European Communications Summit
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Corporate and Political spheres: similarities and differences
Corporations are defined as groups of people authorised to act as an individual; essentially a corporation is a body of people acting as one[i]. Corporations were "first chartered in the public interest to meet a public need, to provide a public service. They were seen as extensions of the government"… doing public business[ii].

The requirement to balance out service and profit-making can lead to less than ethical strategic decisions, particularly in the realm of communication (sales, marketing and public relations) in order to sell products. However most recent studies of ethics in advertising, marketing and public relations talk of a fine line that is accepted by corporations, the media and consumers. Exaggerated claims are accepted, but with the proviso that no-one is harmed as a result of believing advertiser's claims; fundamental honesty is however demanded to maintain trust between consumer and the organisation. It is argued that such acceptance is on the decrease, the short term gains of the hard sell has wholesale negative associations among the majority of consumers. Hence, much current thinking focuses on the notion of the corporation as relationship builder and maintainer.

This evolving relationship between the corporate sphere and the increasingly unmanageable consumer means that ethical behaviour, social responsibility and honest, open communication becomes a fundamental part of corporate strategy in order to build and maintain relationships with consumers and establish loyalty. Thus while profit may underpin the aims of a corporation, the methods used to gain that profit can be the provision of a product that meets public needs and desires and about which communication is ethical and sustainable. Corporate communication is the projection of a consistent, and perhaps positive, image of the organisation, its products and services, its body of people, members, executive, across multiple audiences at one single moment[iii].

Political organisations do not differ significantly from the bodies corporate. While they may not provide the product, they set the framework for the allocation of resources and power within a community; this is the fundamental nature of the political offering. Equally, political organisations tend to work under similar constraints to their corporate counterparts, increased disloyalty and unmanageable consumers who are hard to reach due to fragmentation of the media and a postmodern approach to media usage. These factors, coupled with the competitive nature of politics (electoral and cause) and the competitive nature of the relationship between politics and the media, leads to greater use of corporate communication strategies (advertising and public relations). The goal is, as with their corporate counterparts) to gain profit – if we can elide the concept of profit with electoral or donative support; but the earning of profit rests upon gaining and keeping public trust. Some, such as Kevin Moloney, Bob Franklin and others argue from a highly idealistic perspective that there are vast differences between political and corporate organisations; however, in practice, there is significant elision between their aims and objectives, the context in which they operate and the resultant communication strategies.

There are key differences however; perhaps the most significant are not in terms of organisational behaviour or communication but in public expectations. While a high street brand can be excused

for misleading advertising, providing the ramifications are minor; a political party is not excused for using spin. The representative function of parties and pressure groups within a democratic pluralist society appears to place pressure on political organisations to be honest and open to scrutiny from the media and the public; the same is not true to the same extent for corporate brands. This places significant pressure upon the communication professionals that operate within the political sphere.

Identity, both corporate and political, has come to the fore in recent years. In particular the importance of the narrative (story) which enables either type of organisation to position itself in an era where ideologies and meta-narratives seem passé[iv]. suggest five types of identity, the narrative covering three: professed (what the organisation claims as identity); projected (how it voices identity); and manifested (the organisations' history). While history can be perceived as much as it is controlled; these three elements can be determined by the organisation. Parties and individuals position themselves ideologically and personally, defining themselves within the society they seek to represent; they will determine how to communicate these elements across the media mix; also they will choose how to invoke history both in terms of accepting and rejecting parts of their own and the organisation's past in a process of both deification and rehabilitation[v]. Such narratives if built carefully and accepted and promoted via independent mass media can be powerful tools of political communication[vi].

The problems for political organisations lie in other two types of identity: experience and attributed identity, something that contrasts them with their corporate counterparts. The key challenge for political organisations is bridging the identity gap created by a lack of direct experience with the brand. While members and activists may have experienced the brand's identity, for the rest of the population experience of political products is indirect and assumed, if not attributed by the mass media. Therefore identity is attributed from perceptions built from third party commentaries, often mediated, and preconceptions based on performance character. Perceptions of parties can be built from media appearances by the leader; in contrast a bank, supermarket or even online insurance agent can offer a tangible experience to its customers. It appears then that a clear challenge for professionals in political communication, particularly at the government or supra-national level is translating political actions (policy) into tangible experiences that audiences can see and feel. But is that possible?

What is required is a clear linear connection between the narrative as developed over time, often through marketing and public relations campaigns, and the provision of services to the individual and their community. The separation between a government or supranational political body, who sets the parameters for the allocation of power and resources, and the bodies that then provide the services can lead to confusion over the role of the overarching body. Successes can be attributed to the local provider; failure linked to the larger body. This is particularly the case in the competitive environment of politics. A major problem for a party in government is the criticism they face within political systems built around opposition. While opposition is necessary to ensure checks and balances, too much opposition leads to mistrust in a system of yah-boo politics. Electoral politics needs marketing! Oppositionalism can creates mistrust, but it is the perception of non-accountability that often appears to be key to the entrenched mistrust that exists in many Western democratic societies. Politicians fight amongst themselves but have little interaction with the public; the media assume the role of hectoring watchdogs, digging the dirt on all sides; the

public become spectators of the process.

Corporate organisations have a clear message, they have competitors but not ones who challenge their claims directly; thus there is a clear linear process between brand, message and product. If satisfaction is created, so is trust. The fractured route political communication takes, and the lack of clear connection between the narrative and experience, leads to the creation of an attributed identity, one led by negative perceptions offered by oppositionalist reportage and separating political organisations further from their public. This is the challenge, can it be met?

The direction some academics[vii], and it seems many political organisations, are looking towards is that offered by Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The solution to the disconnection between society and its elected representatives, and actual and attributed identity, is for greater interaction to take place[viii]. Given that ICT and in particular Web 2.0 offers the potential for that interactivity it is unsurprising that candidates for election are exploiting social networks, weblogs, websites, email and e-newsletters and even Second Life[ix]. But studies find that the current online offerings are more about shaping perceptions and attributed identity[x], so appearing to interact, than actual interaction and, where interaction does take place, it is more likely to be during a campaign than a term of office. Thus a gap exists for political organisations that is not a problem for most corporations; the lack of direct experience with the brand and its products means that narratives become all important but the narrative must be shared more widely and inclusively with society; the big question is how possible this is?

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[i] Christensen et al, (2008), Corporate Communication, London: Sage, p. 8

[ii] R. Estes (1996) Tyranny of the bottom line: Why corporations make good people do bad things. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, p. x

[iii] Cornelissen, (2004)

[iv] B. Moingeon and G. Soenen (2002) Corporate and Organisational Identities: Integrating Strategy, Communication and Organisational Perspectives, London: Routledge, p. 17

[v] On this point parties which rebrand as 'New' as in the UKs New Labour or alter their image such as many leftist parties, or develop a personal history such as French presidential candidate Segolene Royal

[vi] There is little work on the power of the narrative in political communication but on broader brands see the work of Phillip Pullman

[vii] In particular the work of Professor Stephen Coleman.

[viii] G. Stoker (2006) Why Politics Matters, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

[ix] The use of ICT during election has been mapped see D G Lilleker & N Jackson, Mapping the new political communication arena, forthcoming 2008/9.

[x] In the UK alone, even the use of social networks focus mainly on top-down communication, see D G Lilleker & N Jackson, Bandwagon or Revolution, paper presented to the Web 2.0 political communication strand, 17 April 2008. Publication to follow.