CHAPTER 6

The Triumph of Feelings: On the Power of Imagery in Business

Lars Strannegård

The Trust Dimension of Image

In recent years, images, brands, opinions, and attitudes have attracted an increasing amount of attention, both from representatives of organizations and from individuals. And as a result of this shift, researchers in business administration have begun to take an interest in matters concerning trust, images, and reputation. Searches for terms, such as “branding,” “employer branding,” “trust,” “performance,” and “reputation,” produce a hugely larger number of hits in academic databases today, than even just a few years ago.

All of these terms refer to the same issues, that is, visibility, credibility, trust, and confidence. Among the great number of attempts to define “a brand,” one of the most quoted is “a brand is a promise.” In other words, a brand is closely associated with credibility, and reputation is a guarantee that whatever is promised, will, actually, be delivered.

This chapter takes as its point of departure the observation that while our societies are becoming increasingly preoccupied by the task of controlling, monitoring, and measuring performance as a way to build, safeguard, and manage reputation, simple production of numbers and figures (e.g., in form of rankings) does not seem to be enough to reach that end. Instead, the mass media have come to play an increasingly ubiquitous role as the key discursive intermediary between organizations and the general public, with power to “translate” such figures
into stories and images that have direct impact on how an organization is perceived by the outside world. By possessing this power, the media increasingly influence the ways in which organizations act and activities are organized, acquiring a constitutive role in the organization of society.

In this chapter, I reflect upon the role played by the media in generating, transmitting, and shaping credibility, reputation, and the public image of societal actors, particularly companies. In particular, I want to draw attention to the ways in which the media logic increasingly permeates other institutional spheres, turning the media’s creation of reputations and images—and thus production of trust—into an act of institutional border crossing.

In the immediately following section, I will attempt to demonstrate the manner in which rumors and reputation have assumed a key role in nearly every organized activity in society, and address the fact that the search for transparency has become more intense in society in general. In the wake of this search, various forms of monitoring systems have been developed. The subsequent sections address the media and its increasing influence and, more specifically, the increase of such influence on organizations and corporate activities and the way in which this has led to credibility, reputations, and rumors being shaped and determined in the open, public arena. The closing section addresses the increased importance of appearance, and the way in which organizations, people, and activities are perceived.

Increased Monitoring

Trust, credibility, and confidence are concepts that have spread very widely, indeed, in recent years. In historical terms, this may seem a bit odd as the modernity of the twentieth century can, in many instances, be described as the battle of knowledge against preconceptions. With the growth of industrialization, when factories began churning out products and the distribution network became more integrated and refined, the concept of scientifically based optimization took hold. Max Weber’s ideas of ideal bureaucracies were a part of the spirit of that time: positions of power and power structures were to be allocated and established on the basis of competence and clearly defined rules. This was the era that saw the birth of modern business administration. Even though earlier philosophers had had an influence on the subject, Frederic Taylor’s book, Principles of Scientific Management, published in 1911, can be regarded as the birth of the subject of business administration. This