

**2005 Business Strategy and the Environment
Conference September 5-6, 2005
Leeds & West Yorkshire, the UK**

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Communicating CSR

- Brand management

Abstract

The interaction of corporations with different groups of stakeholders is not a new topic, but the question of what kind of *responsibility* a corporation really has toward its stakeholders is a topic for current discussions. Child labour, environmental disasters and ethical dilemmas – these are all problems that bring the discussion about the need for communication of corporate social responsibility, CSR, to the agenda.

CSR is all about *how* a company chooses to run its business i.e. in which *way* business is done. A company with a serious CSR intention is likely to gain a competitive advantage, while a company with a neglecting attitude might face overwhelming problems. The discussion about CSR and communication of CSR shows that CSR should be an important part of a corporations' *brand management*. Communicating positive CSR is a way of strengthening a brand, while neglected or negative CSR news can lead to dramatic consequences.

Key words: CSR, brand management, communication, generalization, construction business

1 Corporate social responsibility

”Business is not divorced from the rest of society. How companies behave affects many people, not just shareholders. A company should be a responsible member of the society in which it operates.” (Internet, World Business Council for Sustainable Development 1, 2004)

Businesses and their role in society are subjected to more intense scrutiny than ever. What is the main purpose of a company? Is it to make as profitable business as possible in order to satisfy the owners’ requests and demands or is it possible to see the company in a larger perspective in the society? Should this perspective go beyond pure financial aspects of the activities? The quotation above refers to the ongoing discussion about what kind of responsibility a company has. Besides making profitable business the responsibility of a company can, for example, be connected to programs for fair treatment of employees, using sustainable environmental friendly methods and participating actively in discussions about ethical social dilemmas (Löhman & Steinholz, 2003; Philipson, 2004). It is a discussion about how companies chooses to do business; solely with financial objectives *or* in a responsible way that might affect the financial return, but support other values.

The discussion about the actual responsibilities for the businesses in the community has increased and an expression of the expanded responsibility has been developed; *corporate social responsibility* or *CSR* (Internet, Ejbo 1, 2005; Löhman & Steinholz, 2003). There is no one universally accepted definition yet, but a number of organizations and companies have made their own interpretation of CSR. The European Union states the following about the definition of CSR:

“CSR is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (Internet, EU 1, 2004).

It is common to talk about the balance between three values; social, environmental and financial values when CSR is being described. Working actively with CSR by taking actions in favour to maintain the balance between these three values is not regulated by laws; it is a voluntary initiative (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004; Internet, Ejbo 1, 2005; Löhman & Steinholz, 2003).

The question of the business community’s role in society is not a new phenomenon. Companies have always been a part of society, but the companies of yesterday have grown and the proportions between the public and private sector have changed (Löhman & Steinholz, 2003). Today, there are many multinational corporations acting all over the world in the spirit of the globalization trend (Arnold, 1993; Internet, CSRwire 1, 2004; Löhman & Steinholz, 2003). The 100 largest economies in the world today are represented by only 50 countries; the rest is multinational corporations (Foley, 2003, 5; Veres, 2001).

An increased awareness and focus of the responsibilities of a corporation gives the business communities the opportunity to be important and powerful actors in the societies (Ruggie, 2002; Nilsson, 2005). Many companies are encouraged to actively work with corporate social

responsibility, CSR. But it is not only an opportunity given to the companies; it is also in many cases an expectation by customers, employees, society and other stakeholders.

The challenge for the companies is to find a balance between the different aspects of business practice; the social, the environmental and the financial values in a framework where different stakeholders have different interests. A successful CSR strategy is seen in a well founded CSR management implemented in the organization and communicated to the stakeholders.

1.1 Why communicate?

“For most companies, the question is not whether to communicate but rather what to say, to whom, and how often” (Kotler, 2003, 563).

The statement above suggests that it is not a question of communicating or not for companies today. It is a question of *how* to communicate. Integrated corporate communication refers to the fact that *everything* a company does send “a message” (Arnold, 1993; Löhman & Steinholz, 2003). The business cards, the letters and envelopes, the way the employees are headed, the way customers are treated - it is *all* a part of how business is conducted. The attitude towards CSR matters is included (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Löhman & Steinholz, 2003; www CSRwire, 2005).

Socially mature businesses lead the way. Socially active companies, like the Body Shop and Ben & Jerry’s, have been pioneers in the work and communication of CSR (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004; Internet, Ejbo 1, 2005; Thayer Robins, 2001) Large corporations have followed in their footsteps; for example, McDonalds (Nilsson, 2005) by social and environmental programs for example promoting fish conservation, and Unilever by including references about human rights in its business principles (Internet, Ejbo 1, 2005).

The question of how CSR is communicated is a research area still to be explored (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Internet, Ejbo 1, 2005). In some cases advertisements has been used to inform about a company’s responsible approach; “Profits and Principles. Is there a choice?” was an advertising campaign from Shell aiming to state their dedication to environmental issues (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). Some companies have successfully profiled themselves as socially responsible; the case of British Petroleum is an example (Ibid). The company has changed its name to BP and marketed the tagline “Beyond Petroleum” to emphasize the commitment to the environmental values.

The old expression “all publicity is good publicity” is no longer valid in the harsh competition between companies today (Apéria & Back, 2004). Getting publicity and being in focus because of a neglecting attitude towards CSR issues is hardly a situation a company wants to face. Communication thus becomes an important part in ensuring future business (Charter & Polonsky, 1999).

1.2 A case study in the construction sector

In recent years, the construction sector in Sweden has been fighting a reputation of doubtful business ethics (von Schantz, 2005). Today, the sector is working actively to improve the image and continue to be a respected part of the Swedish business community (Internet, BI,

2004). Ethical rules have been formulated and many construction companies are working with CSR issues, but the question of how to successfully communicate the CSR approach remains unsolved. The statement below stresses the importance of the question of communication.

“Business cannot hope to enjoy concrete benefits from CSR unless they intelligently communicate about their initiatives to relevant stakeholders” (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004,17).

The general awareness of CSR in society has gradually increased (www, CSRwire, 2005). Media keeps the debate in the public domain and ethical investors and financiers are seeking more information and raising their expectations progressively (Bengtsson, 2005; Internet, Ejbo 1, 2005). The construction sector, in Sweden, is no exception. The recent history and reputation leaves the sector no other choice but working with and communicating a serious approach towards CSR issues.

The aim of this study is to investigate how corporate social responsibility is communicated. Communication in this case refers to what the media portrays in terms of CSR issues for our focal company. The object is to provide a model for how the media coverage affects the corporate image in terms of a brand. The case study is briefly presented in this article as an illustration and the full version is available in von Schantz (2005).

In this article, a case study is briefly presented of how the *Skanska Group*, a Swedish construction corporation (Internet, Skanska 1, 2005) is described in terms of CSR issues in the press. Being active in a construction sector faced with many CSR related problems and with a corporate history of bad publicity, Skanska has been forced to take the issues of responsibility seriously. Therefore, Skanska is chosen to be the focal company in this study. Despite the fact that Skanska is a worldwide organization, the study has been limited to the activities in recent years at the Swedish market.

The other actor of particular interest in this study is media. Relevant media has been selected from the daily business press published in Sweden and is represented by the two largest news papers; *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD) and *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) as well as the largest daily business news paper; *Dagens Industri* (DI). The selected papers covers the major business activities in Sweden and the articles from the papers are available in databases. Other media, such as radio and TV, has not been examined due to the complexity in collecting data. The data collected from articles in the newspapers are published in the year of 2001 to 2003 since the chosen research area is of increasing novelty and current interest.

In constructing a case, interviews and articles about CSR have been the primary empirical sources. Throughout the process the empirical picture has been modified and validated in a continuous analysis (Kvale, 1997). In this process, qualitative rigor has been achieved through numerous confirming interviews with relevant stakeholders (Denzin & Lincon, 1994) and careful documentation that provides grounds for “thick descriptions”(Stake, 1994, 242).

2 A CSR communication perspective

Communication of CSR is still an area to be explored (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Internet, Ejbo 1, 2005). The relevant receivers of the communication must be identified and therefore the concept and awareness of stakeholders is crucial to fully understand for a company that is aiming for successful CSR communication (von Schantz, 2005).

2.1 Stakeholders in communication

According to Kotler et al. (1999), a company acts in a microenvironment as well as in a macro environment. These environments are related to marketing emphasising that that a company is not a lonely actor, rather a part of a system of exchange and interaction. There are several other actors and activities that affect the company and that must be considered in strategic as well as daily decisions.

In a traditional marketing sense, the companies' microenvironment consists of the closely related actors; suppliers, competitors, customers, marketing intermediaries and the public. The macro environment of a company consists of larger societal forces that affect and shape the microenvironment. These forces are defined as demographic, economic, natural, technological, political and cultural forces, which all could mean opportunities or pose threats to the company.

The related actors of a company, both in a micro environmental as well as in a macro-environmental perspective, can be described as the stakeholders of a company (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). Figure 1 is a model of internal and external stakeholders in relation to the company, the dark circle in the middle represents the company with the internal stakeholders and outside are the external stakeholders.

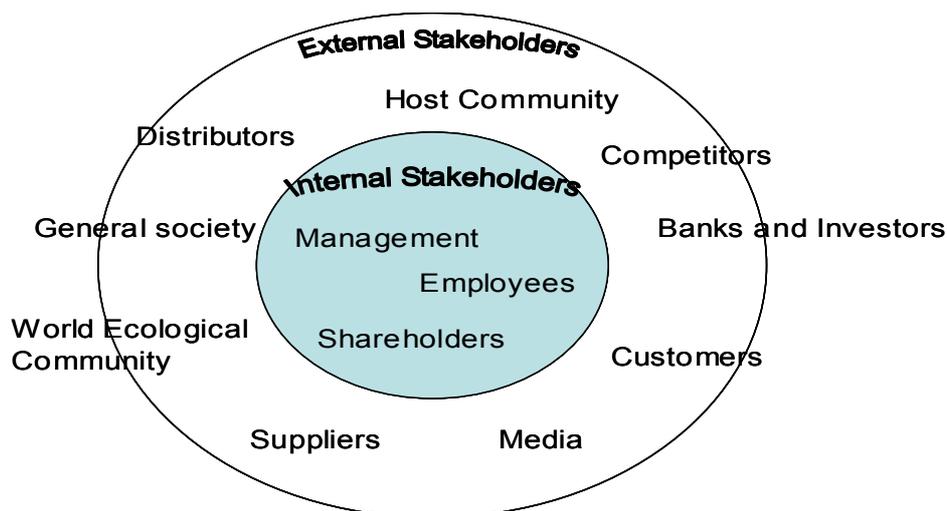


Figure 1. An example of a model for external and internal stakeholders of a company (inspiration from Deetz 1995, 50-51; Kotler 2000, 40-47).

Traditionally, companies have paid more attention to their shareholders (or stockholders) than to the rest of the stakeholders (Kotler, 2000). The expression of shareholders is referring to the owners of the company and is stressing the financial aspect of a company (Lazonick & O’Sullivan, 2000, 13). Stakeholders are all the different groups, outside and inside the organization, that have some kind of interest in the company. A traditional and brief list of stakeholders, besides the shareholders, could be; consumers, workers, investors, suppliers, distributors, host communities, general society and world ecological community (Deetz, 1995, 50-51).

Companies that strive to satisfy the needs of the different groups of stakeholders will meet a difficult challenge since the expectations and demands from the stakeholders are very variable. The communication includes annual reports, press releases, internal magazines, business cards, logotype and perhaps most importantly the performance in which the company meets different stakeholders.

2.2 The communication process

Communication is defined as the process by which information is transmitted and understood between two or more people (McShane & Von Glinow, 2003). The communicational aspects of an organization have become more and more important; emphasizing that communication must be effectively adjusted for the intended target groups (Larsson, 1997).

The model of communication which is regarded as the classical communication model was developed in the 40s and has been modified and altered by later scholars (Larsson, 1997). The classical communication model described five elements; the sender, the message, channels, the receiver and feedback. The communication is expected to result in some kind of effect and the notion of noise or disturbance was mentioned as a part of this early theory. One version of the model is shown in Figure 2. Information flows through the channels from the sender to the receiver and there will be feedback from the receiver to the sender which is a confirmation of the message being received. There is a famous sentence quote by Harold Lasswell, one of the first within communication science, that describes the communication model; *“Who? Say what? In which channel? To whom? With what effect?”* (Larsson, 1997).

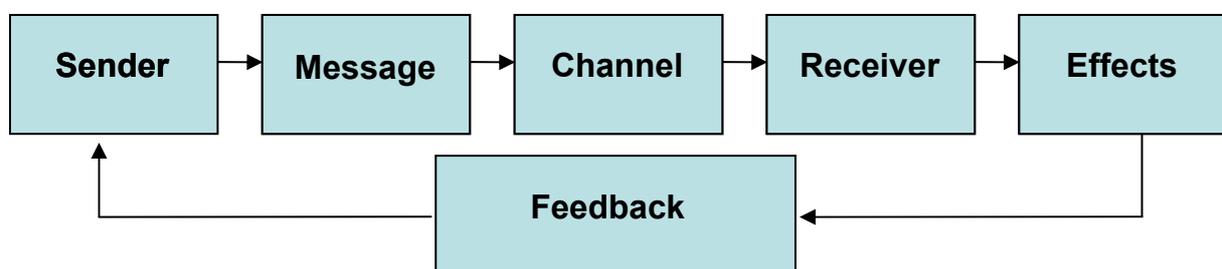


Figure 2. A simple communication model (Larsson, 1997, 35; McShane & Von Glinow, 2003, 323 ; Nitsch, 1998, 7).

The model has later been modified with supplementary elements such as the senders encoding of the message and the receivers decoding. This emphasizes that a message does not always receive the way it was intended from the sender. The encoding, the decoding, the choice of

channels and the noise make the transmission of the message a uncertain process, where the feedback gives the sender a picture of the outcome of the process. A further developed communication model is illustrated in Figure 3.

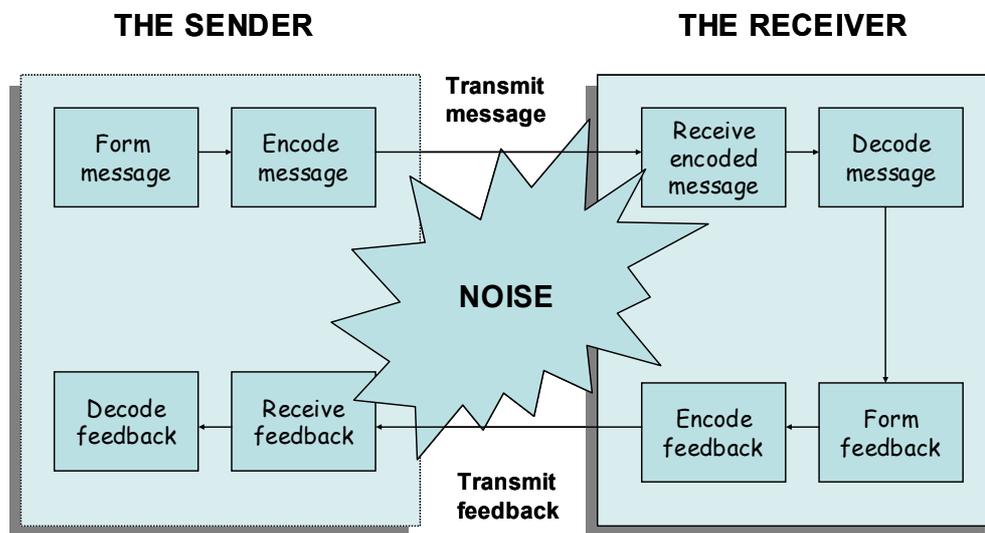


Figure 3. A communication model where noise affects the transmitted messages and feedback from senders and receivers (Kotler 2003, 565; Larsson, 1997, 45; McShane & Von Glinow, 2003, 324, with minor modifications).

The model shows that if any part of the communication process is distorted or broken, the sender and the receiver will not have the common understanding of the message. In spite the best intention from the sender of the communication the barriers might hinder the purpose and effect of the intended message. It is important for the sender of a message not to take for granted that the message has been successfully transmitted and interpreted, just by sending the message. It is a simplifying illusion that a communication process is accomplished by the first step (transmitting a message). There are many barriers in a communication process referred to as noise in the model above. Differences in perceptions, filtering, cultures, languages and the phenomena of information overload are examples of communication barriers according to McShane & Von Glinow (2003).

2.3 Communication platforms

In marketing, there are different ways of formulating and creating a message that is intended for the receivers. These messages are seen as an important part of communication and they may be divided in terms of so called communication platforms Kotler (2003). These five communication platforms are presented in the figure below (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Corporate communication platforms in terms of different channels and messages. Each of these platforms is an important part of creating awareness of the business and the products among various stakeholders (inspiration from Kotler, 2003,564).

Advertising includes the traditional marketing communication tools; news papers ads, television ads and symbols and logos are some examples (Kotler, 2003). *Sales promotion* refers to communication through events like fairs, exhibits, games, lotteries and demonstrations and to give away free samples and gifts. *Public relations and publicity* is the platform that is not directly aiming to communicate to customers. Examples of public relations are the annual reports from a company, participation in seminars and sponsorships and publications. *Personal selling* is when a sales person from the company approaches potential customers through sales meetings and presentations. *Direct marketing* means that the company contact potential customers through mail, e-mail, fax or telephone and offer the products in a direct, but non-personal, way.

An alternative way of describing the different communication platforms is to talk about *communication options* (Keller, 2001). The division between the different options can be done in a similar way as in the model by Kotler, but the main point is that the sender of a message must make an active choice of which channel to use for communication.

Understanding the possibilities and managing the risks of communication a company can create a strong brand (Keller, 2001; Kotler, 2003). The main idea of branding is that everything a company does communicates and that successful brand management will secure the position of the company's products in the mind of the customer.

3. The Skanska case

The Skanska AB corporation with over 60,000 employees all over the world has many closely related actors to consider being stakeholders of the company. Based on the empirical material (von Schantz, 2005); examination of reports and interviews, it is fair to state that Skanska has reached insight about being an actor in the micro- and macro environment of the company. Representatives of the company talk about the traditional stakeholder groups; employees, the financial market, costumers, competitors, the industry, suppliers, decision makers, politicians and potential employees. Skanska takes an active role in national and international situations; participating in different industry related events, such as the development of the “Business Principles for Countering Bribery in the Engineering & Construction Industry”, an initiative taken by the industry presented at the World Economic Forum.

Before discussing the CSR approach of today at Skanska further, let us take a look at the development of the CSR work within the company and CSR related occurrences that has affected this development. Table 1 describes the development as well as major CSR occurrences at Skanska and includes involuntary CSR occurrences in the development of CSR at Skanska, such as the toxic scandal of Hallandsåsen (a large project where toxic construction material was used as tightening material in a tunnel construction).

Table 1. The development and major occurrences of CSR work at Skanska (von Schantz, 2005, 45)

1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The toxic scandal of Hallandsåsen! •Sustainability issues are being discussed, but with focus on the environment. •Top management are making verbal commitments about ethical issues of the company.
1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Environmental Unit is established at the main office.
2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The notion of Sustainability is expanded. •Benchmarking the CSR work at Shell.
2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Environmental unit is renamed Sustainability Unit. •Code of Conduct is presented. •The asphalt cartel is exposed!
2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The first Sustainability Report is published.
2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ethical education of 2,500 employees.

Being a “CSR unaware company” the issue started to appear on the agenda of Skanska in late 90es in connection to the toxic scandal of Hallandsåsen. The top management talked about ethical issues, but there was nothing written and the company referred to verbal commitments.

The CSR work continued; a special unit at the main office was founded and in 2001. Skanska presented their Code of Conduct. This was also the year that the asphalt cartel was exposed

and Skanska figured in media as suspects in an extensive cartel. Working with ethical behaviour by formulating an ethical code and, at the same time, figuring as a suspect in an illegal tangle is a tremendous message coalition to the stakeholders. The credibility and the reputation of Skanska were badly damaged. The fact that a Code of Conduct was presented in that year did not seem to prohibit unethical behaviour.

Since the scandals in 2001, Skanska has worked actively with ethical matters and CSR. The construction industry has struggled with image problems and being a CSR aware construction company is a competitive advantage for Skanska. Realizing the connection between the power of the brand and the effect of CSR makes a company work responsible manners.

Skanska have chosen to talk about sustainability issues instead of CSR and include the social, environmental and financial values in their definition of sustainability. This makes CSR and sustainability synonymous according to the definition of CSR used in this study (the European Union's definition of CSR). Skanska's reason not to use the expression of CSR is that it is a confusing concept. It is true that the expression does not have a universally accepted definition yet, but the expression is, however, used and defined by large international organizations. The definitions made by, for example, the European Union and WBCSD are becoming more and more commonly used.

There are many examples of CSR related activities within the Skanska Group and the most typical examples are the Sustainability Reports that has been published since 2002. Their Code of Conduct was developed the same year. Skanska presents the Code of Conduct and other activities in a Sustainability Reports (Internet, Skanska 1, 2005).

Skanska works with value "based leadership". The CEO Stuart Graham is personally involved in the questions related to CSR. He comments the work in the Sustainability Reports and he has expressed clear intentions about the Skanska Code of Conduct (personal message, Wenblad, 2004). According to Löhman & Steinholz (2003) a successful CSR management must be initiated at the very top management level and be implemented in the organization by policies and guidelines. At Skanska, the CSR issues are coordinated from the main office directly under the Senior Executive Team. The business units are requested to report the implementation of the Code of Conduct to the Senior Executive Team.

4. A value based brand

The phenomenon of branding is not new in the business community, but the awareness of its use has developed considerably (Kotler et al, 1999). The concept of branding became highly discussed in the late 1980s and it has since been a strategic issue for companies with a market oriented approach (Arnold, 1993).

The power of a brand has been discovered by companies and numerous scholars have written books and articles and made research on the topic (Riezebos, 2003). A number of trends are explaining the increased power and focus of brands today. First of all, the globalization makes it possible for the big brands to be available globally and the consumption patterns are getting more and more homogeneous in cultural terms (Arnold, 1993). Owners of big brands are the first to benefit from this development. Big brands also make it possible for its owners to enter new markets, the brand can be used as an entry ticket when a company wants to leave a mature home market and enter new markets. Another factor putting branding in focus is that it is no longer only the fast-moving consumer goods market that is affected by branding strategies. Also service companies and industrial companies realize the advantage of strong brand-building and brand management has become central in business to business marketing as well (Apéria and Back, 2004).

The definition of a brand is according to Kotler (2000) and the American Marketing Association “a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (Keller, 1998, 37). The basic function of a brand is to help the customer identify the suppliers and simplify the selection among the multiple choices on a market. This way of explaining the function of a brand is regarded to be a mechanical aspect of product differentiation and a extended way of describing the function of a brand is to explain it as a personality of a product, making the customers emotionally attached and loyal to the company (Arnold, 1993).

Figure 5, presented below, is a model of the function of a brand. Customers make generalizations based on experiences, for example in consuming a product (personal message, Mark Herbert, 2004). The upward and downward *generalization* in the figure refers to how customers associate the brand of the company with the experience they have with a product. Likewise, in the downwards generalization the customer connect the company name and brand to expectations of a product. A negative product experience will affect the perception of the brand in a negative way, while a positive experience will support a good perception of a company and a brand. The *discrimination* between brands and experiences is the phenomena of separating different products offers, supported by brand and company names, to see the differences.

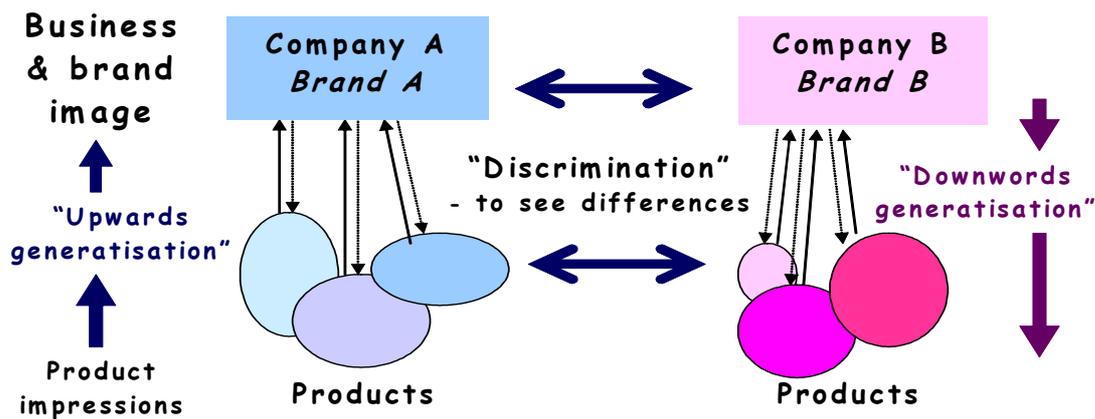


Figure 5. A brand and company name is a carrier of strategic value. The value of the brand and the company name is based on customers' previous experiences that are generalized. A positive experience will strengthen the positive image and it helps the customer to separate this brand from other brands or company names (personal message, Mark-Herbert, 2004).

Less quantifiable elements have been discovered to be the key to many companies success during the last decades (Arnold, 1993). Traditional symptoms rather than *causes* of business performance have been the most influential figures; rates of return and fixed assets have told us about a company's performance. In the western countries a change has occurred; companies have realized that customers care about quality and image and causes of business performance has proven to be the heart of business success.

4.1 A brand as an investment

In order to understand the needs of a customer and achieve customer satisfaction the company must manage customer value¹ (Best, 2004). Economic and price-performance measures are not enough to fully reach superior customer value; customers' *perception* of service quality, brand reputation and product benefits are also crucial elements. Quality is driven by perception of the customers and therefore branding is a key issue for companies reaching for high customer loyalty (Arnold 1993).

Branding strategy is a part of the corporate strategy, concerned solely with positioning of the organisation's outputs in the minds of its target customers (Ibid). The brand itself is essentially a customer perception and positioning is the process by which a company offers its brands to the customers. Positioning is not synonymous with advertising or commercials, putting the company at the right position in the customers mind should be communicated by *all* activities of an organisation.

A strong brand means that consumers recognize the company and the products (Kotler et al, 1999). Big brands are big personalities, people knows what Coca Cola, McDonald's and

¹ Customer value = customer benefits – cost of purchase. Customers are willing to pay more for products and services that add value (Best, 2004, 87).

Marlboro stand for as well as they recognizes the names of famous people like Clint Eastwood and Madonna. For the consumers it is timesaving and risk minimizing to be loyal to a brand that has already been consumed if the needs were successfully satisfied.

For the company the point of branding is that it is an asset. This asset is intangible and described as goodwill, loyalty, reputation or preference, it is simply a prejudice, but the fact is that companies can make profit out of it for many years (Arnold, 1993). Brand names can be worth millions of dollars. In 2002 the brand of Coca Cola was ranked as the most valuable brand in the world, worth \$ 70 billions and second on the list was Microsoft with a brand estimated to be worth \$ 64 billions (Best, 2004, 180).

The value of the brand can be derived from different sources; brand awareness, market leadership, reputation of quality, brand relevance and brand loyalty. These specific brand assets impact the value and changes in these assets will affect the value of the company's brand. Another way of referring to the value of a brand is to talk about brand equity. Customer-based brand equity occurs when customers have a high level of brand awareness as well as a positive perception of the brand image (Keller, 1998). Best (1998) describes the brand equity as the attractiveness of a brand based entirely on its name and image.

4.2 CSR communication in the Skanska case

The Swedish construction sector has suffered from doubtful reputation and is repeatedly in the focus of public debates. Even people from inside of the sector are openly witnessing of poor ethical conduct (Hoffman, 2005). The federal branch organization in Sweden, BI, is also giving this picture by their prioritized strategic goals (Internet, BI, 2004). They state that the reputation of the sector must be improved and the objective is to be regarded as a serious and competent actor in the Swedish business community. The increasing awareness of CSR should be seen as an opportunity for the sector, where all steps in the right direction will contribute to an enhanced reputation. Customers and other stakeholders expect companies to act in a responsible way and companies within the construction sector can gain competitive advantages if they understand the power of CSR.

CSR is all about how a company choses to do business. Regarding the increasing transparency and awareness of today, an unappreciated conduct by the company will damage the brand. Building a brand is a long term effort, but destroying it, by a CSR scandal for example, can happen over night. Realizing the connection between the power of the brand and the effect of CSR should make a company to act responsibly. Communication of CSR does not only create awareness for CSR, it is also a way of creating a bond between the company and its stakeholders (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004).

CSR related news that has been in focus in the press, make companies work actively with these issues. In the Skanska case, they have faced two major CSR crises in the recent decades, and it is clear that media has forced Skanska to develop an active CSR approach. The negative attention has been so harmful for the Skanska image that it had to be turned to something positive, a pro active approach towards CSR.

The conclusion is that an active CSR approach that is based on values and the implementation from top level management contributes to strengthen the brand of a company when it is communicated in a trustworthy way. The Swedish construction sector may gain a further

improved reputation and image by working actively with CSR issues. The study of the case company Skanska shows that negative CSR communicated by media made the company realize that CSR must be taken seriously. The crisis at Skanska is a well learned lesson. The development of Corporate Social Responsibility awareness is more than just PR tactics to please a critical press. It's the future. It's what Skanska and other companies have to do to survive and prosper in a world where more and more of their behaviour is under the microscope.

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