenticity (see Hieronymus, 2005). Our own analysis of Trappist advertising and communications affirmed this view, as did the Trappist marketers and the industry representation that stress the centrality of authenticity to the Trappist image. Also, the Trappists promote their products under the banner “Authentic Trappist Product”. Thus, the broad positioning concept used by the Trappist marketers to solve problems of stakeholder conflict focuses on authenticity. The authors’ findings identify that positioning Trappist breweries as bearers of authenticity accommodates multiple stakeholder interpretations.

The analysis of the Trappist communication identifies that Trappist breweries use planned messages, inferred, and maintenance to emphasize their broad positioning. Planned messages include tasteful adverts of monks brewing beer and interacting with raw ingredients (emphasizing handcrafted traditions), overt messages on websites that emphasize commitment to social causes (emphasizing religious connections), pictures of people enjoying beer in cafes (emphasizing consumption in moderation), and the use of public relations tours that emphasize consumption as part of everyday life in the Abbey. These planned messages also include promotional material such as branded glassware, table mats, and old styled posters. The Trappist breweries also support their positioning ambiguously through the use inferred messages, such as the use of historical signs such as old monastery’s ruins, traditional copper brewing kettles, old styled fonts and glass bottles, and marks showing founding years. Inferred messages further highlight authenticity through the use of wooden crates for packaging, bottles wrapped individually in paper, and pictures of monks packing these crates by hand (emphasizing continuity and small scale production). Lastly, maintenance messages are also used by Trappist orders whereby the limited interaction with the Trappist Orders and the fact that monks follow a practice of strict observance, emphasizes religious life and connections to the past.

Communication ambiguity is deployed, for example, through emphasizing traditional production methods and old production machinery, so that the Trappists allay fears that they were adapting their product to modern tastes or responding to retailer pressure for change. Nonetheless, on this point, the Trappists invest in new production equipment resulting in improved consistency and quality (as noted by critics), thus meeting retailer needs (and, by implication, the younger consumers purchasing from them).

In terms of communications, these investments are downplayed, although not denied, because the Trappists discuss these in terms of ongoing passion for product excellence and emphasize that these investments allowed them to meet social obligations and represented a living tradition. An example of ambiguity relates to the deliberate promotion of Trappist beer as something to savor in special occasions or with friends much like a fine wine. For example, the Trappists develop promotional material (branded glassware, table mats, and old styled posters) for traditional pubs, and use advertisements emphasizing enjoyment in moderation, drinking with friends and family, and appreciating the aroma of the beer. This strategy targets all consumers, thus reinforcing older consumers' perceptions of the beers, placing the beers in contexts that younger consumers would be in, and creating a strong point of difference between them and mass-marketed beers that are typically consumed in volume and quickly (drunk straight from the bottle). Importantly, such a strategy also negates concerns over promoting alcohol consumption because it encourages moderate consumption, slow enjoyment, appreciation, and consumption with food.

A third strategy involves walking a fine line between the overt use of religious imagery, and failing to make any noticeable connection between the Order and the image. For example, stylized images of jolly monks in gaudy colors are typical of many abbey beers, but never used by the Trappist breweries. This creates a subtle form of differentiation. Religious connections are created by statements on bottles and websites emphasizing that the beer is

brewed in a Trappist monastery, and tasteful advertisements show the monks brewing the beer. In contrast to abbey beers that often use religious icons such as stained glass pictures, pictures of religious orders, and monks drinking beer, Trappist beer labels are very simple, merely containing the name of the Order in Gothic script, and the beer style labeled double and triple which relates to alcohol content.

Several outcomes follow from these strategies. First, they are successful in retaining a point of difference between Trappist beers and other beers including abbey beers. This is especially true when combined with information on the Order through websites or public relations tours. Second, this low-key approach to advertising allays concerns of monks about exploiting religion for commercial gain, while also ensuring the sales growth necessary for funding social programs. Third, the emphasis on responsible consumption reinforces their position as a higher status producer, and allays concerns regarding promotion of alcohol. Positioning on authenticity also helps deflect criticism on this issue because Trappists can argue they are continuing past traditions and are socially motivated. Fourth, this ambiguity allows marketers to meet requests from retailers without being seen to undermine important religious values. Finally, these strategies create a position of unified diversity (Eisenberg, 1984) and allow buy-in by multiple stakeholders, thus responsibly responding to their concerns.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate whether communication ambiguity can create reputational consistency among multiple stakeholders. Our study identifies one broad solution to managing multiple and competing stakeholders, responding to calls for research on this issue (Koll *et al.*, 2005; Maignan *et al.*, 2005; Voss *et al.*, 2005). Literature suggests that corporate reputation is formed over time (Balmer and Greyser 2006) through subjective interpretations evoked from consistent external messages (Alessandri, 2001; Deephouse and

Carter 2005; Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Glynn 2000; Markwick and Fill, 1995; Suchman 1995). We acknowledge that planned, inferred and maintenance messages (Markwick and Fill 1995) lie within the control of an organization, however the benefits of message openness is questioned in the context of communicating with multiple stakeholders. While the use of open and explicit communications is acknowledged to impact stakeholder perceptions of an organization, and the creation of corporate reputation, this is in itself one perspective. The basis of this paper is to focus on other perspectives in relation to minimizing tensions among stakeholders, and creating a clear positioning that contributes to corporate reputation.

The line of thought that we adopt in this paper reflects the perspective of Davenport and Leitch (2005), Eisenberg (1984) and Goss and Williams (1973) where ambiguous communications allow contradictory interpretations and consequently reduced conflict. We extend this to understand how ambiguity not only minimizes conflict among stakeholders, but also enables a clear positioning and contributes to reputational benefits. Further, in contrast to previous work on strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984; Leitch and Davenport, 2002), the practices identified here represent real commitments to stakeholder concerns, rather than strategic practices aiming to deflect justified criticism.

This research was framed within the Trappist Brewery context. These breweries are considered representative of other hybrid firms who experience the effects of conflict arising from the need to respond to multiple stakeholders. Our findings are transferable to other settings where organizations face multiple and often conflicting stakeholders. That is, ambiguity applies to organizations that need to communicate different information to stakeholder and is not relevant to hybrid organizations alone. For example, an organization may want to impact corporate identity by varying communication with stockholders

compared to stock analysts, and again, communicate different information to community groups than they do consumers. While challenges with ambiguity in communications occur, and meeting such challenges successfully depends on organizational skill and management of the message, the relevance of this strategy to organizations facing stakeholder conflict is clear and is not confined to public sector organizations. A variety of organizations are impacted by competing stakeholder perspectives and, as a consequence, application of ambiguity is of interest.

It was noted from the outset that literature to date focuses on open communications in an effort to respond to multiple stakeholders and to portray a clear positioning in the minds of these message recipients. There is however a suggestion that deliberately ambiguous external communications create positive effects as they enable broadened interpretation by stakeholders despite the absence of exacting statements. To that end, the authors were interested in focusing on the tensions that arise in a hybrid context and how deliberate ambiguity not only quells tensions among stakeholders, but enables a defined organizational positioning and supports corporate reputation.

5.1 Ambiguity and Stakeholder Tensions

The first major finding from the study was that ambiguity minimizes tensions. Ambiguity allows multiple and even contradictory interpretations to coexist with the intention that conflict is avoided (Davenport and Leitch, 2005). That is, stakeholders focus on the abstract rather than specifics of a message whereby they selectively interpret information to support existing attitudes (Eisenberg, 1984; Goss and Williams, 1973). This allows each stakeholder to be united around commonalities rather focusing on their differences.

Several tensions were identified among stakeholders such as monks, retailers, consumers and beer critics. The Trappist marketing staff has to manage these tensions carefully. A central tension relates to communication where monks, older customers, and critics were resistant to overt communications yet failure to engage in some form of promotion negatively impacts market potential and ultimately the Trappist Orders ability to meet social obligations. To manage these multiple stakeholder conflicts the Trappist marketers engaged in a strategy of deliberate strategic ambiguity across their communications (Eisenberg, 1984; Suchman, 1995).

Several examples of how communication ambiguity minimizes tension are provided. For example while consumers and retailers seek product consistency that is derived from modern production facilities, their communication of ambiguous symbols downplays their modernity. For example, adverts show monks brewing beer, interacting with raw ingredients and packing wooden crates by hand, traditional copper brewing kettles and individual paper wrapped bottles. This communication ambiguity allows the consumer to ignore the commercial realities of production and instead focus on traditions while satisfying retailer and consumer demands for product consistency. Consequently, marketers are able to communicate and satisfy each stakeholder. Retailers and consumers enjoy the uniquely historical position of the Trappist beers and these same retailers, consumers and beer critics further benefit from the production quality and related taste consistency. Further, Monks are satisfied with the traditional linkages between the brand and the Trappist order as it aligns with their social mission and community responsibility. As such, ambiguity enables allows multiple and even contradictory interpretations to coexist with the intention that conflict is avoided (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Eisenberg 1984).

5.2 Ambiguity and Positioning Consistency

The second major finding of this study relates to impact of ambiguity on positioning consistency. Evidence suggests that Trappist marketers develop a vague and permeable positioning, that allows for, and tolerates multiple constituencies but does also enable consistency largely due to its vagueness. Ambiguity enables breweries to use multiple messages to reinforce a deliberately ambiguous strategic position. This is in contrast to impression management, institutional, and brand management theories that advocate promoting a tightly defined point of difference based on cognitive and emotional benefits (Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Deephouse and Carter, 2005; Suchman, 1995) that may ultimately be challenged as being unsympathetic to stakeholder concerns.

Ambiguity facilitates Trappist marketers ability to create a broad positioning of authenticity. Authenticity is promoted in multiple forms in Trappist advertising and promotion. In this manner, ambiguity was demonstrated by planned, inferred and maintenance messages that use overt signs to enable message selectivity. That is, the corporate identity mix includes behaviour, communication and symbolism (Melewar and Jenins 2002; van Riel and Balmer 1997; Abratt 1989; Dowling 1994) with the intention to lead the evaluator toward an overall corporate image (Abratt, 1989; Alessandri, 2001). In an to craft brand identity through knowledge structures so that mental images are formed as a consequence of purposeful corporate actions (Dowling, 1986, 1988; Kennedy, 1977; MacInnis and Price, 1987), symbols, communications and behaviours are used by the Trappists. For example, the product packaging (glass containers and historical label images), promotions (coasters, posters) are symbols that infer tradition, heritage, history and evoke a sense of nostalgia in relation to the Trappist beers, however these are at odds with the commercial nature of production, distribution and promotion. The symbols used by Trappist

Breweries downplay the modern commercial motives of the breweries and allow the audience to focus on the abstract and engage in message selectivity to reinforce their existing attitudes (Eisenberg 1984; Goss and William 1973). This strategy results in multiple interpretations of the brewery's reputation, albeit unified around the positioning of authenticity.

This finding goes beyond previous conceptualizations of impression management, such as image morphing (that focuses on how organizations can have different advertised traditions across national borders), deliberate decoupling (that focuses on saying one thing and doing the other), and brand management theory that emphasizes the importance of targeting brands to consumer segments and using brand extensions to attract new groups.

5.3 Ambiguity and Corporate Reputation

It appears that hybrid organizations are using strategic ambiguity for maintenance of organizational reputation or image so that they improve stakeholder impressions. Hybrid organizations apply communication ambiguity at an organizational level to retain credibility so that stakeholders selectively interpret information to support existing attitudes about the organization (Eisenberg, 1984; Goss and Williams, 1973). The findings have important implications for impression management and corporate reputation. The Trappists, have no particular license on the use of their authentic position. Other organizations are free to use concepts such as authenticity, freedom, and flexibility in their marketing communications, suggesting a problem for achieving differentiation. Yet differentiation is possible under such a broad strategy as is demonstrated in the findings. First, although organizations may position themselves on imitable claims, the achievement of this position must take into account the particular circumstances of the promoting organizations. That is, organizations will mobilize their resources in different ways to achieve the same outcome, thus resulting in a difference

in execution and often subtle differences in brand position despite its ability to be adopted by multiple organizations. Second, organizations must live their espoused position lest they suffer attacks on their legitimacy and be seen as mere cynical commercial entities attempting to curry favor with stakeholder groups. Thus, in contrast to previous work on strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984; Leitch and Davenport, 2002), the practices identified here represent real commitments to stakeholder concerns, rather than strategic practices aiming to deflect justified criticism.

Overall, in relation to the question of whether organizations can successfully balance multiple stakeholder tensions through communications ambiguity while retaining consistency we offer some interesting insights. Communication ambiguity can minimize multiple stakeholder tensions. Further, ambiguity does not infer a lack of consistency. In fact, ambiguity empowers stakeholder to subjectively ascribe meaning to a brand whereby their meanings are based on message selectivity so that stakeholders are able to retain their own idea of consistency. We find that using a broad positioning concept such as the positioning of ‘authenticity’ adopted by the Trappist fits well with the creation of ambiguity. A broad positioning that seems vague accommodates multiple stakeholder interpretations. This was demonstrated with the broad positioning of ‘authenticity’. While ambiguous communications are projected, authenticity is such a broad notion that is subjectively constructed that it has room for each stakeholder to selectively ascribe signs to the organization that consistently relate to this positioning.

6. Limitations

This study has a number of inherent limitations. First, the findings are derived from a single industry case study involving organizations with unique values and marketing

problems. Although we suggest transferability to other contexts, future research is necessary to confirm these predictions. As such, the findings of this study are not generalisable without further research. Secondly, this research identifies some boundary conditions to the use of communications ambiguity. Not all organizations may have the ability to position themselves on broad abstract concepts and instead must focus on narrow cognitive benefits.

Finally, while we investigate use of communications ambiguity, the ethical implications of using such ambiguity in communications are unexplored in this paper. That is, we explore the tensions that exist among multiple stakeholders and the response of the focal organization, however we do not discuss the sender and receiver attitudes towards ambiguous communications and these are central to ethical judgments.

7. Future Research Directions

In response to the limitations outlined above, there are several recommendations for research. Further research could address some of these issues by widening the frame of reference of this study, such as testing other cases. Second, we recommend that future research focus on the ethical implications of using ambiguity in communications from both a sender and receiver perspective. Research also needs to look at how far one can stretch the ambiguity of the organization's image without diluting the organization's reputation and meaning. Research should also examine the behind-the-scenes influence tactics marketers must use to manage stakeholder tension and gain agreement of advertisements and communications among diverse groups. Finally, Eisenberg notes that there are varying occasions when clarity and ambiguity are desirable. Casting an eye to the external environment and an open systems perspective, an organization is dependent on stakeholders (directly or indirectly), who in turn have leverage over the organization. Research should

explore the use of strategic ambiguity in divergent organizations' and environmental contexts considering that environmental contingencies may constrain communication choices.

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