

LUND UNIVERSITY

MASTER'S PROGRAMME IN MANAGING PEOPLE, KNOWLEDGE AND CHANGE



# BRANDING IN TRADE UNIONS

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## CASE OF UNIONEN

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## SUMMARY

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<b>Title</b>	Branding in Trade Unions – Case of Unionen
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<b>5 Key Words</b>	Member branding, Corporate Branding, Relationship Marketing, Organizational Culture, Trade Unions
<b>Problem Analysis</b>	Trade Unions are finding it increasingly challenging to appeal to employees and all trade unions alike are encountering new challenges to attract and retain members. Additionally a more diversified and educated labor market is creating demands for trade unions to better meet individual needs.
<b>Purpose</b>	The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the role of branding in Unionen and how branding efforts help in attracting and retaining trade union members.
<b>Methodology</b>	The thesis' philosophical approach is based on hermeneutics while the method applied is qualitative.
<b>Theoretical Perspectives</b>	The theoretical foundation of this thesis is based on theories related to corporate branding and relationship marketing. Furthermore, the study develops and introduces the concept of member branding in the context of trade unions.
<b>Empirical foundation</b>	Our case organization is Unionen which is the biggest white-collar trade union in Sweden. 7 interviews were conducted for data collection purposes.
<b>Conclusions</b>	Unionen is embracing branding activities but due to the recent merger that the company has undergone branding efforts are still at an early stage. However, so far branding has started off well. Furthermore, the study shows that branding can have an important role in attracting and retaining members since strong brand helps the organization to obtain competitive advantage. In the case of Unionen its uniqueness lies in being close to the members as well in their individually oriented service offering that acts as a base for the brand. Therefore, the study illustrates that the brand functions as a relationship builder and meaning creating device. Finally, at this point of Unionen's existence branding is also giving meaning internally and the brand then has a great opportunity to drive organizational culture.

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**List of Abbreviations**

- HTF Tjänstemannaförbundet
- Sif Svenskaindustri-tjänstemannaförbund

# 1 BRANDING IN TRADE UNIONS – CASE OF UNIONEN

In this chapter, the background and the relevance of the research will be discussed. Finally the discussion will be concluded in the statement of the main research questions that will guide the subsequent study.

## 1.1 Background

Branding thinking has gained exceptional popularity after the 1980s. Brands were first then seen as the most valuable asset that a company own. Traditionally brands were considered complimentary to the product whereas nowadays brands are often seen as concepts that aim to appeal to certain groups of people (Riezebos 2003). Accordingly, one can ask how important is a brand for an organization's sustainability? Some argue that the survival of many organizations rests on the success of their corporate brand (Balmer & Greyser 2003, Kapferer 2004). In other words, the real value of the organization lies in the minds of the customers. This is particularly salient in situations of fierce competition where customers are faced with different options. Strong brand names are designed to help a company to stand out from competitors, and the brands carry with them a set of promises for the customer about the particular product or service. Additionally it is important to appreciate the fact that brands have also a strong emotional component in them.

Branding can be applied to basically anything and even though there is no legal difference when it comes to product or service brands there are, nevertheless, some practical differences when applying branding principles to services or products mainly due to the different natures of those categories (Kapferer 2004, de Chernatony 2000, Grönroos 2000). In the context of trade unions, there is no physical product that is being branded rather the brand relates to the organization as a whole and to the service it provides.

However, marketing has been criticized also for missing a crucial point, namely that of focusing only on a product/service instead of viewing branding at the corporate level even though some authors argue that service organizations do resort more frequently to corporate branding compared to product-based companies (Grönroos 2000). In order to obtain competitive advantage it is said that organizations should position differentiation not only on a particular product but to the entire corporation (Hatch and Schultz 2001). Accordingly it is the corporate culture, people and/or the programs offered by an organization that provide the basis for differentiation through which a value proposition and a particular type of relationship is developed between the organization and the customer (Aaker 1996). Grönroos (1990) argues also that "corporate brand is actually the core of relationship building inside and outside the organization, reinforcing a corporate culture which enhances employees' understanding of the brand's values and ensures an appreciation for good service and customer orientation". The role of employees is paramount in corporate branding and therefore the need to understand corporate culture has been emphasized. Corporate culture has, consequently, an important meaning in branding efforts. A strong vision coupled

with shared values will reinforce the building of a stronger corporate culture that strengthens the likelihood that organizational members will also “live the brand” (Barrow & Mosley 2005 and Urde 2001). Ultimately a strong corporate brand internally and externally will also bring added value for the final customer.

In this thesis we will concentrate on branding from a trade union perspective and it is interesting due to the fact that prior research in this area is lacking. We will consider trade unions as service providers even though this distinction also entails some fuzziness. This is due to the fact that trade union services can be categorized according to different criteria such as individual vs. collective services, according to the degree of standardization vs. personalization, the proximity of service deliverer and the final member to name but a few (see Ch. 4 about Union services).

## **1.2 Problem Discussion**

Trade unions enjoy a strong position in Sweden. Trade unionism has long traditions and its meaning for society has long been undeniable. This organized society is well reflected in unionism in Sweden and trade unions are divided in three main confederations: LO (Landsorganisationen), SACO (Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation) and TCO (Tjänstemannens Centralorganisation). While the first one affiliates mainly Blue-collar workers, SACO’s membership includes college graduates and professionals such as lawyers and doctors. TCO, in turn, focuses on white-collar workers, Unionen being the largest of the affiliated unions (Unionen 2008).

During the last decade the competitive situation and the overall environment that trade unions are faced with has started to change and all trade unions alike are encountering new challenges to attract and retain members. No longer is membership seen as a self obvious thing as it was in the 1960s and 1970s for example, and it is also due to the attitude changes among labor force that have forced trade unions to adapt their operations so that individual customer needs are better taken into consideration. Additionally a more diversified and educated labor market is also creating demands for trade unions to better meet individual needs (Björkman 2005).

This phenomena of managerialism in trade unions has been discussed to some degree in the literature (cf. Björkman 2005), while possibilities for branding have not received as much attentions thus far. This is not to say trade unions are completely foreign to branding thinking. There is evidence that trade unions are also embracing branding activities. In the case of Unionen, a recently merged union between Sif and HTF, it is Sif that brings the most relevant experience within the branding area. Additionally the fact that Unionen has a specific person working mainly with branding issues is a clear indication that branding is emphasized in communication strategy and image building.

The intention is to analyze how branding – that includes considerations regarding union image, vision, values and culture – can be applied in a trade union context and what kinds of implications it has on making union membership more appealing to both current and potential members as well as for other stakeholders. Increased competition for members between different trade unions has forced trade unions to take another look at their service offerings and image, and therefore to create new ways of delivering value for their final members.

It is obvious that trade unions are also affected by image issues, or by the brand they carry, even though this image may not always be built that consciously. What is more, there is evidence that the image associated with trade unions in Sweden is not always a positive one. Trade unions have received some questionable publicity and a good example of this is a dispute regarding a salad bar owner in Gothenburg who refused to sign a collective bargaining agreement with a trade union (Dagens Nyheter 2006). The trade union consequently issued a blockage against the entrepreneur which ultimately raised a vivid discussion regarding the power of trade unions and employees as well as entrepreneurs' free choice. Also some terms such as "fackpampar" or trade "union bigwigs" reflect some negative attitudes towards trade unions in general. This term in particular suggest that trade unions can be seen as being somewhat distant and big organizations with a lot of influence.

Image of the organization should then be carefully crafted and well taken care of, since it would be one of the "magnets" stakeholders can be attracted to. Put differently, it is the interplay between vision and values, culture and image that will strength the corporate brand (Hatch & Schultz 2001). Balmer et al. (2001)<sup>1</sup> argue that a shift is necessary in branding thinking to encompass the whole organization instead of relating it just to a specific product or service. He continues that some of the benefits of having a strong corporate/union brand can be that it differentiates the company from competitors, increases attractiveness for membership and member loyalty and has a positive influence on employee motivation. The research will explore if it is this maintenance of the tangible and emotional benefits communicated by the organization that will increase the attractiveness of union membership and consequently benefit positively member loyalty and retention.

### **1.3 Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is thus to explore what is the role of branding in attracting and retaining members in Unionen? For this purpose we will consequently develop and introduce the concept of membership branding.

The above research purpose is further subdivided into smaller research questions that guide us in our research and will allow us to discover our purpose mentioned above:

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<sup>1</sup> Balmer & Greyser (2003)

The research questions:

- 1) What is the role of branding in Unionen and how is it carried out?
- 2) How does branding help in attracting and retaining members?
- 3) What is the relationship between organizational culture and branding?

We will begin by providing a theoretical foundation concerning branding and corporate branding in particular and will also discuss how organizational culture, vision and values as well as image supports the branding work. Also how relationship marketing relates to branding will be explored. This will enable us to create a framework concerning member branding.

In regards to our case company Unionen we will explore how the alignment of the corporate culture, image and vision & values is done, and how these processes contribute to Unionen being more successful in attracting new while also retaining old members and building long-lasting mutually beneficial relationships.

#### **1.4 Relevance**

Trade union research in Sweden in particular is interesting due to the vital and visible role that the unions have in society. The percentage of Swedish trade union members is actually currently higher than in many other European countries: 78% (Fulton 2007). However, as discussed earlier as well over the recent decades trade unions have faced with a changed labor market where many employees are choosing to opt out from trade unions. And the proof is that it has fallen from its peak of 86% that it had in 1995 (Fulton 2007).

Therefore, new measures are needed to “fight back”. In this thesis the role of branding and how it is created in trade union context will be explored by using the case of Unionen as a practical example. As a newly merged trade union, Unionen is an interesting case company due to the recent merger and the subsequent need to rebrand the union. For this reason, branding efforts regarding image, vision and values as well as corporate culture are emphasized in the communications strategy.

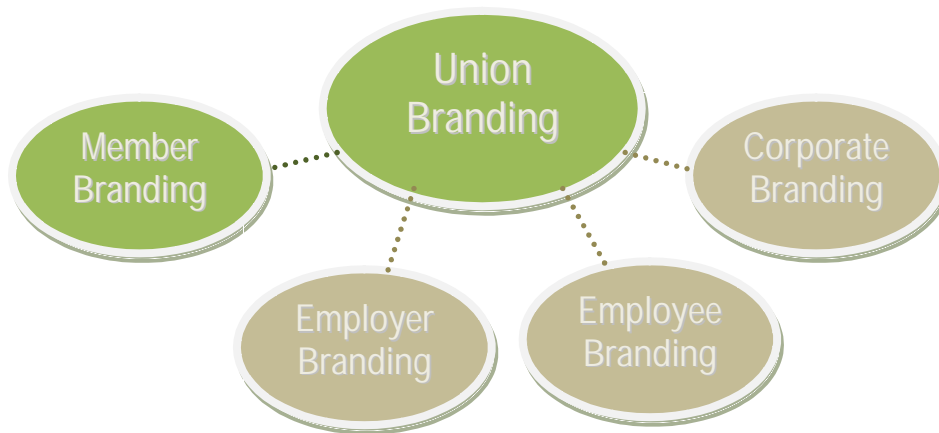
Previous research in the area of branding and trade unions is largely non-existent which is why this study is a welcomed add-on and hopefully will provide new insights into the usefulness and challenges that are pertinent to branding efforts. Furthermore, this study is also relevant because it views corporate branding as a human resources and marketing tool where branding is not only relevant externally but where successful branding must be supported by organizational culture and other key stakeholder groups (Balmer & Gray 2003).

#### **1.5 Demarcations**

Branding is a broad concept and can therefore be studied from many different perspectives. In this thesis we will focus on member branding as opposed to employer, employee or corporate branding.



As already mentioned, research of brand building within unions has not been widely studied. This makes this area of study more challenging and therefore we would have liked to consider the rest of perspectives in order to obtain a more complete study. Yet due to time limitations we will only focus on Member Branding since it will narrow our research project and thus help us obtain sharper findings within such area. Figure 1. illustrates how the different branding concepts relate to each other and highlights our position in this study in green.

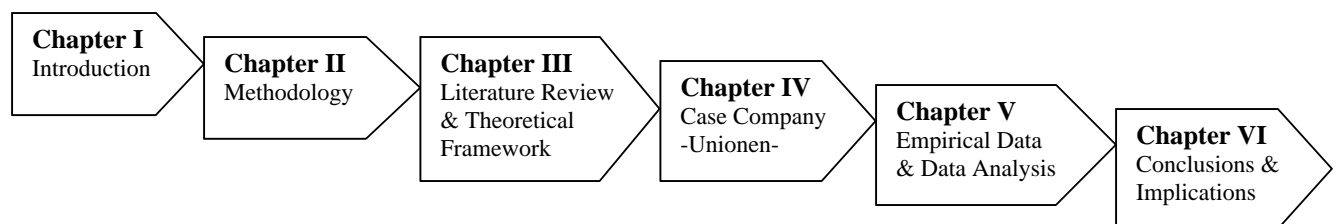


**Figure 1.** The relationship between different streams of branding in trade union context

Member or membership branding, as it will be outlined and further explained in the thesis, refers to branding in terms of making trade union membership more attractive.

## 1.6 Disposition

Our research project consists of six main chapters which briefly consist of the following: In chapter one, we introduce the background for the study followed by the problem discussion which presents our purpose and the main research questions. In Chapter two methodological considerations are presented such as our philosophical and research approach used in this study. Within Chapter three we discuss the relevant literature and theories used, which in turn establish the base for our theoretical framework. In Chapter four we present a description of the case company. The empirical findings are presented and analyzed in chapter five and finally in Chapter six we present our main findings and also answer our research questions.



## 2 METHODOLOGY

Methodology refers to how a research project is undertaken (Blumberg et al. 2005) and in this section we outline our research process, chosen methods as well as discuss philosophical assumptions that underpin our research. Finally discussion regarding trustworthiness of the study is provided.

### 2.1 Philosophical approach

Research work is fundamentally about producing knowledge from the reality that a researcher observes, and thus research is essentially based on reasoning and observations (Blumberg et al. 2005). The reality that the reasoning and observation is based on, is however, a much more debated and ambiguous phenomenon than commonly appreciated.

Epistemological considerations regarding research concern the question of what is regarded as acceptable knowledge (Bryman & Bell 2007). Here the question of whether or not the social sciences can be studied in a similar manner to the natural sciences is a central dilemma. The main difference is often being made between positivistic and hermeneutic approach to knowledge creation. Ontological considerations, regarding whether social reality is a given or constructed, are central in this respect. Whereas positivism takes on an objective perspective seeing social phenomena as something external to the actors, hermeneutics, in turn, can be viewed rather from a viewpoint of subjectivism, which advocates the position that social phenomena and related meanings are common accomplishments of social actors; reality is socially constructed (Bryman & Bell 2007). To research organizations entails that one must adopt the point of view of the individual.

There is a strong tradition in social sciences to regard research as the creation of true, objective knowledge following scientific methods. This kind of objectivist scientific view also places a strong emphasis on empirical data. However, growing criticism has begun to question this view, and problems related to knowledge creation on the basis of empirical material are acknowledged to an ever greater extent (Alvesson 2003). Social reality is not external to the consciousness and language of people and therefore the idea that we are investigating an 'objective' reality is abandoned.

Philosophical approach on a general level affects the way a research problem is approached, how is it conceptualized and what kinds of methods are used for analyzing it (Bryman & Bell 2007). Research based on positivism emphasizes the rationalistic 'cause-effect' style approach to knowledge creation. Grounded theory places empirical material in the foreground, hermeneutics advocate the role of interpretation whereas critical theory questions social realities aiming to increase our awareness of the political nature of the reality and poststructuralist perspective problematizes the way theories are constructed and draw attention to general discourses (Alvesson & Sköldböck 2000).

Naturally it more than likely that any research has elements related to the different philosophical approaches but on the whole we place ours under the hermeneutic classification. This is since our aim is to analyze subjective points of view related to branding and how different stakeholder groups, including the organizational culture support it. Therefore, we are interested in how an individual makes sense of the organizational reality as well as to find out what kinds of meanings corporate branding has for them. Since our aim is to investigate branding efforts in Unionen it is important to investigate how different members in the organization experience the activities.

However, we strongly agree with Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000) that the aim is to strive for reflective and reflexive research method. According to this view the research acknowledges first of all the fact that it is impossible to stay neutral in your interpretations and secondly that the aim is to adopt an open approach to your material aiming to investigate it from different angles (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2000 and Alvesson 2003). We try to stay open for alternative interpretation and keep in mind that even questions are understood in different ways. The aim is also to pick up any contradictions between different statements.

What is more, when formulating research problems one must keep in mind that, as with all research, there are several factors affecting the research work such as epistemological and ontological considerations as discussed above but in addition to these, it is impossible to ignore the influence of values, theories and practical considerations the research may have on design and results (Bryman & Bell 2007). In terms of our study, we are definitely aware of the fact that personal preferences and values might affect the kind of evaluations and choices the researchers make but again by aiming to incorporate an open-minded perspective regarding the analysis of empirical material we believe we are able to stay as neutral as practically possible.

### 2.1.1 Inductive vs. Deductive

Furthermore relevant to any research work is the clarification of the relationship between theory and the actual research. A comparison is made between deductive and inductive approach where deductive research builds upon a theoretical focus where hypotheses are subjected to empirical examination. Inductive takes the opposite approach where findings of a research are fed back to theory (Bryman & Bell 2007). Nevertheless, most research can be considered to include both kinds of elements and that view also applies to our research. We are aiming to investigate the specific conditions of a particular case company and our purpose is not to verify any theory but rather to deeply understand the organization being studied. The deductive element related to our study is apparent in our focus on theory to establish a relevant foundation for our research but the inductive approach is apparent in our aspiration to investigate the unique assumptions and conditions of the case company as well as to introduce a new theoretical term member branding.

## 2.2 Research Approach

It is crucial then to distinct the type of empirical data collection one should use for the purpose of research. According to Bryman & Bell (2007) there are several ways of doing so, but the two main ones rely either on qualitative or quantitative data. The former emphasizes words rather than measurement and generally takes an inductive approach since it tends to generate theories (Bryman & Bell 2007: 28). Hakim (2000) argues that qualitative research is concerned with individual's own account of their attitudes, motivations and behavior and tends to have a more open-ended strategy. The latter, in turn, focuses on quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman & Bell 2007: 28). Methods for measuring data range include different statistical procedures and quantitative research often emphasizes a deductive approach to research in which there is the concern of testing rather than generation of theories.

Our aim is to consider the employees' feelings, motivations as well as their understandings on how they view branding within Unionen and what kinds of possibilities branding presents in terms of attracting and retaining members. We intend to analyze subjective understandings, which is why qualitative research method is more suitable for our purpose. It is through the qualitative method that allows our interviewees to speak with freedom and express their distinct points of view in a more open way. At the same time, it allows us to question whatever doubt we have and clarify it at the moment.

### 2.2.1 Research Design

There are according to Bryman & Bell (2007), six research designs: Experimental design, cross-sectional or social survey design, longitudinal design, case study design, and comparative design. Some of the designs mentioned above tend to be scientific-based as the experimental ones. Longitudinal design studies consider a sample and follow it over a long period of time, which in our case is not feasible. On the other hand, case studies are the most flexible while providing descriptive accounts of particular aspects or process at an organization (Hakim 2000).

### 2.2.2 A case study approach

This thesis is based upon a case study approach since it is most compatible in regards to our research purpose. Case study approach is often recommended when research aims to explain a phenomenon by answering questions such as "how" or "why" and we believe this applies to this thesis as well since the aim is to analyze how branding is pursued in a trade union context and what kinds of possibilities it offers in terms of attracting and retaining members.

Although there are several types of case studies available such as analyzing a single organization, a location, event or person we have chosen to concentrate on one case organization (Hakim 2000). This is because our interest is to gain a richer understanding of a particular organization as the research aim is also to give improvement suggestions to our case organization Unionen instead of only exploring the

branding phenomenon on a more general level. The benefit of investing all available resources on one case company we can thus pursue an intensive and detailed examination of the situation of one organization – Unionen.

### 2.2.3 Selection of the case organization

Our interest in branding led us to choose trade unions as an area to focus on due to the fact that no major research has been done on the topic previously in a trade union context. Furthermore, choosing a trade union in Sweden was attractive due to the strong presence and influence that they have in the country and considering that Unionen is, after all, the biggest and very influential white-collar union in Sweden made it as an ideal choice for this study. Added to this, is the fact that Unionen is affiliated to TCO, the Swedish Confederation of Professional employees, a confederation known as the most highly developed white-collar in the Western world (Wheeler 1975). This also influenced our case organization selection since obviously Unionen within TCO must be doing something that unions in other countries are lacking.

Trade unions in general are facing crucial challenges today in terms of attracting and retaining members. One challenge is the membership decrease during recent years, which made us question what the reasons are for this. Nevertheless, regardless of dropping membership figures, Sweden still ranks among the highest in international comparison (Ebbinghaus 2002 and Kjellberg 2000). Another key factor for making branding an interesting topic in trade union context is the fact that these unions resemble ordinary businesses as well as being market orientated to an increasing degree (Björkman 2005). This motivated us to analyze whether and how the notion of branding is embraced in these organizations, and how it can aid them in their quest for making union membership more attractive.

Consequently, when looking for a specific trade union we primarily had two criteria in mind. First of all, the organization should consider branding as crucial and secondly the aim was to attract a white collar union since attracting and retaining mainly highly-educated workers is somewhat more challenging compared to attracting low-skilled labor. Furthermore, white-collar trade unionism represents an influential and powerful group within Swedish unionism (Wheeler 1975).

Unionen as a case company meets the above stated criteria. Regarding our first criteria, the fact that Unionen has a branding manager and department indicated us that they are indeed in a brand building process since some organizations lack departments or employees with such a title. Furthermore, having undergone a recent merger in January 2008 between Sif and HTF, branding and image issues have received a lot of attention and consideration at the new union as well, both from the marketing and organizational culture aspects.

However, the relatively short existence of Unionen can also be considered from a negative point of view. Since the organization is still forming it must be born in mind that also branding issues regarding vision, values and organizational culture are not well established since two different cultures were merged after all. Regardless of the recent merger, Sif has had an active role in branding efforts previously, i.e. the existence of image studies, the Sif Barometer (an annual membership satisfaction survey) among other branding activities indicated that branding is not a new undertaking for the union (Björkman 2005). Thus, this permeates Unionen with such heritage that the newly formed organization does not need to start from “scratch” but the partners bring previous employee experience with them in this area as well.

#### 2.2.4 Collection of Data

Observation, interview and focus groups are the usual methods for collecting data within the qualitative research (Hakim 2000). Interviewing however is the most used method in qualitative approach due to its flexibility while engaging with the interviewee. According to Hakim (2000), in-depth interviews help clarify the reasons for discrepancy between stated attitudes and behavior, as well as the provision of sufficient detailed information.

Secondly, interviews are generally unstructured or semi-structured (Bryman & Bell 2007). The former lets you act more freely since it does not necessitate that the research has a strict set of questions to go through and therefore the interview takes on a more conversational character. The latter style usually utilizes an interview guide while, at the same time, it allows time for deviations/clarifications on the questions. The aim here is then to obtain deeper insights while ascertaining that certain areas are covered in all interviews.

In this thesis the semi-structured, in-depth interview approach is utilized. An interview guide consisting of certain themes and related questions based on the theoretical framework was developed. This allowed us to make certain that the interview discussion stayed on track and that all important areas were covered in the interviews, which is important regarding our subsequent analysis. Furthermore, due to the fact that we have already specific issues to address and analyze, the semi-structured interview was considered the most suitable. Therefore, the semi-structured interview model enabled us to be almost as flexible as would be the case with unstructured interviews while at the same time making sure there is consistency present in the answers.

Additionally, taking into account the purpose of the research to explore in detail each interviewee's perceptions and experiences regarding branding and the related alignment of stated vision, values, image and culture, in-depth interview method was used since it is paramount to gain detailed understanding of how the interviewees feel and think about the different topics in question. Also secondary sources were

used such as Internet, magazines, articles and brochures were used to gain a deeper understanding of the research area.

#### 2.2.5 Sample of the interviews

The selection and size of the research sample is crucial and it is often hard to determine how many and who should one interview in order to gain the necessary information (Cummings & Worley 2005). Due to different practical and situational reasons it is not always possible to interview everyone who can have interesting input regarding the research topic. It is challenging to gain access to all information and also limited time necessitates that one must prioritize what it is that needs to be done. Regarding this thesis we got access to our case company thanks to the connections of our tutor. Considering the limitations that we were not familiar with the organizational structure or how many people were employed by them the branding manager suggested to us a list of people that she considered can have interesting input in terms of our research aim.

Finally our sample included 7 employees who all belong to different departments within Unionen. We believe this to be a strength in the research since it enables us to gain a broader understanding of the research topic from different perspectives. Even though not every interviewee worked directly with branding issues, branding work should and does nevertheless, touch everyone internally, that is within the organizational culture. Accordingly it is important in terms of our research aim to establish as well how branding efforts are viewed inside the organization on a broader level.

It is worth to mention that although there are other Unionen stakeholders such as the Executive Board or President our sample consisted of regular employees, while some managers were included. Especially since our sample includes full-time Unionen employees they were able to provide us with their accounts based on their own experiences of working internally within Unionen. Furthermore, it is worth to mention that our current study did not include trade union members but rather according to the research purpose the idea was to focus on employees' perceptions and how these relate to member branding.

We also concentrated our empirical research mainly to Unionen's headquarter since the key objectives and directions stem from there. However, one regional office was included in our research in order to obtain additional insights from employees working there as well as to do a comparison of environments among the two offices, especially because of the merger factor.

Regardless of practical and time limitations we believe that the sample size was extensive enough to allow us to obtain the necessary information regarding our purpose of research. The seven interviewees belonged to the different departments and they worked with the following areas: public affairs, research, internal and external branding, human resources, communication, marketing and recruitment.

### 2.2.6 Performing the interviews

Prior to the interviews we sent the questionnaires to the interviewees because we thought it was necessary for them to read it in advanced. We wanted them to know our main ideas to avoid any kind of confusion with our questions. To perform the interviews we traveled to Stockholm since the headquarters of Unionen are situated there and the final two interviews were done in a regional office.

Overall we conducted two types of interviews. Five were done face to face in Stockholm and one in a regional office outside the capital while one more was done over the telephone due to the fact that the interviewee was not able to be present in Stockholm when the other interviews were carried out.

Since we did not know our interviewees personally we thought it was important to create a comfortable environment with them. Therefore, before starting the interview we engaged in an informal conversation which helped to establish a more relaxed atmosphere after which we started with the interview questions. We also guaranteed their anonymity in our later analysis although that issue did not seem to bother them. We decided to record the interviews in order to obtain accurate information as well as direct quotations from them. This way we would not miss any information given. Although we thought it was appropriate to ask permission to the interviewees to record the interview and once having got their approval we proceeded with the recording. We also decided to take some notes during the interviews just in case.

During the interviews we tried to cover all related areas of our Interview guide (see appendix 1). However we did not follow it in an exact order since sometimes the conversation would take different routes. The idea was not to get too confined by the order of the questions but rather to achieve a fluent conversation while making sure all questions were asked at some point. We used the semi-structured interview model which, as described above, let both parts (interviewer-interviewee) to engage in the interview in a non-standardized and free way. Furthermore, in some cases and in order to get deeper understanding of a specific issue, we did ask questions that were not included in the questionnaire.

## 2.3 Trustworthiness and authenticity of the research

Validity and reliability discussions are rooted in the positivist tradition but their adaption to qualitative research is a much debated topic. Overall validity and reliability refer to different things but they are inherently related since validity presumes reliability. Simply put if the measure is not reliable the study is not valid (Bryman & Bell 2007). However, applying these concepts to qualitative research is somewhat challenging since measurement is not a major concern. There are those, usually working from a positivistic paradigm, that promote the idea that reliability and validity can be applied in qualitative research with little change in meaning as long as the measurement dimension is downplayed. Since we



are working from the hermeneutic standpoint it is also appropriate to adapt the evaluation criteria accordingly.

Reliability fundamentally refers to the consistency of measures so that if a research is repeated, similar kinds of results would be obtained (Bryman & Bell 2007). This is problematic in qualitative research since it is not possible to freeze social settings. Validity, on the other hand, relates to whether or not measures used in a research truly measure what they say they aim to measure or assess. Taking the limitations concerning the traditional concepts of validity and reliability into account we will apply an alternative set of criteria in the evaluation of this qualitative study in line with the ideas of Lincoln & Guba (1985) who promote the naturalistic paradigm in research work. The important evaluation criteria in qualitative research are then trustworthiness and authenticity.

### 2.3.1 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness consists of four criteria – credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Credibility or the truth value of the research refers to the more conventional internal validity. By this the aim is to conduct research in such a way that the findings are found to be credible and to demonstrate the credibility of the answers by having them approved by the interviewees (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Naturalistic inquiry is sometimes accused of being sloppy or non-trustworthy due to the fact that strict controls or randomization principles are not applied. Nevertheless, if one adopts and accepts the idea that reality is socially constructed and there is no “ultimate truth” to be investigated it is then the aim of naturalistic inquiry to represent the multiple realities and to prove that the reconstructions of the reality that have been arrived to via the inquiry are true ones (ibid.). Respondent validation can be used as a means to get confirmation that findings and impressions are congruent. However, double checking empirical data in this manner is time consuming which is why this technique is not applied in this study. However, by tape recording all the interviews we have reduced the possibility of misinterpretations or omissions due to memory which ultimately increases the credibility of the research as well.

Transferability is the second evaluation criteria for trustworthiness. Qualitative research is primarily oriented towards a specific situation which is why the preoccupation is usually depth of analysis rather than breadth (Bryman & Bell 2007). However, Gabe & Lincoln (1985) argue that transferability even in qualitative research context is just an empirical issue as long as the sending and receiving contexts are sufficiently alike. Yet the dilemma of transferability lies on the person who seeks to transfer a study to another context since the original investigator cannot possibly know the sites where transferability might be sought later on. Therefore, transferability is at best an ambiguous endeavor. In line with this reasoning the transferability of the results of this study to different settings is somewhat questionable. However, we do not consider this to be a setback since the overall aim to begin with is to gain a rich and deeper understanding of Unionen as a case company. We believe that the results obtained in the study add

positively to the quite under-researched area of branding in trade unions and most importantly they provide practical insights for our case company how the role of branding is perceived across various departments and of course provide Unionen with improvement suggestions.

Moving on to dependability that equals to reliability the aim is to increase the trustworthiness of the research by adopting a kind of auditing practice. Keeping records of the research process is essential in this respect. However, this is not widely used in business research due to the time consuming and clumsy nature of this technique and we have not applied it either. However, talking about reliability in a broader scope it can be mentioned that, for example, regarding the reliability of the answers we receive one must appreciate the somewhat arbitrary nature of the interview situation (Alvesson 2003). We are aware that interviews have their drawbacks such as the interview effects, asked questions may be leading and so on. In our case, we realize that among the drawbacks of conducting the majority of the interviews during two consecutive days is the fact that we did not have time to reflect upon the answers after each interview too much and also the mere burden of being in such a rush might have had implications on our listening so that we missed some important information or deeper reflection on some issues. Naturally this could have been avoided had we had more time but due to practical and time limitation at this time we believe we did the best we could and also recording the interviews enabled us to go back to the interview situation.

Despite this, we must say that all the interviewees were very helpful and cooperative, which made the interview situation smooth and comfortable. We also know that it was in the best interest of both parties to have an understanding of the situation; therefore we believe we had empathy with all the interviewees. What is more, we can also say that one of the benefits of conducting the last two interviews at a later time was that we were able to ask further questions in a clearer way after having reflected upon the received answers from the previous face to face sessions.

The final criterion for establishing trustworthiness is conformability, and it is concerned with the objectivity of the research. Appreciating that complete neutrality is almost impossible to achieve we can, in any case, say that we have strived for keeping personal values and preferences aside when conducting this research. This is done by trying to incorporate a multidimensional perspective to analysis as well as considering the possibility for alternative meanings whenever possible. Familiarizing ourselves with multiple theoretical streams related to branding and relationship marketing is also one way to ensure that we have not confined our framework and thinking too rigidly.

### 2.3.2 Authenticity

In addition to the demands of trustworthiness research should also meet authenticity criteria that include wider political considerations of research (Bryman & Bell 2007). Reflection regarding fairness is central here in ascertaining that different viewpoints are accounted for in the study. As already discussed under

research demarcations (see section 1.6 Demarcations) the ideal situation would be to interview all possible stakeholders. However, due to time and practical limitations our intention is to concentrate on the viewpoint of the union employees. By interviewing different employees from various departments we believe we are considering different perspectives on branding in Unionen.

Otherwise, authenticity discussions also refer to different discussions related to ontological, educative, and tactical authenticity among other things. Without going deeper into the discussion we can mention that at least from an educative point of view this research will be useful for the case organization since it provides valuable contribution to Unionen by giving them information regarding how their branding efforts are viewed internally and how these efforts can help the organization to become more attractive in the market.

### **3 MEMBER BRANDING**

In the following chapter we will review the relevant literature and theories regarding branding in order to form our theoretical framework. We start by discussing the different concepts related to a Brand, and continue with branding formation based on Vision & Values, Culture, and Image & Reputation. Finally we describe Member relationship services, its value and quality. The chapter is concluded in the presentation of our theoretical framework for member branding that will guide the later practical research.

#### **3.1 What is a brand?**

As argued by Grönroos (2000), the first brands in a modern marketing sense were developed a century ago, but it has not been until recent years that brands have been considered as crucial by the service arena. Moreover, several forms and concepts of brand have also proliferated recently. Although the main perspective in our study is member branding, concept that we are introducing, we also consider of crucial importance to introduce the concepts of corporate, employer, employee and product brand. Although these concepts emerge from the same intrinsic branding ideas, each has their own distinctiveness. A discussion of Corporate and Service Brand is included, followed by the value of the brand.

##### **3.1.1 Brand - Corporate Brand, Product Brand, Employer Branding, Employee Branding**

It can be argued that a Brand is in its basic terms a name, term, sign, symbol or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of the seller and to differentiate them from those of competitors (Grönroos 2000 and Kotler et al. 2005). Although a brand embraces those aspects, the concept is taken further as a communicator of values, a way of differentiation, of esteem and therefore, of loyalty among its members (Balmer 2001). The brand at the corporate level is defined as more than its logo or visual manifestation: it is a set of values and missions that add value to the organization as a whole as well as takes into account different perspectives of various stakeholders (Kapferer 2004 and Ind 1997). Finally, Dall'Olmo & de Chernatony (2000) give a twist to brand definitions mentioned above, and argue that brands act as symbolic devices with personalities that users value beyond their functional utility, based on this the consumer would choose a brand that best fits with them.

Corporate branding is a relatively new field within marketing literature but has nonetheless received a lot of attention. Schultz et al. (2005) argue how there are many ways to define what is meant by corporate branding. Some regard it as an extension of product branding where same principles can be applied while others emphasize corporate branding as a more strategic tool by which organization can formulate a more enduring identity that is relevant to various stakeholders. While a product brand appeals to a limited group of stakeholders, a corporate brand embraces many other groups such as potential employees, suppliers for customers, hence resulting central to an organization. (Hatch & Schultz 2001; Balmer & Gray 2003; Kärreman & Rylander 2008). Within such scope, a corporate brand carries many other deeper meanings such as the values of the company and the values are internalized by the employees and therefore reflecting it to the outside world.

However, corporate branding is not only pertinent to traditional corporations in the word's traditional sense but can also be extended to nonprofit organizations, nations, regions, cities among other things. Corporate branding is also widely used in service sector. In fast-moving consumer goods sectors emphasis on product brands is rather prevalent whereas service firms usually resort to branding the organization since a tangible offering is missing. According to McDonald et al. (2001: 336) the corporate brand in such cases provides "...both an internal focus for employees and an interrelated and comprehensive network of consumer perceptions". The role of employees in this context is vital as they are the window to the customer, and thus are responsible for the brand delivery.

Most recently there has been a new trend within the branding area which is the introduction of a new concept known as employer branding, it is basically the application of branding principles to the area of Human Resource management. Barrows (2006) defines employer brand as "a set of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company". It is then argued that one of the main objectives of employer branding is to attract recruits and assure that current employees are engaged in the culture and the strategy of the firm (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). Closely related to this is the concept of employee branding that emphasizes the role of employees as vital in corporate brand building since they can reduce the gap between external and internal atmospheres (de Chernatony & Harris 2001).

### 3.1.2 Value of the Brand

What does a brand has to offer to the customer and what is its value? Vast literature has taken interest in this issue, for example, Balmer & Gray (2003) argue that there are several characteristics of the corporate brand that makes it distinctive while helping provide value in the long term. This is also known as the theory of the resource-based view which states that firms are heterogeneous in terms of their resources and internal capabilities. The authors argue that a value increases when the variables of: a) rare, b) durable, c) inappropriate (intangible), d) imperfectly imitable and e) imperfectly substitutable are met.

On the other hand Aaker (1996) defines Brand Equity as a set of assets linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds or subtracts to the value provided by a product or service to a firm. These assets are known as: a) Brand Loyalty, b) Brand name awareness, c) Perceived quality and d) Brand associations. Awareness refers to the extent that a consumer remembers the brand, while brand loyalty is one of the main targets of organizations because the value of the brand is created and strength depending on how committed or not is the customer. It is just less costly to retain customers than to attract new ones (Aaker 1996). Perceived quality is one of the most important assets because is a sign of trust since it also affects the image of the brand and thus the reputation, issue that will be discussed later on. Finally, brand associations are related to how the brand identity positioning influences the consumer.

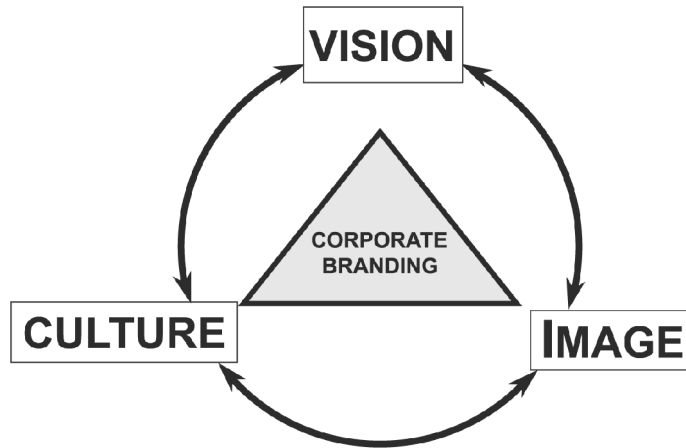
Organizations then can consider such variables when building a brand since the idea is to obtain competitive advantage while the brand becomes valuable and sustainable over time. The same logic applies to service organizations, in which strong brands are less risky and are seen as more reliable, thus increasing its value in the long term (Kapferer 2004, Balmer & Gray 2003 and Ind 1997). Therefore the real value of the brand is the power it has in capturing consumer preference and loyalty (Kotler et al. 2005).

### **3.2 Creating and Maintaining a brand through: Vision, Culture & Image**

As mentioned previously branding originally stems from marketing, although the role and attention that Organizational theory has played in branding formation has increased during recent years. Accordingly, the notion of branding as discussed by Kärreman & Rylander (2008) is very much associated to the practices of values associated within the organization in which the different “parties” at the internal and external level need to be involved. Hence, this could ultimately be done when the culture i.e. employees carry the emotions with them as well as internalize and communicate the values that their organization stands for, which in turn will be exteriorized in the image.

Branding as such then has a unique role within the service sector because employees are the responsible ones of fulfilling the brand promise, more over branding functions as a manager of meaning and leadership practice (ibid.). This approach can also be understood from an internal marketing perspective and thus as a marketing tool. Despite these arguments, it could also be argued that there is no single way to build a brand and therefore branding is not rooted in theory in the strict sense (Kay 2005).

For the purpose of our research, we will apply the theoretical framework developed by Hatch and Schultz (2001) which is based on and emphasizes the interplay between Vision, Organizational Culture and Images held by various stakeholders. This theory helps to identify the key problems for branding. Furthermore, in the trade union context, member branding will be better achieved by the attraction and retention of union members. For this purpose we will further expand on the above mentioned theory (by Hatch & Schultz) so that ultimately our theoretical framework will provide a complete and coherent understanding of branding, and most importantly that of member branding.



**Figure 2.** Successful corporate branding rests on a foundation of interplay between strategic vision, organizational culture and corporate image (Hatch & Schultz 2001: 1047)

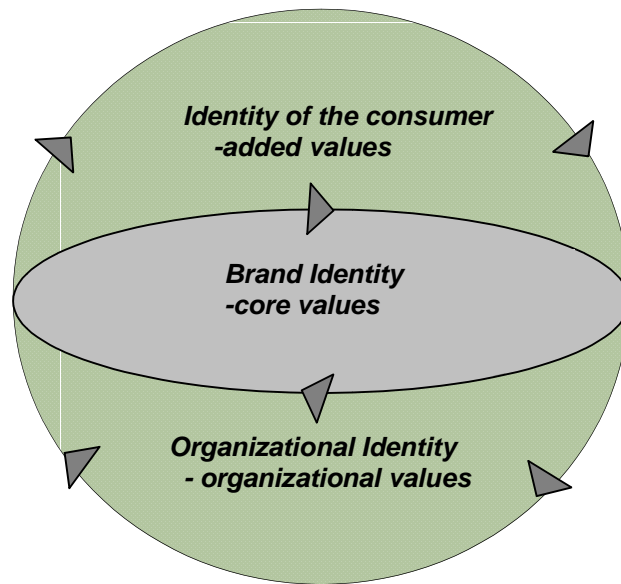
### 3.2.1 Vision and Values

Strategic Vision is defined by some authors as *“the central idea behind the company that embodies and expresses top management’s aspiration for what the company will achieve in the future”* (Hatch and Schultz 2001:1047). Hence, this concept implies that those who belong to the company and who integrate the organizational culture, should follow the vision but even more so carry the brand values with them. It could be said that when there is an alignment between the employee’s values and those of the organization, the brand will turn out to be more attractive and secure. Therefore a central management dilemma is to figure out how managers and employees are aligned (ibid).

As argued by Urde (2001), this process is also called internal brand building since it takes into account the relationship between the organizational culture and the brand. Here the main objective is to get employees to “live” the brand, and moreover to gain their real and true commitment for the brand. Employees then by being part of the organizational culture, become a key stakeholder group and contributors for brand formation. This is because if the brand values are credible, then the promise of the brand will have a positive co-relation. Consequently, the probabilities of retaining and attracting employees and/or union members would be higher. A basic ingredient in developing a corporate brand then is to include a strong but clear strategic vision.

Traditionally when talking about corporate identity, it is said that if it is well managed then the corporate image will reflect the values, beliefs and strategic direction of the organization, which could be said is one of the goals of branding (Stuart H. in Balmer & Greyser 2003). The problem however is how to get the different stakeholder groups to internalize/identify and reflect such values and beliefs? It sounds easy but it is one of the main barriers within brand creation and sustainability.

One of the leading authors that consider of crucial importance the implementation of value foundation within branding is Urde (2001). He highlights that the understanding and practical use of a value foundation in a corporate brand is too often ignored and not followed correctly. Organizations then need to clearly define the values they stand for. He argues that they are three values sets forming the “corporate brand foundation”; namely values relating to the organization (organizational values), values summarizing the brand (core values) as values experienced by the customer (added values). Consequently, these values are connected to organization identity, brand identity and customer identity. It is through the interaction of all these layers that successful value formation is achieved while the interplay between key dimensions of function, emotion and symbolism of the brand are ensured (Urde 2001).



**Figure 3.** There is a continuous interaction between value and identity at three levels (Urde 1997: 1020)

The organization’s values answers the questions “what and who we are?” (Balmer & Gray 2003 and Urde 2001). By knowing what the company stands for is how Urde (2001) argues that the brand identity in turn is formed. Core values are the ones that stand up front in the branding formation and development process or as he mentions: “...core values must be built into the product, expressed in behavior and reflect the feel of communication (Urde 2001:1019). Finally added values (customer values) are the link between internal and external processes, or in other words between vision and image. It could be argued that the core values play a fundamental role in the organization’s strategy since it is embracing the other two already. But what also drives the vision is the mission of the organization. Urde (2001) defines mission as the brand’s fundamental reason for existence, therefore vision and mission work together in the branding process, the former guiding the latter.



### 3.2.2 Organizational Culture

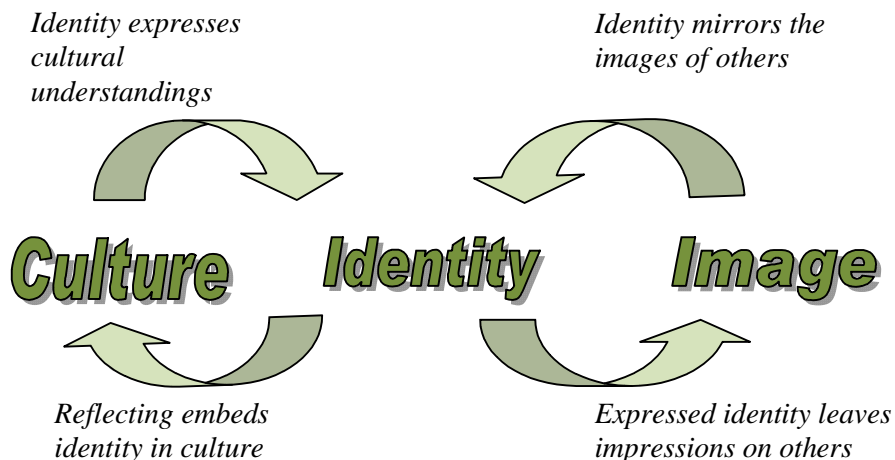
Although the concept of organizational culture within organizational analysis was introduced during the 1970's, it was not until the 1990's that such term was seen as crucial for organizational success. There are also many definitions of organizational culture although most of these concepts are based on the same intrinsic ideas. In its simplest terms Grönroos (2000) defines corporate culture as a set of common norms and values shared by the people in the organization. However another concept provided by Hatch & Schultz (2001:1047) is organizational culture as: *“the internal values, beliefs and basic assumptions that embody the heritage of the company and communicate its meanings to its members; culture manifests itself the ways employees all through the ranks feel about the company they are working for”*.

It could be argued then that the organizational culture has the power to influence internal behaviors. Moreover, the importance that organizational culture has within the corporate brand is because the culture influences how/what perceptions are formed by outsiders. Alignment between organizational culture and image is therefore necessary (Hatch & Schultz 2001). This is because we as humans tend to react more towards what we see than to numbers or company facts or figures (Martineau P. in Balmer & Greyser 2003). In other words, Image is the result of the interplay of both the symbolic-image and behavioral-substance aspects (Grunig J. in Balmer & Greyser 2003).

However, how do you influence employee's behaviors and beliefs in order to obtain a determined image or a change in culture? Influencing or managing organizational culture is a hard thing to do, and moreover there is not a clear cut indication of how to do so. Alvesson & Svingsson (2007) argue that culture is a complex set of meanings, values and orientations, of which members may not be fully aware, and thus it is difficult to influence organizational member's values. However, by trying to understand how people interpret their ideas and how their identity is positioned toward those ideas, employee's beliefs might be easier influenced.

Hatch & Schultz (2002) propose in turn that it is through awareness of expressing, reflecting, mirroring and impressing around culture and image that people's identities are balanced, ultimately the values of the organizational are reflected outside. However this circular process sounds easier than it really is in practice. Therefore the need to be aware that it is culture what stands behind and guides the behavior, it is not the behavior as such (Alvesson & Svingsson 2007). The concept of organizational culture is significant for understanding deeper meanings and assumptions in organizations which lie behind and guide behavior (ibid.). It could be argued then that one should focus on what changes behavior. As argued by Grönroos (2000), this craft of internal behavior is a holistic and complicated one since there are many people and sectors in any given organization. There are many ways of motivating employee's. However it is said that real and true interest and behavior from top-management is necessary in this interaction since otherwise the organizational culture would fail to live and reflect the image of the brand.

Consequently, there are several ways of crafting the internal behavior such as storytelling, workshops, rituals, experiences or symbols. Nevertheless, these kinds of activities might only touch the superficial cultural level and as Grönroos (2000) argues those kinds of programs might not work if they do not fit the culture. In order to influence culture there is the need of influencing the values and beliefs which are included in the identity of a person. According to Ashforth & Mael (1989) social Identification is described as the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate. The authors better known for their “Social Identity Theory” argue that social identification stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group as well as factors influencing group formation. It is understandable that not everyone has the same identity but identification and commitment towards the old/new values and culture would provide bigger opportunity for cultural influence.



**Figure 4.** The Organizational Identity Dynamics model (Hatch & Schultz 2002: 991)

For example, in merger or alliance situations companies often face internal struggles and identity problems. As explained by Olins (1979)<sup>2</sup>, this kinds of merged organizations usually have difficulties in defining who they are and what they want since they drag a diverse cultural background, especially in the ways things are done. Furthermore, employee identities are mixed and confused in terms of the new brand. Hence, the central task here is to discover and define the new identity that will be supported by the culture.

It is the task of engaging employees in “living the brand” that has been emphasized in branding literature as an important determinant for successful brand building (Sartain & Schumann 2006). Therefore, the importance that employees have for the creation of the brand is highlighted. According to the words of Karmark (in Schultz et al. 2005: 104) employee is seen as “a co-creator of the brand as well as a key

<sup>2</sup> in Balmer & Gresyer (2003)

factor in delivering the brand's content and promise". This idea is closely related to what Grönroos (2000) terms as internal marketing. The concept according to him states that employees are best motivated for adopting a customer-oriented mindset by an active and goal-oriented approach by top management where a variety of activities and processes are used in a coordinated way, and it is through these activities that internal relationships will ultimately support the successful and service-oriented implementation of external relationships with customers and other stakeholders. In short, internal marketing can be seen as a management philosophy that recognizes the importance of treating employees as customers (Grönroos 2000: 334).

It is then appreciated that employees are the first internal market for the organization and any company offering or planned market communication is always perceived and evaluated by the personnel first. Furthermore, especially in terms of service brands the main way of ascertaining constant level of service delivery is achieved by creating a supportive organizational culture where employees internalize the values (Grönroos 2000).

Karmark (in Schultz et al. 2005) discusses the challenges related to living the brand programs. He argues that living the brand should entail a more value-based approach to management but in practice often too much attention is put on changing employee attitudes rather than tying important brand values with real life experiences. Consequently a distinction is made between a marketing/communications and norms & values based perspective when implementing living the brand programs.

Karmark (in Schultz et al. 2005) makes a distinction between marketing and values & norms based perspectives in terms of living the brand management whereas Grönroos (2000) uses the terms communication and attitude management. Regardless of the exact terms the division relates to the fundamental question to what degree should the employee identify oneself with the brand in terms of commitment and loyalty. Marketing/communications perspective takes on a more instrumental approach where the aim is to ascertain that employees understand the brand values before they can "live" them. To achieve this various internal campaigns, brand booklets and brochures are often used along with training. However, the problem is that this method can be rather superficial and top-down in nature if not combined with the values & norms (or attitude management) based approach where the concern is to get the employees to really identify themselves with the brand. Here it is rather through socialization that this identification and merging of organizational identity and employee identity can be achieved.

### 3.2.3 Image & Reputation

As argued by Urde (2001), the external brand building process is concerned with relations between the brand and the customer, therefore affecting and reflecting the external image of the organization. According to Hatch & Shultz (2001:1048), organizational images are: "*views of the organization developed*

*by its stakeholders; the external world's impression of the company including the view of the company, customers, shareholders, etc”.*

Images formed by external groups, are not “selfish” in its image construction but instead take into account the values and even the behavior of the organization. These outsider groups are keeping an eye into the brand they are relating to. Corporate images then according to Hatch & Shultz (2001) feed into strategic vision serving as a mirror in which top managers can reflect on who they are. Therefore, external stakeholder groups are influenced by the organization’s image while at the same time they contribute to the forming of the internal vision as well. It could be said that it is an interrelated process. Taken to a bigger extent the brand meaning has been increasingly associated with corporate image building in which external stakeholder groups also have the power to influence internal perceptions or more specifically internal brand formation. Therefore, management and employees have the opportunity to consider external stakeholder groups and benefit from them.

Some authors opt to mix the concepts of image and reputation, though different concepts, these overlap (de Chernatony 2001). Image reflected to the outside world can turn into good or in some cases to bad reputation. Reputation then is influenced by the awareness of the brand, since the stronger the reputation the better it is remembered. It is also said that a brand’s image grows according to the environment hence a brand’s image evolves and shifts but based on tactical reasons (Balmer & Greyser 2003 and Kapferer 2004).

What Harris & de Chernatony (2001) consider as critical is that depending on the employee’s behavior is how their actions will reinforce a brand’s advertised values. However, if inconsistent, the credibility of the brand will decrease. Put differently, the alignment between the values of the employee and the desired values of the brand should be aligned and thus the result is a positive image. It is then emotional rather than functional features that organizations should focus on.

It is crucial to note the difference between Brand Identity and Brand Image since both play a fundamental role in their interplay within corporate branding. It is argued that brand identity is a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain, and implies a certain promise to customers. (Harris & De Chernatony 2001; Aaker 1996; Grönroos 2000). It also establishes a relationship between the brand and the customer/member by generating a value proposition, thus in building a brand. Brand image, on the other hand, is defined as how customers and other stakeholders perceive the brand of the product or service (Harris & De Chernatony 2001; Aaker 1996; Grönroos 2000). Therefore, managers need to examine their brand’s reputation among stakeholders to ensure the brand’s identity is communicated successfully and valued outcomes are effectively and consistently delivered (Harris & De Chernatony 2001; Davies & Chun 2002). However, Grönroos (2000) highlights when involving the

customer in the branding process, brand identity and image are actually synonyms since brand is always an image to the customer.

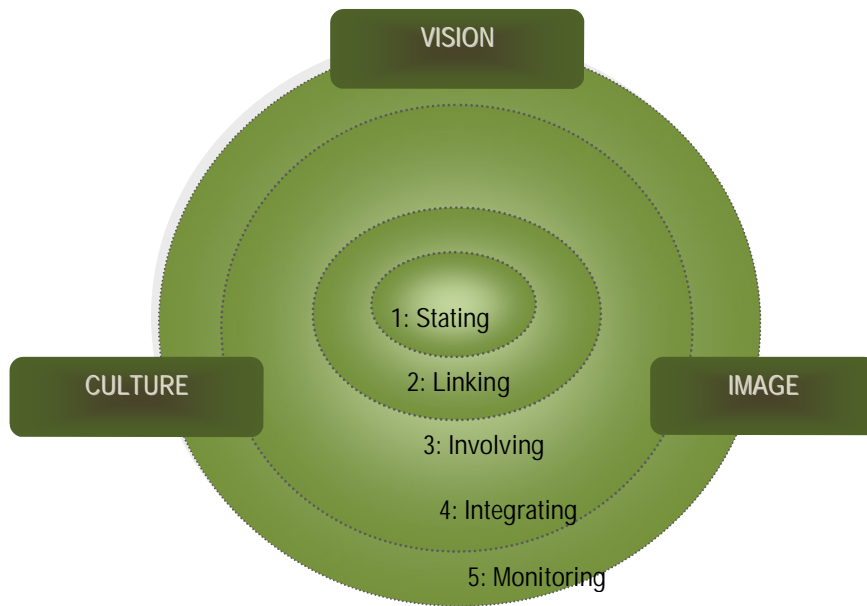
Perceptions also play a crucial role within image and reputation, since it is through perceptions that the brand is viewed. Davies and Chun (2002) suggest that there is the need to align then employees' and customer's perceptions. In their study of retail stores they focus on how customer-facing employees see the organization they work for and how it can influence the way customers see the company as well. In service brands this issue is of special importance because there is an intense customer-employee interaction (Davies and Chun 2002 and Grönroos 2000).

To understand this argument Harris & de Chernatony (2001) propose the identity-reputation gap model of brand management. Their model is based on six components: a) Vision and b) culture, which we have covered in the previous sector, but added to these two are c) positioning, d) personality and e) presentation. Through positioning coherence will be obtained between the brand's vision and core values, or in other words who is the brand for and what it offers? Reputation, good image and brand performance indicators can be obtained if these elements are tied together from an internal and external perspective according to Harris & de Chernatony (2001). Image as the authors argue is not created through advertisements but through the experiences between both parties.

Moreover, Grönroos (2000) suggests that in terms of image building, although communication to the exterior world is basic, it is not enough since the quality of the services becomes a key and a reality factor. More specifically he argues that if the image problem is a real problem only real action will help, whereas if the company's image is unknown or does not reflect its true character then there is a communication problem. The importance of the image according to Grönroos (2000: 294) is that it communicates expectations, acts as a filter in influencing perceptions, is a function of expectation and experiences as well as it has an internal impact on employees and an external one on customers.

### **3.3 Branding strategy**

The building of successful brand that will help an organization to attract and retain its members is time consuming due to the depth and scope of branding efforts. There are different managerial and organizational challenges related to the creation and implementation of member branding and also implications on organizational structure. Borrowing the ideas of Schultz et al. (2005) brand building process can be seen as consisting of different stages that the organization must go through to achieve the desired goal of developing a strong brand that delivers those values that it promotes. The framework acts as a strategic tool for the development and later on for the renewal if needed for the brand (see figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The five cycles of corporate branding (Schultz et al. 2005: 185)

The focus on cycle one is to state the organizational identity (who we are) and the strategic vision (who we want to become?). The focus on cycle one is to state the organizational identity (who we are) and the strategic vision (who we want to become?). The challenge is to communicate and create a unified brand. The need to do this is especially relevant in merger and acquisition situations where the identities of multiple organizations need to be aligned. The key challenge is to reassess and restate the vision for the brand taking into account organizational culture and stakeholder images. The need for cross-functional cooperation is crucial in order to pool together needed knowledge. The need to balance images and culture is paramount in order to avoid narcissism i.e. over reliance on corporate culture or hyper-adaptation i.e. over reliance on external images when defining the brand (Hatch & Schultz 2002)

In the second stage the restated vision and identity for the brand are being supported by the reshaping of organizational structures and processes. So here the aim is to link the brand vision and identity to internal and external stakeholders, i.e. with culture and images. When centralization is pursued brand manuals and other design principles are often used to ascertain everyone adheres and promotes a unified image. What is more, top management commitment and communication is needed in order to sustain employee motivation during the restructuring phase as well as to fight against feelings of anxiety and resistance.

The importance of involving all relevant internal and external stakeholders is addressed in the third stage, and the aim is to align culture and image to the vision. This stage is very much bottom-up oriented where the challenge for top management is to create engagement and acceptance for the brand from internal and external stakeholders. What is more, this stage is all the more challenging for those organizations that have multiple subcultures. As discussed by several authors, culture change is never an easy task (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson 2007 and Schein 2004)

At fourth stage the focus is to further align the different dimensions of the brand to the desired brand identity. The key challenge is then to create local involvement and sense of ownership in regards to the brand so that branding is not seen as something that is just done at the headquarter.

The final stage entails setting up a monitoring system through which the performance of the brand can be evaluated. In practical terms this refers to the systematic monitoring of image and culture perceptions among external (members, customers) and internal (employees) stakeholders. What is more, the insights received from the different stakeholder groups should be combined so that a more comprehensive assessment of the brand is achieved.

The suggested stages are not absolute in a sense that any give organization may experience branding processes that are less linear and the actual sequence of the stages may vary. However, similar to organizational life cycle theories this framework also highlights the process nature of branding, and how each stage poses a set of challenges that the firm must overcome and solve so that it can proceed to the next level. Below a description of each cycle is given.

### **3.4 Building relationships through branding**

In order to attract and maintain customers or members in the case of trade unions it is important that the organization adopts a customer oriented way of operating. Below ideas from relationship marketing and services management are discussed as they relate to building and maintaining relationships and how the adoption of market oriented perspective contributes to making a company more attractive and competitive. The link between relationship marketing and branding is also discussed in service context.

#### **3.4.1 Relationship marketing from a service perspective**

Relationship marketing has been heralded as the new innovative approach to marketing thinking. The paradigm shift in marketing places focus on the value of relationships and consequently business success is ultimately dependent on an organization's ability to create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with their business partners, customers and other stakeholders (Hougaard & Bjerre 2002 and Grönroos 2000). Gummesson (2002: 16), on the other hand, sees relationship marketing as marketing function where emphasis is placed on relationships, networks and interaction. Naturally relationship orientation in business is fundamentally nothing new since liaising with customers and business partners has always played an important role. However, taking into account increased competition and a more sophisticated market companies are finding it more challenging to keep customers satisfied.

The traditional role of marketing has been to allocate resources in such a way that certain goals were reached and this reflects the traditional transaction-based marketing thinking where preproduced value for the customer is provided in an exchange style relationship. In contrast, the relationship perspective

emphasizes that value is created through the existing relationship and achieved via the interaction between the different parties (Grönroos 2000). Thus it is not enough to just sell a product or a service to customers. In short, the focus is on value creation rather than on value distribution.

Dall'Olmo & de Chernatory (2000) view additionally that relationship marketing and branding efforts have important theoretical similarities between them and argue that relationship marketing can be seen as a further step in the branding process. The corporate brand informs both internal and external shareholders about the organization's point of differentiation while also providing focus for constant service delivery (ibid). Especially in terms of intangible offerings such as services the use of corporate brand is often used as the basis for relationship building. Of course the interconnectedness of branding and relationship marketing is not only pertinent to service contexts since firms operating in product markets are already big on branding, and additionally have important lessons to learn from relationship marketing. However, it can be argued that at least the importance of applying relationship marketing principles may be somewhat more essential in a purely service milieu. This is partly due to the fact that in service contexts customer evaluations are based primarily on perceptions and images since a tangible offering is missing.

Services in general can primarily be characterized as being intangible, heterogeneous, and they consist of processes where consumption and production take place simultaneously. However, service concept is not only confined to a firms that provide services, and therefore the term 'service organization' can be used to described any kind of company that includes services elements in their offering. According to Grönroos (2000) the service perspective is then not only a market-oriented point of view on how to manage services but a more holistic management perspective that can be used as a means to create competitive advantage.

#### 3.4.2 Building and maintaining relationships

Building and maintaining relationships can be a challenging task, and even though the notion of relationship lies at the heart of relationship marketing perspective it is important to appreciate that a relationship does not exist just because the marketer says it does. By definition relationship entails the notion of reciprocity (Gummesson 2002). To this end Grönroos (2000: 33) explains that "*A relationship has developed when a customer perceives that a mutual way of thinking exists between customer and supplier or service provider*".

This challenge of building and thereafter maintaining the relationships is easier said than done. It is important to realize that not all customers are interested in engaging in close relationships with a certain company, and the possibility of creating close bonds is also highly dependent on contextual factors. It is more difficult to achieve close relationships and customer commitment in the fast-moving-consumer-goods market compared to some services sector for example (Fernandes & Proença 2008). Dall'Olmo & de Chernatory (2000) argue that the higher the perceived risk and involvement the more probable it is that



the consumer is willing to engage in a relationship. Thus increased risk and uncertainty seem to have a causal relationship with increased relationship engagement as well.

Any business has a multitude of relationships that it must uphold in order to be successful. Gummesson (2002) has categorized these relationships in his model of 30R where different levels and types of relationships a company may have are presented. The overall categories are Classical market relationships, Special market relationships as well as Mega and Nano relationships. Without going into detail the important idea here is to realize that relationships exist above and beyond the traditional customer-supplier dyad in terms of wider society and the overall environment, for example (ibid.). Also what relationships exist and which are important is case specific.

According to the relationship point of view, branding is also about building beneficial relationships. Grönroos (2000) describes branding as consisting of brand relationships and contacts. Gummesson (2000), in turn, uses the term parasocial relationships to characterize a connection that exists between a customer and a brand. In this sense branding is seen as a more interactive process where the role of the customer is emphasized. The brand relationship gives meaning to the offering but naturally any given brand image or perception will be broken if the company is not able to fulfill the expectations during the service delivery process or “moments of truth” as Grönroos has termed them.

Rapp & Collins (1997)<sup>3</sup> are using the term relationship branding as a concept where the emphasis is placed on branding the whole relationship in addition to the service or product offering. The rationale behind this is that a company can identify prospect and current customers by name and address and through the relationship learn more about them in order to offer better value for them. Ultimately it is then about communication that is the central element in regards to managing these brand relationships.

This emphasis on the relationship in branding efforts is analogous to the notions of reciprocity, mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises that characterize relationship marketing. It is therefore that Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony (2000) emphasize how branding and relationship marketing share close links with each other and they could be regarded as the different sides of the same coin. Building strong relationships is then a branding effort through which a company communicates consumer relevant added value that is difficult for competitors to imitate. Expanding on this, Sweeney & Chew (2000: 1234) argue that *“the aim is to consider brand and service brand in particular, as a contributing relationship partner to the consumer in a relationship dyad”*.

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<sup>3</sup> in Gummesson 2002

### 3.4.3 Member loyalty and satisfaction

The notion of value is an important component of relationship marketing. The ability to create superior value to customers is seen as a central means for differentiation and for creating sustainable competitive advantage (Ravald & Grönroos 1996). Value can, however, be created in myriad of way and the starting point for planning should always be to establish what is the value that a customer is aiming to achieve from the firm's offering. Only by knowing this can value be provided competitively. The ability to provide value for the customer is directly linked to satisfaction and consequently customer fulfillment is a precondition for loyalty (ibid.). What is more, the benefits of having satisfied customers will not only increase their commitment but it is more likely that they will engage in positive word-of-mouth communication that contributes to organization's reputation and image (Grönroos 2000). In traditional service and product markets the importance of satisfaction and loyalty are apparent. It is argued that loyal customers are more prone to make repurchases and the costs associated with retaining existing customers compared to always attracting new ones are lower. Furthermore, marketing expenditure is reduced as loyal customers are more receptive to company's communication messages (Grönroos 2000 and Zeithaml & Bitner 1996).

The value concept is often used especially in service literature without having a clear definition what is meant by that. Monroe (1991)<sup>4</sup> defines customer-perceived value as the ratio between perceived benefits relative to the perceived sacrifice by the customer. Heinonen (2004) expands on this model by including time and location dimensions as important determinants for perceived value in service context. Thus, customer perceived value is a more multifaceted phenomenon than a mere trade-off between benefit and sacrifice since quality dimensions of "what" and "how" are not appreciated completely in that equation. Furthermore, since quality and value are interlinked it is therefore that aspects which influence these quality perceptions – namely when and where – are also crucial for determining total value (Heinonen 2004). Grönroos (2000: 140) adopts a more relationship oriented perspective for defining value and therefore he talks about relationship value that is build up by smaller episodes. Thus, the value concept here takes on a deeper meaning as the benefits related with long term relationships include aspects such as safety, credibility, security, continuity which ultimately build up trust and support continued customer loyalty (Ravald & Grönroos 1996)

## 3.5 Theoretical Framework for the study

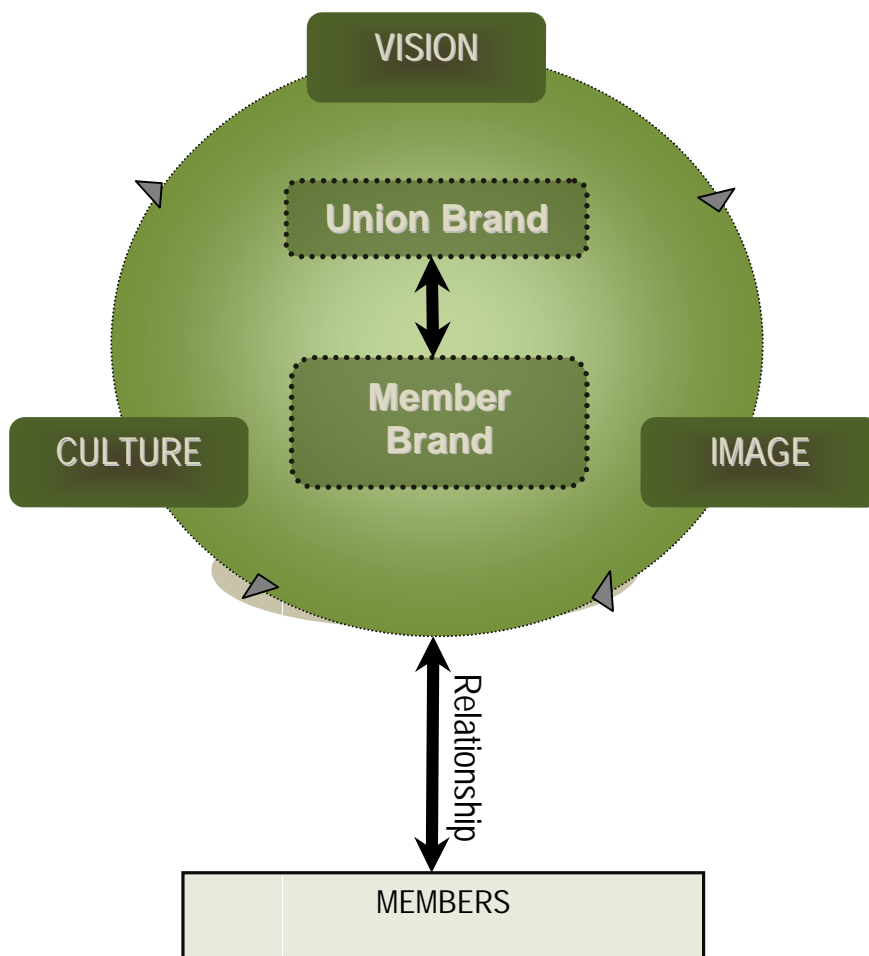
In this section we will summarize and introduce the framework that defines the concept of member branding, based on the different theories discussed above. This framework will guide us in answering the research questions presented in Chapter I.

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<sup>4</sup> in Ravald & Grönroos 1996

This study is focused on trade unions which can be characterized as service providers. Moreover, they are not corporations in the traditional sense either but can rather be classified as “interest groups” instead of for-profit or governmental organizations (Wheeler 1975). Therefore, in terms of branding trade unions, the principles of corporate branding can be applied due to their intangible offering. However, an important aspect in branding work is the interests that these unions promote, and also the fact that the relationship between the union and its member is somewhat special. Therefore, in this study we have chosen to talk about union branding instead of corporate branding and member branding as a means of making the union membership attractive. This process will ultimately increase member commitment.

To achieve a coherent and strong brand there must be alignment between vision, culture and image. It is the interplay of these three dimensions that establishes the foundation for the union brand. It is when the member relationship aspect is involved in the branding process that the member brand will have its meaning, and consequently the relationship between the brand and the member is formed. It is then that the member sees the brand as a relationship partner which results in strengthened bond the union and the various stakeholders involved. These ideas are summarized in the figure below.



**Figure 6.** Member Branding Model (Own adaptation based on the model by Hatch & Schultz 2001)

## 4 CASE COMPANY – UNIONEN

In this chapter the overview of the case organization – Unionen – is provided. A short overview of its organization along with service portfolio is given.

### 4.1 Overview

Trade unions can be depicted in many ways, but according to Hyman (in Huzzard et al. 2004) unions can be classified in three areas. On one hand, trade unions can serve as interest groups with labor market functions. Trade unions also can be a movement of class opposition in which there is a struggle between labor and capital. Finally, trade unions also serve as partners in social integration. The main goal of this social partnership is to raise the workers' status in society and therefore promote social justice. However we need to keep in mind that trade union functioning is context dependent and varies from country to country. Nevertheless, it is now argued that for trade union's optimal functioning it is essential to take into consideration social partnership and networking as a new approach in which the main actors involved are willing to collaborate (Huzzard 2004).

Our case company Unionen is a newly formed Swedish trade union that took its form in January 2008 after a merger between SIF and HTF. Keeping in mind the challenges that trade unions at large are facing today among the reasons behind the merger were to create a stronger union to better meet the needs and demands of current and potential members as well as to gain a better position to exert influence on issues important for the union and for its members. Sif had a strong position in IT and industry sectors while HTF was more inclined towards the service sector. However, to an increasing degree these two trade unions started to serve and compete for the same members, and the merger between these two unions marks the inception of an ever stronger and competitive white collar union that can better concentrate its resources to offer more value to its many members and other elected representatives. (Unionen 2008.) There are 19 regional offices which is why Unionen has a strong presence throughout Sweden and enables it to be close to its members. Moreover, Unionen is not tied to any political parties or specific religion which enables it to promote and lobby causes irrespective of political parties.

### 4.2 Trade Union Governance

Governance in trade unions entails specific rules, and the notion of democracy is central. Administrative and representative rationality are central concepts when talking about trade union structure. The former deals with union performance while the latter refers to objective formation and policy deliberation, i.e. who and how decisions in union are made (Hannigan 1998: 51). Conflicts between these two perspectives arise often since ultimately the question is about if decisions should be made in such a way that performance is increased or if the value of democracy has to be on the foreground no matter what. In a general sense, increased centralization or administrative rationality tend to diminish union democracy but according to Hannigan the idea is that one has to be aware of this tradeoff between the two poles.

Due to this notion of democracy, trade unions encourage members to actively take part in trade union decision making. It is this democracy principle that makes trade union membership by nature different from a normal “customer relationship”. Members have a political interest involved in addition to just taking advantage of the different services provided (Björkman 2005).

On a local level members have the power to influence decision making through electing representatives. In other words, members select workplace representatives to work on trade union issues. Unionen members at a specific workplace can also create a “club” where trade union issues are discussed. Members in a given company also appoint their representatives to their respective regional council which in turn selects the Regional Executive committee. The Regional Council additionally appoints representatives to the Unionen’s Congress and Representative Council.

Congress, that is the highest decision making body setting up long-term strategy for the union, is held every four years while the Representative Council consisting of 130 representatives meets up yearly except during the Congress year. Representative Council discusses the activities for the year as well as draws up guidelines for collective bargaining when needed (Unionen 2008). In short, each region has its own regional council and executive Committee on the local level while the Representative Council and Congress work on national level.

Unionen encourages members to take part in decision-making processes and all members can submit proposals or motions to their branches (clubs), Regional Councils, the Executive Committee or directly to the Congress and receive an answer within three months (Unionen 2008).

### **4.3 Members**

Unionen counts with approximately 500 000 members which also makes it the largest white-collar trade union in Sweden and also worldwide (Unionen 2008). Membership base is diverse including the employed, the unemployed as well as people who are self-employed, and those that are on study leave or already retired. Unionen organizes employees from all levels of the organization who work for everything from big international corporations to smaller family businesses. In short, any white-collar worker from any sector irrespective of their position in the organization or educational background can join Unionen.

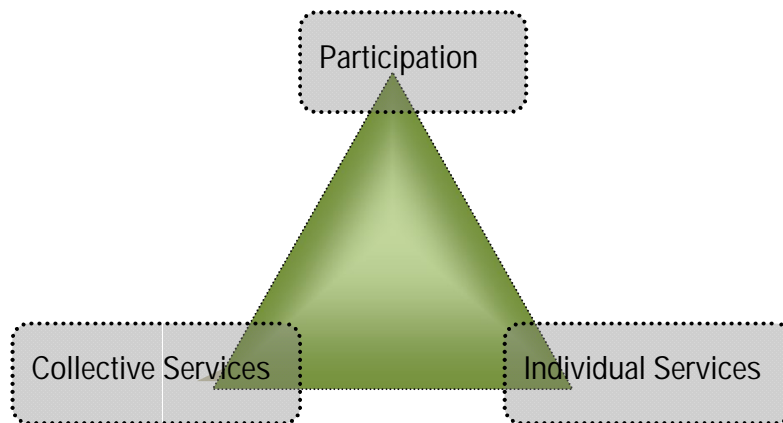
About 45 000 members are so called elected members from 65 000 companies (Unionen 2008). It is apparent that the diverse member base also sets challenges for the union in meeting different needs of the members. Accordingly, members can be classified in terms of their participation level. There are the elected representatives that work with trade union issues at the local level in the companies and then there are the ordinary members. Any workplace that has more than five Unionen members has the right to

form a club and they appoint the representatives to work for trade union issues. On national level 64.6% of the Unionen members are represented by their clubs and representatives. In bigger cities such as Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö regions workplace unionism figures are lower.

Unionen also operates in a market with a lot of recruitment potential. Currently about 40% of organization's potential members are affiliated to Unionen whereas the rest have either chosen a rivalry union or opted out completely from trade union membership (Björkman 2008).

#### 4.4 Services

Unionen offers a wide range of different services for its members and these can be roughly divided into collective and individual services. In practice it is, however, often hard to make a clear distinction in which category a service falls under, since a collective service can be considered as an individual one depending on the case. Additionally the service portfolio can be analyzed in terms of the degree of customer participation or customization that is related to each service. Figure 7 illustrates the service breakdown.



**Figure 7.** Trade union's services categorization (Björkman 2005)

##### Collective services

Overall the traditional trade union mission has been to improve pay and working conditions through collective action (Björkman 2006). These collective services include (1) negotiations and collective agreements at European, national as well as on local level, (2) participation in co-determination procedures and (3) participation in various boards and committees on governmental level. The collective services have still a high importance in trade union context and consequently have not lost their significance despite the fact that their nature has changed to some degree during the past decades. For example increasingly agreements are made on local level. Overall, the changes relate to for example, to the rationalization of services in terms of utilizing new technologies to render services for members, a decrease in participation in some governmental committees and an increase in international work as well

as a tendency to decentralization of responsibility from national level to local levels in conflict situations (Brjökman 2005).

### Individual Services

Considering the heterogeneous membership base of Unionen services that are better accommodated to meet individual needs have become central. Individual services include for example, advice on pay and contracts, advice and the provision of different insurances in the case of unemployment or illness as well as support and representation in court in case a member faces a conflict situation with an employer (Björkman 2005).

The importance of individual services has increased significantly as the union aims to meet the needs of individual members. Focus is now placed on competence development and career services and a campaign promoting the awareness of these services is just starting (Phase 2 in communication strategy).

Currently Unionen's communications strategy with its members is achieved mainly through multi-dimensional segmentation in terms of profession/education, industry sector and interests, and through personal choice meaning that each member makes their pick regarding the above mentioned available criteria in order to create their own unique profile. This profile is done on the web. It is called the "My Profile" service and the idea is that by categorizing members in this manner a more personalized communication between the union and individual member can be achieved. Members will then get news and information concerning the interests they have stated.

Internet is an increasingly important medium for Unionen in their communications efforts and Unionen's webpage hosts a range of services that help individual members in improving their competence such as competence maps, CV writing help, information and in addition to these members are given chance to speak with personal career coaches. Web-based communication and information strategy is very cost-efficient for Unionen since services provided online are not dependent on local union representatives. Furthermore, the union website functions as an important medium in the distribution of information for its member in general regarding various topics.

Naturally Unionen provides information through more common means as well such as brochures and leaflets. Additionally, they publish a member magazine Kollega for all members as well as a range of different regional magazines for representatives. The idea is to be able to communicate with different members through various mediums.

Unionen's communications strategy for the time being is divided into two phases. The first one that just ended was more focused on increasing the awareness level of Unionen among the public since the organization is new. For this purpose a range of mainly external marketing material was put out in

newspapers, on the internet and so on. The second phase will more concentrate on showing what is behind the Unionen brand and the focus is on individual and career services. For this reason, Unionen offered, for example, a chance for everyone to talk with a career coach on the internet at specific dates. The idea behind this is also to communicate the idea that trade unions do offer a wide range of services.



## 5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter the empirical findings of our interviews are presented. The findings are discussed and analyzed against our theoretical framework. Each section begins with the presentation of the data received through the 7 interviewees and afterwards an analysis is provided. At the end a revised framework for member branding in trade unions is provided.

### 5.1 The role of Branding in Unionen

Branding gained popularity since the 1980's and it has achieved a central role in marketing thinking. It is, however, a rather new undertaking in the context of trade unions. This is not to say that trade unions are completely new to using different market orientation methods in organizational planning since there is evidence of how these have been implemented to some degree already (cf. Björkman 2005). Furthermore in the case of Unionen branding is not completely new since they also have people working on brand related issues.

Having undergone a recent merger in January 2008 questions related to vision, organizational culture and external image are very relevant, and consequently the union has a set of challenges ahead of them in terms of communicating about the organization to its various stakeholders. Branding has therefore received a central role even though it is not necessarily being termed as such.

Branding is a broad concept and on the surface it is defined as a symbol such as a name, term, sign that act as means of differentiating the goods and services of a company from its competitors (Grönroos 2000). Accordingly branding informs internal as well as external stakeholders. The notion of corporate branding has gained increasing popularity over the recent years and it is especially used in service context where branding is anchored around the organization rather than on any specific offering (Hatch & Schultz 2001).

Among the first aims in the interviews was to find out how the different participants in this study viewed the concept of branding and what it represents for them. Generally the interviewees were somewhat hesitant to give a clear definition on that matter by explaining how they do not work with branding issues exactly and therefore, are not in a position to give comments on that. However, even those that did not work directly with communication (branding) issues did agree nevertheless that their work has at least implicit implications on branding work.

It was emphasized that the name is an important element in branding even though everyone stressed, however, that it is not enough. It was also seen more important to create a feeling around the company that appeals to different stakeholders.

*"I would say the name of Unionen is important [in branding] since you need to make a contact with the name before you feel something." (Interviewee C)*

*"To me branding means creating a feeling about the company and putting the offer out in a good way. So you have a message but then there is feeling to it. A bit like Coca Cola" (interviewee F)*

In addition to attaching emotional elements to branding also the importance of internal communication and the acceptance of the brand internally were viewed as being critical in successful branding work. Branding has to mean something both internally and externally.

*"Branding is about thinking what the core of the brand is and what we can do, so branding is the action of making the brand into something both internally and externally." (Interviewee E)*

*"Branding for me is less about graphics, logos, trademarks and ads. It's more about "living the brand"-issues like how do we perform/how relevant is the trademark, the logo and the ads." (Interviewee B)*

Yet what the interviewees saw as central in branding work was also influenced by the interviewee's position in the company. Some emphasized communication as central while others tied branding more directly to services justifying branding efforts through the provision of services.

*"Branding is a message; it is about how to put up the message, and then working with the language of the union, so you have it there" (Interviewee D)*

*"Branding is important in terms of communications and language use" (Interviewee F)*

*"The way of working is a part of the branding to make new services for Unionen" (Interviewee A)*

The branding process in Unionen was started by the selection of the appropriate name. It is regarded as important to have a name that also works both at home as well as internationally. The selection of the name has been generally seen as a success. The name symbolizes strength and togetherness, and also directs thoughts to the English word "union". In the naming process there was a list of demands and values that the future name had to fulfill and it is here that branding process begins since it is important that the name reflects what you stand for according to the interviewees. Also the union members were given an opportunity to voice their opinions and feelings regarding the new union and its future name online. This point is well summarized by one interviewee:

*"Since a lot of people think that you just choose amongst a lot of names and pick the one that sounds funniest so it was good to ask the members [for their opinion], and to let them know about the [naming] process so that it's not just a witty person trying to come up with a catchy name" (Interviewee B)*

Generally branding work is seen positively by the interviewees, and many considered the merger to be advantageous since it gave branding questions a more highlighted position in the organization. Sif was already quite advanced in its branding work but now that obviously came to a stop. Some can see it as slightly frustrating that one needs to start from the beginning with branding work again but mostly this was regarded as an opportunity to create an even stronger brand for the new union since there is a lot of experience present already. Considering the changed environment that trade unions are generally facing with dropping membership figures it is clear that new action is needed. Branding the union was seen as a way to pursue renewal by the respondents.

*"They [trade unions] haven't really had to take a good look in the mirror but since the world is really changing so all the unions have to develop as well to meet the new markets. The merger gives that reason to do this [look in the mirror]." (Interviewee G)*

However, it is also apparent that branding has a problematic foundation in Unionen and in trade union context in general. Even though it is apparent that on the one hand interviewees emphasized the importance of branding for Unionen it is also clear that branding is not embraced exactly in the way as it is, for example, in commercial organizations. One interviewee explained that this is due to the nature of trade unions that branding does not really fit in.

*"I think organizations like ours that are idea-based tend not to take these things [branding] as seriously as [commercial] companies do. In companies you can see the concrete value of the brand, you can make calculations and like but here it can be a bit ugly, it is not well seen in trade union context, and it [branding] is supposed to be something that just happens here since we have an idea so you just have to believe"*  
(Interviewee E)

This is closely related to the fact that generally capitalistic thinking is not to be coupled with trade union work. This is the challenge that branding questions partly face in Unionen also. It was said that even in Unionen there are people who really believe that branding is the way for the future while there are also those that, on the other hand, object to using marketing terms.

*"We have a general leanment towards less marketing-minded thinking and more like 'we're not just any company'. I can see that there are good things and a lot of bad things too since some have the attitude that those terms are not us; they are for the other companies. We are not about sales and marketing and all these yakkie capitalistic words but we are more into solidarity"*  
(Interviewee B)

However, the same interviewee also emphasized that even though Unionen does not want to adhere to the use of traditional marketing jargon and thinking as such it does not, however, mean that the techniques in themselves are not useful. Thus, one can be different while still take advantage of tried-and-tested marketing techniques.

Another interviewee said that this kind of ideology can really be harmful for overall branding work since branding is not planned as systematically as it should be. The below excerpt summarizes this point of view:

*"We don't really have that conversation [about branding] internally and if we do there is a big risk that people will get very upset. It is then about how to make the argumentation [for branding] since I think that in the end if we talk about it, people would agree [on things]. Branding has a bad reputation but it is also very dependent on who you meet. It was even said that branding as a term was not to be used in Unionen."*  
(Interviewee E)

Furthermore, even though trade unions do resemble ordinary businesses to an increasing degree it is important to bear in mind that also complicated governance structures can hinder the application of branding, or other marketing methods for that matter (Björkman 2005). These structures relate to the democratic requirements in trade union work and its control, and this topic surfaced several time in our interviews as well. Especially the relationship and role of the regional offices was seen both as an opportunity and hindrance for branding work.

*"Regional office bosses have their own board to answer to and there can be some conflicts or arguments between the headquarters and the board in the regions since the regional manager has his board to answer to and it's rather messy. There are still few struggles, and when you have an own office you want to do your own branding like it's more important to be 'Unionen' in their area than to be Unionen nationally"* (Interviewee B)

*"Many regions have their own offer and also do their own material. This is a problem for branding. We should unite around something more than just the logotype." (Interviewee F)*

This is a complicated challenge for Unionen since it is part of the trade union ideology that everything is controlled by the members. Each region can therefore be very different and how things are done varies. Moreover, it was pointed out several times that also when taking into consideration that Unionen emphasizes closeness to the members as an important value this would ultimately have to be reflected in strong regional offices. Nevertheless, from general branding point of view it is important to be clear about to what degree local variations are accepted or if branding is to be headquarters driven (Schultz et al. 2005). At the moment it seems that there are regional differences when it comes to the work of the regions. Some interviewees thought that regions are living "their own life" too much while others emphasized the fact that it really depends on the individual region as well. With certain offices the cooperation and communication is already working seamlessly.

For the moment the means of achieving coherency in communication on an organizational level Unionen has established certain guidelines that people have to follow. There is a website with a manual where all the rules and logos can be downloaded. However, this is not up to date yet and it is still an on-going project to get this to work completely.

Overall the branding work in Unionen has been well communicated internally. All the interviewees were aware of the fact that "Phase 1" in communication work is coming to an end where the aim was to "tell the world that Unionen exist" and to create awareness regarding the name and the logo. Preliminary reports as well as general opinion among the interviewees show that the campaign has been a success so far. People are aware of Unionen and its green logo but generally it was pointed out by everyone that this is, and should be, just the beginning in terms of branding.

*"I think we're a bit too introvert in our branding work so far. We do a lot of ads like now the campaign "green green green", and it's good but we have to get this to continue one step further. You won't join a union just if a city is painted green." (Interviewee B)*

*"First part of our campaign that started in January is very visible with green ads all over country. This is quite superficial level and the next part will be more difficult. Now the campaign was just to let people know we're merging but the next step is to tell people what's the substance in it. The following campaign has its focus on competence, and especially on supporting competence." (Interviewee C)*

The next phase in the branding process will be about communicating what lies behind the brand name. The focus will be on competence and career services which is an important focus in Unionen's overall strategy. However, it was clear that the bigger challenges are still ahead since creating awareness is not necessarily that challenging. Especially interviewee E highlighted that there is a clear need for someone to take control of the situation otherwise the coherency in communication might be lost. Considering that there are so many regions it is hard to get one message through when everyone is doing a bit of their own thing and that can, as mentioned above, be harmful for the brand. Also interviewee C expressed the need to really tackle these issues now before it is too late.

In short, corporate branding is an endeavor that must encompass the whole organization and it uses the vision and culture of the organization as elements in building a unique selling proposition or organizational value proposition (Hatch & Schultz 2001). According to our findings it can be said that the interviewees did emphasize how branding work must be backed up much more than superficial name or symbol. In order for a brand to be successful there needs to be substance in the brand, and this is what is going to be dealt with in Phase 2 in the communication strategy.

However, it is somewhat interesting to see how branding thinking on the one hand is seen in a negative light and it seems clear that people are somewhat hesitant in adopting branding mentality very strongly. Comments regarding how commercial word use should be avoided were mentioned many times, and this can be seen as a clear indication of how the application of branding is more challenging in trade union context. Those who were against using branding terms were generally seen as interested in emphasizing the cause or true nature of trade unionism that does not fit with capital ideology.

Of course theoretically there is no hindrance why branding could not be applied here as well and research shows that even ideology-based and nonprofit organizations have a lot to gain from embracing branding to secure funding and support for their cause (Csaba, F. in Schultz et al.2005). Then again the answers also show how ideas of branding are present in the communication strategy of Unionen. It is obvious that there are those members in the organization that have adopted branding thinking and are very enthusiastic about the possibilities it can offer but due to the “anti-commercial” attitudes present in the union there is some hesitance as well in calling these terms with their traditional names.

## **5.2 Creating and maintaining a brand**

In this section findings regarding the three dimensions of corporate branding – vision, culture and image – are discussed and analyzed.

### **5.2.1 Vision and Values in Unionen:**

It is argued that organizations tend to be more successful in branding issues if those who form the organizational culture understand and follow the vision and values of the same organization.

The organization’s values answers the questions “what and who we are?” (Balmer & Gray 2003 and Urde 2001). By knowing what the company stands for (through organizational values) is how Urde (2001) argues that the brand identity and core values are formed. The core values are the ones that stand up front in the branding formation and development process which ultimately contributes to the externalization of values.

As argued by Hatch & Schultz (2001: 1047), "Strategic Vision is defined as *"the central idea behind the company that embodies and expresses top management's aspiration for what the company will achieve in the future"*. When there is an alignment between the employee's values and those of the management, the brand will turn out to be more attractive and secure.

Unionen now is facing a challenge in how to deal with two different cultures and thus two previous values and visions that were united into one. We will explore if employees are practicing Unionen's values and if they are inspired by Unionen's vision (Hatch & Schultz 2001).

The values of Unionen are: *"Strong, Closeness, Developing and "Urging"*. And the vision of Unionen is: *"Together we are the leading force that creates success, security and joy at the workplace"*.

We found out that employees in a general sense seem enthusiastic about the new values and accept them but they do not necessarily take those values deeper with them, at least not now since as they argue it is still very early after the merger. Despite that most of the interviewees thought that they were not really living Unionen's values yet they also admitted that now it was the time to follow and live them. So in a general sense employees at Unionen are aware that internalization of values will be the next step.

*"To really get people to follow core values, you have to make them want to follow them, make them their core values" (Interviewee B)*

*"Those values are supposed to be reflected in the communications! Also acting according those values is important" (Interviewee C)*

Even though the values were introduced not too long ago, when we asked the interviewees to define the values, we found consistency in that they all were aware of such values. Moreover, although not all of them gave a straightforward definition of the values, some were able to interpret them with their own words, images or through "storytelling". When speaking about the vision of Unionen, this was also known by most of the employees, although most people knew the values more deeply than the vision for some reason. On the other hand, related to the notion of living the values the explanation given by one of the interviewees was that vision and values is more than written documents, they are about how to work and think.

As argued by several interviewees one of the aims during the kickoff meeting after the merger was to involve everyone in the values and identity discussion. Moreover it was mentioned by many how values and ideas would be equally taken from HTF and Sif – the so called 1/3 HTF, 1/3 Sif, 1/3 new principle. In fact, the idea behind the formulation of the new values thaws to combine the strong points of both HTF and Sif and thereafter add something new into it. . As an example, interviewee B argued that the aim was to obtain the closeness and softness from HTF and the competence and business-mindedness from Sif, while strength was found in both. We got the idea that employees really want to cooperate and take the best sides from each other. However, in practice we got the impression that it was not always the case.

*"And the formed values are really what people are bringing with them, we say that it should be 1/3 from*

*Sif, 1/3 from HTF and 1/3 new but that is not always the case.” (Interviewee G)*

However, there were those as well who did not think everyone was so involved with discussing the new values. This issue then again might reduce the progress of internalization of values. Employees within the service sector should especially be involved in discussions related to values since after all it is the employees who will ultimately carry the values.

Besides the four core values mentioned above, there are an additional set of internal values that was introduced recently by the chief executive officer. This new set consists of 3 values that are: considerate, professional and developing. Having two sets of values is common in organizations and as argued by interviewee B benchmarking was done against Volvo who also has a similar system of values. The same interviewee argued that the idea is that both sets of values would support each other, while one focuses on the internal aspect and the other on the external aspect. These internal values are more directed towards the way of working. It was noticeable that the introduction of these values was not well welcomed by some interviewees and they rather questioned their usefulness and found them confusing since it could ultimately affect the external brand communication as well negatively.

*“These are not core values and there might be some mix up when we get a lot of words like this so it can get a little messy. So we are in a project for internal culture and I think this is very important for internal culture.” (Interviewee B)*

*“..he has created a few core values that are supposed be our landmark as employees in internal work but these also spill out to the external work and it confuses the external brand”.. “I cannot even remember the 2 new values (that the Kanslichef created).” (Interviewee G)*

There was inconformity towards part of top management that was seen to “drag” its old values from its previous organization towards Unionen. This leads us to think that the legacy of one of the trade unions (Sif) is more influential than the other (HTF). Based on these arguments it could be said that there is a misalignment between the organizational values and how management behaves, a basic ingredient for successful branding formation.

Most importantly interviewee E argued that it is not only internal employees who should live and carry the values but this internalization of values should be more directed towards representatives in the working place -clubs-. Consequently, it could be argued that the role that representatives play is crucial in attracting and retaining union members.

*“I don’t think this office has incorporated [the new values], I don’t think, maybe I am demanding since I think these things are important. In my world the values is something important and decisions should be based or at least checked against that [values].” (Interviewee E)*

*“[the question should be] can I help “Anna” live the core values, maybe that is the new manual work” [referring to the representatives].” (Interviewee E)*

When we asked the interviewees to describe the brand of Unionen it was interesting to realize that everyone connected the brand to the stated organizational values. This is probably due to the fact that employees were involved in the “branding process” from the start. For example they took part in choosing

the new name for the union and people were clearly aware that one of the requirements was that the name had to represent the core values. What is more regarding the four core values, it was precisely the value of “Closeness” that was constantly repeated by interviewees as being very unique for Unionen and its brand. Being close to its members is said to be one of the most important values since Unionen has several offices in Sweden unlike other trade unions. This closeness can be achieved due to the capacity and scope of Unionen, and consequently the organization is seen as having a human face.

*“I think that’s also [mentioned] in the core values that we have to be close to the members so they can see what we can do for them. The member isn’t in Unionen to make it bigger or wealthier. He is in Unionen to get help.” (Interviewee B)*

*“..about being close, the challenges is not to ask what is important to you but to listen, and is always good to ask how you feel, they care.” (Interviewee E)*

The value of “development” was also very much emphasized along our study. Interviewees argued that Unionen is focused on education, coaching and career development for their members. For this reason several seminars, courses and so on are arranged.

On the other hand, the value “Strong” was defined from several perspectives. While some saw it as an opportunity others saw it as weakness and negative factor. Generally, the interviewees agreed that the word strong might sound threatening. That is why they prefer to be seen as strong and powerful but humble and kind at the same time. Moreover one interviewee suggested that “competent” might be “the new value”, as a means of proving that Unionen is more than just being strong. Strength as a value was also seen positively, as a symbol of unity and hence where the name Unionen comes from.

*“.. it’s good to be strong but it can also be threatening so I don’t like that all papers just concentrate on that because it’s the easiest to do since we are the biggest white-collar union” (Interviewee B)*

*“When you are very strong and powerful you also need to be very kind, and that’s what we say about Unionen” (Interviewee E)*

Interesting enough is the fact in some areas of the organization it was mentioned that the staff should not talk about values anymore instead “Kännetecken” meaning distinguishing features should be used. It was said that one possible reason for the negative connotations that the value word has is because in Sif there were too many values that no one really remembered.

As already discussed, in order for branding to act “at its best” there is the necessity of aligning three key dimensions of branding values/vision, culture and image (Hatch & Schultz 2001). In the case of Unionen, it was clear to us that the values and visions have been communicated to the staff however there are still many gaps to be filled. Although we could argue that it is rather unfair to analyze the current connection of employees’ values and beliefs to those of Unionen since Unionen’s brand can still be considered as a “baby brand”.



According to Hatch and Schultz (2001), the misalignment of the brand increases when management moves the direction in ways that employees don't understand or support. Therefore regarding this aspect, in our study we noticed that there is a misalignment between the employees' values and the new set of "internal values". Nevertheless, having two set of values (internal and external ones) is common in many organizations. Furthermore these new values have not been fully communicated to all employees.

On the other hand, interviewees actually admitted that they still had not internalized and were not living the four core values. One of the main reasons is because of the "age" of those four main values, which is precisely only "a few months old". The values are still at the surface level. We noticed that in some instances employees would still refer to HTF and Sif as their current employer or that their current working activities are the same as previously. Furthermore interviewees would make reference to studies, reports or analysis done from their previous employer.

There were also many contradictions regarding the value of "Strong". Most of the interviewees talked about this value as controversial and polemic. Interviewees argued that it could be seen as a bad thing or as a synonym of powerful. Hence the value of strong is not always well accepted by interviewees since being a giant trade union is not necessarily the best way to attract members who are individualistic. Finally, some employees suggested that some training is needed to enforce people to really live the values. According to Hatch and Schultz (2001), the claimed values of the corporate brand must resonate with the tacit meanings and values that organizational members hold and use. One way in which branding can influence then a determined culture is when there is a connection between the values of the brand and the employee's values which in this case in specific is lacking.

Nevertheless in our study we perceived several "brand motivational" aspects from employees at two levels:

a) Interviewees were able to talk and interpret Unionen's core values with such easiness that at some points it seemed interviewees were living the values. They argued that Unionen has the ability and capacity to reach its members in a more personal way. Other uniqueness they argued was the interest in professional development of its members through the profile web site and other services. According to interviewee's response the core values seemed to differentiate them from its competitors. Therefore in a general sense, the culture is defending Unionen's values saying that the brand's closeness and related services are better than other unions. Consequently the arguments above might mean that employees are in a sense proud to work in Unionen.

b) Interesting to us was the fact that most employees talked about the values more often than about the vision. This aspect makes us think that the values are being communicated in a higher degree than the vision. Unionen's vision is: *"Together we are the leading force that creates success, security and joy at the workplace"*.

On one hand, the aspect of “together we are the leading force” refers to the organization as a whole. However we can deduce that the culture is still forming and mixing into one. Hence, there are still individualities and frictions coming to float. Nevertheless, employees as already mentioned seem motivated and hence contribute as being part of “the leading force”. Then again, as discussed above, our study suggests that the interviewees’ interest in their members is real in that they look to improve services for members and thus are looking to increase the following: “...creates success, security and joy at the workplace”.

We could still argue that there is a gap between the vision of Unionen and employee’s values if seen from the following two perspectives: a) from the organizational level (since the culture is not very stable now) but at the same time b) aiming at union member’s satisfaction and success (which is being looked at).

In conclusion, employees’ identity and values at this point have not been deeply attached to the “Unionen Brand”. When talking about Unionen many employees still referred back to HTF or Sif which indicates that even though the Unionen values are known they are not internalized completely at this moment. The core values and hence the brand identity have not achieved a “successful value formation” (Urde 2001). Furthermore, the added or customer values seem to still be forming. According to Urde (2001: 1019): “...core values must be built into the product expressed in behavior and reflect the feel of communication.

Although based on the motivational aspects discussed in the previous sections, we argue that employees are heading the right way. We believe that in the medium or long-term there will be an alignment between Unionen’s and employees’ values at a deeper level. This process is also related to the concept of brand identity as being active, living systems, broad, strategic, internal/external focus to brand creation (Aaker 1996, Kapferer 2004, Urde 2001). Hence, the brand is active and so there is the opportunity for employees to evolve with it as well.

However, a drawback to the argument of heading forward and living the core values and towards a desired brand identity is the downsize announcement which might affect the progress. Still we think there is great potential that the brand has on employees’ values internalization process because as argued above interviewees do talk about values with a certain passion. Although if the discrepancies mentioned in our discussion are not solved soon, the brand formation process might be limited.

## 5.2.2 Organizational Culture in Unionen

Most recently there is an increased interest in discovering how and what kind of power does culture have in organizational branding. For example, trade unions nowadays face big challenges in attracting and retaining members, and the satisfaction of members depends to a large extent on the service given by the employees. Since the nature of unions is service based, it is employees and ultimately the brand that will

produce a positive or negative image to the union members and potential members. Moreover, organizations need to be aware that ambiguity, complexity and fuzziness are a central aspect of their culture instead of viewing the organization as being a clear entity characterized by stable and well-demarcated sub-cultures (Alvesson 2002).

Grönroos (2000) defines corporate culture as a set of common norms and values shared by the people in the organization. Employees' behaviors influence internal actions and they are also responsible of external image formation. Management then has a challenge in leading and crafting internal behavior. However, this can ultimately be done if employees indeed identified themselves with the values and the brand. Internal marketing therefore plays a crucial role in branding through its internal campaigns and communications activities.

In the context of cultural change in Unionen, we see two processes of awareness going on among employees. One aspect is that interviewees are admitting the emergence of cultural change and differences and the other aspect is that interviewees want to overcome such differences and move on in order to improve the culture.

Currently, the organizational culture within Unionen is going through a transition since two cultures were united into one, and naturally many implications came with that as well. Mergers are difficult and this merger is no exception. Culture is still forming which is why employees have not quite yet internalized the new values, as one interviewee said:

*"...and it is an important point since due to the merger many people don't feel this sense of coherence since old values are not really met in the new values and the clashes comes so we try to make it manageable for people.. it's like moving into someone and they have their rules of how things should be and then you have own" (Interviewee C)*

Hence, it is noticeable that employees' identities are still situated within their previous trade union to some degree, especially when they relate some of their current activities as part of what they did before.

*".. the organization is still forming and personally I think quite a few of us work according to how we did in HTF of Sif so the work models have not changed much - yet!" (Interviewee C)*

Despite of the fact that interviewees' distinct ways of working from HTF and Sif are present they also seemed to be motivated by the idea of adhering to the new brand. As an example they constantly mentioned the big kickoff meeting in February and an all-staff meeting in November. These gatherings are seen as a way to leave old things behind even though these activities are only part of the first phase. Even though the new culture is not all set, employees are aiming at getting there, towards a culture and a new brand. Interviewees then do relate the importance of the new culture formation parallel to branding formation. Despite these motivational aspects, there is still the issue on how to motivate employees to internalize the new core values and hence adhere to the new culture of Unionen. For example,

Interviewee B admitted that “although they follow rules and techniques, the values and feelings are hidden”.

*“Yes a lot of activities [are being carried out] to get this common feeling, we had a big kick off in February, to talk about the new culture, about the green campaign[advertisement campaign] and so on, that is on the surface, then you need to go more[deep]” (Interviewee D)*

The progress of culture formation and socialization that most employees shared at the initial stage of the merge seemed to slow down, if not stopped due to a recent announcement of layoffs within three years from 960 to 760 employees. This means that one third of the employees would eventually leave Unionen. This period of transition is traduced by many as “chaotic”. Hence, it was clear to us that the there is an air of anxiety and many expressed the fear how this moment of unsteadiness might affect negatively both service level as well as the development of the organization culture in general.

*“1/3 is leaving in the coming winter [layoff] and this “takes a lot of energy from the creative process” since people will be thinking “will I still be here” [trying to keep their jobs, are more worried]. Many people have worked here a long time so I guess feelings of anxiety are strong. (Interviewee F)*

What we found interesting is the fact that a couple of our interviewees saw the merge as an advantage. Some people actually liked the chaos under which Unionen is living and the reason for that is that it would allow the employees to elaborate on the culture from scratch.

*“It can be a challenge but I could see it as a possibility as well because it's new. You can start from the beginning so it's not all that bad. Confusion can be good because everyone is as confused as you. I like chaos” (Interviewee B)*

As we will discuss below there are two triggering factors aiming to ease the transition: one and most importantly is the role of internal marketing and human resource and the other is the role of the leader, which could be called into question.

Internal marketing plays a major role in this cultural transition. As expressed by several interviewees, one of the main aims of internal marketing is to try and regulate contradictory behaviors which are emerging. In order to fight this sense of cultural instability a cultural committee was formed by different Unionen employees. The main task of this committee is to develop and plan strategies on how organizational culture can be influenced so that it will support the overall brand among other things.

It was also interesting to find out that benchmarking is being used as part of the culture program along with the use of CTT (culture trust formation tools) used as a means of culture regulator. Benchmarking is done against Volvo, the Swedish automotive company and actually it is from Volvo where the idea of CTT comes from. This analytical tool allows Unionen to analyze “where they are” at the moment in terms of the culture and plan “where they want to be”. Therefore in the medium/long term organizational culture stability and performance is being seen as a goal. The majority of the interviewees were aware of the existence of the “cultural committee”, however not all interviewees talked as passionately about forming a rich culture as others did, although it is understandable since that is their task.

*"Right now we try to define the goals "where do we want to be at, what are the values, the image and our values should be integrated so we're congruent. That gives a lot of confidence and trust for our brand. The worst thing for branding would be to lie. The CTT helps us to identify our flaws, what we need to improve or what are we doing really good right now" (Interviewee G)*

Another way of triggering the formation and stabilization of the new culture is according to the culture committee group through the example of the leaders: that is Top-down. Therefore as an internal marketing project leadership style and behavior have been set on top of the agenda. In other words, the committee argues that top management should be among the first ones to internalize Unionen values.

*"The first focus will be on how to do some sort of education for all the leaders because you can't ask the employees to be like this if the leaders aren't considerate or professional themselves so they have to live the values too. You cannot just order them." (Interviewee B)*

We could also argue that Unionen's culture is being challenged at three levels. The first level is between organizations HTF and Sif. The second level is within the functional departments themselves, i.e. research, marketing and so on while the third level is between the headquarters and the regions.

Firstly, we noticed that the legacy of Sif is stronger than that of HTF. One reason for this could be that Sif was simply bigger in terms of employees and resources. However, some interviewees explained how they got the feeling that some Sif managers were merely welcoming HTF members to the new situation rather than embracing them as an equal partner. We also noticed this influence from Sif in that geographically HTF members would relocate to Sif locations at the headquarters. Within this environment of change, there are also behaviors and attitudes that are starting to come to surface from "each of the unions".

*"... [that] is the old Sif behavior" or "HTF behavior", I think it's been there all the time and it's come out to the surface because it is sort of a honeymoon we have had for four months and now it's becoming reality so I think some bad things that haven't been seen will come up. I think it's just natural. (Interviewee B)*

Secondly, some interviewees saw a deeper division within the different departments compared to HTF and Sif as a whole. In other words, for some interviewees it did not matter whether the background of a co-worker is HTF or Sif but rather the bigger issues are related to the ways of working between the different areas inside the organization.

*"..There are different problems connected to cultures about different perceptions and outputs, not among HTF and SIF is between departments, some colleagues from other organization are very happy to use our board's procedures, others not very happy." (Interviewee A)*

Culture orientation programs are also being done at the regional level. However, we found quite interesting the fact that as interviewee D said: "they [the regions] are making their own culture". There is the dilemma as to how similar or different should the different regions be among each other? On the other hand, there were also some inconsistencies regarding the performance of the regions. While people at the headquarters argued that regions were adapting well to the cultural process, we found that regions were actually also struggling in adapting themselves into Unionen.

Finally, when asked if the change processes mentioned above and related feelings of anxiety would be reflected to the different stakeholders such as present or potential members, most interviewees said that they did not want this to affect external stakeholders. Even though the interviewees' intention was not to let this situation affect any stakeholder group there was consistency in opinions in that the somewhat unsteady image might be reflected towards members, particularly due to the coming up restructuring of the organization. Despite these negative factors, the interviewees seemed to have a positive attitude but at times also contradictory:

*".. but compared to other companies working environment is good here (we're not throwing out people to the streets) so I would say we're privileged here. But you have to realize that you work on the conditions of the members since they pay our salaries and they've got the right to know we have reasonable costs and that their fees are used in a reasonable way! And well, now we have realized that we need to cut costs so that members know how money used" (Interviewee C)*

*"And even though merger is a fun thing to do it is still a cause of stress and therefore, when you are stressed you go down in creative thinking and patience so when people do the external work with members so sometimes when members phone they aren't very specific what is their problem and then the ombudsman says this problem is your responsibility..." (Interviewee G)*

Corporate branding according to Hatch and Schultz (2001) requires the need to align the organizational culture and the desired image. If there is a positive alignment it will produce awareness among stakeholders which will ultimately enhance organizational attractiveness and reputation. Therefore branding at an organizational level includes internal and external work.

Organizational and social identification towards Unionen could be questioned at this point. According to Ashforth & Mael (1989), social identification is described as the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate. Within Unionen, the perception of oneness is internally viewed from two groups: HTF and Sif. Also, categorization exists since there are clear boundaries that distinguish both groups. While self-enhancement was also salient in that there is distinction and even a possible elitism. HTF is sometimes seen as a lower-status trade union while Sif as a higher-status union. The non-belongingness of some employees towards Unionen can be a factor which might slow down the process of organizational identification and thus identification of the brand.

On the other hand, based on our study, we argue that there is cultural division at three levels of the organization in which ways of working, behaviors and attitudes are coming to float: a)Organizational: HTF & Sif, b)Among the same departments c)Regional vs. Head Quarter. Grönroos (2000) argues that the craft of internal behavior is a holistic and complicated one since there are many people and sectors in any given organization. Hence we understand that there is a challenge that Unionen has which is to overcome cultural differences within the organization, and therefore there is the need to take care of the image that is given outside the organization. One way to overcome those cultural differences however is with the help of internal marketing.

According to Grönroos (2000: 334) internal marketing can be seen as a management philosophy that recognizes the importance of treating employees as customers. The author also argues that crafting of internal behavior considers leadership as a key factor in initiating and developing the cultural process. Therefore, despite that there is still no complete identification towards Unionen and its internal divisions in general we see a common feeling from the culture that is willing to “move on”.

We concluded that within Unionen for the most part the work done by internal marketing has been well received by stakeholders. We are aware that the goal that internal marketing has now is to help its employees to “live the brand”. Cultural activities, programs and communications are in top of the agenda. For example, the establishment of the cultural committee, which deals with issues related to socialization (through gatherings) and plans in general how culture can be influenced, is being used as triggering a factor for cultural stability. Internal marketing at Unionen is indeed using an instrumental approach to craft the internal behavior of employees. Despite the fact that cultural achievements take time, a positive factor as we saw is that interviewees in general seem cooperative, a basic ingredient for success.

Based on our study, it appears to us that employees really care for their members. Regarding the merge for example, interviewees want to avoid giving a bad image. But again this is another challenge for the organization due to the feelings of anxiety for the upcoming restructuring. Finally, even though we see a gap between the organizational culture and the image wanted, overall the “Unionen brand” has the power to support social identification thus this will come about at a future stage of branding.

### 5.2.3 Image of Unionen

Even though trade unions are sometimes referred to as “interest groups”, unions also look for competitive advantage just as market-oriented organizations do. One way of establishing advantage over other unions is by having an attractive and credible brand. Moreover, the importance of showing that one has a better image than the competitors is clear; how an organization is perceived by outsiders means a lot in the service industry. Image according to Harris & de Chernatony (2001) is not created through advertisements but through the experiences between an employee and a customer. Organizations need to listen to its stakeholders and hence the need to know and understand what the distinct stakeholders want from, in this case, Unionen is apparent.

Grunig (1993)<sup>5</sup> defines image as what audiences perceive of an organization and these images can ultimately be achieved if the symbolic and behavioral aspects are combined. The role that employees play in this process is a key factor but even more so there is the need to align the vision of the organization with the image. Having a good image would also contribute to the attraction and retention of members by its own right.

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<sup>5</sup> in Balmer & Greyser 2003

One of our aims during our interview sessions was to find out to what extent Unionen is aware on its image and its effects. Currently Unionen is in a process of communicating its desired image to the general public. Most of the interviewees agreed that one of the reasons for the merger was to establish a new trade union that includes the strong aspects of the previous organizations while also is attuned to new changes in the society. However processes of change such as the merge takes time, and in the meantime misperceptions can be formed by outsiders if there is not stability in the image or the culture. Therefore, just as the brand is forming, the same process is happening with the image of Unionen.

*"I think we're still building the brand, so we're not there yet but it's getting there and I think Unionen is changing and people's image of Unionen is still more according to the "let's get on the barricades" but we say no, we want to cooperate. So I don't think the image and where we want to be is still not congruent yet." (Interviewee G)*

Symbolic aspects of the brand can be understood as "superficial symbolic activities" such as the advertising campaigns that Unionen has done so far ("the green campaign"). When referring only to the symbolic aspect of the Unionen brand, studies have been done so far to see if the image of the brand shown to the audience was successful. Preliminary research shows that so far image and awareness campaigns have been successful. The results were based only on what can be called the "coat" of Unionen since at this stage it would be unfair to grade a "four month old organization".

Moreover, continuing with the symbolic aspect of the image, when choosing the name and logo of Unionen, the kind of image that is strived after was also considered. Interviewees agreed that being a united organization is how they wanted to be perceived and hence the word "Unionen". This goes to show that image considerations at Unionen are of high importance and decisions made are checked against image issues.

*"There was a survey done to find out what people feel and think about Unionen but this was more related to the campaign, logo etc. so to see if people know about the existence of Unionen, results were good!" (Interviewee F)*

However, now the challenge is to prove to the external world that who Unionen is with actions. This is termed "Phase 2" in the communications strategy. According to several interviewees there will be a study within the next months to see what kind of image Unionen has acquired in this time. The image/branding studies that will be conducted in the future will show how the many stakeholders are perceiving the image of Unionen regarding what it is and for what it has done.

*"Next time (in autumn) it'll be more interesting to see how people see the substance, not only the surface". (Interviewee F)*

*"We have not measured it [image], no, but when we will start using union barometer so hopefully some questions related to how they perceive the organization will be answered, so we'll look at the image." (Interviewee A)*

Overall, we found that there are three main repercussions on Unionen's image produced by the recent merge. One consequence is seen among the same employees of the organization which is pretty much



related to the layoffs announced, the second aspect is how Unionen is seen as the biggest white-collar trade union and the third aspect is how Unionen is seen as a Strong organization. All these three aspects of the image of Unionen are being expressed by the interviewees with some kind of fear or threat.

Firstly, interviewees in a general sense argued that the changes regarding the coming downsizing is producing stress in the environment. Hence, employees' conscious and unconscious behaviors generated by anxiety are permeating Unionen which ultimately may affect the image. Therefore employees' attitudes and their ways of working also contribute to the image formation, especially since employees are the main contact window with external groups.

*"We work one way outside and another inside, there are certain inside groups that help each other and also the problem is that things just happen fast and it doesn't really correspond to the image we are trying to give outside of being open, democratic" (Interviewee F)*

*"...when members or potential members read that all trade unions are losing members right now and that [the organization] will cut 260 people so who wants to join [that kind of] organization." (Interviewee A)*

On the other hand, a common statement among the interviewees was that the big size of Unionen can be very challenging since members might want to get out fearing they will be lost in "the giant" and therefore not being listened to. Despite that matter, the image that interviewees said they wanted to give is not that of "distancing", but of closeness. As a matter of fact, interviewee F argued that other smaller unions only had offices in Stockholm versus Unionen that has 19 regional offices all over Sweden. Thus, Unionen is positioned closer to its members. Furthermore, one way to counter-attack the image of distancing, interviewees suggested is the "My Profile service" they offer to members,

*"We need to be more personal which is strange since we are bigger and people are fearing we won't see them, so we have to get them to see us" (Interviewee B)*

*"..from there we made the qualitative study and the fear was that you will get lost in the union of this size, employees might not want to join a union of half a million members, it could be a threat in a way.. even the name is like the Union could be seen a threat powerful, we are big and strong" (Interviewee A)*

Finally, being seen as a strong union is both as an advantage and as a disadvantage. However in the context of the desired image, it was mostly seen as an opportunity according to the interviewees. Most people agreed that now the image was stronger in a positive sense in that members would benefit from a wider range of services. Moreover, since previously HTF and Sif have been focusing on different sectors, Sif on IT and industry and HTF on service sector, the new union possesses a lot of cross sector knowledge. This aspect of scope of service serves as an indicator in which interviewees are taking Unionen's values and translating and crafting them towards a desired image.

*".. the harder part is to prove the softer part of Unionen.. and actually Unionen doesn't want to have the strong "big elephant" image. We want to have a human face, understand each other solve problems with members together. So we solve them together and we are there to support you but we don't do everything for you" (Interviewee C)*

*"In some ways some external stakeholders are positively affected by the organization. We are stronger and more knowledgeable in many areas when it comes to the service sector, IT and development as it was divided between Sif and HTF" (Interviewee A)*

One way of balancing the “possible negative images” is by communicating the vision and values of Unionen to the distinct stakeholders. Regarding this matter we got the impression that Unionen wants to give an image of a caring organization towards its members by helping them develop professionally. Development, one of the four core values, is linked to the new shift on services offering. Accordingly Unionen wants to give now a proactive image, in which members are self-starters and not passive absorbers of information.

Another aspect that was mentioned constantly among interviewees was their concern regarding competition with other trade unions. Here comes into play the significance of nurturing Unionen’s image. One of the concerns is that members that seek status from trade union membership might change to “specialized” unions i.e. those unions that focus on their specific professional group only. Hence, interviewees’ reflections on that aspect were that Unionen will not be a “status organization”; Unionen wants to be seen as a “down to earth” union. To fight this fear of competition, segmentation of professions is done in which there are a specific service packages depending on the member’s profession. Therefore, Unionen is aware that securing the interests of its stakeholders is aiming the retention of the same.

*“But the members or at least those members with high pay, we fear [the organization] they will leave for “Civilingenjör” for example since those trade unions are more of a high status. So if you are in Unionen for the status then you have to move because Unionen will not be a status union, I think ever” (Interviewee B)*

One way of dealing with the image is through external communications. In special interviewee D made a concise argument in which Unionen employees need to think on their members when writing documents i.e. towards media, so members’ feelings or ideals would not be affected. Although this is a hard task to do since there are people who think and believe in different ways. Moreover a desired image by most of the interviewees is that one of openness and dialogue. Therefore the task of external communications and public affairs in Unionen is a challenging one since at this stage they are one of the main groups in triggering the image formation.

*“That’s why we have to be so aware, who is reading, and to respect the image of the members and what they think politically and that makes even more knowledge of what you are talking about and not write down too fast)” (Interviewee D)*

*“I think externally branding will go faster unlike internally because there are a lot of people that have worked here a long time and I think it’ll take about at least 2-3 years to change the culture, we need to make a lot of activities to motivate and unite people.” (Interviewee G)*

*“The image is to be a constructive partner within the social dialogue, within everyone, with a partner you do negotiate, we want growth, development” (Interviewee D)*

The role of external communication at the micro level (i.e. member’s work place) however is having its drawbacks. Interviewees in general are openly admitting that there is a “bottle neck” when it comes to delivering the messages to union members directly at their work places:

*“Lots of people work with our representatives, they have collective agreement but they don’t know that’s the union, we shouldn’t blame them, that is our problem for not communicating it” (Interviewee E)*

In a general sense, the image may influence the choice of the brand a person picks. If members see the brand as big they might want to avoid it and choose a smaller union. Nevertheless, if members see a provider of individual services members might want to stick with the brand. More over “closeness” was constantly mentioned as one of the best “cards” that Unionen has to offer. The brand then provides an image with a certain value to external stakeholders. Interviewees in general want to avoid being seen as a strong and powerful trade union, they want to give Unionen a “soft image” but competent at the same time. Hence we could argue that the brand is feeding organizational identification in which employees are directing what ways they want to be seen.

What Harris & de Chernatony (2001) consider as critical in image building is that depending on the employee’s behavior is how their actions will reinforce a brand’s advertised values. In this case, due to the layoffs announced, interviewees want to avoid expressing their anxious behavior e.g. when answering the phone to their members. Employees at Unionen are willing to have a good relationship with their stakeholders in order to avoid giving them a bad image. On the other hand, Hatch and Schultz (2001) argue that organizations need to take in consideration who their stakeholders are and what are their needs in order to reduce a gap between the organizational culture and the image formed. Unionen employees are indeed focusing who their external stakeholders are to give those groups specialized services. Some of the key groups being looked at are young professionals and students. On the other hand Unionen is segmenting its services to fulfill individual needs. According to Hatch and Schultz (2001) an image should be formed by those targeted groups of who Unionen is. However the image can ultimately be formed if the right communication is being sent to the targeted groups.

External communications and marketing at the macro level (organizational) in general is doing a good job. Image so far has proven to work out according to the “green campaign”, people are aware of Unionen’s existence. Now the challenge will be to prove what Unionen is made of. For this reason, image studies are on their way not only to prove the substance of Unionen but to see how has been the acceptance of the new brand as well as its reputation.

However the role of external communication at the micro-level (union members-workplaces) seems to be challenged and hence the image formed by stakeholders seems to be in risk as well. Communication about individual services offered by Unionen or what members are paying for, for example, is not flowing towards the main aims: members at workplaces. Members ignore that security is what they are paying for, as one interviewee argued. “Security” is indeed part of Unionen’s vision as previously discussed. We could argue then that it is essential that the vision is communicated to Unionen members. According to Hatch and Schultz (2001), images held by stakeholders of what the company is and what it stands for can become part of the strategic envisioning process. If members know what the vision of Unionen represents then they will form an image of the organization. If not aware of the vision stakeholders might form misperceptions regarding the image which might affect member commitment.

### 5.3 Building and maintaining relationships

A shift in marketing thinking is placing focus on the value of relationships and businesses profitability is dependent on organization's ability to build long lasting and mutually beneficial relationships with its many stakeholders (Hougaard & Bjerre 2002). As Grönroos (2000) summarized the focus is to create value together with the customer. Especially in service context the importance of relationships has been underlined. It is due to the nature of services where production and consumption happen at the same time, and where the customer is a co-creator of the value that the significance of establishing a good relationship is clear (ibid.)

Trade union membership naturally entails the establishment of a bond between the union and the member and our intention was to find out how the interviewees see the nature of this relationship. Generally, everyone emphasized that the challenge in Unionen in terms of building and maintaining relationships is the fact that you have so many different kinds of members and relationship structures. First of all, members have many roles towards the union since they are simultaneously consumers and providers of the services as well as owners and/or participants in decision-making processes. This is very characteristic for trade unions in general since ultimately the unions exist due to their members. It is the idea of participation and engagement that should characterize the nature of the relationship between Unionen and its members. However, it is clear to everyone that this ideal situation is long from that in reality. According to interviewee A about 10% of the members are so-called multiple stakeholders who, in addition to using services, also take part in decision-making. These members are usually the representatives. However, it was commonly acknowledged that majority of Unionen members are passive. The reason for this was explained mostly by the fact that Unionen, or even all trade unions in general, have been very poor at communication what the value of the membership is.

*"People don't really understand the benefits of trade unions, for example they don't know the laws that govern their employment. We should stop inventing things so that when someone gets an idea, there is a group formed that finally presents an idea to the members. Instead we should ask potential members what do they want rather than saying this is what you want" (Interviewee F)*

*"I think they [the members] just disappear. The biggest competitor is just there to take them because the members cannot see what the benefits are, but that is not the member's fault, it's our fault because we haven't been very good at it [communicating the benefits]." (Interviewee B)*

*"We are masters at saying a lot of things while at the same time we're not very good at giving integrated information." (Interviewee E)*

Thus it was apparent that the interviewees did not regard the communication efforts of Unionen as sufficient. There is a lot of information available, some mentioned that maybe even too much, but the way that it reaches the final member is not optimal. Generally the interviewees emphasized that among the biggest problems relate to the fact that members are not aware of the worth of different services like collective bargaining or otherwise people just lack the knowledge regarding the value that trade union

membership can bring them. In this context many also mentioned the “insurance company” image again that is the challenge.

*“We have this discussion, if we are an insurance company or a movement, and I think we can be both.” (Interviewee E)*

It is then apparent that the member relationship for many people can be characterized as a somewhat distant one. Even though Unionen encourages participation from its various members this is hard to achieve. First of all, it was emphasized by some that it is challenging to get people involved in trade union work. With all the pressures of today’s hectic work life time is limited. The representative structure with all the clubs was thus seen as a major branding challenge both in terms of ascertaining coherent communication for all members as well as engaging people in general.

*“Due to the fact that the club is so far away so they can be just about anything. This structure was build and became strong in the 70s when people had time for club meetings. Today people don’t have time anymore for such things – they need to go home. All “cause organizations” have the same problem that people don’t have time like the Red Cross, Unicef etc. It’s hard to get people to work for free since it’s voluntary. And that is a branding challenge since you cannot force them.” (Interviewee B)*

*“We don’t have a product, we sell ideas and branding is crucial. If you are a member of something, you need to feel that you want to have that [belong].” (Interviewee E)*

When asked reasons for why building close relationship with members is so challenging, all interviewees regarded that the general change in attitudes in the society at large can be seen as the explanation. People are very individualistic these days which leads to members not seeing much value in being connected to a trade union. However, as mentioned by almost everyone, it is first and foremost a communication challenge since individuality and trade union membership are not, and need not to be, mutually exclusive. This point of view was summarized by interviewee B:

*“Members want to be strong by themselves and we have to make them understand that we can make them be stronger and more secure.” (Interviewee B)*

When asked how Unionen is tackling this issue of individuality everyone emphasized the importance of personalized communication and individualized services. This relates to “Phase 2” in Unionen’s communications strategy where the focus is on competence development and career services. Services related to these areas were emphasized by all the interviewees and seen as the way for making union membership more attractive. In particular the “My Profile” tool was heralded by everyone as the means to deal with the challenge of individualism. Overall there seemed to be a lot of enthusiasm for this service since it was regarded as a very cost efficient and effective way of targeting the needs of different groups, professions and so on.

*“...you can choose on the website different areas that interest you, and this web profile is a step to adapt to the world around us.”(Interviewee F)*

*“...members are individualistic; they don’t want to be a part of a giant. A profile membership is the answer then that we work with. Members want to be strong by themselves.” (Interview B)*

*“I think that Unionen has a distinct unique selling point in this membership profile.” (Interview E)*

My Profile platform makes the membership more personalized and interesting for the individual person. This was also regarded as a means for dealing with competition from smaller more specialized trade unions which only target a specific professional group, for example. My Profile was seen as an answer to this by giving Unionen the possibility to target individual member needs better.

Moreover, interview A stressed additionally the fact that since in trade unions members pay only a one time monthly fee for the subscription so the fee structure does not provide good possibilities for evaluating what services are appreciated and which are not. Since My Profile offers the member a chance to voice what he/she is interested in so consequently it also gives valuable information for Unionen about its members. In short, it offers Unionen a possibility to segment their customers cost effectively and this was regarded as one of the main benefits.

However, there were some interviewees that were not completely convinced that this is the way to go forward. The idea is that members get targeted communications materials such as articles according to their interest area.

*"The new service for our members is the membership profile on the Internet. Internally we are in a way really fond of this, but then again we are not sure if this is the activity to do [send more information to members online]. I mean does the world really need more information? If I would want more information I would go to Google, not to Unionen's website so check if they have written an article about this topic. So the thinking is good but maybe the activity is not the best" (Interviewee G)*

In general, it is clear that there is a shift towards individual services in Unionen to accommodate for the growing trend of individualism. Yet, everyone highlighted that this does not mean that collective services have lost their importance. Many interviewees again emphasized that these services are of crucial significance since Unionen does support and promote the "Swedish model". This model is mostly known as a socio-economic formation recognized for its ambitious social welfare policies, its egalitarian social structure, peaceful conditions on the labour market and its emphasis on collective bargaining (Magnusson 2006). However, the nature of collective services has changed a bit so that agreements are done increasingly at the local level. Additionally most people again underlined the communication problem that Unionen, and maybe all trade unions in general, have in communicating about the benefits and meaning of the collective services.

Regarding the service portfolio on the whole it was clear that there is a need to do things cost-effectively. For this reason as well the mass customization services on the web as well as the idea of helping members to help themselves was highlighted strongly. Web based services and information channels were regarded as crucial in this perspective.

*"We have a lot of money, but if every member demands 1 hour of service the money would vanish. These web-based systems are very interesting in Unionen like the web discussion groups where members can help themselves, and that way we can make our service as rational as effective possible." (Interviewee D)*

Consequently interviewees were also highlighted how the nature of trade unions has changed from what it has been 10-20 years ago. The aim of the services is to position Unionen as an “enabler” rather than reliever. The new focus on career services and competence development is in line with this new role.

*We should also be aiming at career development, and I think we are the best trade union when it comes to that. As a member you can get career coaching help up to 6 hours without any cost...And I think this is rather important. We need to go from being relievers to enablers so we don't just take care of people's problems. And that is what is happening when it comes to career services. (Interviewee A)*

Thus, it was apparent to us that most people thought that the way to make trade union membership attractive is by rethinking the role of the union towards the member; the move from being a reliever to enabler as mentioned above. Some interviewees took this idea a bit further and talked about how Unionen should see themselves as creators of networks. This could be one way of making the membership more interesting for people who are high on individuality by giving them the opportunity to network with people who share similar interests. This idea of Unionen as being a forum for the members to meet was regarded as the ideal situation that would most likely appeal to its many members as well.

*“Unionen should be a meeting place, that's the dream of being a new fresh place where it happens, what it [trade union] is all about. That's what we should be, an area for meetings, for members, for potential members.” (Interviewee E)*

*“We may have an important role helping members creating networks.” (Interviewee A)*

The “My Profile” service was also thought of contributing to the community building idea. This was summarized nicely by one interviewee:

*“Through my profile we try to combine this workplace community building with taking care of professional interest, taking care of industrial sector, so hopefully My Profile will contribute to attractive membership. It can also be used for developing services and even activities.” (Interviewee A)*

Finally the interviewees were asked to evaluate the satisfaction level of the members in regards to the services provided. The most interesting outcome was that generally the interviewees thought that those members that do not belong to a club (branch) are generally more satisfied than the ones who do have a club in their organization to turn to.

*“I think that members who have taken part in something we've done are satisfied so we know that what we do is good but there are 2/3 of members that have never even made us a phone call and they are not very satisfied. It's like a packbag that you just add to your expectations. That is a ticking bomb since they don't know what they pay for... they should be aware of what they are paying for and other things [services] we do to make things better, it doesn't need to be bad to use us.”(Interviewee B)*

Some interviewees also saw this issue related to the “insurance company” image and communication problem. Many considered it as a challenge to reach all the members since the trade union structure with all the clubs is extensive.

In conclusion we can say that relationship aspect in Unionen is a challenge. To begin with, trade unions have been recognized as services providers and the intangible offering makes the importance of relationships clear (Björkman 2005). However, the extent to which service marketing principles can be directly applied in this context is debatable. Of course service marketing ideas are relevant but they must

be adapted a bit to fit completely in union setting. It is safe to say that the participants in this study all acknowledged the importance of relationships in Unionen. It is clear that member relationship differs from that of a normal commercial customer-supplier one due to its political nature. Members take part not only in service provision but also in decision-making (Björkman 2005). Yet everyone emphasized that it is a challenge to establish a close relationship with all the members. The club structure with the representatives is one challenge since the final member can be quite far away from the trade union. Also the satisfaction level of the members seems to deteriorate when they belong to a club and members do not deal directly with Unionen.

The establishment and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships is the cornerstone of relationship marketing, and it is argued that business success is dependent on the organization's ability to form mutually beneficial relationships with its many stakeholders (Gummesson 2002). Fernandes & Proença (2008), in turn, emphasize that the precondition for building relationships is to understand what the driving forces of customer relationships are. In terms of Unionen it was clear to us that the organization aims for tighter relationships with its members but one of the main challenges to achieve this fully is the inability of Unionen to communicate the value of membership clearly. Moreover, the general public is not aware of the benefits of the different services provided or how one can benefit from membership in general. Naturally customer value perception is a precondition for any relationship (Grönroos 2000). What is more, Dall'Olmo & de Chernatory (2000) argue that the prones for a customer to be interested in engaging in a relationship with an organization is dependent on the perceived risk and involvement. In trade union context the perceived risk is not necessarily high but the decision to join a certain union is mostly based on subjective images and brand perceptions. Branding in this sense is important in building trust as well as in creating willingness to get involved. However, it is important to keep in mind that idea-based organizations by and large face this challenge in attracting members when involvement is based on voluntarism.

Another interesting conclusion that we can draw from our findings is that Unionen is rather sophisticated in its effort to meet individual needs. Considering the growing trend of individualism Unionen has already started taking measures to better accommodate their services to meet the needs of its members on a more individualized basis. My Profile along with focus on competence development and career services are examples for this. This indicates that Unionen is not blind to the changing world around them but has realized that they themselves need to change if membership figures are to be boosted. Also it was generally highlighted that in order to be attractive compared to competition Unionen must be able to target individual needs better. The strength of Unionen can ultimately be its ability to organize the whole workplace. This kind of "one company – one trade union" ideology can be a way to establish a unique selling point for the union as well.



To sum up, in order to attract and maintain customers or members in the case of Unionen it is important that the organization adopts a customer oriented way of operating. We can conclude that Unionen is customer focused in its operations and our findings indicate that the union aims and wants to listen to its members as much as possible. However, it is apparent that the situation is not optimal yet and especially communication between different parties is not sufficient.

#### **5.4 Revised member branding framework**

In this study we have discussed how Unionen is embracing branding as a service organization. Branding questions have received a highlighted position in the new trade union due to the fact that it needs to communicate about its existence and what it stands for in light of the recent merger. Successful brands especially in service contexts require that special attention is paid on nurturing relationships that develop employees' and members' respect for certain functional and emotional values of the brand (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmio Riley 1999, in McDonald et al. 2001). It is for this reason that branding work needs bigger emphasis on issues related to values, organizational culture and so on. Consequently branding turns into a comprehensive undertaking that demands skills that span across different departments (McDonald et al. 2001). According to Grönroos (2000) marketing is not confined to one department rather everyone is seen as a part-time marketer responsible for creating and influencing the brand.

It is due to the importance of brand in informing both members and employees that we introduce and relate the term "member branding" to trade union branding process. Overall, on the basis of our empirical findings we can update our theoretical framework for member branding to account for the more complex nature of branding in trade unions. The updated member branding framework is illustrated in figure 8.

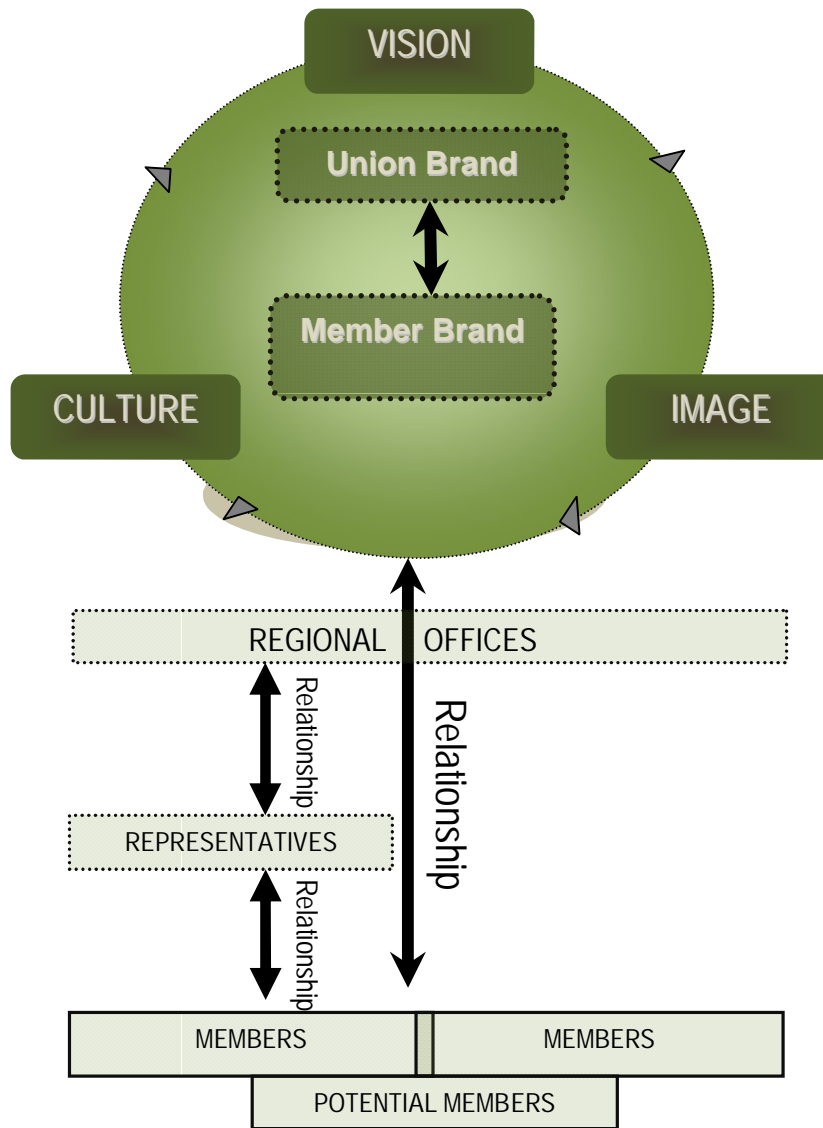
The framework describes the different elements that constitute and contribute to a strong brand. Coherent internal perception and understanding of the brand is a precondition that the external stakeholders will view the brand favorably as well. Furthermore, it is a requisite that there is a clear alignment between the vision, culture and image dimensions of the brand. Once these aspects are in harmony favorable brand relationship with members will come about.

Moving on to the external side of member branding the model (figure 8) shows how the structure of the trade union with its regional offices sets extra challenges in achieving a coherent and unified communication strategy since the overall corporate brand is filtered and influenced by the regional office in a member's area. Of course this is not pertinent to all trade unions in general but at least in the case of Unionen this is an aspect that needs to be taken into consideration.

Secondly, the framework depicts the multiple relationships that exist. Firstly the type of relationship between the final member and a union is of special character since people are not only users of services but they also have a political interest involved. Unions have different types of members that furthermore differ in terms of their interests, occupations etc. as well as in their willingness to get involved in trade union work. It is then ultimately about appealing to people through the brand that they find trade unionism attractive. Also the establishment of a special relationship with the representatives is important since they are the ones who ultimately act as “brand ambassadors” for a trade union. The role of the representatives is crucial since they carry the union brand, and hence they also contribute to the overall brand image.

In consequence, the framework appreciates that the branding efforts should be directed towards the relationship between member-union and member-representative. Hence, according to the model below there is, first of all, the brand that needs to be managed in general towards the members but other important “actors” are the representatives that also engage in creating and promoting the brand and establishing relationships. Therefore, there is a two level interaction involvement. In light of this interaction there is a need to develop a communications strategy to ensure coherent and unified messages are reached all the way down to the final member.

To sum up, member branding is a perspective derived from union or corporate branding with the emphasis on relationship. The goal of member branding is then to make trade union membership attractive and consequently if members understand the value of the union membership the ultimate retention will be improved as well. Again even though the different terms emerge from the same fundamental branding principles we consider it relevant to introduce the concept of member branding as it better summarizes the nature of branding in trade union context.



**Figure 8.** Revised framework for member branding (Own adaptation based on the model by Hatch & Schultz 2001)

## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter we will address the research questions that we formulated for the purpose of this study. The aim was to investigate what is the role of branding in Unionen, how branding will help in attracting and retaining members as well as to explore what kind of connection there is between branding efforts and organizational culture. Answers to these questions are provided below.

### 6.1 What is the role of branding in Unionen and how it is carried out?

Branding has gained popularity in marketing thought since the 1980s but previous research of its role and meaning in trade unions has not been done. This was one of the issues that this study addresses. We began by introducing ideas of corporate branding as we consider that is more suitable for trade union context. Later we have chosen to talk about member branding since it is not only the corporation that is in focus rather the member relationships. Moreover, since trade unionism is based on voluntarism we consider that branding is a more comprehensive endeavor compared to what more traditional companies deal with.

Our research indicates that branding in Unionen is interesting due to its somewhat uncertain position. On the one hand, it is clear that the recent merger has given a heightened role for branding. A general feeling is that everyone is aware of the fact that in order to curve the dropping membership figures and to modernize the concept of trade unionism new actions are needed and branding is seen as one means for achieving this. Therefore, a lot of enthusiasm is present in Unionen but under the surface the ideology of “anti-capitalism” is also affecting the role of branding in a sense that argumentation done in favor of branding must be more delicate. This as such does not need to have a negative impact on branding work but naturally if important discussions are avoided in brand planning then the overall brand can suffer.

Currently, the branding process has taken off quite well according to our research and even though it is naturally somewhat early to make judgments we can at least conclude that externally the first phase in branding and communications has been successful. The goal was to increase awareness of the existence of Unionen and that has been achieved so far.

Internally challenges of unifying two organizations set additional challenges to branding work. On the whole, we can conclude that the internal branding work is embraced with enthusiasm, and especially different internal marketing activities aiming to bring people together are viewed positively in general. Our study thus indicates that Unionen is quite sophisticated in its branding work in a sense that they do not only concentrate on the external image building but do emphasize the importance of having a unified brand internally before the external one can be coherent. Therefore there is currently much emphasis on the internal aspect such as organizational culture and values related work.

We also found out that Unionen is keen to involve and listen to its many stakeholders such as employees and members when formulating the brand and this is important for gaining better acceptance and involvement for the brand later on.

The future challenges in branding are many and among the most crucial ones is to further align vision, culture and image; the dimensions of the brand. Essential in this aspect is to get regional offices to “live the same brand”. Naturally regional variations are unavoidable, and to certain degree even desirable if “closeness” is one of the values Unionen adheres to, but if regions do not feel ownership to the brand Unionen might face the problem that the brand is seen as something done at the headquarters only. A central decision to be made by Unionen now is to what degree one wants to pursue local adaptation or if the organization should be more centrally-driven.

Furthermore, the many relationships that Unionen, and trade unions in general, have to manage set challenges for achieving seamless communication between members and different local offices. This is also a challenge that Unionen faces which ultimately can undermine brand building work if not addressed at an early stage.

## **6.2 How does branding help in attracting and retaining members?**

Our research indicates that there is a connection between branding and relationship-building since both entail an establishment of a close bond with the customer/member and having an appealing brand contributes to the establishment of relationships and vice versa.

First of all it is clear that brand can be regarded as a valuable asset for a company in making it stand out from competitors. It will be through branding that Unionen can obtain competitive advantage by profiling themselves from other similar unions and this will work as one way of attracting members. Clear positioning will also help Unionen to compete with other more specialized trade unions. According to our findings one aspect for making trade union membership attractive is to capitalize on the value of being close to the members. Many other unions do not have as extensive regional network as Unionen does which makes the closeness aspect a unique selling point for the organization.

Furthermore, the trend of individualism is something that all trade unions have to face up with. Young professionals, which are the main target group of Unionen, have instrumental rather than ideological needs when it comes to trade union membership (Bruhn 1999 in Björkman 2005). Therefore, in order to attract this group Unionen must appeal to these people through attractive offering that meets the more individually based needs. According to our research is apparent that Unionen focuses on members as unique entities and an indication of this is that service portfolio is clearly designed to meet the new challenges that changed values in society at large and the trend for individualism have created. The

emphasis on individual member needs regarding the service offering is vital in terms of improving satisfaction and retention among members.

Regarding the actual relationships with the members we can conclude that firstly Unionen is interested in engaging in more close relationships with its stakeholders but for the time being Unionen has not been that successful in communicating the benefits of trade union membership or its changed nature as a trade union in general. Furthermore, there is also a communications problem in which the vision and values are not flowing to the targeted stakeholders i.e. members of Unionen. If communication is not being received by external stakeholders then how can such groups form an image of Unionen? Even more, misperceptions may arise which can be a risk for the organization. In consequence we see a gap between vision, values and image dimensions. Branding can have an important role to play here in crafting member-union relationship. Brand awareness and acceptance will consequently facilitate communication between the different stakeholders.

Taking into account the fact that trade unions are nonprofit organizations branding can also work as a way to support and create awareness for their cause. This is necessary in order to engage people in trade union work which they would find meaningful. Thus, the branding serves as a meaning creating device. Since the representatives carry the brand, and have therefore a crucial role in exposing the brand to other members, it is of crucial importance that they truly believe in the union cause.

Based on these arguments it is clear that branding efforts are valuable for trade unions. If people are aware of the efforts and what lies within a brand the consequent relationship will be strengthened. The importance of attracting and retaining members is therefore obvious, and it is here that the significance of member branding stems from. It is through branding that members are influenced and especially in contexts where evaluations and value images are based on perceptions.

### **6.3 What is the relationship between organizational culture and branding?**

Within this new shift of increased interaction between two major areas of study which are marketing and organizational theories, it is even more questioned if the culture is leading the brand or if it is the other way around? Therefore, one of our main research goals was to find out the relationship between branding and Unionen culture. In general, our study indicates that culture and branding are inseparable and the former presumes the latter if a successful brand is to be achieved.

“Living the brand” is being challenged in Unionen due to a cultural division at the organization. What is more, it is essential to identify with the values in a given organization and even more so in terms of branding efforts. In line with this argument we saw some inconsistencies of how employees perceive the

values. As an example of this the value of being “strong” was seen both as an opportunity and as a weakness. Therefore since this value was regarded as somewhat controversial we think that it could be adjusted a bit to another more neutral word such as “competent”, for example.

The role of internal marketing was seen as crucial in helping to cope with the value internalization process in which two main targets are set for their cultural project: the leaders (top-down leadership) and the organization (internal programs and activities for Unionen as a whole). However, branding efforts cannot be achieved effectively if the culture does not work towards giving a desirable image. We then suggest that communication at micro-level should be improved so members are aware of who and what Unionen is. Members can ultimately help craft the image, the brand and the values of Unionen if they receive the appropriate information.

Based on our study, we see two trends in Unionen related to the overall brand in terms of the culture:

a) *Trend 1*; the gap between the identity of employees and the Unionen brand is somewhat wide.

Even though employees accept Unionen as their current employer, employees still do not have Unionen “T-shirt” completely on. This is due to the fact that the employees still identify themselves with their previous organizations (HTF and Sif) to some degree.

b) *Trend 2*; the gap is narrower between the values of employees and those of the Unionen brand.

We see a positive co-relation between the values of Unionen and those of the employees since organizational values are being expressed with a certain passion by employees. Furthermore, the organizational culture is motivated and enthusiastic, key ingredients for achieving branding success. Therefore, at this stage of Unionen’s brand existence, we could argue that the brand is functioning as a regulator of employee’s values and beliefs. In consequence, the organizational culture and values dimensions are partially thus not completely aligned. Unionen brand and internal marketing activities are complementing each other in guiding the internalization process of the values.

In other words, the brand is giving a certain meaning to employees. We see a path in which the brand is embracing and feeds the organizational culture at Unionen. Hence the brand is influencing the “value internalization process”. Since values are not internalized yet, we can say that the brand has great opportunity to drive organizational culture and create a sense of coherency and purpose for Unionen employees.

#### **6.4 Future research**

Branding research in trade union context is a completely new phenomenon. This study has been one contribution to this field and has provided insights on how branding is seen from one trade union’s point of view. However, in the future it would be interesting to make broader studies regarding branding in trade unions by making comparative studies between several unions. This way, the branding efforts could be better appreciated if studied from different perspectives.

Also we believe that further research in the field of branding is needed from the perspective of the members since they can provide more knowledge regarding branding efforts. In addition, considering that trade unions are nonprofit organizations in a sense that membership and trade union work is based on voluntarism it would be interesting to investigate in more detail what kind of role and meaning branding has for the workplace representatives since they are an important medium for unions to attract more members.



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### **Magazines and Brochures**

- Hetluft – Representative magazine 4/08. Unionen
- Unionen – karriär och utveckling
- Unionen – 15 frågor & svar om ditt nya förbund

# APPENDIX 1

## Interview Guide

### GENERAL

- 1) What is your job/ role in the organization?
- 2) How do you work with branding issues?
- 3) Who is your current membership target?
- 4) In general what do you think are the strengths of Unionen?
- 5) What are the challenges that you think Unionen faces now and in the future?

### HISTORY

- 6) Did you work in HTF or Sif previously?
- 7) What do you think of the merger?

### VISION & VALUES

- 8) What is the vision of Unionen?
- 9) What are the core values of Unionen and how are these communicated externally?
- 10) Do you feel you have internalized the Unionen values?
- 11) What does Unionen offer for its members?

### BRANDING QUESTIONS

- 12) How does Union segment its customers?
- 13) Are there different kinds of offerings to different groups? Examples?
- 14) How does Unionen build relationships with its members?

### BRAND

- 15) How would you define the Unionen Brand?
- 16) How do you define branding and what does it mean to you?
- 17) What is unique to Unionen compared to other trade unions?
- 18) How do you think the brand attracts members? What is the value of the brand?
- 19) How do you evaluate the brand value?
- 20) How do you measure brand perceptions internally and externally
- 21) How would you define Unionen's Corporate Identity?
- 22) How is branding work done from your point of view in the organization?
- 23) When did branding start in trade unions?
- 24) How do Regional Offices work with branding issues or is it done centrally?

### ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

- 25) How would you describe the organizational culture?
- 26) How do the different departments within Unionen work towards the corporate brand?
- 27) How do they see each other in regards their organization?
- 28) How do you think the organizational culture is reflected to its external stakeholders?
- 29) How are the values enforced to employees?
- 30) How is the merger reflected in your everyday work? What expectations you had?

### IMAGE

- 31) Describe the image of Unionen that you think the public has?
- 32) What/How is the image shown to its stakeholders? What is being done to create one both externally and internally?
- 33) What is the most important medium for communicating the image/vision of Unionen?
- 34) How do you know Unionen has a good reputation? How do you measure it?
- 35) What kind of communications channels & strategies exist to gain direct involvement with Union members?

## MARKETING

- 36) What internal and external Marketing activities are done and what kind of programs have been done and will be done in the future to reinforce memberships?
- 37) What is being done to attract future members to the union?
- 38) How do you think Unionen should go about attracting new members?

## HUMAN RESOURCE

- 39) How does HR department work with attracting and retaining employees?
- 40) What internal and external (to attract employees) Human Resource activities and promotions are done?

## SERVICE

- 41) What kinds of service level guidelines are there in place?
- 42) What do you think of the services of Unionen and are there surveys being done?
- 43) How would you describe the customer relationship between the Trade Union and the member?