

Communication strategies of a technology-based organization: Corporate marketing creating competitive advantage

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In the last decade or so, a variety of nearly-simultaneous developments in the business environment forced companies to explore different ways of creating competitive advantage. These trends included the emergence of newly-opened markets, mergers and acquisitions, increase in the number of companies and their products/ services, and rising numbers of sophisticated consumers and their various demands, (Karaosmanoglu and Melewar, 2006). In the US, the unraveling of giants such as Enron and Tyson Foods, and federal legislation underscoring business ethics and accountability compelled companies to also seek a greater understanding of what corporate and social responsibility (CSR) means. By combining the philanthropic motivations of CSR departments with the requirement to seek new ways to create competitive advantage, a new frontier of opportunity emerged particularly for technology-based leading firms. In the area of corporate marketing, which often oversees or supports CSR, these leaders saw new approaches to corporate identity and branding, product development, research, distribution, partnership, and business growth.

It is the concept behind the work OLPC is doing with their XO computer. It is the philosophy behind Intel's World Ahead program. Similarly, Microsoft and IBM are fulfilling corporate and social responsibility through a variety of approaches that are also creating competitive advantage resources. The strategic advantages to the company are numerous, not least of which is enhancement of their global leadership reputation, image, and legacy. In terms of sheer numbers, the new approach will create a class of users and potential customers who had hitherto been outside the purview of traditional business strategy thinking. These companies are acting on a vision that also produces other short term and long term results: creating global citizens and leaders among their employees and the communities they serve. And an array of international communication strategies and training form a cornerstone in this process of creating new areas of competitive advantage.

This paper examines some of the communication strategies of Microsoft Unlimited Potential, a CSR program whose charter of action aims to reach the next one billion underserved people by 2015 with solutions in three key interrelated areas. Each area is crucial to developing sustained social and economic opportunity: education, local innovation, and jobs and opportunities.

According to its website, Microsoft Unlimited Potential recognizes that for the world's more than 5 billion people, the opportunity to learn, connect, create, and succeed remains elusive. Several barriers stand in the way of effectively reaching these underserved communities, including environmental or infrastructural obstacles, localization issues, the need for

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personalized solutions, and the prohibitive cost of technology. In the short term, Unlimited Potential believes that education and training solutions can create the greatest possible impact by building a cycle of sustained social and economic development.

The belief is that this cycle can drive communities: help build connections to form new communities; fuel local and global partnerships; and, most importantly, ultimately become locally sustainable. Sustainability is viewed as a key indicator of effective programs and activities, and is their long-term measure of success. Based on analysis of available information, this paper proposes that the initiative's international communication strategies and training offerings play, and will play, a significant role in building new communities and fostering local and global connections that will drive sustainable social and economic advancement for all. Global citizenship and global leadership will comprise key outcomes and attributes of the human agents affecting the desired changes. For Microsoft, a pathway to the creation of new sources of competitive advantage is defined and it is a win-win situation.

Unlimited Potential as a CSR program is intended to present certain beliefs, values, and emotions of Microsoft the parent organization. Its website is intended to re-present those values and emotions to evoke and prolong corporate associations. Thus, at the implementation level, Unlimited Potential expresses a particular set of corporate identity attributes through its program of activities and designated personnel; and by virtue of the nature of the web medium, many of those identity features are quickly replicated and acquire an enduring tangible quality. According to Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006), corporate identity incorporates an organization's communication, design, culture, behavior, structure, industry identity, and strategy. And if, according to Myers (2006), corporate identity also refers to "a set of meanings by which a company allows itself to be known", then the Unlimited Potential website creates a co-presence both before and after activities are implemented and allows more people to describe, remember and relate to it, and for a longer duration of time.

The literature reviewed almost unanimously makes a profound link between corporate image and corporate identity, stating that image is the collective perception that stakeholders have of corporate identity (Karaosmanoglu and Melewar, 2006). According to Christensen and Askegaard (2001), "corporate image is formed by the presentation of the total sum of signs that stands for an organization's identity." Similarly, Stuart (as cited in Karaosmanoglu and Melewar, 2006) and Van Riel (1997) define corporate image as "The strategically planned expressions of corporate personality via the cues given by its symbols, behavior and communication." From our exploratory analysis we can say that even a cursory review of Microsoft Unlimited Potential, as a program and in its website presentation, will indicate that an integrated international communication strategy has effectively extended and maintained a distinctive corporate image of Microsoft.

By 'international', our analysis implies and extends the common definition of physical geographic entities. Additionally, 'international' also includes particular language, ethnicities, social and other cultural influences and issues that affect the identities and communication of individuals and communities regardless of their location. Therefore, 'international communication' in our research refers to communication that transcends a specific national

context and seeks to engage the multidimensional attributes of the human condition, its strivings and aspirations, successes and failures, and consequently recognizing the community rather than simply the country of origin as frames of reference.

“For most people, strategy is generally perceived as a plan – a consciously intended course of action that is premeditated and deliberate,” (Graetz et al, 2002). Also, “strategy and management is ... the way to provide a framework for planning and decision-making that control and manage influences from the environment” (Khanfar, 2007). Our analysis conceptualizes ‘communication strategy’ as the framework for the communication plans developed to implement corporate, functional, operational, business, and enterprise strategy. Communication strategy also provides “the link between key strategic issues facing the organization and communication plans” (Steyn, 2003). More specifically, this paper will focus on Microsoft Unlimited Potential and its use of the most distinctive international communication strategy: A dynamic presence on the World Wide Web.

Methodology

The World Wide Web is a distributed information system that is based on a hyper-text paradigm, and is now regarded as the principal navigational tool for accessing the resources of the Internet (Dholakia and Rego, 1998). It is also a repository of information as well as a means of communication and training. This exploratory research is based on a content analysis of Microsoft Unlimited Potential’s website. The task of converting textual information of a few web pages (owners) into a database could easily be carried out manually, i.e. by eye, (Lau et al, 2004). Unlike log data, search queries, and other forms of internet data for which quite a few text and data mining applications have become available, our field of analysis is a web site and the challenge is to learn from verbal and visual content including multimedia, to discern its framework not only the direct content.

To manage and evaluate the vast array of information for our purposes, we aimed to answer one question:

What are the international communication strategies framing Unlimited Potential?

Based on browsing strategies “that depend on selection, navigation, and trial-and-error tactics” (Marchionini, 2006) as well as verification, comparison, accretion, synthesis and evaluation of “emergent themes” (Crano and Brewer, 2002) following one approach in content analysis procedures, four strategies become apparent: global intellectual exchange, story-telling and blogging, training, and partnerships.

Global intellectual exchange

Global intellectual exchange defines Unlimited Potential’s initiatives to organize various platforms for dialoging and intellectual exchange. It is a two-pronged strategy here – engaging state and community leaders at one level and at another level engaging students and young adults. Among the well-known events is Microsoft Government Leaders Forum (GLF) -

Americas, now in its tenth year, and held most recently April 3-4, 2008 in Miami. This event brings together government, business, and education leaders from North, Central, and South America to exchange experiences and discuss issues related to governance, education, local economic development, and the knowledge economy, as well as to examine the role that information and communications technology (ICT) plays in achieving success in these areas. A similar GLF-Asia convention was held in May 2008 in Indonesia.

On Unlimited Potential's website, a clean, uncluttered, easy-to-use interface with minimal clicking offers access to Microsoft founder Bill Gates' speech transcripts, video copies of discussion sessions, news and press releases, and hyperlinks to related information on the website. Such easy access to verbal and visual information can be forceful in shaping perceptions of website visitors and consequently a global corporate reputation and image. As a communication strategy, the website offers an organized approach necessary "to manage the company's collective voice that is crucial to building a global brand" (Freivalds, 2005). And by extending the promotional value of the events, it helps to maintain and enhance the corporate image.

For young adults, there is a student technology competition focused on finding solutions to real-world issues. Open to students around the world, The Imagine Cup is a contest that spans a year, beginning with local, regional and online contests whose winners then go on to attend the global finals that are held in a different location every year. For the first time this year, Unlimited Potential announced a new software design award called The Imagine Cup Rural Innovation Award to recognize the solution that contributes toward a more sustainable environment and best helps promote the social and economic growth of underserved populations in developing countries and/or best helps these populations better meet their basic needs. With its global student audience appeal, this communication strategy coupled with the global recognition, rewards, as well as Microsoft corporate brand and identity appeals, will be certain to enliven education and spark local innovation (and which may or may not translate to product development).

On the homepage of Unlimited Potential, the link for The Imagine Cup Rural Innovation Award leads to pages that are rich with clear, uniform, factual and relevant information – that would appeal to an adult user or researcher. Upon querying for additional information on the Imagine Cup, the visitor is taken to a website that is unmistakably designed to appeal to students from across the world. The calligraphy, colors, designs and patterns, and vignettes are clearly selected keeping teens in mind. These web pages, in combination with the Global Stories and Blogs section on the homepage of Unlimited Potential, together create perceptions of what Scholey (2005) calls a "Best Friend" image, a transformational message element that captures "the experience of owning or using a product with psychological characteristics, such as richness, warmth, excitement, enjoyment, and so on" (Aaker & Stayman, 1992; Chen, Shen, and Chiu, 2007).

Stories and Blogs

Unlimited Potential's website primarily tells its stories through pictures and video in a section titled Global Stories and Blogs. The advocacy intent may be missed on this chapter's front page but the images that serve as cover/title pages form a clear index for a serious visitor focused on learning verbal information and who may perchance be interested to listen and see videos of personal stories. The selected images are recognizably international in content and appeal. To see and hear individuals tell their own stories situated in their own contexts (albeit selected and edited by the site sponsor) is quite compelling to any viewer.

Web communities like newsgroups, chat rooms and networking groups have existed before bloggers and blogging came into academic attention. Like other Web communities, blogging blurs the private and public divide. And when created by identifiable individuals such as experts, community and business leaders, and other persons of influence, the persuasive effects of the information and communication are significant. The blogs of Unlimited Potential are organized around two themes: Unlimited Potential World Updates are contributed by its team members from around the globe and Inside UP is maintained by its General Manager James Utzschneider.

Training

Cutting-edge training is offered in a variety of formats and platforms under what the Unlimited Potential website calls Programs and Solutions. Microsoft certification training is well-known. It is offered online and in hybrid format, and is thus accessible to all people anywhere in the world. What our analysis draws attention to are the tools and training offered to students and young adults as they participate in The Imagine Cup, and, in particular, the first-hand training experience offered at a Microsoft facility as part of the competition rewards. The very nature of the competition encourages innovative thinking and a global perspective. Students are directed to think of technology solutions in terms of community, social and environmental impact. The judges' blogs and feature stories make transparent contest evaluation criteria, which by itself can be an educational experience for many students; given that in most emerging markets, such competition rules are usually unknown or ambiguous. By making available on its website the demo videos of finalists' work, Unlimited Potential presents a rich learning opportunity to all users. Additionally, links for Syndication and RSS feeds on their website present added opportunity for focused learning and updated information.

Partnerships

To make the largest impact on socio-economic issues, partnerships are necessary; such an approach has proven to be an effective communication strategy for Unlimited Potential (and Microsoft) as well as for other technology-based firms' CSR initiatives. Through public-private partnerships with governments around the world, Microsoft is helping to bring the solutions, knowledge and tools that can help leaders and citizens be empowered to accomplish more and interact more effectively. At the core of Microsoft's partnerships is the creation of new avenues of social and economic opportunity, especially for underserved people, and bringing technology

to people who previously have not had access to its benefits. Microsoft also believes in partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), development agencies and other technology companies. The OLPC announced support for Windows on the OLPC XO computer. The two organizations will work together on several pilot programs in emerging market countries. XO computers will only be available in emerging market countries where governments or NGOs are subsidizing the purchase of a large number of PCs for students.

On the website, these partnerships are highlighted on the homepage of Unlimited Potential and on nearly every sectional chapter. There are individual links for governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and technological partners. In clear crisp language, Microsoft Unlimited Potential has outlined what it sees as challenges, solutions, and what it has on offer by way of its Programs and Solutions. The information is supported by research and contributions by technical and academic experts in the form of white papers, case studies and even video recordings.

Discussion – Conclusion

Unlimited Potential, as a corporate program and through its strategic use of a dynamic Web presence, is creating not just visual and verbal identities to manage and maintain a coherent image, which is a basis for favorable overall corporate reputation. It is also creating the picture of a familiar individual and best friend. According to Scholey (2005), three images can distinguish any company: best deal, best product/service and best friend. Particularly through its section titled Global Stories and Blogs, Unlimited Potential's website speaks in the conversational language of a best friend. Personal journal entries and pictures of actual Microsoft employees reinforce the human-side and relational voice of what would otherwise be a faceless corporate monolith. Videos of activities and events, particularly local and involving ordinary citizens especially students, can only enhance the perceptions of a best friend image.

Offering training that is customized to local needs, and especially those intended to generate employment and economic opportunities, form a key part of Unlimited Potential's international communication strategies. There is a separate track that focuses on education. Together, the training and education initiatives may not be an apparent communication strategy but what gives it force is the creation of message sources that are, to quote Karaosmanoglu and Melewar (2006), "interpersonal (word-of-mouth from familiar accessible environment and recognizable sources), intrapersonal (company-consumer identification, emotional attachment, company knowledge) and intermediary (word-of-mouth via mass media, nongovernmental organizations, governmental institutions". At the local level, such presence of interpersonal, intrapersonal and intermediary cues can be cumulatively persuasive by way of attendance by Microsoft trainers, appearance of other authority figures of influence, peer trainees, duration of training time, and other cultural elements that create emotional attachment and company knowledge.

In addition to reinforcing a corporate image, Unlimited Potential is creating, knowingly and unknowingly, global perspectives of thought and action. The Imagine Cup, by stimulating technological innovation for solving real-world issues aims to encourage global thinking among students. Internally, Microsoft employees worldwide are encouraged and rewarded for their

community engagement activities and initiatives. The dedicated leadership for these endeavors puts a human face to Microsoft's image, making it more relevant, accessible and recognizable. From their blogs, there is an unmistakable sense of global citizenship and leadership among participating employees. Here is a sample:

Western China Project blog (30 May 08 02:47 p.m.) A group of people from Microsoft's Unlimited Potential team are heading out to Western China next week to raise awareness on a firsthand basis around issues involving the digital divide for rural communities in emerging market countries. You can learn more about the project on the UP home page. The team will be evangelizing existing UP programs targeting rural access like Telecenters and Infowagons. They will even be participating in a "Gobi March" endurance race across the desert.

The impetus to create direct interaction between rural and urban, between corporate and consumer, across classes, across geographies, could only be driven by a corporate-level vision and impulse that transcends the local and individual. As a communication strategy tool, Unlimited Potential's programs and website have succeeded in creating a dynamic communication platform for this global vision. A conscious inclusion of global content and a web presence highlighting human agents, real individuals, engaged in the endeavors helps to extend the credibility of its mission and efforts. It must also be noted here that for many people, particularly here in the US, the retirement of founder Bill Gates in order to pursue philanthropic causes is an important affirmation of Microsoft's CSR endeavors. What can only add more credence is the significant financial support pledged to Gates' philanthropy by another leader Warren Buffet. Future research could explore how Microsoft's corporate marketing boosted its CSR program. Or was it the other way round? This paper concludes that Microsoft's corporate marketing working in tandem with its CSR vision has created a new frontier of competitive advantage.

As the workforce and consumer base changes, businesses and leaders will need to continually evolve their corporate strategy and find ways to communicate vision, reframe organizational purpose, and create meaning for internal and external stakeholders (Smith, 1990; Thomas, 2007). Our analysis examined the communication strategies of Unlimited Potential as a program and as defined and presented by its website. Given its global mission, we assumed the program would use international communication strategies in its activities and events and in its website. Apart from two short op-ed essays on GM's and IBM's use of blogging for strategic communication management, there does not appear to be any other analysis of this kind. As an exploratory analysis, there will be oversights and limitations. Given the analysis's cumulative purpose, it was tempting at times to focus only on the international communication strategies of global intellectual exchange events and activities. Or concentrate only on the blogs and video stories. This may likely be the first analysis on Unlimited Potential and likely the first of its kind – examining the application of a new approach that integrates philanthropic and business goals. And discovering an unexpected result: the creation of a class of users and potential customers who are global-minded and who create new resources for a company's competitive advantage.

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Biography

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