Creating a Conceptual Model for Building Responsible Brands

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Abstract

Despite the importance of brands in mediating corporate social responsibility, there has been relatively little research on how responsible brands are developed from the internal perspective of the company. Some research has been conducted from the external perspective, such as the link between ethical issues and consumer purchase behaviour, but there has been relatively little focus on brand-building itself. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by proposing a model for building responsible brands. After identifying the common features that emerge from the extant brand-building models, the study applies these to the building of responsible brands. The result is a proposed conceptual model for building responsible brands.

Keywords

Brands, branding, responsibility, building responsible brands, conceptual analysis

Introduction

In making their purchasing decisions, consumers are increasingly conscious of ethical, environmental, and social issues, which they expect to see addressed in one way or another in the goods and services that they chose to buy (Crane, 2005). To meet these expectations, many companies are developing brands that are perceived to be 'socially responsible'. In doing so, firms are acting in accordance with the view of Kitchin (2003), who has contended that brands mediate the promises of organisations to consumers. In a similar vein, Fan (2005) has pointed out that a brand is no longer merely the interface between the company and its customers; rather, a brand represents the 'face' of the company.

The rise in 'ethical consumerism' has been associated with increased consumer activism, which has intensified the social and ethical responsibility placed upon companies and brands. Despite this increased interest in ethical consumerism, research into the concept of so-called 'responsible brands' is fairly new and undeveloped. The extant research in this field can be divided into two interrelated streams (Kujala & Penttilä, 2009): (i) the process of branding (which adopts the company perspective in studying the internal processes used to create brands); and (ii) the actual brands (which adopts the customer perspective in studying customer preferences, attitudes, and values). Although these two research streams ('branding' and 'brands') are conceptually separate, they are actually intertwined because the credibility of any professed responsible brand is dependent on there being a genuine correspondence between a company's words and its actions (Crane, 2005; Maio, 2003).

Most of the studies on responsible brands have adopted the second perspective identified above. By focusing on brand image or brand reputation, studies from the customer perspective have examined whether the professed responsibility of products has any effect on customer behaviour (Folkes & Kamins, 1999; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Klein & Dawar, 2004; de Pelsmacker et al., 2005). In contrast, there is a relative lack of research on the first perspective—that is, how responsible brands are developed.

The purpose of the study is to address this relative gap in the literature by proposing a conceptual model for building responsible brands. The paper is organised as follows. First, the key concepts of brands, branding, and responsibility are discussed. This is followed by a review of the brand-building literature. After identifying the common features that emerge from a consideration of the extant brand-building models, a conceptual model for building responsible brands is proposed. The paper concludes with a summary of the major findings and implications of the study.

Brands, branding and responsibility

According to the American Marketing Association (2009) a brand is: "… a customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas; often, it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme. Brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary."

A successful brand, according to de Chernatony and McDonald (2003: 25) is: "… an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely. Furthermore, its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition."

Both of these definitions emphasise the ultimate importance of how a brand is cognitively evaluated by the purchasers or users (de Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). In a similar vein, Meyers (2003) has pointed out that a brand is not merely an object of exchange; rather, a brand is viewed by stakeholders as the medium through which they interact with one another. This wider understanding of the concept of a 'brand' has been taken even further by Kitchin (2003: 71), who contended that: "Brands drive relationships, relationships liberate knowledge, knowledge generates insight, insight drives innovation, innovation drives transactions, transactions create value, which reframes the brand and so on and so on."

This emphasis on the notion of 'relationship' with regard to brands has been extended to the process of branding. In this regard, Fan (2005: 342) defined the process of 'branding' at the corporate level as "… developing and managing the relationship between the organisation and its various stakeholders as well as the general public". This definition is clearly relational in nature. Fan (2005) has also pointed out that branding should no longer be seen as merely adding value to a product; rather, brands represent and promote lifestyles, and brands themselves become a kind of 'culture'. However, as Willmott (2003) has observed, branding decisions should be based on what suits the company or the brand. In other words, the circumstances of each business—such as previous activities and associations, the sector of operations, and the particular concerns and interests of employees and other stakeholders—should be taken into account in branding.

With regard to the issue of responsibility in branding, the terminology in the vast literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) has led to such concepts as: (i) "citizen brand" (Willmott, 2003); (ii) "ethical brand" (Brunk, 2010; Szmigin et al., 2007; Fan, 2005; Crane, 2005; Maio, 2003); (iii) "sustainable brand" (Maio, 2003); and (iv) "CSR brand" (Brüggenwirth, 2006; Polonsky & Jevons, 2006). Crane (2005: 226) referred to so-called "ethical differentiation", which the author described as: "… essentially a process of creating an ethical image, a good reputation or what marketers typically refer to as a socially responsible or ethical brand." In a similar vein, Maio (2003: 239) described a responsible company in the following terms: "Responsible companies are not just participating in sustainable practices; responsible companies that have the trust of their stakeholders demonstrate attributes that go beyond what is sustainable."

The present study adopts the concepts of 'responsible brand' and 'responsible branding' as they cover the ethical, social, and environmental in addition to the economic aspects of being responsible to a variety of stakeholders (such as employees, customers, and the wider society) and include responsibility in general. Moreover, based on the above discussion, it is for each individual company to determine which aspect(s) of responsibility (ethical, social, environmental, etc.) it wishes to emphasise.

Review of the brand-building literature

Although there are substantial internal and external difficulties that make brand-building challenging for any company (Aaker, 2002), most of these problems are within the control of the company. As Hogan et al. (2005) have observed, the complexity of brand-building should not be seen as insuperable, and many brand leaders have shown that it is possible to create and sustain an asset that can have real long-term value.

Several models of brand-building have been suggested in the literature. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) identified three fundamental brand-building tasks: (i) create visibility (which consists of recognition, unaided recall, and so-called 'top-of-mind' status); (ii) develop strong associations (to differentiate the brand); and (iii) develop deep relationships with customers (such that the brand becomes a meaningful part of each customer's life and/or self-concept).

Aaker (2002) created a brand identity planning model consisting of three major stages: (i) strategic brand analysis (which means that the brand strategy is based on customer analysis, competitor analysis, and self-analysis); (ii) brand identity system (which includes creating brand identity, value proposition, credibility, and brand–customer relationship); and (iii) brand identity implementation system (which includes brand position, execution, and tracking).

de Chernatony (2003) identified eight stages in building and sustaining brands: (i) brand vision (defining the purpose of the brand and brand values); (ii) organisational culture (assessing whether the culture assists or hinders the brand's development; (iii) brand objectives (defining a target to be achieved and the information required to achieve it; (iv) audit 'brandsphere' (auditing the five key forces that are critical to the brand—corporation, distributors, customers, competitors and the macro-environment); (v) brand essence (identifying the central characteristics that define the brand); (vi) internal implementation (consideration of the organisation's structure in order to deliver the brand's promise); (vii) brand resourcing (considering the implementation in more detail—for example selecting vehicles of communication); and (viii) brand evaluation (regular monitoring of brand performance against key criteria.

Urde (2003) proposed a brand-building model based on the premise that a brand's identity is developed as a consequence of continuous interaction between the organisation and the customer. The model consists of ten stages: (i) mission (describing the brand's fundamental reason for existence in terms of the organisation's value base); (ii) brand vision (describing where the organisation wishes the brand to be in the next few years, thus providing inspiration and stimulus for development); (iii) organisational values (defining what the company stands for and what it is); (iv) core values (defining the functional, emotional, and symbolic core organisational values that are to be translated into the core values of the brand, which are then to be translated into customer added value); (v) brand architecture (deciding how the company organises and uses its brands in terms of the number of brands, types of brands, and the brand roles; (vi) product attributes (ensuring that the core values are built into the product to make the product exude the brand's identity); (vii) brand personality (ensuring that the impressions and values that the company claims to stand for are harmonised and communicated); (viii) positioning (ensuring that the brand is enduring by being deeply rooted in the organisation's values); (ix) communication strategy (ensuring that the core values of the brand identity are expressed in messages that interest and appeal to customers; and (x) internal brand identity (ensuring that everyone in the company understands and agrees with the core values of the brand and what they represent).

Schultz (2005) identified five phases of corporate branding: (i) stating (expressing the organisation's present identity and what it wishes to become in terms of its strategic vision); (ii) organising (supporting the stated vision and identity of the brand by reshaping organisational structures and processes); (iii) involving (engaging all relevant stakeholders in the realisation of the corporate brand); (iv) integrating (reducing gaps that might exist between the brand identity and the vision, culture, and stakeholder images); and (v) monitoring (measuring the performance of the brand in relation to all brand elements and the relationships among them).

Wheeler (2006) proposed a "complete guide to creating, building and maintaining strong brands". The process consists of five stages: (i) conducting research: (clarifying vision and values, researching stakeholders, conducting audits, and interviewing key management); (ii) clarifying strategy (synthesising learning, developing positioning, and achieving agreement); (iii) designing identity (visualising the future, brainstorming the big idea, designing brand identity, and finalising brand architecture); (iv) creating touchpoints (finalising identity design, developing look and feel, designing program, and applying brand architecture); and (v) managing assets (building synergy around the brand, developing a launch strategy and plan, launching internally and externally, and developing standards and guidelines.

Ghodeswar (2008) developed a conceptual model for building brands in the Indian context. The model consists of four stages: (i) positioning the brand (defining the features, tangible and intangible attributes, product functions, and benefits of the brand); (ii) communicating the brand message (deciding on advertising campaigns, themes, celebrities, events, shows, and the consumer); (iii) delivering on brand performance (ensuring product and service performance, customer care, customer satisfaction, and customer delight); and (iv) leveraging brand equity (defining line and brand extensions, ingredient branding, co-branding, brand alliances, and social integration).

Merrilees and Miller (2008), who focused on corporate rebranding, rather than the initiation of a newly formulated corporate brand, identified three dominant themes: (i) the need to revision the brand on the basis of a solid understanding of the consumer; (ii) the use of internal marketing (or 'internal branding') to ensure the commitment of the relevant stakeholders; and (iii) the role of advertising and other marketing mix elements in the implementation phase.

A summary of the various brand-building models described above is presented in Table 1.

It is apparent from Table 1 that certain recurrent themes can be found in virtually all of the models in the existing brand-building literature. In summary, six key stages can be identified in the brand-building process: (i) identifying vision; (ii) analys-

Table 1. A summary of brand building models

Author	Stages, elements or themes in brand building	Key concepts	Viewpoint
Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000	1. Create visibility 2. Build associations and create differentiation 3. Develop deep customer relationships	Brand identity defined as a vision of how the brand should be perceived by its target audience	Brand identity
Aaker 2002	1. Strategic brand analysis 2. Brand identity system 3. Brand identity implementation system	Brand defined as a strategic asset that is the key to long-term performance and should be so managed	Brand identity
de Chernatony 2003	1. Brand vision 2. Organisational culture 3. Brand objectives 4. Audit brandsphere 5. Brand essence 6. Internal implementation 7. Brand resources 8. Brand evaluation	A successful brand defined as an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique, sustainable added values which match their needs most closely	An integrated brand, co-ordinating all value-adding activities
Urde 2003	1. Mission 2. Vision 3. Organisational values 4. Core values 5. Brand architecture 6. Product attributes 7. Personality 8. Brand positioning 9. Communication strategy 10. Internal brand identity	A corporate brand and its value foundation where the nature, role, and function of core values are considered as a central part	Core values
Schultz 2005	1. Stating 2. Organising 3. Involving 4. Integrating 5. Monitoring	Corporate branding defined as a process where an organisation can continually work out its purpose that is meaningful to people inside and outside the organization	Organisational change
Wheeler 2006	1. Conducting research 2. Clarifying strategy 3. Designing identity 4. Creating touchpoints 5. Managing assets	A brand defined as the promise, the big idea, and the expectations that reside in each customer's mind about a product, service, or company	Brand identity
Ghodeswar 2008	1. Positioning 2. Communicating 3. Delivering 4. Leveraging	A brand defined as a distinguishing name and/or symbol intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors	Brand identity
Merrilees & Miller 2008	1. Re-visioning 2. Ensuring commitment 3. Implementing	Corporate rebranding defined as disjunction or change between an initially formulated corporate brand and a new formulation	Rebranding

ing key stakeholders; (iii) creating brand identity; (iv) defining brand objectives; (v) implementation; and (vi) evaluation. These stages are discussed in more detail in the next section in the context of building responsible brands with a view to developing a conceptual model for the purpose.

Building responsible brands

Identifying vision

The brand vision is crucial for building responsible brands because it gives purpose and guidance to the company's efforts. A suitable brand vision satisfies the established core values of the corporate brand while simultaneously ensuring that the new brand is relevant to contemporary conditions (Merrilees & Miller, 2008).

To ensure that all employees are committed to its implementation, Yan (2003) has argued that companies should involve the whole organisation, not just senior management, in the formation of the brand vision. Yan (2003) has also suggested that the vision must be focused and believable if it is to have meaning for people; in other words, unrealistic claims about 'saving the planet' are inappropriate if a brand image is to be credible.

According to de Chernatony (2003), an effective brand vision consists of three components: (i) the desired future environment; (ii) the purpose; and (iii) the values. These components are interlinked and self-supporting. With regard to the first of these, the company should have a vision of the future environment ten years hence, including potential discontinuities that will result in changes. With regard to the brand purpose, de Chernatony (2003) posed the question: "How is the world going to be a better place as a consequence of the brand and will this inspire and guide staff?". The brand purpose, which is the brand's reason for existence, differentiates the brand and motivates staff over the long term. Finally, brand values are very important because people buy brands that they perceive as having values that correspond with their own; moreover, potential employees are attracted to organisations with similar values to their own. Problems can occur if managers announce what the brand's values should be, but fail to gain the commitment of personnel to enact them; as a consequence, the actual values of the brand will differ from those that were intended. (de Chernatony, 2003.)

Analysing key stakeholders

Companies need to audit their 'brandsphere' to identify the forces that might promote or impede the brand (de Chernatony, 2003). In this regard, Aaker (2002) recommended that brand strategy should be based on three perspectives: (i) customer analysis; (ii) competitor analysis; and (iii) self-analysis. The goal is to create a brand that resonates with customers, avoids competitor strengths (and exploits their weaknesses), and takes advantage of its own strengths (and neutralises its own weaknesses).

Ryder (2003: 156) pointed out that: "At the end of the day, for any commercial organization, the customer is the only reason you are in business." The organisation therefore needs to obtain information about its customers, their buying habits with regard to the brand, and whether the brand meets their needs (de Chernatony, 2003). This becomes more challenging in the context of developing responsible brands. According to Morsing (2006), consumers do not necessarily assume that there is organisational support behind an aesthetic brand promise, but they do expect an organisation to live up to its moral claims about a brand. Companies need to ascertain whether consumers really care about responsible branding. Although consumers generally do have ethical concerns, such concerns are not necessarily manifested in their actual purchasing behaviour (Fan, 2005).

Companies also need to evaluate the differentiation of their brands against those of key competitors (de Chernatony, 2003). In the context of an ethical market, a company needs to determine whether it is wise to orientate its brand to the mainstream or whether it should seek to occupy an ethical niche. Because many companies are now seeking to differentiate themselves through responsibility, mainstream companies might have difficulties in sustaining a convincing ethical differentiation (Crane, 2005).

In building responsible brands, a company's self-analysis becomes even more important. The purpose of self-analysis is to ascertain whether the company is able to realise the vision it pursues. To be successful, there must be internal alignment among the organisation's values, the brand's values, and the employees' values (de Chernatony, 2003). According to Moore (2003: 111): "… the most common reason why employees are negative and cynical about the way they are managed is because the company articulates one set of values (usually hopelessly idealistic) and manages by a completely different set."

As companies move their corporate brands from aesthetic to responsible, the fulfilment of its moral promises is ultimately a concern for employees—because their personal morals become associated with the corporate morals (and vice versa) (Morsing, 2006). Other stakeholders that need to be analysed include distributors and suppliers. Indeed, the influence of distributors and suppliers becomes increasingly important as a company seeks to promote brand responsibility. Some of the biggest scandals in the field of CSR have derived from the practices of suppliers or distributors. Responsible companies are expected to ensure that the whole supply chain is ethical.

Responsible companies therefore need to engage in stakeholder dialogue and to listen before acting (Maio, 2003). Although the historical focus in such dialogue has been on customers and investors, the range of key stakeholders and active constituents has expanded dramatically due to globalisation. Corporations should therefore listen more actively to a wider range of stakeholders. In doing so, they need to understand that a brand is a dynamic asset that is effectively 'co-owned' by both the company and its stakeholders (Maio, 2003).

Creating brand identity

In responsible branding, brands are expected to demonstrate integrity in their values and characteristics. In other words, responsible branding must be reflected in the very content or identity of brands (Maio, 2003).

Brand identity consists of two components: (i) core identity; and (ii) extended identity. The first of these, core identity, is the essence of the brand, and includes the associations that are expected to remain constant as the brand moves into new markets and products. The values of the organisation and the core identity should be in close correspondence. The extended identity provides the 'texture' and detail that complete the brand and help to show what it stands for (Aaker, 2002).

A sense of responsibility can be built into the core identity and/or the extended identity. Most companies use responsibility as an added extra to the core business, which is a simpler way of incorporating responsibility. This is especially the case with existing companies because it is more challenging and risky to change the core identity. However, some brands are primarily based on responsibility. This is especially the case with new companies. New brands have the potential to establish responsibility as the core value of the company.

Defining brand objectives

According to de Chernatony (2003), the brand's vision should be expressed as clear long-term and short-term objectives to establish what the brand is expected to achieve at specified times. Definite long-term objectives should be established, and then constantly revisited during the brand-development process to ensure that all levels of the organisation are committed to them. The long-term objectives are then broken down into shorter-term goals.

Crane (2005) contended that the building of responsible brands requires the adoption of a holistic long-term approach. Because trust and credibility cannot be established instantaneously, corporate actions should be directed towards the longer term, rather than merely being a 'spur-of-the-moment' activity that aims to make a quick profit. This view was shared by Maio (2003), who also recommended that responsible brands require a comprehensive long-term strategy.

Implementation

No matter how thoroughly a company builds its brand internally, a responsible brand can succeed only if it is communicated effectively to potential consumers. The implementation stage is therefore crucial.

The implementation stage includes both positioning and execution (Aaker, 2002; de Chernatony, 2003; Urde, 2003; Schultz, 2005; Wheeler, 2006; Ghodeswar, 2008; Merrilees & Miller, 2008). Brand positioning refers to the creation of a perception of the brand in the minds of customers, and the achievement of differentiation; in other words, the brand must stand apart from competitors' brands and meet the needs and expectations of consumers (Ghodeswar, 2008). Brand execution refers to the communication of the brand's message and the management of assets to ensure that what is promised is actually delivered (Urde, 2003; Ghodeswar, 2008; Wheeler, 2006).

In summary, the implementation stage entails publicising the message of the brand, ensuring that the message reaches its target and making sure it is delivered.

According to Crane (2005), consumers and other stakeholders are demanding that companies show more responsibility while simultaneously being quick to denounce those same companies for perceived hypocrisy with regard to brand images and corporate activities. In a similar vein, Maio (2003) emphasised the importance of matching the 'talk' with the 'walk', and Jahdi and Acikdilli (2009) have noted that organisations that choose to highlight their CSR credentials come under greater scrutiny than those that do not do so.

Evaluation

After implementation, the ensuing activities and results associated with the brand need to be evaluated. Because they are complex entities, no single parameter can be used for such evaluation; rather, a combination of internal and external dimensions needs to be measured to assess the success of the brand (de Chernatony, 2003). Schultz (2005) also advocated comprehensive monitoring, but took the idea further by suggesting that various stakeholders should be brought together in the monitoring. She also contended that the tracking of internal and external brand performance should be aligned. Finally, by comparing results with the vision, it is possible to evaluate whether the brand objectives have been reached. The evaluation stage also provides an opportunity to review the whole brand-building process with a view to identifying what needs to be improved.

A conceptual model for building responsible brands

To summarise the above discussion on building responsible brands, Figure 1 presents a model for building such brands. The model depicts the six key aspects of brand building as an interactive and ongoing process.

As shown in Figure 1, the process starts by identifying the brand vision, which is followed by analysis of key stakeholders. The next aspect, creating brand identity, can utilise a sense of responsibility as a core identity and/or as an extended identity. This is followed by identifying brand objectives, which should be set for both the long term and the short term. The next element, implementation, includes both positioning the brand and executing the brand message. Finally, evaluation of the entire process and the brand itself completes the process and leads to possible changes.

It would seem that every aspect of building responsible brands requires more thoroughness than building general brands. For example, the building of a responsible brand requires a stronger vision, value foundation, internal commitment, and implementation than is the case in developing brands in general. Moreover, responsible brands need to be transparent to enhance their

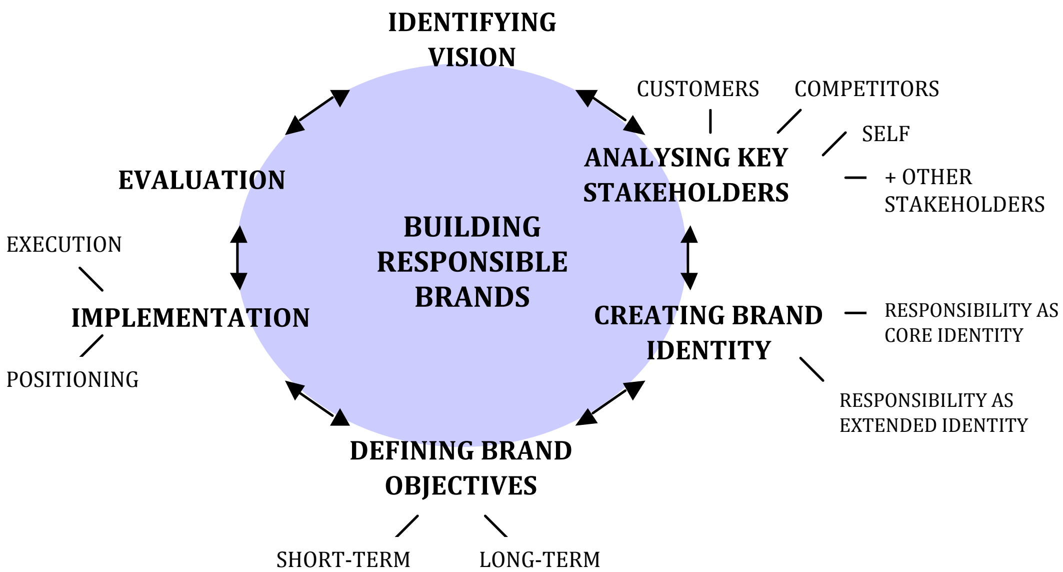

Figure 1. A conceptual model for building responsible brands.

credibility (Willmott, 2003). This means being as open and honest as possible in telling people what the company is doing and how this is overtly linked to the company's core values and activities. Transparency also implies having effective communication channels and mechanisms for dealing with possible crises (Willmott, 2003). As Gad (2003: 190) observed: "In a transparent world nothing is better from a communicative point of view than to have one message—one company—externally and internally". If there is only one message internally and externally, there is much less risk of the brand being exposed to charges of hypocrisy.

For the building of responsible brands, it is essential that the whole company feels a sense of ownership of the brand, and that senior management is prepared to act as champions for the development of the brand (Middlemiss, 2003). If the whole company is not committed to the process, the effort is unlikely to be successful, and without the commitment of senior management, it is virtually impossible to generate effective activity in brand-building. If these requirements are not fulfilled, the result is likely to be a lot of fine words without meaningful action. One of the most powerful values that a company can have is to promise only what it knows it can deliver (Ryder, 2003).

Discussion

The building of a responsible brand cannot be based on simple intuition, changing market preferences, and corporate self-promotion. To be successful, the building of a responsible brand requires systematic planning and coordinated actions, not mere advertising. In building a general brand, a company can choose to create virtually whatever identity it wants and communicate the brand however it likes; however, in building a responsible brand this is unwise. As Moore (2003) has noted, marketers build a sort of 'fantasy value' that outstrips the reality of what they are promoting. In the case of responsible brands this is dangerous, because such brands need to be based on reality if they are to remain credible.

Responsible brands are likely to attract more cynical critics than other brands. It is therefore vital that the internal and the external perspectives are consistent. If promises are broken, the brand's credibility will be lost, and once lost it is difficult to regain. In building general brands, the consequences of betraying the trust of stakeholders are similarly damaging, but not to the same extent as occurs when a brand is ostensibly committed to being trustworthy.

Building responsible brands is thus challenging; however, there are many benefits to be gained if it is done well. The direct benefits include a more motivated workforce, more trusting relationships with suppliers, and more efficient processes. The indirect benefits include an enhanced reputation, increased perceptions of quality, and greater loyalty from more profitable customers (Willmott, 2003).

Finally, the responsible brand needs to be communicated to consumers and other stakeholders. In this regard, some of the more important sources of background information for ethical consumers are the media, campaign groups, and informal communication networks. New technologies and social media have extended consumers' access to information on brands (Berry & McEachern, 2005), and these should be utilised to promote responsible brands. Although companies have traditionally used corporate social reports as their main means of demonstrating their responsibility (Adams & Zutshi, 2005), ethical consumers are often sceptical of corporate self-promotion (Berry & McEachern, 2005). New technologies and social media should therefore be used to promote the responsible brands and CSR in general.

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