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Analysis of values and communication of the Responsible Brands. Corporate Brand strategies for sustainability

*Análisis de los valores y la comunicación de las Marcas responsables.
Estrategias de las marcas corporativas en el contexto de la Sostenibilidad*

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ABSTRACT: New social demands require responsible behavior of companies. This phenomenon, which has coincided with the development of social responsibility, has a direct impact on the corporate brand and values, including the vision and mission associated with the brand. Using a sample of 10 companies, this study is based on a qualitative analysis study of identity issues related to responsibility and sustainability which are part of the corporate communication message. The results

¹ Part of this article was developed during a research period between June and September, 2011 as Visiting Scholar in the Center for Business Ethics at Bentley University (Waltham, MA) and as Research Fellow in the Real Colegio Complutense at Harvard University (Cambridge, MA).

show that brands develop similar discourses in order to exhibit the identity. Only a few of these companies define their strategic positioning on ethical issues.

RESUMEN: *Las nuevas demandas sociales exigen a las empresas un comportamiento responsable. Este fenómeno, que ha coincidido con el desarrollo y auge de la Responsabilidad Social, tiene también un impacto directo en la marca corporativa y en los valores, visión y misión que se asocian a la misma. Con una muestra de 10 empresas, se realiza un estudio cualitativo de los rasgos de identidad vinculados a la responsabilidad y la sostenibilidad presentes en los mensajes de comunicación corporativa. Los resultados muestran que las marcas desarrollan discursos similares para expresar la identidad. Sólo algunas optan por definir su posicionamiento en aspectos éticos.*

Keywords: Corporate brand, ethical identity, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, responsible brand.

Palabras clave: Marca corporativa, identidad ética, responsabilidad social corporativa, sostenibilidad, marca responsable.

1. Introduction

This report focuses not only on the corporate brand, but also, on the analysis of the corporate identity as a key point to define the values from which the brand builds meanings and relationships with its stakeholders (Freeman, 1984, 1994)². As a result, a responsible behavior is required for the companies. Therefore, concepts such as corporate citizen, sustainability, responsibility or shared value appear more and more frequently on the corporate discourse. This phenomenon, which has happened at the same time that the development of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), also has had a straight impact on the corporate brand and in its values, vision and mission.

This study relates these concepts and, specifically, it analyzes the construction of identities and corporate brands that connect with ethical and responsible values. From the analysis of corporate communication activities of selected companies, it is identified the universe of meanings related to sustainability and responsibility that these brands are sharing with their stakeholders.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the academic literature from the field of corporate branding and its relationship with the identity, corporate social responsibility and sustainability are reviewed. Secondly, the objectives, hypothesis and methodology of the study are established through a qualitative analysis of corporate messages with a sample of ten selected Merco Responsible Companies of the 2011's ranking. Then, the main results of the analysis are reflected upon. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion on the main conclusions reached in this investigation.

² Cfr. FREEMAN, R. Edward, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Pitman, Boston, 1984; FREEMAN, R. Edward, "The Politics of Stakeholder Theory: Some Future Directions", *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 1994, 4(4), 409-429.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Corporate Brand

The management of the brand or branding is a field of study widely discussed in the academic literature for several decades. Traditionally, these studies analyzed the brand from a marketing perspective and, therefore, they focused their attention on the relationship of the brand with the consumers or customers from a business perspective³. However, since the early 90's, publications have arisen identifying the need to approach the brand not only with regards to its products and services, but also from a broader approach that take into account the company with a global vision⁴ (Bernstein, 1989, King, 1991; Balmer, 1995). At first, the concept of company brand is stated but shortly after the concept of corporate brand which is used up until today is consolidated.

The distinctive feature of the corporate brand is that it is built to express the identity, in other words, the values, vision and culture of a company (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer, Fukukawa and Grey, 2007, Keller, 2008; Hatch and Schultz, 2008)⁵. The identity can be considered the element that unifies the organization and provides a reference to the stakeholders. The release of this new brand approach has highlighted the need for management above the boundaries of the marketing department. Consequently, it involves the entire organization because all areas have an impact on the brand and its different stakeholders⁶ (Ind, 1997; Hulberg, 2006, Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2008).

The increasing attention that companies are paying in the past two decades to the development and management of corporate brands is explained by various reasons. On the one hand, the new economic and social context in which companies operate requires a new way of understanding and managing the brand. In an era characterized by strong competition, and by the need to find new forms of differentiation, globalization and internationalization, the corporate brand emerges as a navigational tool⁷ (Balmer, 2010) that guides the entire organization, involves its employees and improves the relationship

³ Cfr. AAKER, David, J., *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name*, Free Press, New York, 1991.

⁴ Cfr. BERNSTEIN, David, "Corporate void", *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 8, 1989, pp. 315-320; KING, Stephen, "Brand-building in the 1990's", *Journal of Marketing Management*, 7, 1, 1991, pp. 3-13; BALMER, John M.T. "Corporate branding and connoisseurship", *Journal of General Management*, vol. 21 n°. 1, 1995, pp. 24-46.

⁵ Cfr. BALMER, John M.T. and GRAY Edmund R., "Corporate brands: what are they? What of them?", *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 37, n° 7/8, 2003, pp. 972-997; BALMER, John M.T., FUKUKAWA, Kyoko and GRAY Edmund R., "The nature and management of ethical corporate identity: a commentary on corporate identity, corporate social responsibility and ethics", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2007, 76. pp. 7-15; KELLER, Kevin L., "Building and managing corporate brand equity", in SCHULTZ, Majken, HATCH, Mary Jo and LARSE, Morgens H. (eds.), *The Expressive Organization*, Oxford University press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 116-137; HATCH, Mary Jo and SCHULTZ, Majken, *Taking Brand Initiative: How companies can align strategy, culture and identity through corporate branding*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2008.

⁶ Cfr. IND, Nicholas, *The corporate Brand*, Macmillan Business, London, 1997; HULBERG, Jon, "Integrating corporate branding and sociological paradigms: A literature study", *Brand Management*, vol. 14, n° 1/2, 2006, pp. 60-73; HATCH, Mary Jo and SCHULTZ, Majken, "Are the Strategic Stars Aligned for Your Corporate Brand?", *Harvard Business Review* 79, 2001, pp. 128-134; HATCH, Mary Jo and SCHULTZ, Majken, *Taking Brand Initiative... op. cit.* 2008.

⁷ Cfr. BALMER, John M.T., "Explicating corporate brands and their management: reflections and directions from 1995", *Brand Management*, vol. 18, 3, 2010, pp. 180-196.

with the stakeholders. On the other hand, there is a greater demand from society to have more information on companies, not only about its products and services. Thus, today the stakeholders want to know what values and principles the companies have, what their commitments to sustainability are and how they understand and deal with businesses.

In this context, branding, which addresses these new demands, provides significant competitive advantages for companies because, as stated by Balmer and Gray⁸ (2003), this allows the corporate brand: to communicate company values, differentiate from competitors and strengthen esteem and loyalty ties in the relationship between the company and its stakeholders. According to Hulberg⁹ (2006) the three main factors that explain the growing interest in developing the corporate brand are: the ability to differentiate (these attributes are more difficult to copy than the characteristics of a product), transparency (it reflects the information on the company in a more open and accessible way) and cost reduction (rather than push many brands power a joint strategy to encourage the synergy and consistency of messages).

However, for the brand to become a competitive advantage, on the one hand the company must have a strong and virtuous identity from where they can build the brand. On the other hand, it should be able to develop a brand management model transferring its character (including its different brands, business divisions and staff) and coherence to all its performances. From this point of view, the corporate brand involves a great challenge: the brand must be experienced in the organization and, in turn, it must be shared by the society in each of its actions¹⁰ (Alloza, 2001).

With all the above mentioned, it can be said that, although the corporate brand is based on the product brand and shares the goal of creating differentiation and belonging emotions¹¹ (Knox and Bickerton, 2003), its scope and its management are very different. First, its scope is much broader, due to the fact the corporate brand is not only the products and services of a company, but also the company itself. Thus, the brand is directly related to the policies of the organization¹² (Goodyear, 1996; De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003). The corporate brand represents the identity, the values and principles. Furthermore, it represents a promise that affects the behavior of the organization with all its stakeholders.

Taking into consideration the impact that this brings to the organization, the corporate brand involves management procedures which are more complex than the product brand. King¹³ (1991) notes that one of the challenges faced by managers regarding the corporate brand, is to be able to relate the stakeholders with the internal audiences. This is because the employees are a significant stakeholder in business management, which are in different departments and requires that companies should be able to deliver the message which is in tune with the offer. Indeed, one of the major difficulties of management is this ability to respond and build a personality capable of interacting with

⁸ Cfr. BALMER, John M.T. and GRAY Edmund R., "Corporate brands...", *op. cit.*, pp. 972-997.

⁹ Cfr. HULBERG, Jon, "Integrating corporate branding", *op.cit.*, pp. 60-73.

¹⁰ Cfr. ALLOZA, Ángel, "La gestión estratégica de la marca", in *El estado de la publicidad y el corporate en España y Latinoamérica*, Pirámide: Madrid, 2001, pp. 207-269.

¹¹ Cfr. KNOX, Simon and BICKERTON, David, "The six conventions of corporate branding", *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 37, n° 7/8, 2003, pp. 998-1016.

¹² Cfr. GOODYEAR, Mary, "Divided by a common language", *Journal of Market Research Society*, vol. 38, n° 2, 1996, pp. 110-122; DE CHERNATONY, Leslie, and McDONALD, Malcolm, *Creating powerful brands*, 3rd edition, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2003.

¹³ Cfr. KING, Stephen, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-13.

different stakeholders which sometimes have conflicting interests¹⁴ (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Villagra, 2010). Ind¹⁵ (1997) also highlights the difficulty in managing the wide variety of points of contact between the company and its stakeholders. Simoes and Dibb¹⁶ (2001) also point out the difficulty of building a coherent corporate brand arguing as reasons the high degree of intangibility, the complexity and the social responsibility involved in its management. To this complexity it must be added the need to adapt to the different cultural contexts in which the company operates, which involves the consistent management from a global perspective and the relevance from a local perspective. This aspect is particularly relevant in international brands¹⁷ (Cerviño, 2002).

Therefore, the corporate brand is a dynamic entity, which is defined by the organization from its identity, and that includes values and a promise that have to be a referent for internal and external stakeholders. However, this cannot be defined in a unilateral way from the company because it must be understood as something interrelated (Alloza, 2010: 156).

The brand is not placed in the center of its world seeing the rest of the social reality as its environment, the brand is placed at the heart of a network of relationships in which it is incorporated and decide what kind of relationship to establish with the network because the value and wealth creation depend on those relationships¹⁸.

As a consequence, the brand is built every day as a result of the interactions generated with all its stakeholders, and what is more important, as the universe of symbols and experiences that the companies and its stakeholders share.

2.2. Identity as base of building coherent and responsible brands

To identify the basic components that make up the corporate brand Hatch and Schultz¹⁹ (2008) propose a management model that starts from the identity of the company in relation to three aspects: the company's strategic vision, the culture (and all the aspects that have to do with the internal stakeholders) and, finally, the image and the perceptions that its stakeholders have. According to these authors, the brand management must be based on aligning these components with the purpose of not occurring into failures that could affect the overall image and reputation of the brand. In

¹⁴ Cfr. BALMER, John M.T. and GRAY Edmund R., *op. cit.*, pp. 972-997; VILLAGRA, Nuria, “Los retos de la marca corporativa y su relación con las marcas de producto”, in VILLAFANE, Justo (dir.), *Informe Anual 2010. La comunicación empresarial y la gestión de los intangibles de España y Latinoamérica*, Pearson Educación, Madrid, 2010, pp. 215-220.

¹⁵ Cfr. IND, Nicholas, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Cfr. SIMOES, Claudia and DIBB, Sally, “Rethinking the brand concept: New brand orientation”, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 6 (4), 2001, pp. 217-224.

¹⁷ Cfr. CERVIÑO, Julio, *Marcas internacionales. Cómo crearlas y gestionarlas*, Pirámide, Madrid, 2002.

¹⁸ ALLOZA, Ángel, “De Maquiavelo a Neurociencia: las marcas que queremos”, in VILLAFANE, Justo, (dir.), *Informe Anual 2010. La comunicación empresarial y la gestión de los intangibles de España y Latinoamérica*, Pearson Educación, Madrid, 2010, pp.131-171.

¹⁹ Cfr. HATCH, Mary Jo y SCHULTZ, Majken, *op. cit.*

this context, reputation is understood as a result of a good corporate behavior and good management with the stakeholders²⁰ (Fombrun, 2005).

In the same way as within this model, there exists a consensus in the literature when indicating that the identity is the basis from where a coherent and differentiated corporate brand²¹ can be built (De Chernatony, 1999; Harris and De Chernatony, 2001; Urde, 2003; Hulberg, 2006; Hatch and Schultz, 2008). This is because the identity is a basic component of the brand, as it is going to be reflected in the behaviors and corporate communication²² (Balmer et al, 2007). Hence, it is essential when providing a uniform brand experience. In fact, Villafañe²³ (1999) defines identity as the core of the company, its essence and also emphasizes its mutable and dynamic character.

In the process of brand building and management it is very important that the identity is based on principles and solid, consistent values, because these will guide all corporate activities and, consequently, they will be perceived by the stakeholders. As it has been mentioned above, the stakeholders demand information about the vision, principles and values. Thus, the main objective of corporate branding is to shape the value system of the company and to help promote and build its reputation²⁴ (Fan, 2005). Consequently, the corporate brand summarizes the main identity values through a brand promise and establishes relationships and emotional links with the *stakeholders*: “*The emphasis of corporate branding lies in the articulation of a set of values that span the corporation as a whole, casting an umbrella over all its offerings across diverse marketplaces*”²⁵ (Palazzo and Basu, 2007: 336).

The values of the company should be reflected in a consistent way in all corporate actions²⁶ (Hatch and Schultz, 2001; weaves, 2003; Aaker, 2004). This implies that the values are internalized and shared throughout the organization.

According to Schultz and De Chernatony²⁷ (2002) the branding strategy provides a dynamic context that articulates the various activities of the company for which it announces what is and what can be expected now and in the future. However, at this point, assuming the relevance of communicating corporate values today, some questions have to be taken into consideration: What values should communicate the corporate brand? What commitments and principles have to be adopted by the company with regards to the society? Should the company communicate values centered in the professional or ethical commitments or must the company also adopt much broader social commitments? How to communicate the CSR strategies and sustainability in the

²⁰ Cfr. Fombrun, Charles J., “Building Corporate Reputation Through CSR Initiatives: Evolving Standards”, *Corporate Reputation Review*, 2005, vol. 8, n° 1, pp. 7-11.

²¹ Cfr. DE CHERNATONY, Leslie, “Brand Management Through narrowing the gap between brand identity and brand reputation”, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 15, 1999, pp. 157-179; HARRIS, Fiona y DE CHERNATONY Leslie, “Corporate branding and corporate brand performance”, *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 35, n° 3, 2001, pp. 72-86; URDE, Mats, “Core Value-based Corporate Brand Building”, *European Journal of Marketing*, 37, 2003, pp. 1017-1040; HULBERG, Jon, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-73; HATCH, Mary Jo and SCHULTZ, Majken, *op. cit.*

²² Cfr. BALMER, John M.T., FUKUKAWA, Kyoko and GRAY Edmund R., *op. cit.*, pp. 7-15.

²³ Cfr. VILLAFANE, Justo, *La gestión profesional de la imagen corporativa*, Pirámide, Madrid, 1999.

²⁴ Cfr. FAN, Ying, “Ethical branding and corporate reputation”, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 10, 4, 2005, pp. 341-350.

²⁵ Cfr. PALAZZO, Guido and BASU, Kunal, “The Ethical Backlash of Corporate Branding”, *Journal of Business Ethics* 73, 2007, pp. 333-346.

²⁶ Cfr. HATCH, Mary Jo and SCHULTZ, Majken, *op. cit.*; URDE, Mats, *op. cit.*, pp. 1017-1040; AAKER, David A., *op. cit.*, pp. 6-18.

²⁷ Cfr. SCHULTZ, Majken and DE CHERNATONY, Leslie, “The Challenge of Corporate Branding”, *Corporate Reputation Review* 5, 2002, pp. 105-112.

identity features and in the brand discourse? All of these issues are discussed in the following sections, as well as their relationship and implications for brands.

2.3. *Values contribution in building responsible brands*

As it has been mentioned before, in recent decades the society have shown a growing interest in learning behaviors, values and attitudes of companies towards social issues and the socially responsible management. At the same time than this trend, there has also been an increase in the incorporation of ethical criteria when assessing the performance of companies. Therefore, the base on which an ethical and responsible brand has to be built is its identity and values. Consequently, Fan²⁸ (2005) notes that an ethical brand must have at least as core values trust, honesty and integrity.

As a result, there is a trend in the recent years to enhance the identity factors of the companies and to define new strategies and brand management to conciliate the interests of the company with the interests of society. This new attitude, established from the foundation of the corporation, must be integrated into the branding strategy, 1) for the corporate brand and product brands have an identity and a personality consistent with this new attitude and 2) to be perceived uniquely by shifting the experiences and messages of this strategy to the stakeholders.

According to Fan²⁹ (2005) branding is a human activity and, therefore, it must be evaluated from a moral perspective. Van de Ven also agrees with this approach and notes that:

As consumers tend to personalize the relationship with a corporate brand, it should come as no surprise that they judge the “personality” of the corporation as if one is actually dealing with a moral person. As a result, the behavior of a corporation is judged in virtue ethical terms such as “crooked”, “corrupt”, or “trustworthy” and “responsible”³⁰ (Van de Ven, 2008: 341).

Ind³¹ (1997) also highlights the relevance of the responsibility, noting that a corporate brand has an ethical imperative or social responsibility wider than the product brand. This has encouraged the development of a corporate discourse based on values that exceed the commercial offering of the company and that are grouped around social or environmental dimensions or those regarding human rights.

This entire trend has evolved in parallel with the development of CSR³². In fact, CSR is a concept widely discussed in academic literature from the second half of the 20th century. CSR encompasses economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic expectations that the society has of the business³³ (Carroll, 1979). Primarily, this concept has been related

²⁸ Cfr. FAN, Ying, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-350.

²⁹ Cfr. FAN, Ying, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-350.

³⁰ VAN DE VEN, Bert, “An ethical framework for the marketing of corporate social responsibility”, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 82, 2008, pp. 339-352.

³¹ Cfr. IND, Nicholas, *op. cit.*

³² There are used in Spanish similar concepts to the CSR such as: responsibility, social responsibility, corporate social responsibility and corporate responsibility although social responsibility of the business applies to all companies. However, the general concept used in the academic English literature is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

³³ Cfr. CARROLL, Archie, “A Three-Dimensional Conceptual Model of Corporate Performance”, *Academy of Management Review*, 1979, 4(4), pp. 497-505.

with developed countries economies³⁴ (Carroll, 1991; Christensen and Overdof, 2000, Freeman, 1984, 1994). However, the attention of the emerging movement of CSR explains a recent interest linked to the economic growth and competitiveness³⁵ of developing countries (Baskin, 2006; López and Fornes, 2011), to define the new expectations of the stakeholders with regards to the company in a global context. This concept is further developed taking into consideration the existing relationship between businesses and sustainability³⁶ (Brundtland, 1987; Elkinton, 1998; Rudnicki, 2000), coupled with the growing awareness of the society on problems regarding the planet and that the United Nations includes in its international initiatives (Global Compact and the Millennium Goals, among others). The European Commission defines CSR as the responsibility enterprises have for their impact on the society, maximizing the creation of shared value with the stakeholders and the society in the long term, while mitigating the negative impacts as part of its management³⁷ (European Commission, 2011).

Thus, CSR is understood as a new business management model that includes economic, social and environmental values, as well as ethical values in management, providing differentiation and competitiveness in business. This leads to successful economic results for companies³⁸ (Garriga and Melé, 2004). The relevance of CSR has also coincided with the appearance of other concepts increasingly settled in business management, such as corporate citizenship, the triple bottom line, sustainability and business ethics.

All of these concepts have a direct connection with the management of the corporate brand. In fact, concepts such as responsible company, sustainable business or corporate citizenship³⁹ (Lozano, 2009) are used increasingly to refer to organizations that enhance this dimension especially in their management and communication models in line with their ethical standards.

At the same time, a responsible brand is a brand that includes ethical, social and environmental values as well as economic ones in its commitment to the stakeholders⁴⁰

³⁴ Cfr. CARROLL, Archie, "The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility: Towards the Moral Management of Organizational Stakeholders", *Business Horizons*, July/August, 1991, pp. 39-48; CHRISTENSEN, Clayton M. and OVERDOF, Michael, Meeting the challenge of disruptive change, *Harvard Business Review*, 78 (2), 2000, pp. 66-75; FREEMAN, R. Edward, Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach, *Pitman, Boston*, 1984; FREEMAN, R. Edward, "The Politics of Stakeholder Theory: Some Future Directions", *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 4(4), 1994, pp. 409-429.

³⁵ Cfr. BASKIN, Jeremy, "Value, values and sustainability -corporate responsibility in emerging market companies", *Working paper, University of Cambridge Programme for Industry, Cambridge, 1, October 2006*; LÓPEZ, Belen and FORNES, Gaston, "Corporate Social Responsibility in emerging markets: Evidence from Spanish MNCs in Latin America", SPAIS (School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies), University of Bristol, Working Paper, nº 02-11.

³⁶ Cfr. BRUNDTLAND, Gro Harlem, "Our common future/World Commission on Environment and Development", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987; ELKINTON, John, *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*, Capstone Publishing Ltd, Oxford, 1998; RUDNIKI, Mark, "Environmental and Social Responsibility as the value in modern politics", Paper delivered during meeting the OIKOS Int. Warsaw, 10 November 2000.

³⁷ Cfr. EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of the Regions*, 2011.

³⁸ Cfr. GARRIGA, Elisabet and MELE, Domènec, "Corporate Social Responsibility Theories: Mapping the Territory", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2004, 53: 51-71.

³⁹ Cfr. LOZANO, José María, *La empresa ciudadana como empresa responsable y sostenible*. Editorial Trotta: Madrid, 2009.

⁴⁰ Cfr. KUJALA, Johanna, PENTTILÄ, Katriina and TUOMINEN, Pekka, "Creating a conceptual model for building responsible brands", *EJBO, Electronic Journal of Business Ethics and Organization Studies*, 2011, Vol, 16, No.1, pp. 6-12.

(Kujala, Penttilä and Tuominen, 2011). If what characterizes a corporate brand is to express the identity, attitudes and behaviors of a company by building a universe of meanings between the organization and its stakeholders, a responsible brand is one that represents companies that are creating an ethical and responsible management and also enhancing these aspects in its values of positioning and its discourses. As a result, responsible brands relate to that category of brands that want to transmit the excellence in management of social and ethics aspects to their stakeholders.

As it has been explained before, from the point of view of the company, the creation of brands based on ethical or responsible aspects brings great advantages because it enables connecting the discourse of the companies with an increasing demand present in the society. Furthermore, it is a key differentiator in terms of positioning because it is innovative and well valued by stakeholders.

However, there are other important issues or aspects that deserve consideration. First, society demands an ethical business behavior but at the same time society is very critical. Stakeholders reward companies that perform ethically and punish those who do not. Therefore the companies are being evaluated from a moral criteria⁴¹ (Du, S., CB Bhattacharya and S. Sen, 2010; Lewis, 2001). As the demands on these issues will be very high, it should be noticed that, once the commitments are adopted, the company must be consistent with them in their actions. In other words, once the brand takes on some values and ethical standards, the company cannot go back, because the stakeholders will expect and demand that the companies maintain them. As a consequence, the best thing is to take small steps that are achievable rather than large ones which are only declarations of good intentions⁴² (Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005). Consequently, there are studies illustrating that consumers punish those companies they perceive as unethical regarding their social commitments⁴³ (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Becker-Olser *et al.*, 2006).

A second consideration relates to the positioning as a responsible and sustainable brand. This positioning is not suitable for all companies and should be pursued only if the organization aims to offer something different⁴⁴ (Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005). Otherwise, it is preferable to develop positioning with other attributes in which the brand really stands out⁴⁵. Van de Ven (2008) goes further and reflects on the relevance of considering when the branding of CSR is morally acceptable. According to him, the business model of the company should be based on ethics.

In this type of commitment, trends have to be placed out of the game and, therefore, not all brands should choose CSR as the basis of its positioning, only those brands whose CSR is a differential element (Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005) clearly integrated in their identity and strategic projects. When CSR is not the basis of the brand positioning,

⁴¹ DU, Shuili, BHATTACHARYA, C.B. and SANKAR Sen, "Maximizing Business Returns to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): The Role of CSR Communication", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 2010, pp. 8-19; LEWIS, Stewart, "Measuring Corporate Reputation", *Corporate Communications: An international Journal* 6, 2001, pp. 31-35.

⁴² SCHLEGELMILCH, Bodo B., and POLLACH, Irene, "The perils and Opportunities of Communicating Corporate Ethics", *Journal of Marketing Management*, 21, 2005, pp. 267-290.

⁴³ Cfr. BROWN, Tom J. and DACIN, Peter A., "The company and the product: corporate associations and consumer product responses", *Journal of Marketing*, 61:1, 1997, pp. 68-84; SEN, Sankar and BHATTACHARYA, C.B., "Does doing good always lead to doing better? Consumer reactions to Corporate Social Responsibility", *Journal of Marketing Research* 38 (2), 2001, pp. 225-243; BECKER-OLSEN, Karen L., CUDMORES B. Andrew and HILL Ronald Paul, "The impact of perceived corporate social responsibility on consumer behavior", *Journal of Business Research*, 59, 2006, pp. 46-53.

⁴⁴ Cfr. SCHLEGELMILCH, Bodo B., y POLLACH, Irene, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-290.

⁴⁵ Cfr. VAN DE VEN, Bert, *op. cit.*, pp. 339-352, p.341.

it is preferable that, if the brand wants to communicate ethical or responsible aspects, this communication focuses on explaining specific actions.

Thirdly, when defining the values and the brand territory, it must be taken into consideration that the values and expectations of stakeholders change over time, culture and place⁴⁶ (Polonsky and Jevons, 2009; Schleggelmich and Pollach, 2005). Therefore, if necessary, companies must adapt themselves without losing their identity in this process. As a consequence, the tools of dialogue with the stakeholders can be a diagnosis and a listening platform for the company.

Once the challenges in the identification and management of values are analyzed, the question is how the company should deliver this message. Hence, the most experienced field is the communication of Corporate Social Responsibility.

2.4. *Values Communication: the experience of communicating Corporate Social Responsibility*

In the process of analyzing the communication of values most authors execute this analysis from the field of ethics⁴⁷ (Fan, 2005; Palazzo and Basu, 2007; Van de Ven, 2008) and from the field of Corporate Social Responsibility⁴⁸ (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Middlemiss, 2003; Morsing and Schultz, 2006). Since there are different positions in understanding what should be the role of communication, the corporate brand management and the corporate communication should be closely related to the Corporate Social Responsibility⁴⁹ strategy (Villagra, 2009). Today, this relationship is asymmetrical, since it is characterized by the contrast between the desire of companies to engage and implement CSR strategies and with the rejection of communicating massively that commitment. The reasons why companies are reluctant to communicate their socially responsible actions are diverse and can be applied generally to the communication of ethical and responsibility values beyond their own CSR strategies.

On the one hand, it increases the expectations of stakeholders to the company⁵⁰ (Schleggelmich and Pollach, 2005). Thus, it increases its degree of severity. As a result, companies that have not reported these actions often go unnoticed, while those that communicate intensively are generally evaluated more critically. Then, the paradox, those organizations carrying out a more active socially responsible commitment are often the most criticized and scrutinized by the media, which leads to more critics.

⁴⁶ Cfr. POLONSKY, Michael and JEVONS, Colin, "Global branding and strategic CSR: an overview of three types of complexity", *International Marketing Review*, vol. 26, n° 3, 2009, pp. 327-347; SCHLEGELMILCH, Bodo B. and POLLACH, Irene, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-290.

⁴⁷ Cfr. FAN, Ying, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-350; PALAZZO, Guido and BASU, Kunal, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-346; VAN DE VEN, Bert, *op. cit.*, pp. 339-352.

⁴⁸ Cfr. SEN, Sankar and BHATTACHARYA, C.B., *op. cit.*, pp. 225-243; MIDDLEMISS, Nigel, "Authentic not cosmetic: CSR as Brand Enhancement", *Journal of Brand Management*, 10 4/5, 2003, pp. 353-361; MORSING, Mette and SCHULTZ Majken, "Corporate social responsibility communication: stakeholder information, response and involvement strategies", *Business Ethics: A European Review*, vol. 15, n° 4, October 2006, pp. 323-339.

⁴⁹ Cfr. VILLAGRA, Nuria, "Marca corporativa y RSC: una relación necesaria", in BAJO, Anna and VILLAGRA, Nuria (eds.), *Valores para una gestión responsable. Memoria Académica 2008-2009*, Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, 2009, pp. 159-167.

⁵⁰ Cfr. SCHLEGELMILCH, Bodo B. y POLLACH, Irene, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-290.

Furthermore, Ashforth and Gibbs⁵¹ (1990), indicate that the more a company communicates its ethical, social and environmental behavior, the more likely it is to attract critical attention from the stakeholders. Schlegelmich and Pollach (2005) even added that the companies who communicate their advantages in excess could have the risk of being perceived negatively which is referred to as the boomerang effect.

On the other hand, another factor that can cause intense negative communication of ethical and socially responsible aspects is that the stakeholders may think that the company is trying to hide something⁵² (Brown and Dacin, 1997). This distrust and lack of credibility in the corporate discourse reveals some skepticism by the stakeholders⁵³ (Keller, 2000; Schlegelmich and Pollach, 2005) who observed that the proliferation of messages regarding values of responsibility and social commitment in industries or companies do not exemplify these particular values with their performances. Jahdi and Acikdili⁵⁴ (2009) even highlight the unreliability and inconsistency of these messages when they are used 1) for what they call the no industries or, 2) by companies that invest greatly in communicating their actions and responsible values rather than pursuing initiatives or driven actions.

Perhaps this explains why many companies are prudent or fail to communicate about their commitments and ethical values. As a consequence, most companies would opt for a low profile communication (Schlegelmich and Pollach, 2005; Morsing and Schultz, 2006). In other words, discreet messages that generally are based on concrete actions and avoid the great statements of the company.

Developing very segmented and targeted actions to address very specific stakeholders instead of campaigns in mass media would also be preferred because it is thought that linking this type of content with brand management and communication can produce the perception that this is a cosmetic and fictional action. Furthermore, it could be misconstrued that the company is using ethics and CSR for a marketing purpose⁵⁵ (Tixier, 2003; Schlegelmich and Pollach, 2005).

However, not all aspects of communicating values and socially responsible and ethical commitments are negative or pose risks for the companies. There are also positive aspects for why companies should work on improving their communication and branding strategies. Spreading the CSR strategy can unleash economic benefits⁵⁶ (Maignan et al., 1999) as well as aspects such as recognition, positive reactions in the stakeholders, reputation, differentiated positioning or greater legitimacy to name a few.

⁵¹ Cfr. ASHFORTH, Blake E. and GIBBS, Barrie W., "The double-edge of organizational legitimation", *Organization Science*, 1:2, 1990, pp.177-194.

⁵² Cfr. ASHFORTH, Blake E. and GIBBS, Barrie W., "The double-edge of organizational legitimation", *Organization Science*, 1:2, 1990, pp.177-194.

⁵³ Cfr. KELLER, Kevin L., "Building and managing corporate brand equity". En SCHULTZ, Majken, HATCH, Mary Jo and LARSE, Morgens H. (Eds.), *The Expressive Organization*, Oxford University press: Oxford, 2000, pp. 116-137; SCHLEGELMILCH, Bodo B. and POLLACH, Irene, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-290.

⁵⁴ Cfr. JAHDI, Khosro and ACIKDILLI, Gaye, "Marketing Communications and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): Marriage of Convenience or Shotgun Wedding?", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 88, 2009, pp. 103-113.

⁵⁵ Cfr. TIXIER, Maud, "Note: Soft vs. Hard Approach in Communicating on Corporate Social Responsibility", *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 45, 1, 2003, pp. 71-91; SCHLEGELMILCH, Bodo B. and POLLACH, Irene, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-290.

⁵⁶ MAIGNAN, Isabelle, FERRELL O.C. and HULT G. Tomas M., "Corporate citizenship: cultural antecedents and business benefits", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 27, 4, 1999, pp. 455-469.

To achieve these positive effects the company should try to align its identity and values with that of the organizational behavior. This should be consistent with the corporate brand and should be communicated correctly.

Brand managers and corporate strategists must address the issue of how to communicate their behavior in a meaningful way. To answer this question requires that the firm not only clearly understands its brand identity and positioning, but that it understands how the brand and the wider organization relate to CSR⁵⁷ (Polonsky y Jevons, 2009: 337).

Moreover, the company has to properly report its activities with regards to communication if it wants to be seen as socially responsible. Otherwise its activities and values represented may not be noticed or perceived correctly or could even be perceived on the contrary. Although the communication of these issues has received little attention in the academic literature⁵⁸ (Arvidsson, 2010) it is very important to look into the most appropriate strategies for communicating these values⁵⁹ (Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Polonsky and Jevons, 2009; Villagra, 2007) to all stakeholders.

In general, it is observed that the communication of values and ethical issues seeks over all to recover the legitimacy of the company and has evolved from reactive strategies to increasingly proactive strategies (Arvidsson, 2010; Schleggelmich and Pollach, 2005). Although the marketing communication can be very effective at times and, above all, with customers, companies prefer to use separate and discreet channels (Schleggelmich and Pollach, 2005). In any case, the communication strategy should be viewed in an integrated way, since all communication actions influence each other (Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009).

In the process of seeking greater credibility for the message, the use of implicit forms of communication rather than explicit ones is preferable (Morsing and Schultz, 2006). However, this decision should be made taking also into account 1) the public 2) the objectives to be reached by the message.

Another aspect which should be considered is that the brand's commitment to these values must be authentic, and if not, this form of communication will contribute to the stakeholders' skepticism. According to Van de Ven (2008), the corporate brand promise results in a differentiated brand proposition which is a deal with moral implications between the brand and its stakeholders. If the company is unable to fulfill this pact, there will be a gap between what the company actually does and what it promised to do. Companies that focus their brand promise on social or environmental issues are more likely to attain this gap.

Jahdi and Acikdilli (2009) argue that a successful communication of CSR must meet the following criteria:

1. Credibility of the source / company. This is a prerequisite and essential.
2. The image and reputation of the company must be appropriate to the business sector it belongs to.
3. Flee from the rhetoric and make the brand do what they intended.

⁵⁷ POLONSKY, Michael and JEVONS, Colin, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-290.

⁵⁸ Cfr. ARVIDSSON, Susanne, "Communication of Corporate Social Responsibility: A Study of the Views of Management Teams in Large Companies", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 96, 2010, pp. 339-354.

⁵⁹ Cfr. MORSING, Mette and SCHULTZ Majken, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-339; POLONSKY, Michael and JEVONS, Colin, *op. cit.*, pp. 327-347; VILLAGRA, Nuria, "¿Por qué tenemos miedo de comunicar la Responsabilidad Social Corporativa?", in BAJO, Anna and VILLAGRA, Nuria (eds.), *Evolución conceptual y práctica de una gestión responsable. Memoria Académica 2006-2007*, Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, 2007, pp. 77-91.

4. Holistic, integrated and coordinated approach.

Although each brand must follow its own guidelines, it is also important to note that the values and themes chosen for communicating ethical responsibility have to be perceived as interesting and relevant for a large number of the public. Moreover, images and stories that are highly related to emotions have to be used⁶⁰ (Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005; López, 2007, López and Martínez, 2012) as differentiating communication strategy that seeks closeness and trust of stakeholders⁶¹ (López and Sebastian, 2009).

3. Objectives and hypothesis

3.1. Objectives

In general, this article is about the study of corporate brands and the characteristics of the identity and the discourse of the responsible brands have been analyzed. This analysis has the following objectives:

1. To study how to build identities and corporate brands which connect with ethical and responsible values.
2. To identify the universe of meanings around the sustainability and corporate responsibility which companies are sharing with the public in their corporate message'.
3. To analyze the relationship between the discourse of the business which is linked to sustainability and corporate responsibility and its corporate communication.

3.2. Hypothesis

The discourse of the corporate brand includes values of responsibility and sustainability in its features of identity and in its corporate communication. Taking into consideration that communication is a reflection of the business' behavior, this analysis explains the relationship between social discourse and business discourse linked to the sustainable development. From this statement, the first hypothesis is enunciated:

H1: Responsible companies include in its corporate identity (vision, mission and values) discourses directly related to ethics, social responsibility and sustainability, in line with the new social demands.

Consequently, responsible brands, which are managed by responsible and ethical values, are perceived more favourably in society. From this statement the following hypothesis is obtained:

H2: Sometimes there exists a direct relationship between a responsible company and the brand positioning. This relationship is based on ethical or responsible aspects, which makes a responsible brand stand out.

⁶⁰ Cfr. SCHLEGELMILCH, Bodo B. and POLLACH, Irene, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-290; LÓPEZ, Belen, *Publicidad Emocional. Estrategias creativas*, ESIC, Madrid, 2007, 217 pp.; LÓPEZ, Belen and MARTÍNEZ, Gema, "Comunicación 360º", in PINTADO, Teresa and SÁNCHEZ, Joaquín (coord.), *Nuevas tendencias en comunicación*, ESIC, Madrid, 2012, pp. 17-45.

⁶¹ Cfr. LÓPEZ, Belen and SEBASTIÁN, Ana, "Responsabilidad Social Corporativa y Reputación Corporativa", in SÁNCHEZ, Joaquín and PINTADO, Teresa (coord.), *Imagen Corporativa. Influencia en la gestión empresarial*, ESIC, Madrid, 2009, pp. 139-170.

This differentiation is also used in the socially responsible communication of the company, based on the concept of sustainability as it is defined by the companies analyzed. As a result, the third hypothesis of this study is proposed:

H3: responsible brands use low profile communication strategies by specific communication actions to communicate their ethical and responsible values to stakeholders.

4. Methodology

In order to address objectives and hypothesis, qualitative techniques of content analysis are used in the study to obtain a taxonomic description of the values that brands are communicating through their corporate communication strategies. The study was done by analyzing the main corporate communication tools of ten companies to understand the main features of identity –looking closely at the vision, mission and values–, and the corporate brand personality that are communicated to their stakeholders through the concepts of CSR, sustainability and other related concepts. To explore this link between brands and responsible communication values, the following corporate communication tools have been analyzed: corporate website, brand identity book or manual of brand identity and corporate advertising (commercials, radio spots, and printed advertising). The sample (as Table 1 illustrates) or the selection of these ten companies was based on the highest scores obtained in the first edition of Merco Responsible Companies published in 2011⁶². The variables on which how this study evaluated which company was the most responsible in the ranking were: ethical behavior, transparency and good governance, contribution to the community, behavior with employees, environmental commitments and climate change.

Table 1. Merco Responsible Companies 2011

Company	Industry	Ranking Position
Acciona	Building	10
BBVA	Financial	9
Google	Technology	8
Inditex	Textil	6
Iberdrola	Energy	2
La Caixa	Financial	1
Mercadona	Distribution	3
Repsol	Energy	7
Santander	Financial	5
Telefónica	Telecommunications	4

Source: Table adapted from Merco Responsible Companies 2011's ranking.

⁶² MERCOS has been published since 2000 by Villafañe & Asociados with the collaboration of “Análisis e Investigación”, a company which develops the field work. In 2011 it published the first edition of Merco Responsible Companies.

5. Findings

Through this qualitative study the key identity values that companies are managing in their relationship with stakeholders are identified, as illustrated in Table 2. The comparative analysis of corporate communication tools, such as the website, information section of the company and sustainability reports, the manual or the book and the advertising, which explain that the vision, the mission and values of the analyzed brands have a clear orientation to ethics, accountability and sustainability. Therefore, H1 is validated: *Responsible companies include in its corporate identity (vision, mission and values) discourses directly related to ethics, social responsibility and sustainability, in line with the new social demands.*

In this way, the analysis of the sample established that the brands that are part of more challenging industry are the ones which are more focused on these aspects. These aspects linked with sustainability are especially present in the energy sector (Iberdrola, Repsol), and construction/infrastructure (Acciona).

Table 2. Overview of the identity aspects of the analyzed companies

Company	Vision	Mission	Values
Acciona	Our vision is to meet the challenge of achieving sustainable development in all our business areas, so that the generations of today and the future will have a better life.	Our mission is to be leaders in the creation, development and management of infrastructure, energy and water; contributing actively to social wellbeing, sustainable development and the creation of value for our stakeholder groups.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Honesty 2. Leadership 3. Excellence 4. Environmental concern 5. Social responsibility 6. Long term view 7. Financial strength 8. Customer focus 9. Innovation 10. People care
BBVA	BBVA, we're working for a better future for people.	BBVA is a global group of financial services whose main commitment is to provide with the best solutions to its customers, a profitable performance to its shareholders and the development in the societies in which operates.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on the customer as the centre of business. 2. Creation of shareholder value through business activity. 3. Teamwork as the engine in the creation of value. 4. A management style that generates enthusiasm. 5. Ethical behavior and personal integrity as a way of understanding and conducting business. 6. Innovation as the engine of progress. 7. Corporate social responsibility as an intrinsic part of development.

Google	Don't be evil. Google's aim is to organize the universal information and to make it accessible and usable universally.	It is not mentioned in an explicit way in the documentation analyzed.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Think of the user and the rest will come alone. 2. There is nothing better than the motivation to improve one's skills. 3. It is better to be quick than slow. 4. Democracy is a good way to govern the Web 5. The answers can come everywhere, it is not necessary to wait for them 6. It can prosper economically being honest 7. There is always more information to be discovered 8. The need for information breaks all barrier 9. It is not necessary to wear suits to be formal 10. To be very good is not enough.
Inditex	The vision is not mentioned explicitly in any written form.	The vision is not mentioned explicitly in any written form.	The principles governing Inditex's commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility include: <i>good faith</i> in relationships with stakeholders and society at large; an ongoing <i>dialogue</i> with the aforementioned stakeholders and social organizations; and, finally, <i>transparency</i> in our business activities generally, and, specifically, in the development of our sustainability strategy.
Iberdrola	We aspire to be the Global Energy Company of choice due to our commitment to the creation of value, quality of life, the safety of people and of supply, the protection of the environment and customer focus.	The vision is not mentioned explicitly in any written form.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Corporate ethics and responsibility 2. Economic results 3. Respect for the environment 4. Sense of belonging and trust 5. Safety and reliability 6. Customer focus
La Caixa	Leading financial group in the Spanish market, with an international vocation, generating value for society, its	To encourage saving and investment by offering the best and most comprehensive range of financial services to the greatest number of customers and to make	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quality 2. Decentralization 3. Responsibility 4. Innovation 5. Efficiency

	customers and employees.	a decisive contribution to society to provide flexible tailored coverage of basic financial and social needs.	6. Security
Mercadona	The vision is not mentioned explicitly in any written form.	Prescribers of the solutions for “the boss” to prepare its “Total Purchase”. A business model which focuses in satisfying the needs of 4,4 million households throughout 5 business (household cleaning, food, drinks, domestic animal’s food and personal care).	The vision is not mentioned explicitly in any written form.
Repsol	A global company that seeks the welfare of people and is a step ahead in building a better future through the development of new efficient energy.	The vision is not mentioned explicitly in any written form.	Ethical values: 1. Integrity 2. Transparency 3. Responsibility 4. Security Professional values: 1. Leadership 2. Results focus 3. Innovation 4. Customer focus
Santander	Aims to becoming a global bank	The vision is not mentioned explicitly in any written form	1. Dynamism 2. Leadership 3. Innovation 4. Retail focus and quality service 5. Professional ethics and sustainability
Telefónica	We continuously work in transforming possibilities into reality with the goal of creating value for employees, customers, shareholders, partners in a global level and for the whole society.	Providing our professionals the best workplace, firmly committed to ensuring the best talent and career opportunities. Making the customer the core of everything we do, seeking maximum satisfaction with our services and solutions. Offering our shareholders the best combination of growth and profitability of the industry. Acting as a transformation engine. We are an active part of the society and markets we serve, offering our professional expertise and perspective in the world of telecommunications. Showing local and global reality as it is, with consistency and commitment, being innovative, open, committed and honest in everything we do.	1. Vision 2. Talent 3. Engagement 4. Strength

Source: Self elaboration from the information of the corporate websites, basically on the section of corporate information and other documents such as the corporate responsibility report (data from August to October 2011).

As well as considering the values are the foundation on which the brand builds its ethics and the responsible way in which it is sustained, we also analyzed how each company enounced these values. The values exemplified by Repsol are particularly representative and thorough. They are distinguished by ethical values (those relating to the essential and enduring principles in an organization that should guide the relationship and behavior between the company and its stakeholders) and professional values (those who seek to achieve the vision, affect the performance and provide competitive advantage). The rest of the companies analyzed did not deepen their classification and generally they relate to professional values, as illustrated above. Ethical behavior is present in 6 out of the 10 companies analyzed under the guise of “ethical behavior and personal and professional integrity”, “good faith”, “ethics and corporate responsibility”, “ethical values”, “it can prosper economically being honest” and “professional ethics”.

Social responsibility also appears as a value often used by the sample companies through the following designations: “social responsibility”, “corporate social responsibility as a commitment to development”, “corporate responsibility”, “ethics and corporate responsibility”, “social commitment”, “responsibility” (2 companies), “commitment”.

Transparency, sustainability and environmental issues are also values presented, although on a less frequent basis when analyzing its discourse as responsible brands. All other values set by the brands in this corporate discourse comply to corporate and commercial aspects of competitiveness such as: commercial and customer orientation, innovation and financial strength.

The discourse of Google and Mercadona requires special mention. Contrasting with the other brands analyzed, in these two companies it is perceived as a language and with clear commercial orientation values, customer and productive activity focused. In these cases, the responsibility of the brand depends crucially on its ability to act appropriately in relation to its business and to its customers. A specific reference to other commitments related to sustainability has not been found.

As a result we can verify that, although all the analyzed companies stand out for their responsible management, and for which they are recognized (this is evident because of their presence among the top ten ranking of Merco Responsible Companies), the analysis of the corporate discourse allows us to conclude that the statements of vision, mission and values include aspects relating to responsibility and sustainability but these are not always highlighted as the most important for its strategic positioning.

Furthermore, the analysis of the visual identity of the brand does not permit us to identify a trend leading to communicate aspects of responsibility in these elements (as illustrated in Table 3).

Table 3. Logos of the analyzed brands from MERCOCO Responsible Companies 2011



Source: Compiled from the corporate website of the companies analyzed.

However, because of the exploratory nature of this study, a larger sample of companies should be analyzed in order to reach conclusive results. Following the classification proposed by Professor Villafañe⁶³ (1999), the elements studied were, the logo (integrated for the symbol and the typographic element) and the corporate colors.

With regards to the sample analyzed, perhaps the clearest case is seen again in the companies from the energy sector (Iberdrola, Repsol), construction/infrastructure sector (Acciona). In the case of Acciona, the leaf part of the logo, or its tag line “Pioneers in development and sustainability”, are clear examples of how the visual identity of the brand connects with a responsible brand positioning. Another significant example is Iberdrola, by integrating natural images into its logo and with a predominance of green it manages to reflect its commitment to sustainability, to renewable energy and environmental care.

However, in the other examples a direct relationship with sustainability in the corporate name, the color code or the symbol used in logo and other emblems of the brand are not identified.

As a result, the following hypothesis is verified: *H2: Sometimes there exists a direct relationship between the responsible company and the brand positioning. This relationship is based on ethical or responsible aspects, being a distinguishing feature of the responsible brand.* In other words, the socially responsible company discourse presents ethical and social values in their statements of vision, mission and values. However, only some companies will use it as the main focus in their corporate discourse, in order to differentiate them from other companies. This is also seen when an image is used to express the personality of the company, that is the visual identity. Once again we see that, even though each of them have a responsible management developed, this is guaranteed by being one of the to the top ten Merco Responsible Companies, only two of them have decided to reflect this explicitly when building the visual identity of their corporate brands.

With regards to advertising, many of the surveyed companies e.g. Google, Inditex and Mercadona do not advertise by focusing on communicating corporate values, while other companies in the sample do. These companies relate their values to responsible means such as: future, innovation, sustainability, environmental commitment and engagement with stakeholders. These along with other attributes, usually relating to corporate issues (strength, internationalization, profitability, etc.), are used as positioning values in the corporate communication actions analyzed. The following table illustrates the highlighted value of positioning for each of the companies, among those mentioned above, (as illustrated in Table 4).

Table 4. Highlighted value of positioning in the actions of communications studied

Company	Value of positioning
Acciona	Sustainability as the core business basis
BBVA	Trust and simplicity
Google	They do not make advertising campaigns
Inditex	They do not make corporate advertising campaigns
Iberdrola	Pioneers in green energy
La Caixa	Customer focus and closeness
Mercadona	They do not make corporate advertising campaigns
Repsol	Innovation in the energy industry
Santander	Strength of a global bank
Telefónica	Closeness /Social progress

Source: The authors. A compilation from the corporate communication activities of the companies analyzed

⁶³ Cfr. VILLAFANE, Justo, *La gestión profesional de la imagen corporativa*, Pirámide, Madrid, 1999.

Acciona and Iberdrola are the only brands of the sample that define their positioning and their communication specifically in the areas of responsibility and sustainability (illustrated in Figures 1 and 2). In the graphical and audiovisual pieces analyzed, both the images and the text (headlines and body copy) boost in a complementary way this claim. Acciona uses a simple message which incorporates visual images that emphasize and reinforce their sustainability attributes in a broader sense (economic, social and environmental). Furthermore, it is reinforced by the presence of text that explains and contextualizes the interpretation of the image. In the case of Iberdrola, their campaigns are characterized by a style of images where natural and open spaces and the presence of the green color are the main characteristics. The typography reflects a close and flexible style. Within the sample of selected campaigns Iberdrola undertakes two actions: 1) a campaign focusing on communicating a positioning as a leading energy company and as a pioneer in renewable and clean energy and 2) a specific campaign to communicate the values of the company (see Figure 2).

Figures 1 and 2. Acciona and Iberdrola. Corporate Advertising



All other brands studied focus their corporate communication strategy on communicating global aspects (e.g. the internationality of the company, economic performance, turnover and employees). In these messages, which are characteristic of corporate advertising, the brands have been mixed with the strategic direction, the values or the social and environmental role or contribution of the company in these areas. Occasionally, taking into account the relevance that these issues are gaining in recent years, these brands make specific campaigns relating to sustainability and responsible management as illustrated in figures 3 and 4.

However, the discourse of these brands in contrast to the examples of Acciona or Iberdrola is that the characteristics linked with responsibility and sustainability are included as part of the message but they are not the basis of their positioning.

Figures 3 and 4. La Caixa and Telefónica. Corporate Advertising



The communication of La Caixa reinforces confidence and conviction in their customers through clearly visible message on the application form (that is the relevance of the customer to the company is reinforced in the tag line and in the images) and in the concept of closeness that characterized their messages.

In the case of Telefónica the body copy enhances the values of commitment and sustainability linked to the business strategy and how they understand business.

When reporting the brand’s ethical and responsible engagement, the brands decide to communicate to the stakeholders the specific actions that are being developed. For instance, the case of Repsol’s corporate advertising “Achievements” is remarkable. This campaign, through different creative pieces, aims to communicate an image of Repsol as an expert in energy, leader in innovation and committed to social welfare through their projects Microalgas and SolarGas.

Figures 5 and 6: Campaigns “Achievements”. Repsol



For its part Telefónica created a solidarity campaign aimed at the unemployed by reducing telephone bills by 50% up to a limit of EUR 20 per bill. Moreover, in the case of BBVA through the campaign “the unemployment destroyers”, they joined Antenna 3

to broadcast commercials from a selection of independent small business that are creating jobs on radio and television.

Figure 7. Campaign “Unemployed”. Telefónica



These are examples of communicative actions aimed at positioning the brand as socially responsible and can be highlighted, not as the basis of their positioning, but through the communication of specific actions that the company is developing or is engaged in.

Taking the samples analyzed into consideration, it can be observed that the companies communication strategies when addressing these issues, avoid the great discourses, preferring strategic campaigns that are sentimental, close and credible message, which make commitments or implement real initiatives.

From the analysis of the communication actions described above, the last hypothesis is partially validated. *H3: responsible brands use low profile communication strategies by specific communication actions to communicate their ethical and responsible values to stakeholders.*

6. Discussion and conclusions

The corporate activities are carefully observed by the stakeholders, when we take into account that the companies are measured against a criteria consistent with the social discourse (ethical values, social impact, environmental aspects, etc.) As a result, the responsible brand has become a key point that helps to achieve the corporate objectives and is a benchmark that generates attachment and orientation in the organizations.

Even though there is a growing trend in associating ethical or social responsible aspects to the corporate brands, in general these aspects are communicated by specific actions that are not necessarily part of the strategic positioning of the brand. To mention responsible brands in a broad and consolidated sense, it is necessary first to go a step further and make the entire brand management revolve around these issues. Moreover, a strong ethical commitment is needed as a distinguishing feature of the brand from its competitors (Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005; Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009). Therefore, to position itself as a responsible brand, it is essential that the behavior and the communication of these brands are built on a solid ethical identity coherent with their message.

Regarding the communication strategy, it is important to note that the approach of companies to management models grounded in ethical values and a greater commitment to society and the environment, should be able to be communicated in the same manner as other corporate actions. However, in general, there is a great reluctance to transmit the brand's social responsibility. Rather the preference is to maintain a low profile through 1) specific communication tools (corporate website, corporate responsibility reports, etc.) and highly segmented public ones (Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005), 2) or through communication actions that highlight specific initiatives carried out by the company, either using specific or mass media. Thus, the company responds to the actions in line with the social demand and at the same time, tries to minimize the type of skepticism that its public message usually generates (Du, Bhattacharya and Sankar, 2010; Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). Moreover, companies try to give tangibility to their actions by providing more credible messages.

The companies analyzed are noted for their socially responsible and ethical behavior, by their strong presence in Merco Responsible Companies 2011. However, the comparative analysis of the discourse of these companies can state that, although these companies belong to different industries, they use a similar message when communicating their values and identity features.

In its communication actions companies focus mainly on the sustainable initiatives carried out in the areas of: 1) commitment to the environment and climate change and 2) contribution to the community. The other aspects analyzed by Merco Responsible Companies (ethical behavior, transparency and good governance, behavior with employees) are communicated through very specific and targeted tools (codes of ethics, Corporate Governance Annual Reports, internal communication documents, etc.).

Taking into consideration that the study is based on a small sample of ten companies using qualitative techniques, the results, however, cannot be applied to all Spanish companies that have ethical, social and environmental values. As a result, this analysis has obvious limits, but it implies an academic contribution in the field that studies the relationship between responsible brands, ethical values and communication.

By using quantitative techniques, further studies are needed to verify the relationship between the discourse of socially responsible companies, their values and their social values, in order to fully understand that there is a new approach as to how to include sustainability into their business model. Furthermore, other future lines of research should also complement the analysis of the discourses of companies with the perceptions, attitudes and influence generated in the corporate stakeholders and in the society.

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