

Airbnb - From authentic hero to mainstream zero

TEACHING NOTES

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

Teaching Plan

The following teaching plan provides a comprehensive overview and guides on how the presented case on Airbnb should be taught. The case serves as an example of a company which lost part of its authenticity and trust while growing bigger. Just like many other companies from various industries are facing this or similar issues, Airbnb had to take action and reposition themselves in the hospitality sector. The document “Written Case” is handed out to the students first, as it provides information on the background and history of Airbnb until 2016, when the company started to take several steps to counter their business issues and ends with a management question. Hence, it serves as a stimulus for the upcoming discussion among the students, who act as Airbnb’s management and must come to a potential solution. The decisions Airbnb made are explained in the document “Management Decision” and will be revealed to the students after the first discussion. Thus, the teaching plan is intended to support the presenter with the overall preparation and effective presentation of the case. The aim is to stir an interesting and lively discussion among the students, which should finally result in achieving the below-stated learning objectives. The targeted audience in this case are Master students of the course ‘International Marketing and Brand Management’. The teaching notes include a summary of the most important issues of the case outlined by the case synopsis. It outlines the learning objectives, key learnings and applicable theories. Additionally, it provides teaching suggestions, including a board and time plan. Lastly, it presents an epilogue and a reflection by the authors.

Case synopsis

It all started in 2007 when the three founders of Airbnb began to rent out their loft in San Francisco while acting as hosts and tour guides at the same time. They realized that this would be a great business idea and turned the project into a multibillion-dollar company - in only ten years. But during the last few years, Airbnb faced challenging times. In the USA, a study in 2014 suggested that a ten per cent increase in Airbnb listings causes a 0.42 per cent increase in rents and 0.76 per cent increase in house prices. All around the world, residents complained about Airbnb and the impacts on their hometowns and lives. As a result, its reputation experienced a setback and the company found itself thinking about how they could get back on track and continue growing in a valuable and appropriate way. Airbnb is still a global player in the hospitality industry, however, regarding the future strategic development of Airbnb, it is important to consider how the company will position itself on the market and how Airbnb plans to maintain its reputation through extensions to their existing portfolio.

The Airbnb case can be categorized as an evergreen case since it captures management challenges which many organizations could face at some point. Therefore, this case is relevant for the present and the future for start-ups. In recent years it has become quite attractive for entrepreneurs to start their own company. These start-ups are often relying on certain core values of the owners, however, there is a trend, which has been observed, that at some point of being successful stinginess

increases and the core values are pushed in the back, which is why this case is relevant to the analysis.

Learning objectives

Several key learnings are intended to be achieved through the presentation of the case, the subsequent discussion and evaluation of various management decisions. These can be found in the following chapter. Moreover, the case and its learning objectives can be linked to different theories and models from the brand management literature. As the most prominent and important subjects from theory, the literature on corporate brand identity as well as corporate brand reputation were identified.

Corporate Brand Identity

Corporate brand identity can be defined by how a company would like to be seen and perceived in the market. It consists of elements such as attributes, traits, behaviours or culture, which are then communicated to stakeholders. Furthermore, brand identity can be seen as a key aspect of strategic marketing as it helps to win and keep customers as well as it is a means to differentiate. Moreover, brand identity is crucial for employees since it facilitates their work and makes it easier for them to identify with the company (Duffy, 2017). What stands out in the brand identity is the brand's core as it presents the consistent essence of a business (Urde, 1999). Airbnb defines their core values as championing the mission, being a host, embracing the adventure and being a cereal entrepreneur. Championing the mission refers to their mission of changing the way people travel and to contribute to a world where everyone can belong everywhere and people can live in a place instead of simply visiting it (Airbnb, 2020). Thus, brand identity is a rather important aspect in this case because Airbnb grew into a huge business and acquired several additional extensions to their offering in the past years. The growth came along with several issues such as increased rental prices in major cities or annoyed locals. This already took away some of Airbnb's initial authenticity. Moreover, some of the extensions, such as Luxury Retreats or HotelTonight, are rather questionable when it comes to their initial core values, too.

A great way to make the importance of the corporate identity visual is the so-called Corporate Brand Identity Matrix, which was developed in 2013 by Urde. As can be seen in the model (**Exhibit 1**), it consists of nine elements with the identity, including promise and core values, in the very center. It illustrates a clear interdependence between the different elements, though the core is the element through which all lead at the end (Urde, 2013). The first management question refers to how Airbnb can regain its authenticity after being negatively portrayed in the media, wherefore it is important to look at the core values in order to reach a decision that is in line or to evaluate why some decision/alternatives might cause even more harm to the company's authenticity.

Another model useful for corporate identity is the Corporate Identity Mix by Birkigt & Stadler (1986 cited in Roper & Fill, 2012). The model, which can be found in **Exhibit 2**, illustrates that not only symbolism and design are important for corporate

identity, but also adds behaviour and communication to it. The three elements in the middle 'symbolism', 'communication' and 'behaviour' are equally influenced by and influence both internal and external audiences. Symbolism stands for graphic elements, whereas planned communication is, for instance, corporate advertising and behaviour includes management behaviour (Roper & Fill, 2012). This, again, can be applied to the Airbnb case. In their communication to internal and external audiences, they communicate their initial mission, vision and core values. Also, this is illustrated in their logo, which combines people, places, love and Airbnb (Airbnb, 2020). Nevertheless, their management behaviour speaks for itself when they decided to grow the business larger by adding extensions such as the partnership with Niido or into the luxury sector.

Furthermore, the Brand Identity Prism by Kapferer (2008) serves as another model for brand identity, while at the same time building the bridge to the next theoretical concept of corporate reputation. The prism (Appendix 3) illustrates six characteristics of a brand, which are defined as physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection and self-image by Kapferer (2008 cited in Roper & Fill, 2012). Physical aspects are for instance color or logo of a brand, whereas the personality is made up by a company's traits and how consumers' perceive this. Moreover, the culture mirrors brand values and the relationship relates to the interaction with customers. Customer reflection looks at how consumers reflect with a brand when using it. Additionally, the self-image talks about how consumers perceive themselves when using the brand (Roper & Fill, 2012). These elements should be in line, though there can be seen a contradiction in the case of Airbnb. A growing number of people are becoming aware of the negative impacts of Airbnb on both the economy and society, as it was explained in the document "Written Case". Thus, people looking for authentic travel experiences, as promised by Airbnb, might start rejecting the brand because it is not in line with their values anymore and contradicts with the customers' self-image.

Corporate Reputation

In the previously described Brand Identity Prism, the role of the consumer in the brand identity discussion became more prominent, thus it forms the transition from brand identity (internal) to brand reputation (external), which certainly is equally important in the case of Airbnb. There are many different definitions of reputation, however, it can be summed up as the overall image and perception stakeholders hold on a company. Brand reputation is essential for, for instance, investing in it can come with benefits such as the possibility to charge premium prices. Also, it is a means of differentiation as well as it can offer a competitive advantage to a business. When building a positive reputation, customers can act as so-called 'advocates', whereas a negative reputation can facilitate the emergence of 'terrorists' (Roper & Fill, 2012).

In line with the emerging importance of brand reputation, the previously described Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix have been adjusted and reputational elements were added to it (**Exhibit 4**), such as relevance, responsibility, trustworthiness, or credibility. Thus, it builds the bridge between corporate identity and corporate reputation management (Urde & Greyser, 2016). In the Airbnb case,

the revised matrix can be used to analyse how the different reputational elements of the matrix have been influenced in the course of the past years of growth and product/service extension. The trustworthiness and responsibility, for example, can be seen as being negatively affected due to unsatisfied locals or issues with local taxes, as elaborated on in the 'Written Case'. Also, the element 'willingness-to-support' can be seen as impacted as with their mission Airbnb intended to attract customers that seek authentic travel experiences. Those who do might, however, not be attracted by a company that is accused of increasing rental prices or adding an extension to their portfolio such as Hoteltonight or Niido. Airbnb Experiences, on the other hand, can be seen as a rather positive extension when it comes to reputation since it brings back part of Airbnb's authenticity and connects and includes locals and guests on a new level.

Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is another crucial aspect in the Airbnb case as, due to their product and service extensions, they underwent some kind of repositioning between 2016 and the present 2020. Van Riel and Fombrun (2007 cited in Roper & Fill, 2012) see it as a key aspect that what a company intends to communicate should be organized consistently around a core topic. They further refer to this as 'reputational platform'. Stakeholders must be provided with understandable core messages, otherwise, they might end up confused about the positioning, which in turn might lead to the brand's under-performance (Roper & Fill, 2012). In the Airbnb case, it is important to emphasise this core, especially after their immense growth and amendment of new products and services. The question then is either how to align the new products and services with their initial core values or how to adjust their core values to the new environment. If Airbnb wants to stick to what they initially have founded their company on, is changing people's ways of travelling, they could make use of the 'expressive core positioning theme' (**Exhibit 5**), based on Cornelissen and van Riel and Fombrun (2008, 2007 as cited in Roper & Fill, 2012), which seeks to differentiate a company via the usage of symbols as well as values. Through using those repeatedly, the company becomes associated with the desired values. The initial company strategy was also based on the expressive core positioning theme, though there can be identified a tendency that they are now moving more towards a functional and general strategy. On the one hand, it is functional as Airbnb is still superior to hotels when it comes to their societal impact of bringing locals and tourists together, while on the other hand it is general since it creates overall industry demand and lost part of is differentiation due to raising competition through imitators.

Overview of Key Learnings

The emphasis on this case lies on the possibility to extend a brand portfolio to add value and growth while sticking to core values and thus aligning both brand identity and image. The following **Table 1** provides an overview of the learning objectives of the discussed case. They are divided into the themes remembering, understanding, applying, evaluating and creating. Each topic is given a short explanation as well as how it relates to the specific case.

Table 1 Key Learning Objectives

Key Learning Objectives		
Remembering...	...the problem of establishing a company on brand identity (especially core values) which are getting lost along with their exponential growth and lead to misaligned brand identity, image and reputation among stakeholders.	In this case: Airbnb as an ‘accidental’ business idea with the mission to change the way people travel and an authentic underlying concept and the desire to grow and make profit
Understanding...	...the potential negative effects of exponential growth and addition of product/service extensions.	In this case: Negative associations with Airbnb through higher rental prices, dissatisfied locals, Airbnb as a ‘mere business purpose’ for hosts, local tax issues and partly misaligned (?) product/service extensions that give the impression of Airbnb only being for-profit instead of authenticity
Applying...	...managerial decision to extend a product portfolio to add value and growth and to regain authenticity and trust.	In this case: Brand (re)positioning
Evaluating...	...possibilities to extend a product portfolio that adds values, growth and is in line with the company’s core values.	In this case: Usage of theory - Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016) - Corporate Identity Mix (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986) - Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2008) - Core Positioning Themes (Cornelissen, 2008; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007)
Creating...	...ideas for product portfolio extensions that can help companies to add value and growth while taking into account their core values.	In this case: Add authentic product/service extensions

Discussion Questions

The discussion should evolve as a natural extension of the previous presentation. Thus, the first question needs to be aligned with the provided information and introduce the discussion smoothly. It is supposed to be easily approachable to enable as many students as possible to take part in the discussion and bring in a variety of ideas. This is why the following question is recommended to be used as the opening question.

How can Airbnb adjust their portfolio to tackle the negative headlines?

In the case of Airbnb, the discussion is referring to the situation in 2016. The students are asked to analyse how the company can move on by adding new products to their portfolio and thereby add value and continue growing.

The following questions can be useful in guiding and supporting the discussion:

- *What exactly is Airbnb's portfolio?*
- *What possibilities has the hospitality industry to offer?*
- *Should they look for opportunities outside of the market that they are operating in at the moment?*
- *How is Airbnb positioning itself?*
- *What are their main competitors doing?*

At the end of the case presentation - after presenting the implementation performed by Airbnb - there will be time for final thoughts. The students are asked to express their opinion about the decisions Airbnb has made. This time, the question is open-ended due to the currentness of the case and it cannot be said how Airbnb will develop. The following question is considered appropriate as an opener of the discussion.

Do you think these launches and acquisitions align with Airbnb's core values?

In like manner, there are supportive questions:

- *Is the extended portfolio affecting the brand image?*
- *Is the extended portfolio misaligned?*
- *Can Airbnb rescue its reputation through the launches and acquisitions?*
- *What are the impacts of the extended portfolio on Airbnb's core values and brand image?*

Teaching Suggestions

Case-based learning is a great tool in order to engage students and create a real-life atmosphere in which previously acquired knowledge can be applied and tested. Therefore, it is extremely important that the presenter must be able to lead the presentation in an appropriate way. This section will provide a guideline which includes teaching suggestions and a time and board plan in order to lead the discussion. In order to engage the students, it is recommended to include various visual tools. The presenter should have a visually appealing PowerPoint presentation complemented by the usage of the whiteboard in the classroom. Writing down notes and thoughts during the presentation adds value to the learning process due to the collective creation of contribution to the case.

In the following, the three main phases of the case presentation will be considered and advice will be given. The first phase is the *pre-presentation and introduction phase*. Having the cover slide of the presentation already on the wall creates the right atmosphere because the students know the topic and will consciously or even unconsciously revise what they know about it. In order to ensure a clear understanding of the case, the first part of the presentation should provide basic information and cover all relevant topics for the following discussion.

The second phase is the *discussion phase*. During this phase, the presenter acts as a discussion leader. After having introduced the main question, they must ensure that throughout the entire discussion the question remains visible to the students. Also, the discussion leaders must keep a neutral attitude, though they must guide the discussion in order to prevent it from going in a wrong or misleading direction. They must keep in mind that in the end the discussion question must be answered. It is recommended to distribute the written case beforehand that in case students want to recap the given information or make use of the information as a support of their arguments. At the end of the discussion it is recommended that the presenter asks one student to give a short summary of what has been discussed.

The last phase is called the *concluding phase* and represents the final part of the presentation. The last minutes of the presentation are as important as every other part and should not be given too little attention. The case will be summarized through a final exchange of thoughts. In other words, the students can reflect on what they have heard and given their opinion on the management decision taken by the board of Airbnb. It is an important aspect of the learning outcome, to be able to objectively recap the entire case and come to a final point of view. At this point it is useful to have a vote to get an insight into how the students interpreted the management's decisions.

Time Plan

Time management is an important aspect of a presentation in order to cover all the parts without the need of rushing through or even skipping some of them. Therefore, the presenter is recommended to spend a certain amount of time on each part of the presentation, which can be seen in **Figure 1**.

The first 15 minutes will cover the general information relevant for the case, such as company background, structure and positioning as well as the incidents which lead to the current situation. Everything that is necessary in order to grasp the problem needs to be told. At this point, the students are aware that Airbnb is in a situation that requires change. Thus, the presenter will open the first discussion with the above-proposed question. This part of the presentation will take approximately 15 minutes, in order to give enough time for adequate elaborations. The presenter will only act as a discussion leader and guide by passing on the word and supporting the stream of insights with the supporting questions, but the main content will be produced by the students.

The presenter will structure the insights on the whiteboard in the form of a decision making process table, as further explained in “board plan”. After the students had the chance to collect their thoughts, the presenter will display the portfolio extensions implemented by Airbnb which will take roughly five minutes. In order to conclude the case the students will have about ten minutes to express their opinions on Airbnb’s management decisions.

Figure 1 Time Plan



Board Plan of the Discussion

In order to structure what has been said, a decision-making-process table will be drawn on the whiteboard. It is up to the presenter if she/he wants to take the role of the person writing down the notes on the whiteboard, or if one of the students will be appointed. **Table 2** displays what the board plan could look like during the discussion, it should contain three elements; the key factors, analysis and alternatives. Afterwards the students are asked to evaluate the different alternatives and develop proper recommendations.

Table 2 Decision-making process

Key factors and challenges	Analysis	Alternatives and actions
<p>Current situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bad image - Struggling to be authentic - Losing its identity through fast growth - Red numbers - Angry locals - Airbnb had to pay fines - Issues with city councils - Airbnb is only profit oriented - Affects core values - Affects different stakeholders (external: hosts, guests, locals, governments, competitors) 	<p>Frameworks and tools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand Identity Prism - CBIRM Matrix - Corporate Identity Mix - Core Positioning Themes - Core Positioning Themes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adventure trips - “Rent a local” - “Back to the roots” - Luxury stays - To match with a travel partner -New criteria; the host must be present all time - To rent out more rooms, instead of whole apartments -To limit numbers of Airbnb’s rentals per city - Better communication from Airbnb - To offer local experiences - Embrace and emphasize the founders’ core values on which the company was founded <p>→ Identify crisis → Identify main issues and take real, immediate action → Talk to affected stakeholders, take in their opinions and concerns; collaborate with them → Take public and honest stand → Strengthen core values → Fix issues</p>

The first step is collecting the status quo information in the column key factors, followed by naming appropriate frameworks and tools that can help the analysis of the situation. Based on this different alternatives will be formulated. Because this Airbnb case is focusing on adding value and growth through extending their portfolio, there are no right or wrong answers. What the students are going to come up with is unpredictable, which is why these teaching notes provide examples that represent the alternatives that the students might identify. For instance, adventure trips, such as staying at an Iglu or tree house, or making travelling affordable by

providing a platform where you can match with other single travellers to stay at an Airbnb together. Taking all elements into consideration, the students will have to decide which alternative(s) they recommend implementing.

Epilogue

In 2015, Airbnb made plenty of negative headlines due to increasing rental prices for locals, breaking rules in the tax law as well as the alienation of locals in their neighbourhoods. After this, they enlarged their portfolio by five extensions (Airbnb Experience, Luxury Retreats, Niido, Airbnb Plus and HotelTonight) in order to align with the company's mission.

Within five years, much has changed since they recently reached 500 million guests and experience even further growth. Due to the fact that some of their recent add-ons were just added two years ago, it cannot be said yet how this will further influence the company and its values. However, it can be said that Airbnb Plus and Airbnb Experiences have been successful and travellers have shown interest and approved these extensions, therefore, it has added value to their portfolio.

The Airbnb case illustrates how a start-up company can face exponential, worldwide growth over a rather short period and how this is linked to potential constraints and issues along its way. What occurred in the Airbnb case led to divided opinions among both users and non-users, for instance Millennials tend to like the concept, whereas older generations rather present the opponents due to e.g. increased rental prices in major cities. Also, Airbnb's initial idea of changing the way people travel was challenged by increasing profit and the related lust for more. Through growing so big, as well as incorporating new features, Airbnb's core values are not quite in line anymore with their portfolio. Hence, the company must decide whether they want to change their portfolio in order to be able to align again with their core values from 2008 or if they have to adjust their values in order to be an authentic company, where its operations and values match.

Reflection

This section will reflect on the entire process of writing a case study that can be used in a student classroom. Furthermore, it will describe how the transition from being a student that receives the input to the teacher that needs to create the output was perceived. At an early stage, the group had to prepare three cases which were then discussed during supervision with the professor of the course, Mats Urde. All three of them were crisis cases and the group was advised to reconsider other topics than crisis management. Eventually, the group decided to look deeper into the topic of how a corporation handles their reputation after they had experienced a crisis, intending to evaluate their positioning, brand image and reputation rather than considering the actions taken during the period of the crisis itself.

Unfortunately, the chosen case happened to be too broad and interrelated with too many aspects, that it seemed impossible to create a situation in which all relevant information would fit into a discussion that would not exceed the available time

frame at the presentation day. Hence, further brainstorm sessions followed and the group had to realise that it was not that simple to find an appropriate case that matches the settings of the course. However, all the research is done and the discussions held turned out to be very helpful regarding the development of skills in the field of assessing in how far data is relevant and applicable to a predefined topic. Once the group decided to choose Airbnb it had overcome the biggest challenge by that and it experienced peaking motivation as well as enthusiasm about getting started. The Airbnb case is - as explained at the beginning of this paper - an evergreen example, but still a rather unique scenario due to its interruption of the market.

The next task was defining the right approach and angle to the case. This included finding the right questions that would be asked during the discussion. Here, we had to consciously change our mindset from student to teacher for the first time. We asked ourselves which teaching style and approach usually keeps our attention and how we would like to deliver the information of the case, in order to create interest among the students. We were not used to analysing our own behavior as students, which made this an interesting task regarding getting to know our attitude and approaches towards processing information during class. Thinking as teachers, we wanted to have a rather broad overarching discussion question that is accompanied by more specific questions that would allow different perspectives and hopefully make the students think about aspects that they would not have considered without. We intended to create an engaging and interactive atmosphere since we figured that this is what we would appreciate ourselves as students.

Overall, the most challenging parts for us were defining a case that suited the course layout and the most valuable learning was the change of perspective from student to teacher. We experienced the course and especially the case based learning as demanding, yet extremely insightful.

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Appendix

Exhibit 1 Corporate Brand Identity Matrix applied to Airbnb (Urde, 2013)

External + Internal Internal	Value Proposition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a place to stay - to become a host • to increase tourism spending • to change the way people travel <p>Cheaper than hotels, local accommodations, get to know locals</p>	Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • key customers: make them feel home • embrace the vision to belong anywhere 	Position <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • change the way people travel • to be the market leader in their sector/industry
	Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their rebrand: combine People + Places + Love + Airbnb = forms their logo • follow-up communication through the app and emails • first disruptor of hotel industry 	Core (promise+core values) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • championing the mission • being a host • simplifying • being a cereal entrepreneur • embracing the adventure • every frame matters 	Personality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • entrepreneurial spirit
	Mission and vision <p>Mission "to contribute to the creation of a world in which everyone can belong anywhere and to provide people with the opportunity to actually live in a place instead of simply visiting it"</p> <p>Vision "belong anywhere"</p>	Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being authentic • caring, open and encouraging to everyone they are working with • driven by curiosity and positivism, embracing the adventure • entrepreneurial spirit 	Competences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unicorn experience • rapid growth • large portfolio • popularity

Exhibit 2 Corporate Identity Mix applied to Airbnb (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986)

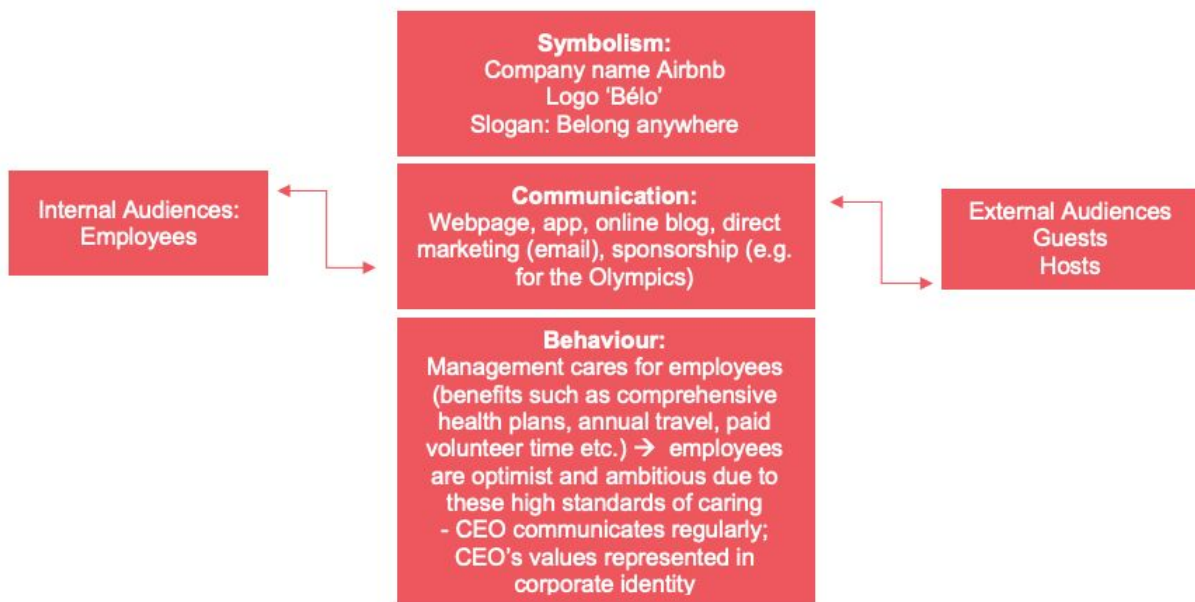


Exhibit 3 Brand Identity Prism applied to Airbnb (Kapferer, 2008)

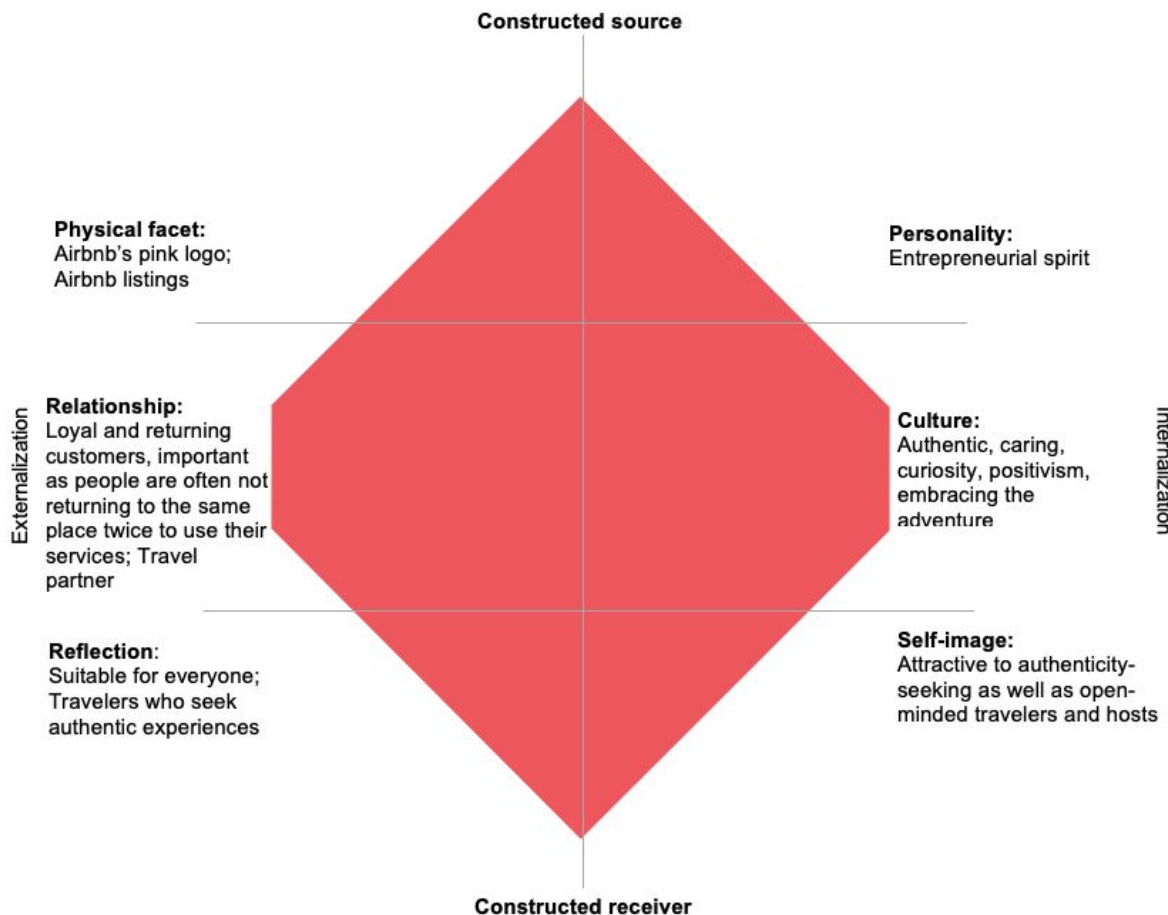


Exhibit 4 Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016)

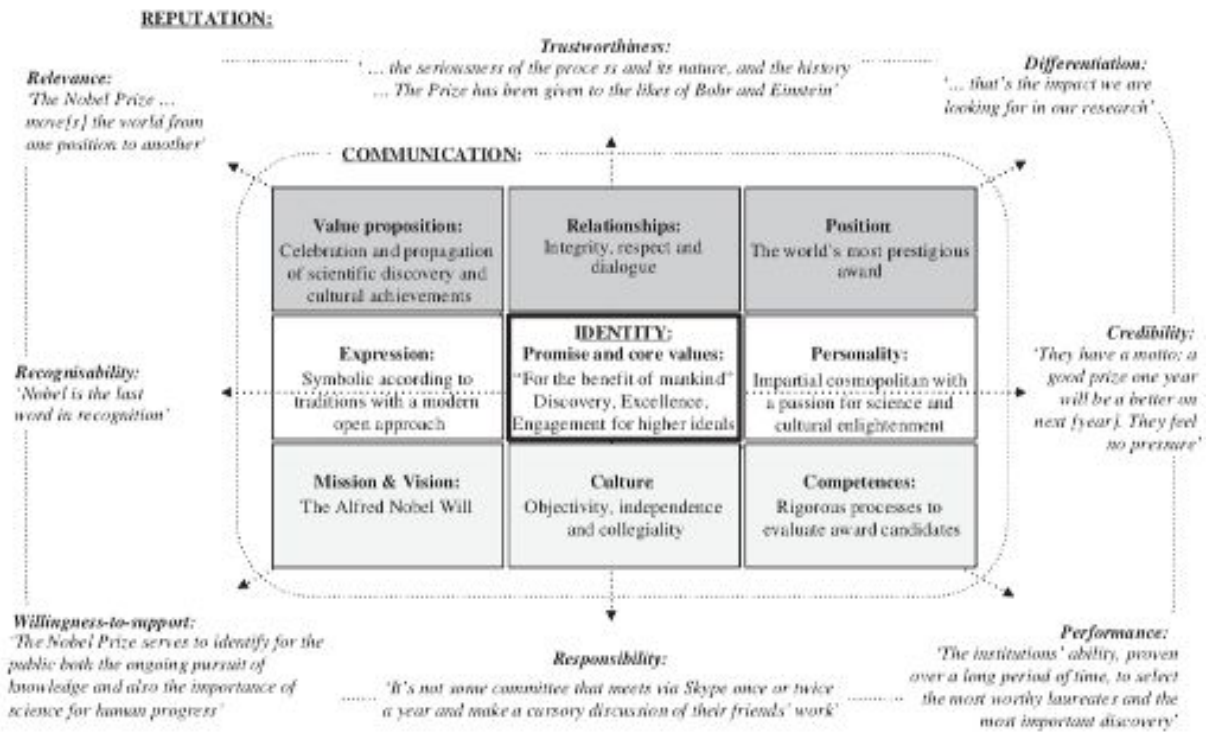


Exhibit 5 Corporate positioning themes (Based on Cornelissen (2008) and van Riel & Fombrun (2007)).

Core positioning theme	Explanation	Airbnb
Functional	<p>Functional positioning uses rational information and should be based on a claim not yet used by competitors. This strategy is founded on being superior about its products, customers served, achievements or contribution to society or the industry.</p> <p><i>This is informational content claimed through the use of justified information.</i></p>	Airbnb 2016 - ?
Expressive	<p>This form of positioning attempts to differentiate the organisation through the use of symbols and values. By repeated use of the symbols that represent a particular set of values, the organisation can become associated with those values.</p> <p><i>This is transformational content claimed through association.</i></p>	Airbnb 2007-2015
Emotional	<p>positioning through an emotional theme aims to draw stakeholders to an organisation by provoking positive responses and involvement.</p> <p>This is emotional content claimed through involvement and affiliation.</p>	
General	<p>This positioning strategy can be made by any organisation in an industry and attempts to raise overall industry demand rather than set out a point of differentiation or superiority. often used by organisations who have a substantial market share.</p> <p><i>This is informational content claimed through an industry-wide issue without reference to industry leadership.</i></p>	Airbnb 2016 - ?
First strike	<p>This positioning is similar to the generic strategy but under this strategy the organisation claims superiority, and hence differentiation, on the basis of being the first and only organisation to make the claim.</p> <p><i>This is informational content claimed through an industry-wide issue with reference to industry leadership</i></p>	