The Russian Roulette of the Fashion Industry
The case of Balmain

TEACHING NOTES

Excerpt

Case teaching is a valuable tool for dynamic self-learning, and is designed to supplement other teaching methods. It is a combination of both art and skill to accomplish with excellence, and a great amount of detail is needed in order to execute case teaching efficiently. This teaching plan demonstrates a comprehensive guide on how to present and teach the case of 'The Russian Roulette of The Fashion Industry - The Case of Balmain', with a focus on brand management. The background information of this case can be found in the attached documents "MDC_GroupCase22_WrittenCase", and "MDC_GroupCase22_Management Decision".

The aim of this guide is to provide assistance on how to prepare, organise and structure the case in an optimal way. This then leads to an efficient and engaging case discussion, of which will create greater understanding of the defined learning objectives. In the following teaching plan, an overview of the key challenges arising from the case is provided, as well as the desired learning objectives, presentation of the main and assisting questions to guide the discussion. In order to visualise the issue and motivate discussion, this guide also provides teaching suggestions along with a time and board plan. In order to get acquainted with the case, this teaching plan begins with a case synopsis.

Case Synopsis

In April 2011, after a plethora of successes, creative director Christophe Decarnin and luxury fashion brand Balmain decided to end their creative collaboration. Decarnin, during his tenure at Balmain house, revitalised the previously irrelevant brand by injecting a much-needed new look. This was achieved through his fashion forward and easily understood designs, of which provoked a strong celebrity following for the brand, and Decarnin as an inspiring creative leader. What was a brand with poor reputation and impossibly erroneous financial results, was now defining and leading luxury fashion in the 21st century.

The change of creative lead in a luxury fashion house can be strategic, capitalising on the presented opportunities to revitalise a brand. This can be achieved through various methods, one of which is image transfer from the designer themselves onto a brand, but this move can also entail large financial investment and present a large amount of risk. In an industry which is epitomised with high throughput of their creative leaders, the management of these brands, specifically Balmain's owner and CEO Alain Hivelin, needs to weigh the appropriate options in replacing Decarnin. This decision will be significant for the future direction of the Balmain fashion house.

Therefore, a question is posed; how is the position left by Christophe Decarnin to be filled to secure the future of the Balmain brand?

Learning Objectives

The presentation of this case and the discussion of Balmain's need for a strategic decision in a challenging crossroad situation, is designed to transfer several key learnings to the audience which will be defined in the following section. The presented case has numerous implications for strategic corporate brand management and reputation reaching far beyond Balmain and the fashion industry; provoking a debate on a timeless and reoccurring concern of modern brands. Consequently, the case provides the audience with a wide range of learning outcomes in the field of vision and leadership in relation to corporate brand identity, personality and reputation. In the following, an overview of the key learning objectives of the Balmain case will be presented.

Corporate Brands and Brand Representatives

In some cases, individual leaders become so vocal and visible on behalf of the brand that they are instantly associated with their respective organisation's brands. By being this visible, these individuals leverage on this association, and forming a type of sub-brand. Popular examples of this phenomenon are Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk. A leader's personality and behaviour, good or bad, is indisputably linked to the brand and reputation of his or her organisation (Roper & Fill, 2012). A high-profile individual leader can bring a brand an increased level of personal and emotional engagement. This is largely due to the leader becoming a human embodiment (Davey, 2011), of the otherwise rather intangible brand values, and creates credibility and trust. This concept of imposed meaning can be compared to celebrity branding, which works on the premise of a "meaning transfer model" enabling individuals to effectively imbue products with personality and lifestyle connotations (McCracken, 1989; Carroll, 2008; Roper & Fill, 2012). Some of the benefits of using brand representatives with high public recognition, as support to a brand strategy, involve increased attention and awareness, image polishing and brand repositioning (Carroll, 2008).

In the fashion industry, talented creative designers with strong and charismatic personalities can gain prominent status and sometimes, as can be seen with the likes of Karl Lagerfeld or Marc Jacobs, even become brands themselves. Christophe Decarnin was undoubtedly an important leader in the Balmain history, upsetting the status quo, developing a fan base including many celebrities and leading the company into profitability. With his success, he became quickly an important representative for the company and dependency on his personality was high. His successor, Olivier Rousteing, who in the beginning was an unknown designer, turned to social media to promote both Balmain and himself. Together with his powerful network of famous

friends, Olivier Rousteing achieved celebrity status himself, and is now the most followed French fashion designer on Instagram with over four million followers. Rousteing's rise to fame through social media activities represents an integral part to the international growth of Balmain that helped to reposition the brand, reach new customers and increase sales figures.

Despite the numerous benefits, there are also some potential problems with high profile leaders and brand representatives. The strong link between a high-profile individual's behaviour and the corporate reputation will create a dependency which is not entirely controllable for the organisation. Misbehaviour or even the departure of such an individual can counteract all the aforementioned benefits, and have severe effects on a brand which might lead to decreasing stock prices (Davey, 2011; Forrest, 2011). Thus, an individual brand of a high-profile leader has the potential to develop such a close link to the corporate brand that their reputations rise and fall in tandem (Davey, 2011; Forrest, 2011), constituting a significant dependency which cannot be ignored. Risk of cannibalisation where the brand representative outshines the product or organisation by becoming more memorable than the product or corporate brand (Keller, 2008; Roper & Fill, 2012), is another potential problem. In these cases the management board needs to strike a balance between leveraging the beneficial personality traits, while having a plan for lessening the negative impact of misbehaviour, departure or cannibalisation (Davey, 2011; Forrest, 2011).

Decarnin's failure to attend his last fashion show caused the speculation of rumours around both Decarnin's health problems, and supposed conflicting views with Balmain's management. His final departure only enforced the speculation and uncertainty on his successor and the future of Balmain, negatively affecting the corporate brand. A learning outcome for the Board of Balmain could be to carefully contain the dependency of the Balmain brand from its popular creative head. The brand has to be strong on its own in order to not be outshined by a popular designer, thereby avoiding embarrassing and catastrophic outcome such as the John Galliano incident and preventing a fall out after the designer's departure.

Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation (Vision and Leadership)

Roper and Fill (2012) establish ten dimensions of which underpin a brands reputation. One of the tenants highlighted within this comprehensive and conceptual framework is the aspect of 'vision and leadership'. The ability to direct and motivate others is an inherent aspect of being an inspirational leader (Roper & Fill, 2012). It is said that strong leaders are those who are able to amplify and vocalise their vision, reinforcing the culture of an organisation, and influencing others to achieve their vision (Roper & Fill, 2012). There are numerous examples of powerful leaders in history, which have demonstrated the ability to guide others, such as political leader Winston Churchill and entrepreneur Richard Branson. During Christophe Decarnin's

position as the creative director of Balmain, he was able to articulate a clear vision and motivate an idle brand to redefine the rigid rule book of fashion in the 21st century.

Strong vision and leadership is a core tenant of creating a strong and lasting reputation of a brand. But it is important to remember a brand is built upon various elements, of which leverage from one fundamental component – the core identity. The core identity is derived from the core values and promise a brand offers, eluding an essence what it stands for. Whilst aspects of a brand such as the expression and position might change over time to become more relevant in the hearts and minds of consumers, it's identity must remain unchanged (Kapferer, 2012). The core identity in this respect, can be likened to the DNA of a brand. The interplay between the various aspects and the core identity can be visualised through Urde's (2013) comprehensive Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) (see **Exhibit 1**). This three-by-three matrix is logically structured and grouped into an external, internal/external, and internal rows, with the core identity at the heart. The arrows in the figure demonstrate how an element of the framework, 'echoes' another, and are highly interrelated, with all elements affecting the core (Urde, 2013).

Closely related to the strong vision and leadership, it is the vision and mission which is of vital importance to the core identity of a brand; an element that has been regarded as the point of departure for a brands identity (Kapferer, 2012). This therefore demonstrates the mission and vision as being the key element in which the brand's core identity is built upon. The mission seeks to explain why the corporation exists, and what motivates its existence beyond financial gains (Kapferer, 2012). Extending the mission, the vision formalises the strategic direction of the corporation and provides inspiration for its future (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1994). In the case of Balmain, the direction of the brand has often been dictated by the creative director, employed to embed and execute on their vision. Therefore, through strategic thought and visionary leadership, the creative director possibly has the ability to significantly impact the creative vision of the brand, and subsequently influences its core identity and resulting reputation through their radical changes. Upon Decarnin's appointment to Balmain house, the media speculated upon the direction he would take the brand on, a consensus was agreed that he would uphold the traditions of the brand, rooting himself within the Balmain DNA (Rotman, 2017). However, his approach to disregard Pierre Decarnin's legacy raised concerns around the rooting for the brand, and what it then stood for and promised clientele.

In an industry synonymous with a high turnover of creative leaders, managing a lasting core identity of a brand can be a troublesome exercise. Particularly as creative directors are expected to lead the brand with strategic thought and visionary leadership. Decarnin's passion for change, and the resulting reputational implications can be visualised using the extended version of the CBIM, the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM) (see **Exhibit 2**), (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The addition of the reputational supporting elements such as willingness-to-support and differentiation, adds value to the previous model, in understanding the

interconnectedness of the tenants, and their repercussions on brand reputation. The appointment of Christophe Decarnin, and the changes he made to the Balmain brand resonate on the strategic diagonal dimension of this matrix (see **Exhibit 3**). Leveraging from a modified identity, the now youthful, relevant brand, Balmains willingness-to-support increased as clinetle were now engaged and inspired by the vision of the brand and its leader. Extending this dimension to the upper right-hand corner, the drastic overhaul of the brand modified the position Balmain in the hearts and minds of clientele, strengthening the strategic dimension of differentiation.

Although the appointment of Christophe Decarnin meant Balmain could celebrate an abundance of successes, a concern is raised as whether the appointment of these strong and visionary leaders is good for the health and maintenance of the core identity of a brand. Where a new leader comes into play and drives a brand revolution, there is a chance these radical changes are too much to comprehend, and the brand does not know where it stands anymore. Therefore, before appointing a new creative director, the management need to be clear on the direction they wish to take the brand on, asking themselves, who are we as a brand? and, what do we stand for?

Overview of Key Learnings

Remember	… the dependency that may evolve from employing a prominent creative designer
Understand	… the impact that the decision on the appointment of a creative designer will contains
Access	… possible options and available candidates to fit the position of the creative designer
Evaluate	… these options upon their benefits and risks, the fit to the brand, the level of dependency that may evolve from the cooperation, ability to lead the brand into future, costs of the appointment and further criteria
Decide	… based on the best-fit to the brand
Consider	… ways, in which you can strengthen your brand independently from its prominent representatives and build a strong reputation reservoir for the future

Table 1: Overview of Key Learnings

Teaching Suggestions

Case teaching represents a powerful learning tool for students as it illustrates real-life management challenges and offers students an opportunity to apply gained theoretical insights to a specific example as well as enhance their analytical thinking. For case teaching to be effective, it must be carefully planned, framed and executed. In the following section we offer a precise plan for the presentation of the Balmain case, that can be summarized in these five steps:

1. Development of the case & preparation of the class for discussion
2. Presentation of the challenge and solution options
3. Guiding discussion
4. Presentation of the actual solution
5. Conclusion and discussion of results

Step 1: Development of the case & preparation of the class for discussion

The case of Balmain is very industry specific, even though the presented problematic is universal to other industries as well. Since not everyone is acquainted with the ways in which the high fashion industry works, it is important to provide understanding for the nature of its business. Further, the audience should be briefed upon the importance of the position of creative designer to the brand, since this represents the main point of discussion for the presented case. Finally, to fully set the scene for the upcoming discussion, the background of the case – including Balmain's history and the events that led to the challenge should be presented to class. This background information can be found in the document "MDC_GroupCase22_WrittenCase" attached to the case files.

Step 2: Presentation of the challenge and solution options

The Challenge of Balmain

After the departure of Christophe Decarnin, the Management Board of Balmain needed to take a decision on a creative successor. In order to address this challenge in class, the instructor should pose questions to open the discussion. As opening the following question with guiding instruction is proposed:

How is the position left by Christophe Decarnin to be filled? Weigh all options that Balmain is facing in this decision by their benefits and risks.

Personas

For better organisation of the discussion, the presentation of five possible succession options in form of personas who can be evaluated against a number of criteria is recommended. The instructor should introduce each option with a short profile providing basic information about the persona's work experience and personality. One of the presented five personas should naturally represent the final option that was actually chosen by the Management Board. In the following an example of five personas is given in table 2.

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4	Option 5
	Design Team	**In-house recruitment**	**Unknown designer**	**Rising star**	**Star designer**
Recruitment type	Internal	Internal	External	External	External
Example	-	Olivier Rousteing	Natacha Ramsay-Levi	Jason Wu	Karl Lagerfeld
Age	21-45 years	24 years	25 years	29 years old	55+ years
Gender	Male and Female	Male	Female	Male	Male
Nationality	Mixed	French	Libanese	Chinese-Canadian	French
Work experience	No famous personalities but longstanding experts in their respective field	Worked for Balmain for the last 3 years	Recently finished fashion school and won several design competitions	Runs his own fashion brand	Extensive portfolio of creative director positions held within luxury fashion houses
Personality	A dedicated team of international designers working together collaboratively without anyone standing out	Outspoken, charismatic, socialite, tech-savvy	Passionate, idealistic, ambitious,	Quiet, understated, likes to stay in the background	Confident, focused, eye for detail, arrogant
Popularity	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Popular in the industry	Popular in the industry and beyond
Miscellaneous	Directions for the designs come from the Management Board			Has contacts to big international celebrities	Affiliated with a wide array of celebrity friends

Table 2: Presentation of Persona

Board Plan

In order to structure the evaluation and analysis of the presented options against several relevant criteria, the instructor can use a pre-prepared matrix, drawn on a whiteboard. The horizontal axis displays the five options while the vertical axis reveals the chosen criteria. The following table 3 shows an exemplary matrix.

Options	Option 1: Design Team	Option 2: In-house recruitment	Option 3: Unknown designer (externally recruited)	Option 4: Rising star (externally recruited - own brand)	Option 5: Star designer (externally recruited)
Alignment to the Brand: (High - Low)	High	High	Low - Medium	Low - Medium	Low - Medium
Level of Brand Responsibility (marketing/retail/ communications): (High - Low)	Low	Medium - High (depends on the agreement with Board)	Low	High	High
Ability to Lead the Brand into Future: (High - Low)	Low	High	Medium	High	High
Potential Brand Dependency (will the brand become dependent on this person(s)?): (High - Low)	Low	Medium	Medium	High	High
Possible Long-Term Solution: (High - Low)	Low	High	Medium	Medium	Medium - High
Costs of Appointment: (High - Low)	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium - High	High

Table 3: Matrix for Board Plan

Step 3: Guiding Discussion

Discussion represents the main part of a case study. In order to ensure that the audience has understood the challenge that Balmain is facing, a short summary of key aspects relevant to the decision should be addressed once again. The audience should be encouraged to keep several questions in mind before assessing the provided options, namely:

- What are Balmain's main issues as a result of Christophe Decarnin leaving?
- What level of dependency can Balmain possibly be seeking with their creative director to carry the name of the brand?
- How do personalities affect the company's internal corporate culture?
- How do personalities affect the company's external perception?
- If strategic marketing and communications are part of the job (of a creative director) - what sort of personality should this person has? Is the personality important?
- What is the possible impact on the reputation?

After the recap, the management challenge should be proposed once again, and the audience should be invited to fill in the matrix by evaluating assessment criteria for each option. From the case instructors group, one person should lead the discussion and ask question and be assisted by the others, who would take care of taking the results of class interaction down in the matrix.

General suggestions for guiding a class discussion

Adapted from the Harvard Business Publishing (2014) the following table sums up key considerations for an instructive and educational case discussion. These suggestions will aid generating a rich discussion, and help to guide the session towards desired learning goals.

In Class Considerations:	Reasoning/Action:
1) Students as Conversation Owners	The discussion should be driven and maintained by the students, and therefore not degenerate to the instructors learning.
2) Avoid Exerting Opinions	Force students to take ownership, all students should have a plan of action to maximise their learning.
3) Be Action Oriented	If students have a solution, focus on the analysis asking questions such as "Why would you do that?" or "What evidence supports this approach?"
4) Manage the Discussion by Themes	Ensure the topic of discussion is relevant for the learning outcomes by themising the analysis and decisions.
5) Manage Trade-Offs	Use questions to manage the depth and breadth of the discussion to heighten conflict e.g. "How does this relate to a brands image?" when discussing age; this will encourage lateral movement of discussion to brand image and so forth
6) Clarify and Heighten Conflicts	When conflicting views are both supported and reasonable, clarifying and heightening can excite the discussion, students should be open and honest and honest in their opinions. Add comments such as "student X and Y have different views, both can't be right; will someone clear this up?"

7) Use Questions to Guide Discussions	Guide conversations with questions, and encourage development on specific points or to clarify opinion or statement
8) Provide Clarification with the Aids	Do not just use the board for passive recording, actively draw connections between ideas and concepts. Be aware that the class boards are used as summaries of learning though
9) Listen	Limited instructor's own opinions. Listening in classroom establishes students are primary.
10) Ensure Respect of Opinion	All thoughts are accepted and embraced. Where holes occur, they should be highlighted by students, but not ridiculed.
11) Use Humour Carefully	Humour can be good to heighten conflicts and make relevant points, but be careful not to force humour
12) Use Body Language	In larger classes, moving around can be reflected in the pace of the class. Non-verbal gestures can also help to manage the discussion. Aid for students to talk to each other rather than the instructor.
13) Provide Summary and Closing thoughts	Use the end widely to briefly sum-up what was discussed and the link theory.

Table 4: Key Considerations for Educational Case Discussion

Step 4: Presentation of the actual solution

At this point of the case, the actual management decision is presented to class. First, the evaluation matrix, as filled in by the case instructors, is presented to compare it to the results of the class discussion. Second, the real person behind the chosen option, in our case Olivier Rousteing, is revealed. The results of his appointment are presented, including the reasoning behind his appointment, his social media affinity, the Balmain Army and the financial success followed by Rousteing's activity.

Step 5: Conclusion and Discussion of results

In the final part of the case teaching, the results of the appointment of Olivier Rousteing are discussed and the problematic of Balmain's dependency on his new, prominent persona are highlighted. One of the reasons behind his appointment was his lack of prominence that reduced Balmain's level of dependency on the creative director and also the reputation risks that come with this dependency. However, Rousteing has been able to reach fame over time and his name is now strongly connected to the brand. This leads to the final conclusion that fashion brands have to build a strong brand on their own, in order to survive the come and go of creative directors.

Time Plan

The presented five steps of the case can proportionally be divided as followed:

Provision of background information	Presentation of the challenge and solution options	Discussion	Presentation of the actual solution	Conclusion and discussion of results
15 %	20 %	40 %	10 %	15 %

Table 5: Time Plan

Use of Media

To provide clarity and a good overview of the case, a mixed use of several media is beneficial. Preparation of a PowerPoint presentation that includes key points about the case background, management challenge and further key points of the case is indispensable.

For the part of class discussion, for Balmain case we suggest the use of media as followed:

- During the discussion the PowerPoint slide should present all of the available options for the management choice, providing the ground for their assessment.
- The evaluation of presented options should be accomplished in the form of a matrix as discussed in the section "Board Plan". For this task the whiteboard should be utilized and prepared prior to the start of discussion.
- Finally, the management question should be visible throughout the discussion, and therefore preferably written out on any other supporting media. If a separate flip chart is not provided, the management question can be placed above the evaluation matrix on the whiteboard. The visibility of the management question will ensure that class participants have a base for their considerations and the discussion is driven in the right direction.

Epilogue

As mentioned in the introduction to this teaching guide, the problematic presented in this case reaches beyond the Balmain brand and goes even further than the fashion industry. The issue, connected to the prominence of certain brand representatives and the consequently developed dependence of the brand on these individuals is present for many companies, especially those whose CEO is vocal and present in the public media. One asks oneself if Tesla would be as relevant as it is without Elon Musk at its front; whether Apple could be as successful as it was under the leadership of its visionary Steve Jobs; or whether Playboy will be able to keep the resonance around its brand after the death of Hugh Hefner. In these cases, the names

of the iconic founders are connected so strongly to the brand, it is hard to imagine one without another.

In case of high fashion brands, the outlook seems to be a bit more optimistic. Most fashion houses have a long history behind them and a heritage to refer to. Fashion houses such as Chanel, Dior or Yves Saint Laurent had the possibility to build and strengthen their brands, as well as earn a reputation over years, so that they can withstand the "shining" of any creative director. Most of these houses reinforce their brands and heritage by leveraging on signature stories. Signature stories represent the strategic positioning and statements of a brand, centralised on the mission, values, customer relations and strategic intent (Aaker, 2016). They provide an enthralling narrative which enables growth by clarifying the brand, and enhancing it. Signature stories are therefore a strategic asset leveraged through time, providing internal and external direction. Through these signature stories brands can authentically deliver their message, independent from one individual leader, even through challenging periods. The future will show, whether Balmain will be able to draw on its reputation repertoire and have the ability to withstand the next potential challenge of parting from Olivier Rousteing.

Reflection

This case study was written for the course BUSN35 Corporate Brand Management and Reputation, and was presented in front of a student audience. The task was particularly intriguing, since students usually are asked to solve business cases, not write them.

To begin with, the group conducted research to seek out interesting cases that were either a good example of brand management over time, or the handling of a brand crises. Three pre-selected cases were then presented to professor Mats Urde and teaching assistant Axel Welinder during a supervision session, and the presented case of Balmain was selected as the final choice for this assignment.

In order to prepare for this case study and to define an appropriate managerial problem, several group meetings were essential to the process. In addition to the managerial problem, we identified several topics of importance that were considered crucial for the understanding of the case. For example, not every student in class might be familiar with the business dynamics of the luxury fashion industry, hence, a lot of emphasis was put on the explanation of leadership roles and the weight of the management question to the Balmain brand. Those points both needed to be clearly articulated in the written case, and in the presentation. For the discussion part of the presentation, a clear and comprehensive manner in evaluating the options was needed. Here, the group was inspired by the Getinge Case presented earlier in the course, and has decided to adopt a similar evaluation matrix, that would assess every option upon a predefined set of criteria.

Two test runs, one with an International Marketing student who had previous background knowledge about the presented brand, and one with a business student who did not have any knowledge about the fashion industry or Balmain, were conducted. These test runs helped us to identify weaknesses in our presentation and modify parts of our case accordingly.

In conclusion, we experienced this assignment as an unusual but exciting learning method for our theoretical, analytical and managerial capabilities. Through the assignment we were able to further develop our skills in problematization and case solving. Overall, we are very content with the outcome of this assignment, and believe that the presented Balmain case has significant potential for future use, and can be used outside this Corporate Brand Management class.

Appendices

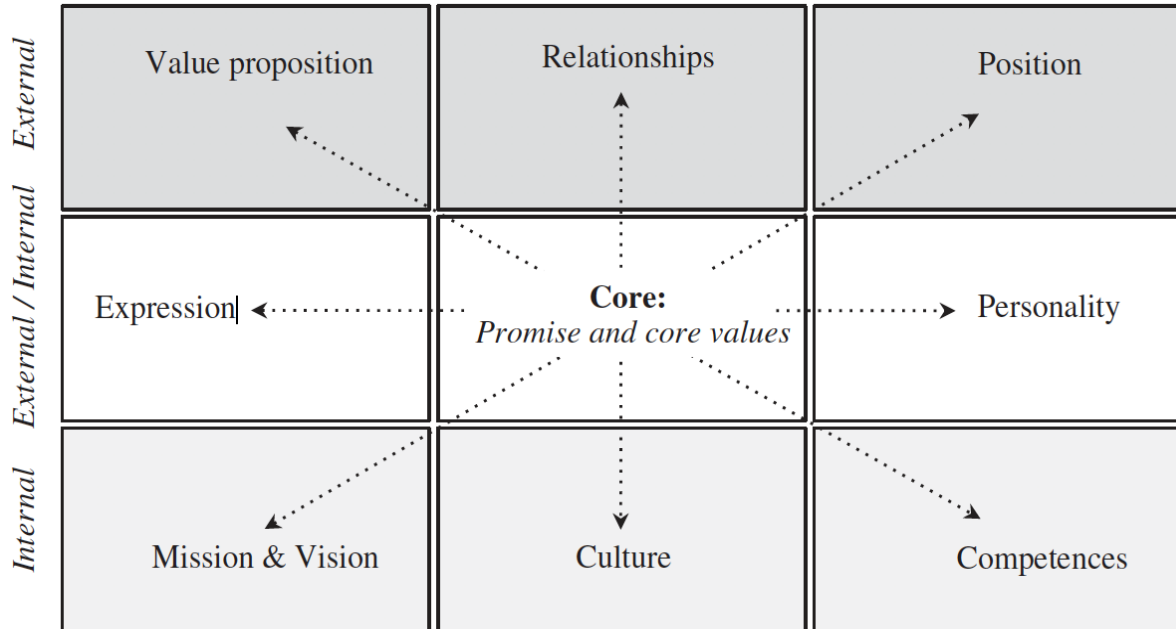**Exhibit 1**: Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Urde, 2013)

Exhibit 2: Corporate Brand Identity & Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2014)
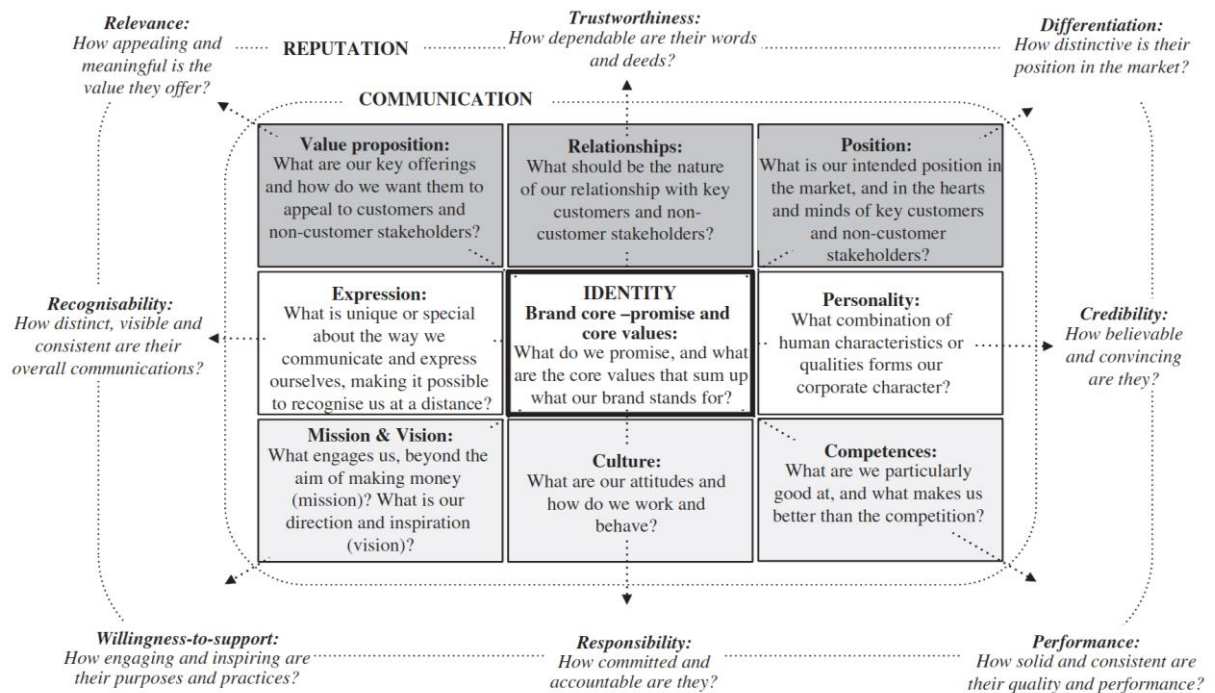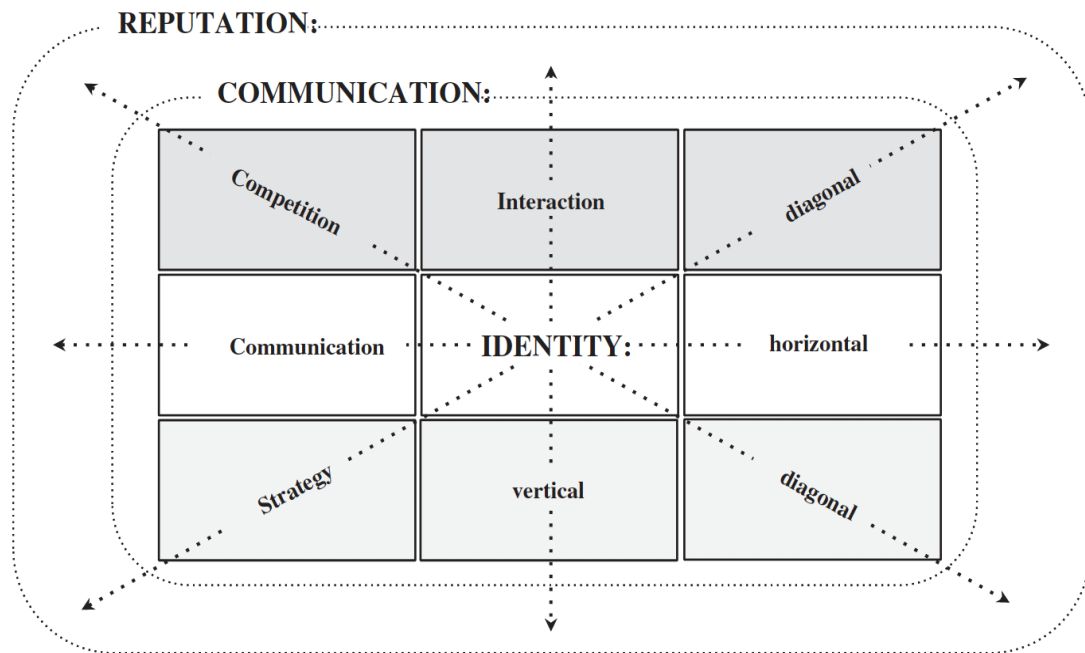
Exhibit 3: Corporate Brand Identity & Reputation Matrix Key Linkages (Urde & Greyser, 2014)

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