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Organizational Reputation: Defining the Indefinable

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. *After reading this chapter, students will be able to define key reputational concepts: reputation, identity, image, and relationship.*
2. *After reading this chapter, students will be able to analyze reputations of the organizations they are familiar with.*
3. *After reading this chapter, students will be able to apply the reputational concepts to their own personal reputations and reputations of their classmates.*

Have you ever thought about your personal reputation? What do people think when they hear your name? What about the reputation of a restaurant you are planning on going to? What do you know about it? What do others think about it? What does it even mean for a restaurant to have a good reputation? And do you think it matters at all what kind of reputation a restaurant may have?

Let us think about it. Would you go to a restaurant known for giving people food poisoning? I think most people would avoid going to a restaurant known for poisoning its customers – even if the food looks good, the building is clean and welcoming, and the staff is smiling (see Figure 1.1). Thus, reputation in that case would mean a difference between getting customers' business and not getting it. In other words, it would be a very important factor for the restaurant's success and even survival.

The same may also be true for cars, phones, clothes, hotels, universities, sports teams, political parties, and even countries. Take for example a case when the Dominican Republic experienced a decline in bookings and an increase in cancellations of already-booked reservations in 2019. A *Washington Post* story reported only 30 people on a private beach at one of the most luxurious Dominican Republic hotels of more than 400 rooms and suites (Krygler, 2019). The story concluded that the country's reputation had a potentially devastating problem after the shooting of David Ortiz, a famous baseball player, and the death of several U.S. tourists. In fact, the reputational impacts were so severe that the country launched a #BeFairWithDR social media campaign in order to restore its reputation as a safe and enjoyable tourist destination. But why did a few negative cases overshadow millions of tourists who traveled



Figure 1.1 Food in a Restaurant. *Source:* GoodLifeStudio/Getty Images.

to the Dominican Republic over the years and had amazing experiences? To answer that question one must seriously consider how reputations are built and maintained, and what can harm reputations.

Most often reputation research focuses on corporations, and study after study concludes that reputation is among a corporation's most valuable assets (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 2002). In fact, customers of corporations with positive reputations will become loyal to their products and services, employees of corporations with positive reputations will be more likely to stay in their jobs longer and be more productive, and even investors will be more likely to invest in corporations with positive reputations (Goldberg and Hartwig, 1990; Laskin, 2013; Raithel and Schwaiger, 2015; Rao, Agarwal & Dahlhoff, 2004; Roberts and Dowling, 2002; Shapiro, 1983).

Thus, reputation becomes an important concept to study and define. When it comes to defining reputation, it seems like everyone knows what it is. Indeed, we use the term reputation in our casual conversations without much hesitation. Yet, reputation is one of those words that are easy to use but hard to define. In addition, there is a plethora of terms that seem similar to reputation and sometimes even used interchangeably with reputation. See, for example, if you can differentiate reputation from organizational identity or an organization's image. This chapter reviews definitions of reputation and compares reputation with similar terms.

Identity

Identity is the starting point when defining a reputation. It is also what organizations have the most control over. Simply speaking, identity is how you want to be perceived. For example, Walmart may want everyone to think of it as a place where you can find



Figure 1.2 Shopping at Walmart. *Source:* Pjiilane / Shutterstock.

the best prices on everything, the best place for a bargain, while Neiman Marcus, instead, may want to be perceived as an exclusive shopping venue for exclusive few customers – pricey but with a great shopping experience (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

Does it mean that customers would feel exactly how the organization wants them to feel? Not necessarily. A person may go to Neiman Marcus to find a bargain, while another person may go to Walmart because they enjoy the shopping experience there without even looking at prices. In other words, identity is the story the organization tells about itself, whether others would agree with it or not. Identity is not limited to organizations – this can be extrapolated to products (product identity), brands (brand identity), people (personal identity), and so on.

How do organizations build their identities? It starts with the goals, values, and mission of the organization. Neiman Marcus's mission statement, for example, declares, "we have continually transformed and elevated the luxury shopping experience, offering the finest in fashion, shoes, handbags, jewelry, beauty and decorative items for the home." Compare it with Walmart's mission statement, "to save people money so they can live better." If these statements were the starting points for two organizations, no wonder they needed to make very different choices about the types of their stores, products they sell, people they hire, and pretty much everything else.

It may be an interesting exercise to compare mission statements of several organizations working in the same industry and then analyze how the different visions of the organizations' mission lead to different results. For example, Table 1.1 lists mission statements of several automakers producing very different brands of cars.



Figure 1.3 Shopping at Neiman Marcus. *Source:* Dfwcre8tive / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY 3.0.

The mission statements and other essential statements are not the only documents shaping an organization's identity. Every communication from the organization makes a statement about what that organization stands for. Annual reports, CEO press conferences, appearances on national and local news, emails to employees, and all other communications project the organization's identity. That's why it is important for all communications to be guided overall by the organization's mission and be done in coordination with each other. Sometimes organizations have different divisions responsible for different types of communications – the investor relations department may produce annual reports, the marketing department may work on advertisements, the public relations department may write news releases, and the social media team may manage Facebook and Twitter activities. Without close coordination between these teams, their communications may pull an organization's identity in different directions, harming the efforts of each other instead of complementing and enhancing each other's work.

The organization's identity is built on not only what it says but also what it does. In fact, a proverb states that actions speak louder than words! This means actions of an organization may have a stronger effect on its identity than its released statements, advertisements, and social media posts. Imagine a Neiman Marcus store with unfriendly employees, dirty floors, and clothes lying around in unorganized piles. It is unlikely that such a store would be projecting an identity of an exclusive and luxury shopping experience no matter what its managers say. Or, imagine Walmart selling items with significantly higher prices than other local retailers. It may seriously threaten the store's identity despite all the communications to the contrary. Thus, it is very

Table 1.1 Mission Statements of Select Car Manufacturing Companies.

BMW

BMW creates driving pleasure from the perfect combination of dynamic, sporty performance; ground-breaking innovations; and breathtaking design.

Ferrari

Born of the spirit of racing, Ferrari epitomizes the power of a lifelong passion and the beauty of limitless human achievement, creating timeless icons for a changing world.

Ford

To help build a better world, where every person is free to move and pursue their dreams.

Honda

At Honda, The Power of Dreams drives us to create intelligent products that enhance mobility and increase the joy in people's lives.

Kia

Respecting people and practicing environmental management to maximize value creation and pursue balanced and shared growth with stakeholders.

Lucid

We're proud to be an American electric vehicle company, owned and operated in the United States. Inspired by the spirit of California, we're moved to think beyond mobility and design for a world where life is the most important journey we'll ever take. To look beyond tomorrow, and shape a future where we no longer have to choose between doing great things – and doing the right thing.

McLaren

McLaren exists to create breathtaking performance road cars. And deliver the most thrilling driving experiences imaginable.

Mercedes-Benz

We have been moving people and goods for more than 130 years. Building outstanding, fascinating vehicles is what we do best, and by doing so we inspire our customers, both today and tomorrow.

Nissan

As a company worthy of trust, Nissan provides unique and innovative automotive products and services that deliver superior measurable values to all stakeholders.

Rivian

Rivian is on a mission to keep the world adventurous forever. This goes for the emissions-free Electric Adventure Vehicles we build, and the curious, courageous souls we seek to attract.

Rolls-Royce

Inspiring Greatness. Pushing boundaries and creating new realities both within and beyond automotive design for over 100 years.

Subaru

More than just a company that makes cars, aircraft, and related technologies, Subaru aims to be a company that “makes our customers smile.”

Tesla

To accelerate the advent of sustainable transport by bringing compelling mass market electric cars to market as soon as possible.

Toyota

To attract and attain customers with high-valued products and services and the most satisfying ownership experience in America.

Volkswagen

Our goal is to be an industry leader in providing unmatched quality automotive products and services.

important for an organization to weigh all its decision against its mission statement and other key principles to make sure every action is aligned with the company's vision of itself and with what it wants to project to the outside the world.

Many studies analyzed identities of organizations and, as a result, researchers developed a classification of components of the organizational identity. One of the key components of the organizational identity is its industry and corporate strategy – in other words, how the organization differentiates itself from all other organizations and what place it wants to secure for itself among all the competitors within the industry. We can think back to our example of Walmart and Neiman Marcus – both are retail companies but they have very different strategies and unique approaches to selling stuff. Another component is corporate communication – how an organization communicates and represents itself. For example, McDonald's and Wendy's seem to be in the same industry with pretty similar strategy, but their communications are miles apart. In fact, Wendy's marketing leader explained that for Wendy's social media presence the main goal is not to sell products but to entertain anyone who visits their page. End result: Wendy's has been recognized as the best fast-food company on social media (McKinnon, 2023).

Identity is also shaped by the organizational design – its logo, color scheme, other visual elements. In fact, companies spend millions of dollars developing and updating their logos. For example, in March 2023, Pepsi unveiled its new logo, the seventh one in its corporate history from 1899 to 2023. The reason for the change – to make the logo reflect the company's identity better and showcase that Pepsi is “a bold and confident brand” according to Pepsi's chief marketing officer (Wiener-Bronner, 2023, p. 1).

Another element shaping the organizational identity is its corporate culture, including the mission statement, values, history, and even the location where the organization is from. Indeed, country of origin may have a strong effect, especially on consumers not familiar with the product directly (Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998). When people are choosing a bottle of wine they may lean toward Italian or Spanish brands even without knowing how that specific bottle of wine would taste. Country of origin may have a negative effect as well – staying with the same example of wines, an amazing wine from Moldova may have more difficulty in persuading customers to give it a try than a mediocre wine from France.

And, of course, as mentioned above the actual behavior of the organization – the actual actions the organization takes – has a very strong influence on its identity. Research suggests, however, that organizational identity is affected by more than just official actions of organizations – it is also what its employees do and how they behave. From the CEO to an intern, the organization's employees constantly shape organizational identity. People in communities surrounding an organization's headquarters may find it upsetting if employees park on the streets blocking the road or throw garbage out of their windows. All of these actions – intentional or not – are reflected by the people in the local community and can affect how the organization is perceived.

Image

An image of an organization is a reflection of the organization's identity in the eyes of a particular public or stakeholder. If identity is how the organization wants to be seen, an image is how the organization is actually seen. An image can be compared with a

mirror that somebody pointed at an organization – the reflection in that mirror is the organization's image.

As a result, an organization's image has a very strong connection to the organization's identity. Organizations that focus on great customer service make sure it is central to their identity and, as a result, invest significant resources in perfecting customer experiences, which are reflected in the images customers have about such organizations. What organizations project to the world through their identity – all their actions and communications – are often reflected in their image.

The reflection in the mirror, however, is not always a perfect match with the object it is reflecting. Mirrors can distort the image; the lighting and other details of the surrounding environment can distort the reflection as well; mirrors can reflect only a certain part of an object, completely missing everything else. The same is true with an image. The organization's image may fail to perfectly match with an identity the organization wants to project. Take, for example, Neiman Marcus again. A person can go to a Neiman Marcus store while being in a bad mood – maybe a person had a fight with their significant other on the way to the store. No matter what the store employees are doing, the customer remains angry and unhappy. The mirror's own peculiarities are affecting how the organization's identity is being reflected and the resultant image fails to create in the customer's mind what the organization is trying to project. Or imagine a customer shopping at Walmart takes out their smartphone and starts comparison-shopping online, finding better bargains on different websites – changes in the technological environment influence the image of Walmart as a low-price merchant.

Some audiences may not even care about the shopping experience. For example, investors may care only about the share price and may want their shopping experience to be a bit less luxurious, as long as it means cutting costs and improving profits. Or people who live on the same road where Walmart is located may care about only the constant traffic going in and out of the store, thus lowering the prices on goods that can potentially lead to more traffic going to the Walmart store will be a negative event for these local residents rather than positive. Different groups of people may care only about a very specific issue or a very specific part of the organization and completely disregard what the organization itself thinks is important.

And, of course, both Neiman Marcus and Walmart, retailers operating multiple locations worldwide, may be faced with inconsistent images based on varying experiences from only one or two outlying stores (see Figure 1.4). It is difficult to persuade a customer who just had a bad experience in a store that most other stores of the same brand are significantly different and would provide a better experience. As a result, one negative experience may potentially destroy years of good work organizations invest in building and maintaining their identities. On the other hand, it is also possible that years of good work would protect an organization from one or two bad experiences.

One of the key challenges in managing organizational reputations is identifying gaps and misalignments between organizational identity and its image. Imagine a situation where consumers, for whatever reason, completely miss the mark on what the company's products are about. For example, Toyota's identity focuses on building high-quality cars that lead to satisfying ownership experience (in fact, according to Toyota's mission statement "the most satisfying ownership experience") (2023). Its identity is not about building fast cars or flashy cars. Compare it with Ferrari that starts



Figure 1.4 Shopping at Walmart Supermarket in China Provides Different Experience Than Shopping at Walmart in the United States. *Source:* pcruciatti / Shutterstock.

describing its identity with this: “Born of the spirit of racing . . .” (2023). Ferrari describes its cars with such words as power, passion, beauty, and timeless icons. Both of these car manufacturers have very different identities, which should be reflected in their images.

As a result, if for some reason Toyota cars start experiencing poor reliability and Toyota’s image as a manufacturer of reliable car starts suffering, it is a real threat to the company, as reliability is at the center of its identity. The organizational image will be drifting away from the organizational identity, creating a gap that may lead to confusion and bewilderment on the part of consumers. Eventually, this misalignment may affect other audiences important to the organization and even threaten the organizational existence. On the other hand, if Ferrari cars develop an image of poor reliability, it is unlikely to cause significant misalignment between the organization’s identity and image. In fact, Ferrari cars are somewhat famous for their poor reliability already – some of the car rankings even place them as the most unreliable cars ever (Warrantywise, 2023). It does not hurt their sales or their customers because the organization does not focus on reliability – it is not central to its identity. Even the principal of Ferrari’s Formula 1 team, Mattia Binotto, in response to poor reliability of cars on track, responded that he would rather have fast cars than reliable cars (Cooper, 2022). Having slow but reliable cars, however, would be a pretty disastrous scenario for Ferrari, while it would be quite a success for Toyota. Table 1.1 lists some of car manufacturers’ identity statements.

In managing organizational reputation, it is important to understand the connection between identity and image and act accordingly in order to keep the two aligned. When in 2002, for example, Toyota decided to join Formula 1 to race with such

competitors as Ferrari, McLaren, or Williams, it had very little to gain, as winning in Formula 1 would not reinforce its identity. In fact, Toyota had to work extra hard to simply avoid embarrassment in the sport. Despite having the largest budget among all F1 teams, Toyota never managed to win a single F1 Grand Prix race, and withdrew from the sport after eight years (Collantine, 2008). On the plus side, this failure in F1 did not affect Toyota much, as its customers did not necessarily care about racing results as it was not central to what makes Toyota Toyota. In fact, Toyota international sales almost doubled during the time it was failing to perform in F1 (Toyota, 2012).

As a result, it is important for organizations to understand their true identity and make sure the image of the organization is a true reflection of such identity. In fact, identity can be compared with human DNA – this is who we actually are. However, our friends or colleagues will not recognize us if they looked at scans of our DNA. Instead, they would recognize us if they looked at our photos. There is a connection between our DNA and how we look – DNA determines how our hair, eyes, and nose look. However, we can color our hair and we can wear contact lenses to change our eye color. The same is true for organizations – while identity shapes the organizational image, organizations have the power to adjust and modify their perceptions.

Nevertheless, there is another variable that comes into play that can affect the alignment between organizational identity and image – the relationship between an organization and its various stakeholders.

Relationship

Relationship is an interpersonal concept, but it can also be applied to relations between people and organizations and even between organizations. Imagine, for example, a grocery store that for years has been buying produce from a local farm. We can say that they established a good business relationship. In fact, if the farm consistently provides good quality produce, delivery after delivery, at fair prices and in a timely manner, the store is more likely to overlook an occasional error or mistake or a rotten case of tomatoes. The established relationship allows for a mistake. The reverse is also true. If that local farm is happy with their long-term relationship with the grocery store, they may say no to another company that wants to buy their produce even if they offer a higher price. The farm may prefer to keep and maintain this long-term relationship over a short-term profit.

These relationships become the context in which identity is being projected and reflected into an image. Relationships affect both parts of this equation – the projection and the reflection. Organizations have many relationships and those relationships have different levels of prominence and significance. Think of your personal relationships, for example. You may have several relationships of high importance in your life – parents, siblings, children, significant others. You may have relationships that are also important but maybe not to the same degree – you may put your friends or your roommates in this category. You may also have relationships that are less relevant – you colleagues or your neighbors. Finally, you may have relationships that you do not even think of and do not even know about. For example, a person driving

next to you on a highway. But this insignificant relationship can change into one of the most important relationships in your life if that person swerves into your lane forcing you to crash and sending you to the ER. In other words, the relationships and their importance can change. Sometimes this change is slow and gradual, but sometimes it can be fast and unexpected. As a result, it is important to monitor and try to predict how your relationships with the outside world can develop and change. This concept is known as environmental scanning – scanning your environment for changes in the relationships you have.

The same is true for organizations. Organizations also have many different relationships of various importance (see Figure 1.5). Corporations tend to focus on their relationship with customers, making it one of their most important relationships. But corporations cannot exist without employees – as a result, employee relationships are also among the most important for organizations. Publicly traded corporations spend significant resources managing their relationship with their shareholders and investors. Universities care about student relationships. For many organizations, government relationships are important to monitor and manage, as a small change in laws and regulations may mean a difference between losses and profits. It is also true that even a seemingly unimportant relationship may change into one of the most important for the organization. Nike probably could not imagine back in 2005 that one student-led group, United Students Against Sweatshops, would generate so much publicity and protest that Nike would have to take responsibility over the way it produced its clothes, shoes, and sporting equipment in Southeast Asia. Although many years have passed since 2005, Nike is still connected with that sweatshop scandal, and its reputation even today suffers from this connection.

As a result, relationship becomes a key part of understanding and managing organizational reputation – it's the context in which reputations live. Mary Ann Ferguson was among the first to highlight the importance of relationship leading to what today



Figure 1.5 People and Organizations Have Many Relationships. *Source:* sodafish visuals / Adobe Stock.

is known as *OPR Theory, Organization-Public Relations Theory*. Advocating for the importance of studying relationships, Ferguson explains (1984):

By putting the research focus on the relationship rather than on the organization or on the public, we can come to better understandings of what it is that is important about these relationships, both to the public and to the organization. A model that focuses on either the organization or the public assumes that if and when changes occur either the organization and/or the public must change. A relationship-centric model has the assumption that the relationship is the prime issue of concern, not the parties. (p. 19)

This paradigm shift in public relations from *what organizations do* to *the relationship organizations have* with various publics became an important step in understanding the concept of organizational reputation. Indeed, if an organization decides to improve its reputation, it may do a lot of things and invest a lot of money but still produce zero effect on its reputation or, worse, make its reputation score decrease. Thus, looking at the organization by itself is not sufficient to understand its reputation. And this brings us to the definition of the reputation.

Reputation

Reputation, in most simple terms, is the sum of all the images and relationships the company has over time. In many definitions of reputations we would typically find words like overall perception, collective judgment, combined stakeholders, long-term, and similar (Abdullah and Abdul Aziz, 2013; Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006; Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009). In other words, reputation is a summative and long-standing concept. One way to understand reputation is to compare it with climate. Climate of a given location is the sum of all weather experienced in that location over time. For example, we know that climate in Miami is warmer and wetter than in New York City. Miami has 61.9 inches of rain on average a year, while New York gets 46.23 inches. The average temperature in New York City in its hottest month, July, is 77° Fahrenheit, and the average July temperature in Miami is 83° Fahrenheit. This is climate – long-term averages. However, on any given day two cities may experience different weather: it may rain in New York while it may be absolutely dry in Miami. A day in July may be hotter in New York City than in Miami as well. This is daily weather. Even when the weather is colder in Miami than in New York (it does happen!), it still does not change the fact that Miami's climate is warmer overall.

The same is true for reputation. Reputation is defined through these long-term averages – and, as a result, is slow to change. At the same time, an image can be changing all the time. A company may have a good quarter of sales, posting record profits – it would have a very positive affect on the company's image among investors. But next quarter the company may fail to meet its profit targets – its image among investors would suffer, as a result. But none of these events alter the long-standing reputation of a company's stock as a reliable investment.

This long-term nature of reputation is one of the reasons Reputation Dividend, an organization that measures and evaluates reputations of corporations, has similar companies at the top of its reputation list year after year. Reputations are slow to change and may not always react to daily changes in operations as stock markets tend to do, for example. In fact, Cole's (2019) report on global reputation notes that while stock markets declined 0.4%, the value of reputation increased 2.1%. The value of reputation of all corporations comprising 15 equity market indices equates to \$16.77 trillion, which represents 35.3% of the overall market capitalization. This truly makes reputation the most valuable asset!

Reputation is also stable across different relationships as it is a sum of all images and relationships organizations have. In fact, changes in an investor's perception of an organization may influence an organization's customers and employees. It is impossible to silo an organization's reputation. When students started protesting Nike's sweatshops, the information spilled over to customers, investors, employees, and even government agencies – in other words, it did not just affect Nike's image among students: over time it affected Nike's overall reputation.

Although reputation is based on the products the company makes, profits the company posts, and the salaries it pays to its employees, reputation is more than any of these singular components. One way to think of a company's reputation is to imagine it in an environment completely out of its usual business. For example, imagine if Nike opened a hotel. What hotel would it be, how would it look, what amenities would it have? Nike's overall reputation would guide your imagination. Or imagine if Hilton would start making shoes. What kind of shoes would they make? What you think about Hilton's reputation would help you envision what kind of shoes they would make.

As a result, we can conclude that reputation is a long-term belief that sums up the images about the organization from various publics based on their relationships with the organization. Thus, it becomes important to understand who the publics are and how to manage relationships with them.

Chapter Summary

All organizations have their *identities* – same way as people have DNAs. These identities affect how the organization appears to all different publics the organization interacts with – consumers, investors, suppliers, employees, and others. However, the same way as people are not judged simply based on their DNA, the perceptions of organizations may differ from their internal identities. This perception is known as the organizational *image*. The image is strongly affected by the relationships between the organization and various publics – consumers' perceptions of an organization are shaped based on their shopping experience, but employees' perceptions are affected by their work experience. Thus, the context in which identity is perceived by various publics and translated into an image is shaped by the *organization-public relationship*. When we add it all up – identity, image, and relationships across various publics the organization deals with – we arrive at reputation. As a result, we define *reputation* as a long-term belief that sums up the images about the organization from various publics based on their relationships with the organization.

Five Key Terms to Remember

Identity

Image

Reputation

OPR Theory

Mission statement

Discussion Questions and Activities

- 1 Explain the relationship between identity, image, relationships, and reputation.
- 2 Based on the key characteristics of reputation described in this chapter, propose your own definition of reputation.
- 3 Find a recent ranking of organizational reputations. Review the companies at the top of the list. Discuss why, in your opinion, these companies have the best reputations. What is different about these companies in comparison with their peers?
- 4 Pick any industry and select three to five companies working in that industry. Find their mission statements and compare and contrast them. Discuss the differences and similarities.
- 5 Take any large company making consumer products. It can be Apple, BMW, Nautica, or anything else. Pretend this company opens a chain of hotels. Based on the company reputation, propose what kind of hotels this company would have. What would be unique features and amenities of these hotels and why?

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