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Building corporate reputation with stakeholders

Exploring the role of message ambiguity for social marketers

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Abstract

Purpose – Managing the corporate reputation of hybrid firms (organizations that act commercially to pursue social agendas) involves particular challenges because of competing stakeholder interests. With reference to the Trappist beer market, the paper seeks to identify the value of message ambiguity in reducing stakeholder tension, while simultaneously achieving a clear market positioning.

Design/methodology/approach – In total, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted with brand marketers, owners, channel buyers, industry representatives and consumers.

Findings – The findings demonstrate how ambiguous communications minimize tension between stakeholders. One form of ambiguous message strategy is identified – i.e. the deliberate use of “authenticity” as a positioning device. This positioning allows stakeholders to ascribe conflicting meanings to the Trappist brand, resulting in increased reputation and decreased stakeholder tension.

Research limitations/implications – The use of authenticity and message ambiguity represents one means of balancing stakeholder interests, while achieving a clear market position. The paper believes the findings are particularly relevant for social marketers and managers of highly symbolic brands.

Originality/value – Marketers can reduce stakeholder conflict through the use of brand images that emphasize normative as opposed to performance-based commitments. Such commitments need to be broad enough to allow different stakeholders to ascribe their own meaning to the brand without diminishing the strength of the firm’s market position.

Keywords Stakeholders, Corporate image, Non-profit organizations, Communications

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

With increased competition in the not-for-profit sector, social marketers are being urged to develop a customer orientation and a clear market position, including an identifiable corporate image (Glynn, 2000; Young and Salamon, 2002). However, social marketers often face particular challenges in building a single corporate image because competing stakeholder interests impede this strategy. Unlike for-profit firms, hybrid firms (defined as those that require market success to fund social programs) must

balance business and social needs within a context of multiple and often competing stakeholders (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2009) – defined as “all the relevant publics or multiple markets with which any firm interacts”; Kliatchko, 2008, p. 145) and “any individual or group who can affect or be affected by the approach to the issue addressed by the network” (Roloff, 2008, p. 238).

The nature of postmodern markets makes engagement with stakeholders particularly important for brand managers because the firm is just one of many meaning-makers, alongside other stakeholders such as consumers, critics, NGOs, the media, and other interested parties (Roloff, 2008). This is particularly the case for hybrid organizations, as their brands are often positioned around a set of moral norms and thus invite scrutiny from multiple stakeholders (Palazzo and Basu, 2007). As such, marketers in these organizations must somehow craft an identifiable market position against a background of competing interests (Glynn, 2000; Koll *et al.*, 2005; Lindgreen *et al.*, 2009; Palazzo and Basu, 2007; Roloff, 2008; Voss *et al.*, 2005). Since such advice runs counter to traditional brand management and marketing communications techniques (Keller, 2003), we explore, with reference to the Trappist beer industry, how firms simultaneously build brand position through allowing for multiple stakeholder agendas (responding to calls for such research; Donaldson and Preston, 1995). As identified in our findings, marketers use a strategy of message ambiguity to achieve these dual goals, and thus we explore further how such an approach to communications is implemented.

Our focus is important because research identifies that an over-emphasis on the needs of one stakeholder group may result in a negative reassessment of the organization's reputation among donors, employees and influencers such as the media and critics (Glynn, 2000; Lindgreen *et al.*, 2009; Palazzo and Basu, 2007; Suchman, 1995; Voss *et al.*, 2005). For example, emphasizing customer orientation to the detriment of artistic integrity by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra resulted in media criticism, reduction in donor support, a musicians' strike and a decline in subscriber and audience numbers (Glynn, 2000). Environmental advocates, religious, medical and arts organizations, as well as universities, face similar difficulties in developing corporate reputations because of stakeholder differences (Voss *et al.*, 2005). To date, research has focused on the strategies used to manage stakeholder conflict, especially in the light of tactical responses to crises (Suchman, 1995), rather than examining how firms can develop and enhance their corporate reputation in the marketplace – a gap our article seeks to fill.

This article examines one strategy for managing corporate reputation against a background of competing interests and tensions – strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity refers to “those instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals and helps promote unified diversity in organizations because deliberately ambiguous missions allow divergent interpretations to coexist and are more effective in allowing diverse groups to work together” (Paul and Strbiak, 1997, p. 149). The use of ambiguous messages is believed to be essential in situations where a firm's reputation is embedded within networks of stakeholders (Roloff, 2008). In these cases, business ethicists suggest firms need to balance commitments to product/service performance and wider moral norms to allow different stakeholders to identify with the firm and its goals (Palazzo and Basu, 2007). Long-term commitments such stakeholder engagement leads to performance benefits (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2009) including buffer effects in times of crises (Vanhamme and Grobben, 2009).

This article has the following structure. First, we provide a short review of the importance of stakeholders to corporate reputation. Second, we present details of our case methodology including background on the industry context. Third, we present our case findings, focusing on the source of stakeholder conflict and the reduction of that conflict using strategic ambiguity. Finally we present a discussion that addresses implications for theory, future research and practitioners.

2. Why stakeholders matter for corporate reputation

Early research on corporate reputation focused on building a strong corporate image with target consumers. Central to this view was the need for an organization to develop a consistent core message that would form the basis for the firm's identity with its target audience (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). In cases where this message resonated with consumers, firms were encouraged to stay on message through a strategy of reinforcement (Keller, 2003). As a result, early writings on integrated marketing communications (IMC) encouraged firms to adopt a "one voice, one look" strategy whereby all the firm's communications and consumer touch points communicated one consistent message to the marketplace (Beverland and Luxton, 2005).

However, this "one voice, one look" approach may break down in contexts where organizations face stakeholder conflict (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg and Witten, 1987; Palazzo and Basu, 2007; Roloff, 2008) because corporate reputation is reflective of collective stakeholder judgments made over time about an organization's communications and actions (Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Glynn, 2000; Markwick and Fill, 1995; Suchman, 1995). Stakeholders can impact brand image, corporate reputation, and ultimately revenues through proxy resolutions, boycotts, modified vendettas (Harrison and St John, 1996), and/or the withholding or restrictive use of resources (Fry and Polonsky, 2004). Recent research also suggests that stakeholders are no longer passive receivers of corporate communications (Yannopoulou and Elliott, 2008) and *may* selectively choose to focus on those actions that reinforce their own agendas resulting in an assessment at odds with marketer intent that nevertheless shapes organizational reputation (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg and Witten, 1987).

These changes require social marketers to take into account competing stakeholder views when developing marketing communications (Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Dowling, 1988; Kliatchko, 2008; Markwick and Fill, 1995). As a result, new definitions of IMC have adopted a stakeholder approach (Kliatchko, 2008; Palazzo and Basu, 2007) and recent research on building corporate reputation challenges the importance of a singular view, arguing that different messages may be needed to achieve a strong reputation – for example, since employees are critical to brand delivery, separate messages need to be targeted at employees as well as end-consumers and other stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz, 2008).

Thus marketers must engage in a delicate balancing act. First, they must engage with, and manage the response of, firm stakeholders because such publics have the ability to effect firm reputation (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2009; Roloff, 2008; Vanhamme and Grobben, 2009). Second, managers are exhorted to "stay on message" to reinforce corporate image and enhance corporate reputation (Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Glynn, 2000; Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005; Markwick and Fill, 1995). Yet, how do marketers achieve the consistency believed necessary for corporate

reputation when facing increasingly networked and influential stakeholders that may make message consistency difficult, if not impossible?

3. Methods

To address our research question we conducted an embedded single industry case study. We did so for three reasons. First, there is a lack of research on managing stakeholder tension in light of reputation concerns, justifying a more exploratory approach to capture a wide range of variables. Second, the focus on the implementation of strategic ambiguity as a corporate reputation-building tool required us to capture multiple aspects of practice and process. Third, it is recognized that research on responsiveness to stakeholders should take place in single industries because such conflicts are often industry specific (Koll *et al.*, 2005). As a result, we selected the Trappist brewing industry for study.

3.1 Research context

Trappist breweries provide a rich context for understanding stakeholder conflict and corporate reputation management in a hybrid context. Trappist monks belong to the order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance. To be self-sufficient, Trappist monks are allowed to sell excess production not needed for personal consumption. To differentiate their products from competitors, the Orders developed a unique authenticating label for their products. To use the label “Authentic Trappist Products”, monks must produce the products within the confines of a Trappist monastery, and the majority of profits must fund the monastery and its social programs. The first part of the findings section provides evidence of stakeholder tension, supporting our choice of Trappist breweries as a legitimate case study to address our research questions.

3.2 Sample selection and data collection

The main stakeholders in the Trappist beer industry are identified using Roloff's (2008) revised definition (see section 1) that gives particular attention to the goals of all stakeholders rather than just the firm's objectives. This definition is particularly relevant when studying brand management since brand meaning is increasingly the product of many meaning-makers, of which the firm is just one (Ritson and Elliot, 1999). The following stakeholders are relevant to the Trappist beer setting:

- members of the Trappist Order (i.e. the monks);
- secular employees who oversee the breweries' marketing operations;
- business customers such as café owners, distributors and retailers;
- end-consumers;
- beer critics;
- representatives from the industry organization; and
- members of government agencies.

Interviews of all stakeholders, except beer critics and members of government agencies, were conducted. In relation to beer critics, the authors relied on secondary information, including a recently published book by Hieronymus (2005) that provides extensive detail on their views. The authors also drew on other published sources and web-based material (including the web page of the late renowned beer critic Michael

Jackson). Owing to space limitations, we do not focus on the views of government officials here because Trappist Orders restrict their advertising, and have policies against encouraging alcohol abuse.

Primary data for this article was gained from five sources. In total, 25 interviews were conducted: 12 with consumers of Trappist beers (two females – Trappist-style beers are primarily drunk by men – and ten males aged between 20 and 54), the six Trappist breweries (Achel, Chimay, Orval, Rochefort, Westmalle, and Westvleteren), one recently former Trappist brewery (La Trappe), five trade buyers, and one with the director of the industry organization. All interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed.

Interviews conducted at the seven breweries (five cases are believed to be necessary in studies of highly complex cases and to improve certainty; Yin, 1994) involved questions on each brewery's guiding philosophy, marketing practices, positioning, and competitive pressures (future concerns and aims). Informants were also asked to describe areas of difficulty or concern relating to their role, the Trappist practices and values, and other relevant issues. Further interviews on desired content and levels of marketing activity by the Trappists were carried out with retailers and the industry organization. Interviews were conducted at the informant's place of business and on average lasted for two hours. Following this, interview data were integrated with secondary information from the specialist brewing media, news media, and secondary data gained from the breweries to provide further background information. This included brochures, company reports, advertisements, in-store trade promotions, and Internet sites. In all, 56 sources were reviewed.

Consistent with the evolving nature of case research, as it became clear how marketers were using ambiguity, we decided to conduct 12 in-depth consumer interviews (interviewing ceased when theoretical saturation occurred; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), using photo-elicitation techniques. This type of interviewing allows one to surface and examine informants' deep-seated meanings and decision rules. Since the industry members stressed the importance of authenticity to Trappist identity, we sought to examine this issue with consumers who explicitly preferred Trappist style beers.

Following Zaltman's (2004) recommendations, we divided our study into three parts. First, we examined informants' general definitions of authenticity. Second, we explored authenticity in the context of Trappist beer by asking informants to select three images they associated with authenticity from an image file and contrast these with three images they viewed as inauthentic. Informants were also invited to use their own pictures or images as the interviews were conducted in their homes – two-thirds of the informants selected at least one image or object in this manner. The image file we provided included 46 images associated with beer production, religion, consumption contexts, advertising, and retail displays. These categories of images were selected based on a close reading of Beverland's (2005) comprehensive review of cues used to indicate authenticity. Within each category, slight variations of images were included. For example, we selected pictures associated with modern production techniques as well those associated with craft methods (both approaches are used by Trappist breweries). These variations were selected to allow informants to identify the often fine-grained differences between the authentic and the inauthentic.

The final part of the consumer interviews focused on 24 different bottles of beer. We included examples of genuine Trappist beers as well as a number of well known and

lesser known abbey beers (these beers are positioned in competition with the Trappist beers but are not subject to the same restrictions and are often backed by large conglomerates), as well as a few non-Trappist style products including mass marketed brands and foreign beer brands. Consumers were encouraged to go through each of the bottles and discuss those they thought were authentic Trappist products. The result of this exercise was a relationship between message cues, definitions of authenticity (i.e. stakeholder biases) and consumption preferences (i.e. reputation).

3.3 Data analysis and quality checks

The authors conducted the analysis independently, and their interpretations were then compared. Disagreements between the authors were explored in detail until agreement could be reached (this process often resulted in more nuanced insights). The analysis follows standard interpretive practice. Theoretical categories were elaborated on during open and axial coding procedures (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Throughout the analysis the authors tacked back and forward between the literature on stakeholder management and the data (dialectical tacking), which led to the development of a number of theoretical categories and sub-categories.

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

4. Findings

The findings are presented in two parts. First, we identify the existence and sources of stakeholder tensions (see Figure 1). Second, we identify the Trappists' solution to these conflicts – namely the use of message ambiguity – in this case, the centrality of authenticity to corporate image.

4.1 Sources of stakeholder tensions

We focus on three main sources of stakeholder tension facing Trappist marketers:

- (1) the market;
- (2) religion; and
- (3) marketers.

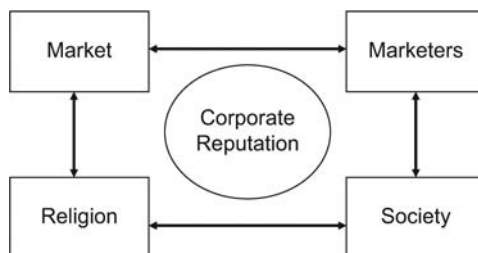


Figure 1.
Stakeholder influence on
the reputation of Trappist
organizations

These are identified in Figure 1. As mentioned earlier, we did not focus on health officials (labeled “society” in Figure 1) because their sole concern (in this theoretical context) regards responsible alcohol use. Also captured under the “society” label are the beneficiaries of Trappist social programs. Their concerns are reflected in the Trappist desire to survive and expand sales, as reflected in the following passage:

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

This passage identifies the impact of failing to manage stakeholder tension on the communities dependent on the Trappist Orders.

4.1.1 The market. One source of tension was driven by market changes – those changes desired by consumers, channel customers, and beer critics. Our analysis of these stakeholders revealed four drivers of tension between the market and religion:

- (1) product adaptation;
- (2) channel choice;
- (3) the centrality to market-based reputation of indexical (i.e. factually verifiable) links between religion and beer production; and
- (4) consumers’ desire to connect with the Trappist Orders.

These will be covered in order.

The first conflict relates to the need to adapt Trappist products to market changes, while simultaneously retaining a sense of tradition. Consumer trends suggest that savory (as opposed to sweet), heavy (i.e. dark ales), high-alcohol beers were undesired by younger consumers, particularly the growing female market. The lack of restrictions faced by Abbey brewers meant they could respond to such demand with new products that were marketed as traditional products (traditional beer in Belgium is synonymous with beers brewed by religious orders; Hieronymus, 2005). Retailers and critics identified that Trappist beers had suffered inconsistent quality in the past (from one batch to the next) and had been surpassed in quality by Abbey beers.

Tensions between continuance of tradition and market relevance are common in industries with a strong craft tradition because craftspeople often seek to replicate previous practices out of a sense of duty and passion (Beverland, 2005). However, solutions to this problem are not simple. For example, although the Trappist Orders have invested heavily in scientific production techniques to minimize variation and lift quality (in one case, an €80m investment), they are unable to communicate these investments directly to consumers in order to reinforce perceptions of quality and increase their reputation. While consumers desire the outcomes of such investments (consistency of taste and quality) they respond positively to imagery associated with traditional hand-crafted production methods. For example:

You want to appeal to a general group of people ... this would change the authenticity because you need proper industrial processes to maintain and deliver products to the market and that loses some authenticity because the beer is not produced in an old fashioned way, people who are dealing with the beer are not brewing it but sitting behind a computer ... they

need not know anything about the beer, accountants for example are not working in the brewery, it's not the old way of brewing as it used to be (Consumer: Bram)[1].

Bram's passage identifies concerns about how responding to market concerns may undermine the status of the Trappist corporate identity, because responding to a broader segment would by necessity require changes in traditional methods and tradition would be lost because the tacit production knowledge of the monks (built up over time and through an apprentice system) would not be held by the extra employees needed to produce different styles at large volumes.

Another further tension arising from the need to be market relevant relates to channel choice and support. Historically Trappist beers were sold direct from the monastery or through specialist stores and cafés. However, to target new consumers and counter threats from Abbey beers Trappist breweries are coming under pressure to sell in supermarkets (which they resist and to engage in substantial channel support in other channels. For example:

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

The retailer quoted above identifies the difference between the Abbey and Trappist beers in terms of responsiveness to requests for support and the relative level of support. Requests for more promotional support reflect retailers desire to increase sales of Trappist products because many of them prefer to support the Trappist products rather than the Abbey products.

Central to the reputation of Trappist breweries (and the product category "traditional beers") is the link between religion and beer production. One condition of using the label "Authentic Trappist Product" is the production of beer by monks in a monastery. The Trappists are "living monasteries" and thus have a real point of difference *vis-à-vis* many Abbey brands, which often have tenuous links to actual religious orders. Also, consumers place particular emphasis on links between religious imagery and beer production when selecting beer brands. For example:

This picture of the monk drinking his beer is the most appealing, it is the first connection when I think of Trappist beer, the monk drinking and enjoying it. The monks are living there, it is their home, and they are growing up making the beer and growing ingredients, other companies the workers just see it as a job, whereas the monks are really seeing it as part of their life work, when you have a lot of experience then I think you can brew it in an old fashioned way, and every time a new monk enters, there is a long time they can exchange ideas and experiences between old and new people, whereas in Heineken this is not possible, people work there four or five years they take their knowledge with them. It [Trappist beer] could be brewed by someone else but it would feel like a little disappointment, it would feel it would be brewed by Grolsch's production line

[1: So if Heineken bought an abbey and used exactly the same old methods?]

If the Heineken beers and the Westmalle beers are produced in the same factory, then no it is not the same (Consumer: Tim).

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

Tim’s passage identifies the value he places on images that reinforce an ongoing connection between the Trappist order and beer production. For Tim (and the other consumer and retailer informants), this ongoing connection is central to their understanding of the Trappist image, and drives their continued loyalty. As he notes, Tim states that even if the product was exactly the same, without a direct link to an Abbey, the product would be less desirable. Also, this actual connection to a living order is the key point of difference between the Trappists and other producers, including abbey beers that traded on religious imagery for commercial affect. Tim’s view is not lost on retail buyers, and explains calls for greater promotion and channel support.

One result of consumers’ valuing the direct relationship between religious life and beer production (and corporate reputation) is the desire to visit the Trappist monasteries to experience the story behind the brand. For the consumers, such tours also help them identify the genuine Trappist product from the Abbey products that are mass-marketed products trading on religious imagery despite having little (if any) connection to real religious communities. For example:

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

Trappist beers are brewed in an abbey in a real old fashioned way. You can really dive into the process, you don’t see that with Grimbergen. In the Trappists are the monks who make the beer, the large companies just have production employees, not in old fashioned clothes, in the Trappist you see how they live there, they really live for the product, with real addiction for the product, in Grimbergen, they just work there for the money, they have no connection to the product (Consumer: Peter).

The above quotations identify the value informants receive from being able to connect directly with the place and processes of production and the creative individuals behind this process. The ability of consumers to visit the orders and undertake public relations tours is an essential strategy in reinforcing key attributes of the Trappist image. In particular, John (and the other informants) value meeting the monks, hearing their personal stories about previous colleagues or the Order’s history, and going backstage through behind-the-scenes tours of production facilities. Peter’s passage reinforces the importance of behind-the-scenes tours and advertising of the Trappist story to his impression of authenticity, and, more importantly, a sense of difference between the Trappist beers and the more commercial Abbey beers seeking to position themselves as *faux* Trappists.

These four market-driven demands, while standard fare for for-profit marketers, present real problems for the Trappist marketing staff because they clash with values central to religious life.

4.1.2 Religion. The second source of stakeholder tension revolved around conflicts between the monks and the other stakeholders. We have labeled these as “religion”

because they represent a clash of values. Making marketers' reactions to market demands difficult are monks' concerns about promoting alcohol consumption, proselytizing religion, protecting the "sacred", and remaining true to religious covenants. These are covered in order, with the two passages below reflecting the first two of the monks' concerns:

We are not advertising much, which is a major difference with the commercial breweries. We have advertising material. This material escorts the selling of the beer. An example is the glasses. We want that our beer is drunk in our glasses, we have coasters, we have cards but also material around the drinking of beer. You will never see us on television or some advertising. The community wants to be very careful to support the consumption of alcohol. (Monk: Case 4).

The religion is quite important because otherwise I would not be here. The religion is not communicated to the customers. It is not the intention to stimulate that people are coming to life in the abbey (Monk: Case 5).

The above quotations identify concerns about communication activities (run by the distributor group Bavaria) that increase consumption among young people (Trappist beers are much higher in alcohol than other mass-marketed beers; Hieronymus, 2005) and proselytize religion. Such concerns are driven by a desire not to increase alcohol consumption among younger people. Also the monks do not want to use images of religion in their communications because such images may recruit new monks with more material motivations. Such concerns help explain the reluctance to sell through supermarkets, and engage in channel support including price promotions that focus on volume.

Despite consumer and retailer desires for greater promotions associating religious life with beer production, the monks limit the ability of marketers to do so. For example:

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

We never use the image of the monks in our communication because we have to respect the monks. And they don't want us to use them. I think it should be an error to use a monk in our communication because they are not there to make promotions; they are there to pray and live in a certain way (Marketer: Case 2).

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

The above passages reflect monks' concerns that consumer-driven marketing communications may diminish the solemnity of their religious devotion and trivialize their values. For example, the third passage identifies the restrictions on using the "sacred" (the cross) for "profane" (commercial) reasons (Belk *et al.*, 1989). The second

part of the passage by the marketer from Case 7 reveals the concerns the monks regarding consumer desires for behind-the-scenes tours (at one extreme, one brewery had 80,000 visitors to the monastery per year, as well potentially intrusive media interest). The passage identifies that the Abbot must enforce customer-oriented behavior in the Order even though this interrupts religious contemplation.

The monks' desires identified in this section run counter to market demands. In particular, should the monks refuse to compromise their position, their ability to maintain the order and fund their social commitments. This is because their lifestyle is central to consumers' product choice. Mass-market competitor Abbey beer brands face no such restrictions on using imagined religious connections to promote their products. Thus, they have achieved market dominance and many of our consumers had difficulty in telling the real Trappist products (which they desired) from the Trappist look-alike beers (which they wished to avoid). The religious values of the monks present real difficulties for Trappist marketers wishing to create a strong organizational identity.

4.1.3 Marketers. When attempting to enhance their corporate reputations, the Trappist marketers studied attempted to respond to market concerns while being respectful of religious values. This balancing act was not an easy one and often resulted in tensions between them and the monks. For example:

The large abbey is our unique selling point; we receive about 25,000 visitors a year. When you come inside in here, this of course makes a large impression. In our new campaign we focus on the abbey. Everything is located at the abbey, always the abbey on the background. The monks don't like to use religious symbols. We have to deal with this (Marketer: Case 3).

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

The quotations above identify the difficulty faced by marketers in exploiting consumer interest in religious imagery and behind-the-scenes tours of monasteries. Although the marketers quoted above understand the need to manage public relations tours, communications about religious life, and the use of religious symbols in brand advertising responsibly, he also recognizes that this is a missed opportunity to build compelling links between the Order and consumers. Marketers face a further problem. Within the confines of Trappist Orders (in contrast to others), monks follow a practice of strict observance where they only speak when necessary (hardly in keeping with a customer orientation).

Also, strategies to grow sales often raised concerns for long-time consumers of Trappist beers. For example:

When you have the Trappist beers in the supermarkets this will not have a positive effect on the image of the beers. But if we are not presented in the supermarkets we are dead. The cafés are not enough to survive. And in Belgium the volume of the specialist shops is not enough to take our production (Marketer: Case 2).

You do not buy it in a supermarket you go to a specialized store, and that would give an air of authenticity, that it is special. It could be sold in a supermarket only if it is with the other

Trappists, in its own place that does not change. . . . it looks like the supermarket has paid attention to the type of beers it is displaying, the Rochefort number 6, 8, and 10, and the owner is responsible for the shop and loves the product and shows it, no advertisements, just here are these special beers (Consumer: Hans).

The passages above reveal concerns over the cost of dealing with mainstream, mass retailers. The passage from the marketer identifies the tensions between requiring this channel's support for survival and their personal belief that using such channels will undermine the brewery's reputation. Hans, a long-time consumer of Trappist beers, echoes this concern, identifying that what is special about Trappist beers would be lost if they are simply sold on a shelf with other traditional style beers (which would include Abbey beers).

4.1.4 Summary of conflict. In summary, the need to successfully navigate the modern market results in stakeholder tension. Management of such tension is critical to the identity of Trappist breweries and their ability to fund monastery costs and social programs. The three sections above demonstrate that while the monks cannot ignore market pressures, neither can marketers simply respond to retailer and consumer demands for more promotion, changes in products, aggressive brand marketing that draws on religious iconography, and unlimited behind-the-scenes tours of monasteries. Not only would the monks forbid such activities, but also consumer passages suggest that over-promotion of quality investments, using mass channels, and (as demonstrated in all the projective interviews with consumers) highly stylized marketing using, for example, pictures of "jolly monks brewing beer" could undermine reputation.

Central to all the informant passages covered in the three sections above are concerns regarding the protection of authenticity. For example, monks are concerned about remaining true to their espoused values and their heritage. Traditional consumers desire beers made by monks in live monasteries, committed to using profits for social purposes. Supportive retailers desire materials to help them support the continuance of Trappist traditions. Finally, marketers wish to respect the wishes of the monks while also ensuring they play their part in ensuring the survival of the Orders. Despite their differences, this desire for authenticity is something all stakeholders share. Importantly, we propose that by emphasizing the authenticity of their products, all stakeholders can find common ground without undermining corporate reputation. Thus, we identify the use of authenticity as a tactical form of strategic ambiguity that simultaneously reduces stakeholder conflict and enhances corporate reputation.

4.2 Managing stakeholder tension through ambiguity

As noted above, the effective promotion of Trappist beers as purveyors of authentic traditions will reduce stakeholder tensions and provide a point of competitive differentiation against beers produced by larger rivals. However, as noted in the summary section above, authenticity concerns are expressed differently by each stakeholder group. Organizations confronted with conflicting stakeholders can engage in "strategies that do not minimize ambiguity but are nonetheless effective" (Leitch and Davenport, 2002, p. 130). In the context of communications, this strategy is believed to result in downplaying certain details of the organizations' operations that conflict with the desired image (Beverland and Luxton, 2005), having vague mission statements (Leitch and Davenport, 2002), and adapting messages for alternate audiences (Kates and Goh, 2003). These approaches characterize Trappist marketing communications.

For example, our analysis of Trappist marketing communications identifies the use of planned, inferred, and maintenance messages to reinforce claims of authenticity. Planned messages include tasteful adverts of monks brewing beer and interacting with raw ingredients (emphasizing handcrafted traditions but not enjoyment of the product), overt messages on websites that emphasize commitment to social causes (emphasizing religious connections), pictures of friends enjoying each other's company cafes over a meal and a glass of beer (emphasizing responsible consumption), and the use of public relations tours that place beer production within the wider context of each Order's social and moral goals. As well, ongoing commitments to lived tradition are emphasized in images of traditional copper brewing kettles, old-style fonts and glass bottles, and the upkeep of ancient monastery buildings. Inferred messages further highlight authenticity through the use of wooden crates for packaging, bottles wrapped individually in paper, and pictures of monks packing these crates by hand (emphasizing involvement in production, love of the product, and small scale production). Lastly, maintenance messages are also used during tours of the Trappist Orders that focus on respecting the privacy of the monks and their decisions to the rules of strict observance. These messages not only respect religious values but also reinforce perceptions of sincerity (central to claims of authenticity; Beverland, 2005) and create a powerful sense of mystique around the Trappist brand.

While these messages decrease stakeholder conflict and reinforce a point of difference, they are also only part of the story. Further ambiguity is deployed, through emphasizing traditional production methods via images of old production machinery, even though modern industrial techniques are used to ensure consistency of quality (identified as crucial to market relevance). Yet, these investments are downplayed (although not denied), because the Trappists also promote authenticity in terms of ongoing passion for product excellence (this also gains the support of critics who challenge the notion of a fixed "traditional style", suggesting that such claims are made to excuse poor quality). Thus, investments in modern production equipment represents part of a living tradition of incremental innovation and product leadership, while the adoption of such techniques emphasizes how far the Trappists will go to meet their social obligations.

Communications also manage tensions arising out of conflicts between market-based stakeholders and the monks on the role of religious imagery in marketing. For example, stylized images of jolly monks in gaudy colors are typical of many Abbey beers, but are never used by the Trappist breweries. This creates a subtle form of differentiation. Religious connections are created by statements on bottles and websites emphasizing beer being brewed by monks in a "living" monastery. In contrast to Abbey beers, which often use religious icons such as stained glass pictures, pictures of religious orders, and monks drinking beer, Trappist beer labels are very simple, merely containing the name of the Order (usually in Gothic script), and the beer style, labeled "double" and "triple", which relates to alcohol content.

These strategies create a position of unified diversity (Eisenberg, 1984) and allow buy-in by different stakeholders because they are broad enough to allow for multiple interpretations of authenticity (i.e. message receivers selectively choose cues that confirm their biases of "what authenticity ought to be"; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). For example, Bram's passage (see section 4.1.1) is reflective of Grayson and Martinec's (2004) belief that consumers may suspend disbelief when judging the authenticity of

products or tourist sites. For example, Bram recognizes that quality comes from industrial production processes, and he understands that the Trappists even use such methods to the detriment of the continued authenticity of the product. Nevertheless, in his discussions of authenticity he identifies that products can still feel authentic if the right image is presented (which also involves leaving out certain aspects of Trappist operations that do not conform to Bram's ideal of authenticity). Likewise, the other consumer passages (see section 4.1.1) suggests that central to the Trappist identity is the continued tradition of monks being involved in beer production. Thus, although religion is part of the Trappist aura, the critical point of difference relates to a continued tradition of monks being involved in beer production. As the consumer informants note, they are loyal to Trappist beers because someone passionately committed to the product is immersed in the process – absorbing the craft as part of monastic life and seeing beer production as central to their identity (i.e. it is not “just a job” but a “calling”).

5. Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine how marketers can minimize stakeholder conflict while enhancing corporate reputation using strategic ambiguity (building on calls for such research; Koll *et al.*, 2005; Maignan *et al.*, 2005; Voss *et al.*, 2005). This aim (to our knowledge) is the first attempt to transfer notions of strategic ambiguity to research on corporate reputation. The first major finding from the study was that ambiguous brand messages such as the promotion of authenticity allows multiple and even contradictory interpretations to coexist thereby minimizing stakeholder conflict (Davenport and Leitch, 2005). The second major finding was the identification of one tactical form (the use of authenticity claims) by which marketers can implement a strategy of deliberate ambiguity without undermining competitive differentiation and corporate reputation. These findings support the recent suggestions by business ethicists that anti-brand attitudes can be reduced through positioning the brand around normative goals (authenticity is a moral commitment; Beverland, 2005) as opposed to functional superiority (Roloff, 2008).

Supporting Postrel's (2003) contention that what is authentic in the marketplace is mostly determined by the subject's personal goals and agendas, our findings demonstrate that the use of authenticity in brand communications enables hybrid firms such as Trappist breweries to engage in seemingly contradictory stances. For example, the Trappists claim they are religious organizations disinterested in promoting religion (even though stylized religious images are used), sellers of relatively high alcohol beers concerned about promoting alcohol consumption, and organizations dedicated to solving social problems through the sale of products that are associated with societal spillover costs. However, rather than focus on these contradictions, our informants use this open message to ascribe their own meanings to the brand, selectively interpreting information to support existing attitudes (Roloff, 2008).

A further benefit of such message ambiguity is that in spite of their conflicts, stakeholders find common purpose in the protection and promotion of authentic brewing traditions even though the review of beer critics identified that there is virtually no indexical relation between modern Trappist beers and the products of the past. Although some may question the ethics of using deliberately ambiguous

messages, these findings confirm Grayson and Martinec's (2004) contention that people may prefer to suspend disbelief rather than challenge their preconceived ideas of what is authentic. That is, consumers see in brand what they want to see, in order to achieve identity goals (Palazzo and Basu, 2007). Such a finding has interesting implications for brand preferences as it suggests that legitimate stakeholder challenges to abstract claims may have little effect on overall brand image (although the short-term vs. long-term effects of this require further examination). As such, we propose that deliberate ambiguity offers a more viable alternative to cynical impression management or deliberate decoupling (Beverland and Luxton, 2005) in a postmodern market because stakeholders may actively give personal meaning to vague terms such as authenticity.

The above results suggest that deliberately vague, but emotionally satisfying messages (the desire for authenticity is characteristic of much postmodern consumer choice; Grayson and Martinec, 2004) may unite employees, external customers (including trade buyers and consumers), and critics to create support for the corporate brand and ward off criticism or external threats. Paradoxically, such vague notions also enhance one's point of difference against larger scale competitors because claims of authenticity tie organizations to local traditions and thereby place them apart from modern commerce (Beverland, 2005). Once again, such a strategy can assist consumers seeking to reconnect to an identity based on time, place and culture in an age when such notions have been undermined by globalization, deterritorialization and hyperreality (the triumph of image over reality) (Palazzo and Basu, 2007).

We examined how firms manage the seeming paradox of building reputational capital (requiring a competitive point of difference) through consistency against a context characterized by stakeholder diversity. Our findings, in contrast to much recommended best branding practice, suggest that differential advantages can be built from permeable positioning statements. Such a positioning allows stakeholders to ascribe their own meaning to the brand and/or encourages empathy with the organization because although subjective, ambiguous terms such as authenticity have universal and timeless appeal (Beverland, 2005). Given that diversity characterizes the postmodern marketplace, the search for consistency through diversity and dialectical synthesis of tensions seems to offer social marketers a viable means to craft a strong corporate reputation. In doing so, we support calls to broaden IMC approaches to take into account stakeholders (Kliatchko, 2008) while also offering a unique twist on the merits of the "one look, one voice" strategy suggesting practitioners can achieve image synergy through diversity.

6. Limitations and future research

This study has a number of limitations. First, the findings are derived from a single industry case study involving organizations with unique values and marketing problems, potentially limiting the transferability of results. Second, the results identify only one tactical form of strategic ambiguity – brand authenticity. As a result, many other issues relating to the implementation of deliberately ambiguous messages may yet be uncovered. Third, the use of authenticity as a positioning device may be relevant in only some industries and may be reflective of data drawn from mature craft organizations. It is likely that the relevance of authenticity, and the means by which it is conveyed, may be different in other industries, and in contexts where hybrid brands

are less mature and less embedded in national traditions. Fourth, the focus on strategic ambiguity should not limit the search for other solutions to the problems posed by stakeholder tension and corporate reputation concerns. Research has identified that some hybrid organizations (and some for-profit ones) engage in deliberate decoupling (whereby they downplay certain aspects of their behind-the-scenes practices) and careful impression management to deal with similar strategic concerns. As well, we suspect that micro message-targeting strategies may be used in some cases where resources are abundant.

A number of avenues for future research arise from these findings. First, we suggest that researchers address the issues raised in the Limitations section through examinations of stakeholder management in other industry sectors, national contexts and with less mature brands. Second, we suggest that future research is needed to identify other solutions to the stakeholder conflict/corporate reputation challenge and other tactical means to implement message ambiguity. Further research could examine the relative effectiveness of different strategies (ambiguity versus decoupling for example) and different tactics (freedom versus authenticity). Controls for industry and national effects could also tease out interesting boundary conditions of these strategies and tactics.

Third, survey research could examine the relationship between ambiguous messages, perceptions of corporate reputation, and marketplace equity. Fourth, a number of experimental projects could be conducted. For example, research could examine the impact of moral crises on the reputations of organizations using ambiguous or clear positions – does message ambiguity provide a buffer against substantial moral crises or amplify the situation? Related to this issue would be an examination of different forms of crises. In our context for example, would there be different outcomes for reputation if the Trappist-style beers were linked to alcohol problems versus say claims that monks were no longer directly involved in production versus evidence that Trappist Orders were redirecting money away from social causes in order to invest in marketing the products? Finally, research could examine the effectiveness of different messages among different stakeholders.

7. Managerial implications

We believe there are four managerial implications arising from this research that deserve particular attention. First, to enhance corporate reputation, social marketers should orient themselves to their stakeholders and conduct ongoing research to identify their goals, their biases, and the cues used to inform judgments about the legitimacy of the firm's actions. As part of this strategy, firms could give stakeholders special roles in their organization or use web technology to develop a sponsored forum that allows for stakeholder dialogue. This strategy will result in increased appreciation of the complexity of the firm's situation, and a reinforcement of the firm's positioning, be it authenticity, freedom, purity, or whatever. Second, firms' should re-evaluate their communication strategy, using multiple perceptions of the firm's actions to craft an ambiguous position in the marketplace and to develop the multiple messages that support such a positioning.

Third, one aspect of implementation we did not explicitly comment on relates to the explicitness of the messages. We noticed that the least effective way the Trappists executed their strategy was through explicit statements of authenticity. For example,

our informants all reacted negatively to the “Authentic Trappist Product” logo, identifying that at worst it undermined authenticity and at best, diluted perceptions of brands they considered authentic. Rather, the informants attributed authenticity to the firm’s actions. The second section of the findings identifies a range of cues by which the Trappists communicated authenticity. Thus, we strongly recommend that a communication audit focus on the implied messages of the firm. Finally, we understand that the promotion of ambiguous messages may raise concerns for brand managers focused on legally protecting trademarks and brand mantras. We recognize that firms can no more claim exclusive rights to the use of “authenticity” any more than Harley Davidson can claim exclusive ownership of “freedom”. However, what is particularly powerful about the Trappist story is the combination of symbolism (which can and is copied by for-profit firms) with the real – in this case the ongoing existence of living monastic orders. One of the biggest conflicts faced by the marketers related to using monasteries as tourist sites, even though the ability of consumers to connect directly to the place of production was a source of differentiation the *faux* Trappist beers could not replicate. Careful use of such direct links to people and place is therefore recommended as a means to reinforce the point of difference necessary to see off firms seeking to encroach on the non-protected symbols associated with ambiguous claims.

Note

1. Informant passages are presented verbatim and reflect the fact that they were non-native English speakers responding in English.

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