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"LET'S HAVE A DIALOGUE": THE POTENTIAL RISKS OF DIALOGUE FOR CORPORATIONS

Underlying assumptions

- The concept "dialogue" is subject to rhetoric in public relations theory and practice:
  - It's equated to two-way symmetrical communication, and
  - It's proposed to be the most ethical form of public relations practice
- But research has shown that dialogue (its practice and its nature) are misunderstood by practitioners
  - Many believe that they are practising dialogue when they are in fact engaging in persuasion (Theunissen & A. Rahman)
- Furthermore, dialogue poses potential risks that are often overlooked in public relations theory (Theunissen & Wan Noordin)

Potential risks of dialogue

1. Organisations aim to mitigate risk by reducing unpredictability of potential outcomes through e.g. 'control'
   - But dialogue's outcomes are unpredictable and its result cannot be 'controlled' (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, forthcoming)

2. Successful dialogue can bond participants to the exclusion of others
   - Triadic hypothesis (Taylor in Heath et al., 2006)

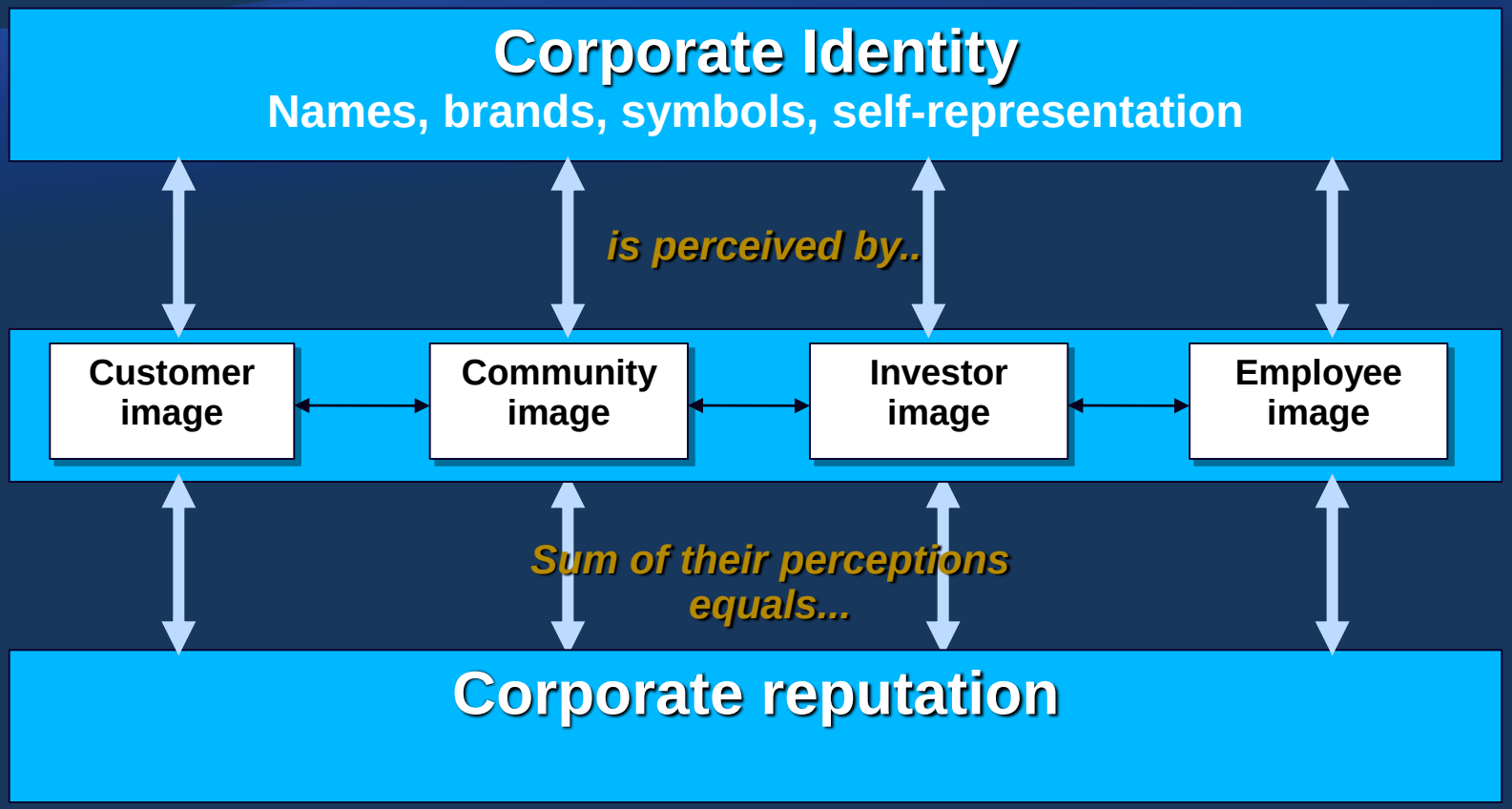
3. Dialogue requires self-disclosure
   - Participants are required to share their deepest hopes, interests and fears, **revealing the 'self' and what shapes the person's identity** (Saunders , 1999)

'Authentic identity'

- In this context is understood to be 'true to oneself' as opposed to manufactured identity, which is perceived as inauthentic, and aimed at deception and manipulation
- 'Authenticity' is a ***social construct***; it cannot be 'controlled' and if we try to control the process, we are 'doomed to fail' (Edwards, 2010, p.201)
- Equally, 'identity' is a social construct and should be seen as ***co-creational*** (L'Etang, 2008)
- Dialogue as a mode of communication is integral to creating the construct of authentic corporate identity

While these comments may seem obvious to scholars of identity, they go against mainstream, functionalist thinking in public relations

Paul Argenti's model



(Argenti, 2003, p.72)

So what's different here?

Firstly, corporate identity is a 'tool'

"…dissonance…might exist between how the organisation would like to be perceived and how it is perceived in reality. The task of organisational PR is to reduce dissonances to a minimum. The 'tool' used by corporate PR to achieve this is organisational identity."

(Tench & Yeoman, 2009, pp.242-243)

Secondly, corporate identity is created by the organisation

"A company's *identity* is the visual manifestation of the company's reality as a conveyed through the organization's name, logo, motto, products, services, buildings, stationary, uniforms, and all other tangible pieces of evidence *created by the organization* and communicated to a variety of constituencies."

(Argenti, 2003, p.58)

Thirdly, changes in corporate identity are initiated by the organisation

"Companies often institute name changes either to signal identity changes or make their identities better reflect their realities."

(Argenti, 2003, p.62)

Fourthly, stakeholders are the recipients of identity

"Stakeholders are…the receivers of the organisation's identity. They process the organisational identity and create organisational images in their minds."

(Tench & Yeoman, 2009, p.249)

So, the crux of the argument

- (Authentic) corporate identity is ***socially constructed*** , and ***dialogue*** becomes integral to creating a corporate identity that is perceived as *authentic*
- Not engaging in dialogue may result in the identity being perceived as manufactured
- But because dialogue is ongoing, requiring self-disclosure, it ***may expose inauthentic identity*** – organisations can no longer hide their "true self"

Applying dialogue to creating corporate identity: implications

- Corporate identity is *no longer solely created or controlled* by the organisation
- Stakeholders become *co-creators* of corporate identity
- The process of creating corporate identity is *fluid and ongoing* with 'unpredictable' results – it is no longer static and once-off (greater costs?)

Thank you for your time

Citations

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