

COMMUNITY SANITATION AND CORPORATE IMAGE IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: A CASE OF GHANA'S TOP RATED HOTELS

Abednego F. Okoe
Okoe67@yahoo.com

Rhodale Amartey
rhodale.amartey@yahoo.com

Helen Arkorful
harkorful@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

A congenial physical environment is a critical success factor in the hospitality industry. This study explores the influence of community sanitation on the relationship between corporate identity and corporate image in the hospitality industry in Ghana. In-depth interviews were employed among clients in two of Ghana's best hotels (a five and four star hotels respectively) situated in a local community. The results indicated that while a blend of a perfect servicescape and perfect community environment is ideal, hotels can still insulate themselves from the less than perfect community environment and still develop a favorable corporate image based on the right strategies. Common themes identified in the strategies include: spick and span immediate environment, appealing servicescape, neatly-dressed employees and excellent customer service. The implication is that the hospitality industry should leverage the controllable factors to create a competitive advantage while they seek to minimize the threats they face.

Keywords: Ghana, corporate identity mix, corporate image, corporate sanitation, business operations

INTRODUCTION

Corporate image is a critical success factor in the performance of organizations (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Antecedents of a good image include stakeholders' experiences of corporate behavior (MacMillan, Money, Money, Downing, & Hillenbrand, 2005). Several positive outcomes with regards to stakeholder behavior emanate from a favorable reputation (Ardend, 2009). Theorists such as Balmer and Greyser (2006) posit that, the development of a favorable corporate image is predicated upon the establishment of consistent synergy between brand management activities including the use of the corporate identity mix and customer experiences of regular business activities. Thus, uncontrollable variables in the immediate environment such as community sanitation are not factored into the equation. In spite of the reasonableness of these propositions, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) argue that they have largely not been tested empirically.

Post, Preston and Sachs (2002) established a positive correlation between corporate image and reputation on one hand and stakeholder behaviors on the other, which ultimately lead to favorable revenue performance and cash flow. Roberts and Dowling (2002) add that the positive correlation further results in tangible market assets for the organization and cushions it against crises moments or errors by the organization. Money and Hillenbrand (2006) have diagrammatically integrated the evolution and consequences of corporate image and reputation which represents the modern appreciation of corporate image and reputation in the extant literature. Money, Hillenbrand, Day and Magnan (2010) incorporated the organizational and individual levels proposed by Brown, Dacin, Pratt, and Whetten (2006) into the model.

Amongst researchers and practitioners alike, the proper use of terms such as corporate image, corporate reputation, corporate identity and corporate brand is contentious (Pitt & Papania, 2007). The relationship between corporate identity mix (i.e. corporate brand) and corporate image has been hampered by different ways the two concepts are operationalized (Pitt & Papania, 2007). Corporate brand has been studied at the firm level i.e. what firms do to project the corporate brand (Aaker, 2004) while corporate image is usually studied at the individual level, i.e. examined through individual feelings and thoughts about firms (Money et al, 2010; Walsh, Mitchell, Jackson and Beatty, 2009). However Walsh et al. (2009), examined marketing, image and reputation, operationalized at the individual level. The study therefore focuses on the relationship between corporate brand and corporate image at the individual level, examining it in the context of the hospitality industry in Ghana that corporate brand serves as an antecedent of corporate image which in turn favorably influences stakeholder behaviors.

Why the Hospitality Industry?

The hospitality industry in Ghana has received a huge amount of attention in the country's economic development strategy since the 1980s. There has been tremendous increase in both the number of tourist arrivals and tourist expenditure resulting in a corresponding increase in public as well as private investment actively in the respectively hospitality sub-sectors. The hospitality sector now serves as the third largest earner of foreign exchange, only behind mineral and cocoa exports (Ghana Tourists Board, 1999). The hospitality sector is made up of a broad category of sectors within the service industry including lodging, restaurants, transportation, event planning, and theme parks, among others. The lodging sector is the most important since the majority of the other services are largely provided by most standard hotels.

The growth in the hospitality sector can also be witnessed in the expansion of activities in the hotel industry. For instance in 1989, the total number of hotels approved and licensed by Ghana Tourists Board (now Ghana Tourists Authority) was 273. According to Ghana Tourists Board Report (1999), this figure rose to 730 by 1998. In 2014, the number of hotels listed in the Quarterly Report of the Authority exceeded 1,600. The contribution of the hospitality industry to the overall growth of Ghana's economy therefore cannot be overemphasized. La Beach Hotel and La Palm Royal Beach Hotel are two of Ghana's best hotels and are rated as four and five star hotels respectively. Smith, Zimmerman, and Mihelcic (2008), assert that environmental sanitation influences public perception of organizational identity. Environmental sanitation is therefore seen as moderating the effect of the corporate identity mix on corporate image. This is especially relevant in the hotel industry where the role of physical evidence in image building is critical.

The study has two main objectives: (a) to explore the relationship between corporate identity mix and corporate image and (b) to determine how community sanitation moderates the influences of corporate identity mix on corporate image. The study is subsequently structured as follows: First we discuss the relevant theories and empirical findings on corporate identity and corporate image. Second, data collection and instrumentation are explained which is followed by discussion of the results. We finalize this paper by summarizing and drawing conclusions on the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Daily Business Operations

Business operations comprise the dealings of an organization with its stakeholders including customers, suppliers, and employees with regards to everyday activities such as product delivery. Distinction has to be made between deliberate and conscious marketing activities (e.g. branding or advertising) and everyday business operations activities, with the latter embarked upon with the aim of delivering value to stakeholders. Deliberate marketing activities on the other hand, are aimed at influencing stakeholders and raising awareness of business operations activities. This distinction is relevant as it makes it possible for the determination of the degree of importance of deliberate marketing activities and customer experience of business operations in the development of corporate image and reputation. MacMillan, Money, Downing, and Hillenbrand (2005b) report that stakeholder experiences of business operations represent critical antecedents of corporate image and reputation.

Corporate Identity Mix

According to Aaker (2004) corporate identity mix is a tool employed by managers to expose the corporate brand to its external stakeholders so as to create unique mental associations that provide favorable organizational assessment by stakeholders. Marketing researchers like Keller (2008) posit that corporate identity mix should lead to distinctive corporate brand beliefs, which in turn would have a direct impact on corporate image and reputation.

Corporate identity helps to communicate the many facets of an organization to its external stakeholders including who they are, what they stand for, and what they do. Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006), identified several sub-components of the corporate identity concept and these include activities which are directly controllable by organizations such as corporate design and communications. Melewar and Jenkins (2002), observed that there is huge debate regarding the nature of the corporate identity concept and the attendant challenge of researching it. The consensus however is that the corporate identity mix is a sub-component of intentional firm activities involving brand elements such as the name, logo product features, logo and physical evidence that uniquely distinguishes one firm from the other (Aaker, 2004). The corporate identity mix therefore serves as an antecedent to corporate image. This study seeks to provide an in-depth measure of the sub-components of the corporate identity mix and its link with corporate image.

Corporate sanitation

Smith et al. (2008) recount the evolution of cleanliness dating back as far as the Neolithic period. She argues that while waste is considered to be part of human existence, it is quite difficult to change behavior in waste management. George (2008) adds that culturally societies seek to void waste especially human waste. People associated with handling of waste therefore tend to have low social status. This negative association is extended to the corporate entity and subsequently affects the corporate image. Thus, while the poor sanitation has negative health implications resulting in 1.8 million deaths a year (United Nations World Population Projects [UNWPP] Report, 2011), its negative implications for corporate image is equally dire (Aaker, 2004). The corporate identity mix and business operations of organizations are therefore subject to the influences of their respective sanitation environment (MacMillan, Money, & Downing, 2005a). This study therefore seeks to understand the moderating role of corporate sanitation in the relationship between corporate identity and corporate image.

Corporate Image

Corporate image is explained as the perception that stakeholders have of an organization (Bromley, 2002). Persistent image of an organization form its reputation. Fombrun (1996, p. 72) for example, defines corporate reputation as ‘a perceptual representation of a company’s past actions and future prospects that describes the firm’s overall appeal to all of its key constituents when compared with other leading rivals.’ Perceptions of the past and future are as a result of an endless list of stakeholder experiences with the organization and future scenarios. Money et al. (2010), argue that while these experiences do not allow themselves for easy comparison between organizations, the overall appeal (comprising both positive stakeholder trust and emotion) of an organization does. Corporate image therefore is about trust and emotion towards an organization. This study adopts its conceptualization of corporate image in terms of emotions and trust. While organizations do not have control over stakeholders’ emotions and trust, organizational activities engaged in overtime help influence their reputation.

Corporate image refers to the beliefs consumers hold about the organization as a result of intentional branding activities engaged in by the organization (Keller, 2008). Davies and Chun (2002) consider corporate image as the set of characteristics stakeholders associate with an organization. As Aaker (2004) pointed out, corporate brand equity lies in the distinctive and favorable beliefs stakeholders hold towards an organization. Indeed, as far back as 1975, Fishbein and Ajzen indicated that beliefs are antecedents to favorability and behavior. In line with their strategic vision, organizations must consider stakeholder expectations, their own values and competitor positioning in order to help develop a distinctive corporate image. While the formation of corporate image is decided at the strategic level, the corporate identity mix plays a critical role in translating it into a series of tactical activities (Keller, 2008).

Relationship between Business operations, Corporate identity mix and Corporate image

Money et al. (2010) propose an integrated framework of corporate identity mix and corporate image and reputation which is an extension of Money and Hillenbrand (2006). The framework proposes corporate identity mix as having direct influence on corporate brand beliefs

(a proxy for corporate image) which also influences corporate reputation. Corporate identity mixes include corporate messages, physical presence and visual identity. Organizations are in total control of the elements of the corporate identity mix and can vary them at will. Business operations on the other hand evolve out of customer regular experiences of a firm's operations. Changes in business operations can only be experienced by the customer in the long term (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Elements of corporate identity mix are therefore tactical in nature compared to the more relational features of business operations. Money et al. (2010) operationalize corporate identity mix at the individual level and measures it in relation to customer experiences of branding activities instead of the organization's perspective of its activities, Customer experiences with regard to corporate identity mix are operationalized as antecedents of corporate image.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Context and Sampling

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between corporate identity and corporate image within the context of a negative sanitation environment in Ghana's hospitality industry. The framework was tested with customers of four and five star hotels in Ghana. The choice of the sample was because the hotels are closely situated in the same local community hampered by sanitation challenges. Despite the challenges associated with the location, these hotels seem to enjoy favorable corporate image. The hospitality sector is made up of service organizations and therefore exhibit unique features especially relating to the branding of services. The hospitality sector is a high contact organization and requires a high level of interpersonal interaction which necessarily takes place between the employees of the organization and the customers in a very clean physical environment and ambience. Cretu and Brodie (2007) pointed out that corporate image become more relevant when higher levels of service exist. High level and very loyal corporate customers of the two hotels were therefore selected and in depth interviews carried out which facilitated the investigation of the main constructs of corporate identity matrix and corporate image especially within the context of a poor community environment.

Population and sampling

The population included customers of La Beach Hotel and La Palm Royal Beach Hotel. The researchers interviewed a total of twelve high level customers of these hotels. Consistent with Bodet and Chanavat (2010), six females and six males were selected to offer gender balance and a structured interview guide was employed by the researchers. The use of the interview guide was aimed at ensuring that relevant questions were asked. The study relied on the purposive sampling method to select the participants. An average of 15 to 20 minutes was spent on each customer and the interview was recorded with a Sony IC Recorder. Notes were also taken to complement the recorder in the event of a technology failure. The study investigated three constructs used in corporate image which included: (1) corporate identity mix, (2) business operations, and (3) corporate image.

Data collection and Instrumentation

On the basis of the framework developed by Money et al. (2010) which employs corporate identity mix, business operations, corporate brand beliefs (proxy for corporate image) and corporate reputation to establish a relationship, in-depth interviews were conducted with high profile customers of the hotels to gain new understanding of their experiences with the corporate identity mix. To fulfill the purpose of the study, a case study approach was adopted. The case study approach has been criticized on the basis that it does not allow for transferability of findings. However, according to Yin (2003), this approach allows for in-depth knowledge to be gathered in a qualitative exploratory study.

Participants were assembled and questions asked in an interactive manner which made it possible for them to talk freely with other group members. The main theme and sub-themes ensure that the interviewer organizes his thought processes in asking questions even in unplanned encounters. As Corbetta (2003) stated, semi- structured interviews allow the interviewer to organize the various questions and the wording at his discretion. The interviewer can ask questions the way he considers appropriate and to seek clarification if he is not satisfied with a particular answer as well as imposing his own style on the interaction.

With the type of interview decided upon, we sought to establish reliability of performance in a systematic manner, by focusing on obtaining relevant data. Effort was made to obtain favorable interview conditions. Problems associated with research interviewing including asking the questions, listening, and interviewees answering in full, recording the answers and ensuring accurate feedback on the findings. Efforts were therefore made to carefully read the interview questions to interviewees in a neutral tone while emphasizing certain important words (e.g. corporate identity and corporate image) to help interviewees understand the questions. Researchers fully understand that answers should be interesting if good questions are asked. They were also aware that a researcher should not lose his focus even if the participant sounds disinterested and bored as the most monotonous answers can be very revealing. In situations where the participants delayed in responding to a particular question, ample time was given for them to answer. This is very relevant since participants are responding to the question for the first time. Participants may be pondering over the questions and therefore the interviewer remained silent to allow them to do so. In situations where replies to the questions asked conflicted with other previous answers, interviewers drew participants' attention to their previous answers and asked for clarification, this was willingly done. As a qualitative study therefore, the data was iteratively collected and analyzed.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings are presented in accordance with the model relating to corporate identity and corporate image. The paper focuses on corporate identity mix, business operations, and corporate image.

Corporate Identity Mix

Based on the interviews conducted, corporate identity mix is regarded by almost all participants to be very influential in the image they have of the hotels. Corporate identity mix was interpreted differently by the participants as follows:

“..... For me, it relates to the physical appearance of the hotel, how attractive the buildings are.”

“... the way the hotel presents itself to me matters a lot, from how spacious the car park is, to the neatness and comfort of the room and the taste of the food, even if the entire community is dirty.”

Participants therefore do not seem to place much premium on the locations of these hotels but rather the service environment, physical evidence, service employees, spacious car park, among others. Both corporate identity mix and business operations are found to impact on corporate image supporting previous research in the area (MacMillan et. al., 2005b; Money et al., 2010; Walsh & Beatty, 2007).

Business Operations

While the corporate identity plays an important role in attracting the participants to the hotel, the experience of the bank operations had more influence in shaping their perception of the hotel. Participants placed more premiums on the operations of the hotel. Some of the responses were:

“... I consider the way I am received and treated by the hotel as the most important, well that is what sticks in my mind when I think of the hotel even more important than the physical structures. What is the use of a logo when the services are poor?”

“ABSOLUTELY: my coming back and telling others about the particular hotel depends mainly on how I am treated. No Kidding. If the services are lousy, I would NEVER come back again.”

This finding is not surprising and further supports the finding by Money et al. (2010) that long standing customers in a professional service relationship tend to consider their everyday business relationship as more important than the deliberate corporate identity activities. That is, what individuals think, feel and experience about the hotel branding is as a result of the corporate identity mix and business operations of the hotel (Money et. al. 2010). In doing so, business operations were found to have a bigger direct influence on corporate image than corporate identity mix.

Link between Corporate Identity and Corporate Image

Most of the participants thought that corporate identity mix had a direct influence on the image of the hotels. All of the participants had positive image of the two hotels in spite of the fact

they expressed dissatisfactions with the sanitation situation in the community. They attributed the favorable corporate image the hotels are enjoying to their corporate identity mixes including the architecture, spacious car parks, neat surroundings, bright colors and the beautiful ambience. Some of the responses were as follows:

“... I like my hotel a lot because the environment is neat, the buildings and the entire settings are pleasing to the eyes. I just love it. My only problem is when I use the La township road to the hotel. ...I hate the environment.”

“As for me my hotel is up there with the big players. I mean they have it all... the buildings, the appearance of their staff, the neat rooms and spacious car park and all that. I like the beach area too except the broader community which is not all that cool.”

Deliberate corporate identity mix impact on corporate image as the study shows. Investments made in corporate identity mix can therefore be justified with respect to the impact that they have on corporate image (MacMillan et al., 2005b; Money et al., 2010; Walsh and Beatty, 2007). This finding strengthens the view held by many scholars that daily business operations should be consistently integrated into corporate identity mix (deliberate branding activities) of organizations and the necessary investments made to create synergy. In other words, the marketing and operational functions must collaboratively work together in a consistent manner to create a positive corporate image of the organization.

The Link between Business Operations and Corporate Image

All of the participants believed that the daily business operations of the respective hotels have more impact on their corporate image building than the corporate identity mix. Some responses are as follows:

“Whilst I applaud the hotel for the good facilities, I am even more impressed with the prompt service, the courteous manner in which the workers attend to me. Personally, this is why this hotel is the best.”

“I don’t dispute the importance of a nice environment. I am rather more enthused with the kinds of service I receive, and the way I am treated at the hotel. It speaks volumes.”

“When I went to La Beach Hotel the first time, I was impressed with the physical facilities but I had a negative image of the hotel because of the way I was treated by one of the staff. It took other visits to the hotel before I overcame the initial misgivings.”

According to MacMillan, et al. (2005), business operations are more substantial with regards to their impact with customers and have a long established record of impacting image and reputation. The findings are again consistent with previous researches in diverse contexts. Positive image results in positive behavior. Participants are willing to continue doing business with these hotels due to the favorable image they enjoy.

The mediating role of Corporate Sanitation

The mediating role of the community sanitation construct was found to be very minimal, thus having little impact on the corporate image of these hotels. Supportive customer behaviors are seen as representing the consequences of corporate image. Here are some comments:

“... the hotel’s appearance has had a favorable impression on me even though it is not situated at Trassacco Valley or Cantoments,”

“As for me my hotel is up there with the big players. I mean they have it all... the buildings, the appearance of their staff, the neat rooms and spacious car parks and all that. I like the beach area too except the broad bigger community which is not all that cool.”

This finding supports the view held by Walsh and Beatty (2007) that it is positive image that results in positive behavior and not the location. This is however in contrast to the assertions by other writers who postulate that the location or the environment can have an impact on the image of an organization (Smith et al., 2008).

On the basis of the research, it was realized that the results of the study supports the model proposed. Corporate identity mix and business operations have more influence on corporate image than the environment in which the hotels are located. The two constructs therefore simultaneously impact corporate image.

CONCLUSIONS

This study brings together corporate identity mix and corporate image in a simple framework that is qualitatively investigated. The study provides the following contributions:

First, the results of the study demonstrate the impact of corporate identity mix and business operations on corporate image. This result provides evidence for the value of corporate identity activities in business operations in developing corporate image and its consequences. Second, the outcomes show evidence of the relative importance of corporate identity activities and business operations. Within the context of high level existing customers of two high rated hotels, the results indicate that corporate identity mix has a lesser impact on corporate image than business operations. Scholars can further test the relative importance of these activities in different contexts and situations. Third, the study shows that the mediating role of community sanitation had little impact on corporate image if a favorable corporate identity mix and business operations were actively promoted in the organization.

Practitioners can benefit from the insights gleaned from the study. Lessons on the use of successful corporate identity mix and effective business operations can be learnt which will positively affect corporate image and limit any negative role of the physical environment. The findings also have implications for the marketing literature. Some researchers have argued that corporate sanitation is critical in corporate brand image building. Whilst this argument has been acknowledged in the context of the moderating effects of community sanitation, the study further

suggests that this can be overcome by the use of appropriate corporate identity mixes and business operations.

Our research has a major limitation that provides avenues for further research. The study employed the qualitative approach which inherently makes it impossible to generalize the findings. The qualitative in-depth analysis of corporate identity mix and business operations and their impact on corporate image may be quantitatively tested by future scholars striving to further close the gap between the study of corporate identity and corporate image and the role of the physical environment in corporate image building.

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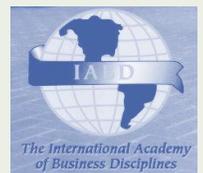
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