

# **AUTHENTICITY AND THE CORPORATE BRAND SAGA**

by

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation analyzes what a corporate brand is and what motivates it. Using qualitative methods the corporate brand of IBM is investigated from the viewpoint of many of its stakeholders. It is discovered that IBM's corporate brand is outside the control of IBM, and is a social construction of IBM and its stakeholders. It is a special type of story – a saga – to which not only the company contributes to the storyline, but also its stakeholders. As such, the corporate brand is a dynamic process driven along by IBM's attempt to be authentic. That is, as IBM shapes its identity in response to the expectations of its stakeholders, and tries to be true to its identity, it is constantly changing. From this process the corporate brand emerges and is propelled and motivated by the force of authenticity. These findings contribute to the marketing literature by providing a revised view of the corporate brand. Not only does this have theoretical implications, but it also significantly changes how managers deal with and try to manage their corporate brands as they now recognize that they are only one of the contributors to the ongoing saga.

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## **Statement of Originality**

I hereby certify that all of the work described within this thesis is the original work of the author. Any published (or unpublished) ideas and/or techniques from the work of others are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

(Terry Beckman)

(June, 2012)

# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Statement of Originality .....	v
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Dissertation Overview .....	6
Dissertation Contribution .....	7
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	9
Corporate Brands .....	9
Why is the Corporate Brand Important? .....	11
The Corporate Brand versus the Product Brand .....	13
Structuralism and the Corporate Brand .....	17
The Corporate Brand Revisited .....	21
The Corporate Brand Saga .....	24
Chapter 3 Authenticity .....	29
Other-oriented Authenticity .....	30
Existential Authenticity .....	33
Be True to Yourself .....	34
The Role of Authenticity in Marketing .....	42
Authenticity Defined .....	47
Authenticity and the Corporate Brand .....	49
Chapter 4 Methodology .....	58
Data Sources .....	62
IBM Data .....	63
Depth Interviews .....	66
Media Articles .....	70
Blogs .....	72
Twitter™ .....	72
IBM's Smarter Planet Campaign .....	73
Data Analysis .....	74
Traditional Brand Management .....	74
The IBM Story .....	75
The IBM Saga .....	76

Chapter 5 Analysis and Interpretation .....	77
Theme 1: The Development and Management of IBM’s Corporate Brand.....	78
Following the Script.....	78
Maintaining Relevance .....	79
Creating Value Propositions .....	81
Managing Negative Associations.....	82
Managing the Brand in Different Contexts.....	84
Making the Corporate Brand Identity Emerge.....	84
The Result: A Strong Corporate Brand?.....	85
Theme 2: The Corporate Brand as a Story.....	88
The Story of the IBM Corporate Brand: A Smarter Planet.....	88
Stories .....	88
Exposition .....	90
Inciting Incident.....	96
Rising Action .....	99
Story Climax .....	106
Analyzing the Story for Meaning – Barthes Codes .....	107
Barthes Narratology .....	108
Barthes analysis - Inciting Incident.....	115
Interpretations .....	126
The Intentional Author.....	132
Theme wrap-up .....	137
Theme 3: The Saga .....	139
Fractures within IBM.....	141
Other Storytellers.....	148
Reactions to the Smarter Planet .....	149
Allusions to the Smarter Planet.....	157
Merging Stories.....	159
Segments of the Story .....	169
Alternate Views of IBM’s Story .....	172
Diversions from the Story .....	177
IBM’s Frayed, Ragged, Disjointed Story = A Rich, Powerful, Interesting Saga .....	186
Chapter 6 Discussion .....	190
What is the structure of the Corporate Brand?.....	191

Who Controls the Corporate Brand?.....	198
Authenticity and the Corporate Brand Saga .....	203
A New Understanding of the Corporate Brand.....	207
Managerial Implications .....	209
Chapter 7 Conclusions .....	213
References.....	218
Appendix A Sample Interview Protocol – Distributor.....	229
Appendix B Ethics Approval .....	230

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Storyline Pyramid.....	89
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## List of Tables

Table 2-1: How corporate branding differs from product branding (Hatch and Schultz 2003, p. 1044) .....	15
Table 4-1: Participant Descriptions .....	69
Table 5-1: Barthes' Codes .....	114
Table 5-2: Intentional Authors.....	130
Table 5-3: Intentional Readers.....	131
Table 5-4: Summary of Corporate Brand Views .....	188

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*Bring the corporate brand to life through a range of well-planned, well-executed marketing activities, and make sure the overall messages are consistent, clear and relevant to the target audiences. (Venture Republic, “10 Steps to Successful Corporate Branding”<sup>1</sup>)*

The corporate brand<sup>2</sup> has been shown to be a strategic differentiator for companies (e.g., Hatch and Shultz 2003; Keller 2000; Schwaiger and Sarstedt 2011; Yeoman et al. 2005). As such it is of importance and interest as a construct in academic research and to industry. As an example of the importance of the corporate brand, and the attention being paid to it, in recent years there have been four journal special issues specifically devoted to the corporate brand and corporate brand issues (Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (2006), Journal of Brand Management (2006) and the European Journal of Marketing (2003, 2012)). In industry companies spend significant time and money to develop, manage and protect their corporate brand; there are even organizations that spend significant resources on the ranking and rating of top corporate brands (e.g., Interbrand, BrandZ™).

As illustrated in the opening quote, the corporate brand is broadly viewed as a structured object that can be manipulated, controlled, projected and brought “to life” by an organization. When described in more detail, it is said that “a corporate brand will potentially have a rich

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.venturerepublic.com/resources/10\\_steps\\_to\\_successful\\_Corporate\\_Branding.asp](http://www.venturerepublic.com/resources/10_steps_to_successful_Corporate_Branding.asp), accessed 2009).

<sup>2</sup> In both academic and industry based literature the term corporate brand is very common. However, in some instances other terms such as “company brand” or “organization brand” are used. For the purposes of this paper these terms are considered to be synonyms.

heritage, assets and capabilities, people, values and priorities, a local or global frame of reference, citizenship programs, and a performance record” (Aaker 2004, p. 7). The assumptions of this quote fit well with the opening quote, in that there is a structure underlying the corporate brand that can be revealed or formulated and then displayed.

Much of the existing literature takes a largely structuralist approach to researching the corporate brand (e.g., Aaker 2004; Balmer et al. 2009; Juntunen et al. 2010; Muzellec & Lambkin 2009). As such it is assumed that the corporate brand has an inner invisible structure, and that through research we can discover what that structure is (Sumner 1979), and then it can be displayed, or brought to life. However, by using structuralist assumptions in looking at the corporate brand one limits the scope and understanding of the corporate brand, and runs the risk of neglecting or leaving out important factors.

For example, one would view the corporate brand as being separable from its context. One would supposedly be able to reduce it to a set of features or characteristics (e.g., Juntunen et al. 2010). This can raise issues of control – that is, the company is assumed to control the corporate brand. If they decide to make changes to it, or keep it the same, they can do so. However, for example, looking at how the Burberry brand was co-opted by some consumers illustrates that this assumption of control is a risky one for companies to assume. According to their own web site, “Burberry is an internationally recognized luxury brand with a worldwide distribution network” (<http://www.burberry.com/AboutBurberry/History.aspx>, 2009). Yet despite the tag of “luxury”, and aspirations to the upper-class, groups of chavs – underclass, marginalized hooligans (Hayward and Yar 2006) – have adopted Burberry caps as a part of their

uniform. They wear the Burberry clothing as they cause trouble in society. Chavs have so much taken over part of the Burberry brand that some pubs, night clubs, and major shopping centres refuse entry to anyone wearing the Burberry brand. In the town of Leicester, U.K. “local bars and police are collaborating in compiling lists of branded clothing that they perceive to be socially problematic” (Hayward and Yar 2006, p. 23). This is likely the opposite of what Burberry would want: where establishments would only allow people entrance if they were wearing a luxury brand like Burberry. It seems that Burberry is in a struggle with a variety of stakeholders over the meaning of its brand, which implies that the company does not have unilateral control of its brand.

Additionally, the notion of being able to identify and analyze separable components of a corporate brand neglects the interactions of a company and its stakeholders that together create the corporate brand’s meaning. Fixating on one set of features leads one to the notion that an ultimate, perfect (or near-perfect) corporate brand can be constructed. This is part of what Aaker (2004) suggests in the above quote. Yet this misses out on the idea that the corporate brand may be the result of the interactions within its context, which is constantly changing. The corporate brand may exist only because of its context, and without that context it would cease to have meaning. Thus, trying to analyze component parts of the corporate brand separate from the context that gives them meaning would lead to a myopia that could devastate a company when that context changes sufficiently.

The structuralist assumptions and approaches thus tend to miss out on the nuances and richness inherent in the context, and the ongoing interactions within that context. Approaching

the corporate brand with poststructuralist assumptions – such as the social construction of meaning – allows for a richer more fluid and culturally embedded perspective.

Ironically, bundling all of the items in Aaker's (2004) above list and looking at their ongoing interactions within a context would be a good starting point for understanding a corporate brand that goes beyond a separable, management controlled entity. The goal of this dissertation is to provide a way to view and talk about the corporate brand that allows for an understanding of its context and the process by which its meaning is realized. Yet, in order to present a new view of the corporate brand, it is necessary to rethink the nature of the corporate brand.

This dissertation uses two key concepts to investigate the corporate brand in a way that includes a poststructural paradigm: the notion of the corporate brand as a saga, and the notion of the corporate brand being the company's quest for authenticity.

A saga is a particular type of story – it is a story that has no clear beginning or end, it changes over time, it is at times interactive, where the listener contributes to the story, and the storyteller changes the story in response. At times the listener actually takes over the role of the teller and the storyteller becomes the listener (Twitchell 2004). A saga is a fluid and ongoing process that is negotiated between a number of people that take on different roles over time. Applying this concept to the corporate brand allows for its continual and unrelenting changing over time and the negotiation is its meaning.

But what motivates or drives the saga of the corporate brand? This dissertation argues that it is the company's quest for authenticity that provides the impetus for the saga. For this

dissertation I define authenticity as *the continuous process of negotiating one's identity within society and attempting to live consistently with the ever-changing identity* (Berman 1970; Tolson 2001). A more complete explanation of this definition of authenticity is provided in Chapter 3. However, it is useful to point out here that there are four important characteristics of authenticity: it is dynamic, it is a process, it is negotiated and it is a cultural imperative associated with freedom of choice. As such, society itself demands that one be authentic to some mythical fixed ideal (Berman 1970), and thus the company pursues this. However, with the fluid and ever-changing nature of the saga, there is no single ideal for a company to be authentic to. The company must thus attempt to resolve the paradox of the fluid nature of authenticity against the societal imperative to be authentic to an ideal.

Therefore this dissertation develops a new theory of the corporate brand. The integration of a saga propelled along by the company's quest for authenticity provides the lens through which this theory development will take place. This allows for the inclusion of the dynamic nature of the corporate brand, the involvement of multiple stakeholders and the notion that the company does not internally own and control the corporate brand. I examine how the corporate brand saga develops as companies pursue authenticity in their interaction with multiple stakeholders. More specifically I answer questions of how a company negotiates the corporate brand within the milieu that includes the cultural imperative of being authentic to a fixed ideal and the ongoing, ever-changing nature of authenticity. Which stakeholders are important in contributing to, and influencing the corporate brand saga? How do these stakeholders interact with the company in constructing the meaning of the corporate brand? What is the stakeholders'

view of the company's authenticity over time? By answering these questions, I hope to gain a fuller, deeper understanding and new perspective of the corporate brand.

### **Dissertation Overview**

The first part of this dissertation reviews the current state of literature on the corporate brand. This provides an overview of the importance of the corporate brand as a theory to study, and also a summary of some key articles in the area. The next undertaking was to demonstrate the structural nature of the current view of the corporate brand. The argument is made that much research on the corporate brand adopts a structuralist versus a poststructuralist paradigm. However, in order to get at a deeper view of the corporate brand, this dissertation adopts a poststructuralist perspective. The next stage explains how the corporate brand can be viewed as a saga. This is all covered in chapter two.

Chapter three first provides a detailed explanation of the concept of authenticity. This dissertation focuses on existential authenticity rather than other-oriented authenticity. This section also develops a definition of authenticity that applies to the conceptual development related to the corporate brand. The next challenge was to integrate authenticity with the notion of a corporate brand saga. This then provides the lens to be used in the empirical portion of the dissertation.

Chapter four explains the empirical approach to be taken for this dissertation. I use thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to explore how a company's quest for authenticity in its interactions with multiple stakeholders generates its corporate brand saga. The first analysis looks at a company (IBM) and what it has done over a period of time compared with findings

from traditional corporate brand literature. Subsequently I analyze and interpret the data according to narrative methods: the first is to overlay a storyline structure onto what IBM has done; the second uses narratology developed by Barthes (1974); and the third applies Reader Response Theory, as described by Scott (1994). Finally I extend the analysis by treating the data as a saga, and examine how the corporate brand emerges from *all* of the stakeholders (including IBM). As mentioned, I focus on one corporate brand: IBM. It is a large organization with a long history and a significant amount of information readily available. Additionally, I worked at IBM in the past and have specific experience that helps me to understand the entire research site.

Multiple sources of data were used in order to gather multiple perspectives on IBM's corporate brand. The sources of data include depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders, Twitter™ feeds, Blogs, media articles and interviews and presentations by key stakeholders. So many different sources of data from so many different stakeholders provides a broad perspective on IBM's corporate brand, and is necessary when using the lenses of authenticity and a saga. The data was collected beginning essentially in the autumn of 2008 (around the launch of their Smarter Planet campaign) and going forward from there. Thus there is a longitudinal element to the data. All of the data sources resulted in textual data (i.e., interviews and videos were transcribed).

### **Dissertation Contribution**

This dissertation contributes to both the theory and practice of corporate branding. First by analyzing the corporate brand through the lens of a saga and authenticity, a new theory of the corporate brand is started that begins to explain what a corporate brand is, and what motivates it

to transform over time. That is, the corporate brand is the socially constructed meaning of a company that emerges from the interactions and communications of a company and its stakeholders as the company attempts to be true to itself while meeting the constantly changing expectations of its stakeholders. Implied in this are the notions that the corporate brand resides outside of the company, and that it is not unilaterally controlled by the company. This provides a new perspective on the formation of, nature of and the changeability of the corporate brand. Flowing from this new perspective are significant directions for new research into the corporate brand. An additional contribution comes in that this research demonstrates that authenticity is at play in a business-to-business context, and the companies seek to be authentic, much like individuals do as described by Berman (1970). From a practical perspective, the results of this dissertation will point to new ways of developing and managing a corporate brand that explicitly recognize its constantly changing nature, and the notion that it is not in the internal control of the company. This will help managers understand what part they can play in the corporate brand saga, and how they can more effectively gain a competitive advantage from their corporate brand.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Corporate Brands**

In both the practitioner and academic fields, the corporate brand has become an important aspect of companies' marketing strategies. In particular a strong corporate brand is believed to provide a positive economic benefit to a company (e.g., Fombrun and Van Riel 1997; Greyser 1999; Aaker 2004). Building a strong corporate brand provides differentiation from competitors, and is thus a competitive strength for companies that are dealing with a rapidly changing, and increasingly competitive environment (e.g., King 1991; Hatch and Schultz 2003).

But what is the corporate brand? Knox and Bickerton (2003, p. 1013) suggest that “a corporate brand is the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organization's unique business model.” This matches well with Brown, et al.'s (2006) term “corporate image”; or what the corporation projects about itself to its stakeholders. Of note, the term “corporate brand” is at times referred to as the “company brand”. There are differences between corporations and companies, but for the purposes of this paper the two are treated synonymously. The key point here is that branding occurs at an organizational level in addition to a product level. The organizational type by legal definition may have an impact on the branding, but in this paper those differences (if they exist) are not looked at. So from this point forward, the terms “corporate brand” and “company brand” refer to the same thing.

Why is the corporate brand's importance increasing? One reason is that consumers are more sophisticated and consequently look for more than just product or service attributes and features. Consumers look for products that contribute to their own values (King 1991), and it is to the corporate brand that consumers look in order to ascertain what values are behind the products and services that the company provides, and whether or not those support the consumers' own values. That is, there is an essence and a set of values embodied in the corporate brand, that help a company to set itself apart from competitors (Kelly 1998); this corporate brand essence is critical to the consumers and other stakeholders, and helps to determine their ultimate loyalty and behaviours. Hatch and Schulz (2003) say that when a company can illustrate through its corporate brand, a strong sense of positive values, it has a competitive advantage.

For consumers, the product and product brand may be the focal point of a relationship with a company (Fournier 1998). Stakeholders who are not final consumers (of a company's products or services) also have relationships with companies (e.g., Berry 2002 (1983); Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sheth and Parvatiyar 2002). But for non-consumer stakeholders, the product and the product brand are *not* the focal point of a relationship – it is the corporate brand that fills this role. There is a distinct shift in focus from the product level to the organization level. Thus, particularly for the multiplicity of stakeholders that exist for a corporation, it is the corporate brand (versus the product brand) that is important.

Many researchers claim that a well-known and respected corporate brand has great value (e.g., Aaker 2004; Balmer and Greyser 2006; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Ind 1997; Keller 2000; King 1991; Olins 2000). Because of this, the corporate brand is receiving quite a lot of attention

in key marketing journals (e.g., special issues on corporate branding/marketing in the *European Journal of Marketing* 2003, 2012, and the *Journal of Brand Management* 2006). Much of the focus in this literature has been on defining and describing the corporate brand (e.g., Balmer and Gray 2003; Hatch and Schultz 2003; King 1991), discussing and demonstrating its importance and value (e.g., Aaker 2004; Balmer and Greyser 2006; King 1991), and talking about what a corporate brand is comprised of and how to build and manage it (e.g., de Chernatony and Harris 2000; Juntunen et al. 2010; Keller 2000; Knox and Bickerton 2003; Urde 2003).

Although research on the corporate brand is *relatively* sparse (especially compared with the amount of research done on product brands), this is beginning to change. As an indication of the recognized importance of the corporate brand, there have been four special issues of journals that dealt largely with the corporate brand and branding: the three listed above and the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (2006). All of these special issues try to deal with the issue raised by King (1991, p. 47): “It’s clear that coordinating all this so that the company brand is presented coherently and consistently is a far harder task than any faced by a classic brand. Many companies have barely started dealing with it.”

### **Why is the Corporate Brand Important?**

The corporate brand is important in strategic terms, because it

*acts as a focal point for the attention, interest and activity stakeholders bring to a corporation. Like a beacon in the fog, a corporate brand attracts and orients relevant audiences, stakeholders and constituencies around the recognizable values and symbols that differentiate the organization....When corporate branding works, it is because it expresses the values and /or sources of desire that attract key stakeholders to the organization and encourage them to feel a sense of belonging to it (Hatch and Schulz 2003, p. 1046).*

Today's marketplace has a proliferation of products, brands and sub-brands, such that the environment is "cluttered, confused and complex" (Aaker 2004, p. 6), and in some cases it is tricky to distinguish between products, as they have become so similar. It has become increasingly difficult to maintain product differentiation amidst this accumulation. In this context of imitation and homogenization of products and services, the corporate brand has risen in importance (Aaker 2004; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Knox and Bickerton 2003). In some cases, such as services, the company is the brand (e.g., Berry 2000). In many other cases, the corporate brand provides the glue that gives context to product brands, linking them together in a meaningful fashion. For example, the Nike corporate brand stands strong behind a range of product and service brands like Air™ (shoes), SPARQ™ (sport specific training program), Hyperdunk™ (basketball shoes), VR PRO™ (golf clubs), Nike+™ (program that comes from a partnership with Apple Inc. to monitor runners' performance), and brings them together within a broad sport and fitness related narrative. Therefore, the corporate brand has significant leverage in contributing to the product brands' success.

The corporate brand as a "beacon in the fog" goes deeper than a set of company-defined values. The company attracts attention, but there is not just a one-way broadcast by the company. Research by Gregory (2007) suggests that a company creates its corporate brand by including input from various stakeholders. By even considering input from external stakeholders, one can see that some control of the corporate brand is lost to the company. This can have a positive or negative effect. The Harley Owner Group could be said to have a positive effect on the Harley brand (Schouten and McAlexander 1995); while football (soccer) hooligans have had a negative

effect on the Burberry brand (Clevstrom and Passariello 2006). In either case, it appears that at times the company does not have complete control over its brand. Or one could phrase this as a question: if the company has control over its corporate brand, how could the Burberry brand (and other brands) be hijacked or twisted by external stakeholders? Thus it is even more critical to understand the development and management of the corporate brand. Corporate branding is more than just finding a neat motto, cool logo, glitzy graphics and a jazzy jingle – it requires subtle work with many different stakeholders – and in response to many stakeholders – rather than blunt force from the corporate board room.

The literature indicates that the corporate brand provides the potential for a positively differentiated company, as a solid foundation for products, services and initiatives. On the downside, a mediocre or damaged corporate brand may create a struggle for *all* areas of the company (e.g., Aaker 2004; King 1991). Thus the corporate brand in general is important to the company.

### **The Corporate Brand versus the Product Brand**

In looking at the corporate brand, one could ask “is it just the same as a product brand?” Many of the concepts related to the corporate brand come out of the product brand literature; for example the desire to create differentiation, preference and the willingness of customers to give it a premium value above what it would get if it had no brand. Thus there certainly are corporate and product brand similarities in particular areas. Yet many authors claim that there are also significant differences (e.g., Balmer and Greyser 2006; Greyser 1999; Hatch and Schultz 2003; King 1991; Knox and Bickerton 2003). They maintain that the differences are important enough

to justify research that discriminates between corporate and product brands – or research that focuses specifically and solely on the corporate brand.

For decades, branding has been an important research topic. However it was only in 1991 that Stephen King specified that there was a need to focus on the corporate brand. King said “in an era of rapid technological leapfrog....the *company brand* will become the main discriminator” (1991: 46, italics in original) that will support company recognition and success in the marketplace. In order to investigate the corporate brand separately from product brands, it is necessary to first differentiate between the two. Building on the work by Balmer (2001), Hatch and Schultz (2003) suggest that there are at least seven significant ways (see Table 2-1 below) in which the corporate brand differs from the product brand. For example, corporate brands link many products, services and divisions under one roof, they tend to be more values-oriented (versus attribute-oriented) than product brands, and are they are relevant to multiple stakeholders rather than just consumers. Hatch and Schultz also say that “the broader scope of the corporate brand pushes brand thinking considerably beyond the product and its relationship to the consumer....corporate branding exposes corporations and their members to far greater scrutiny” (p. 1044).

The corporate brand provides a means for differentiation that goes beyond product and service attributes and characteristics, such that “the values and emotions symbolized by the organization become key elements of differentiation strategies, and the corporation itself moves center stage” (Hatch and Schultz 2003, p. 1041). The product brand focuses on the consumer, and on building and maintaining a relationship with the consumer; however, in addition to the

end-consumer, the corporate brand extends to multiple stakeholders – e.g., investors, employees, alliance partners, cause related marketing ventures, regulators, suppliers, special interest groups and communities (e.g., Balmer and Soenen 1999; Hatch and Schultz 2003; King 1991).

The product brand is traditionally, and typically the responsibility of the marketing department (e.g., Balmer and Greyser 2006); whereas the whole corporation is involved in the corporate branding process. As the total corporation is involved, this leads to a broader social accountability associated with the corporate brand (King 1991). Thus the corporate brand is usually targeted at and interacts with multiple stakeholder audiences (Knox and Bickerton 2003).

	<b>Product Brands</b>	<b>Corporate Brand</b>
<b>Focus attention on</b>	The product	The company
<b>Managed by</b>	Middle Manager	CEO
<b>Attract attention and gain support of</b>	Customers	Multiple stakeholders
<b>Delivered by</b>	Marketing	Whole company
<b>Communications mix</b>	Marketing communications	Total corporate communication
<b>Time horizon</b>	Short (life of product)	Long (life of company)
<b>Importance to company</b>	Functional	Strategic

**Table 2-1: How corporate branding differs from product branding (Hatch and Schultz 2003, p. 1044)**

*“Final consumers and retailers make up the only really important points of contact for the [product] brand. When the company is the brand, however, there are clearly many more points of contact, ranging from the closest to home (employees) to the furthest distant (the community in general), and, in between, shareholders, government departments, institutions (The City, trade unions, etc), journalists, experts, MPs, suppliers, customers, retailers, pressure groups, and consumers of the company’s products/services” (King 1991, p. 47).*

While the multiplicity of stakeholders that relate to the corporate brand is generally accepted (e.g., Aaker 2004; de Chernatony and Harris 2000), few researchers have empirically investigated stakeholders other than the end consumer in relation to the corporate brand (although more recently this has started to change – in particular examples can be seen in the special issue on corporate branding in the *European Journal of Marketing* going to print mid-2012). However, important issues are associated with the other stakeholder groups, such as, inter alia, larger financial outlays, potentially longer partnerships, different decision making processes, consequences of a bad decision, and different forms of relationships.

But perhaps the most important issue, and one that impacts all of the others is the range of demands placed on the company by the plethora of stakeholders. Ind (1997, p. 168) opens his concluding chapter in “The Corporate Brand” with the statement, “The corporate brand is distinct from product brands in the diversity of audiences with which it has to interact.” The stakeholders (or audiences) each have expectations of the company – and there often are conflicts in those expectations, between stakeholders themselves and also the company. This situation adds significant complexity to the corporate brand negotiation referred to by Gregory (2007).

While Knox and Bickerton’s (2003) definition provides guidance about the corporate brand, it contains underlying assumptions about the nature of the corporate brand that have guided its research. In particular, the corporate brand is viewed as an object; and even though we recognize its intangibility, there is still concreteness inherent in its descriptions. For example, Ind (1997, p. 6) says

*Getting to grips with a corporate brand is a difficult task and requires relevant communication. To create tangibility, communication should work at two levels. First, while accepting that each individual will have a unique idea of the organisation, there is still the need to try to build a consensual image that is both an accurate representation and also helps the fulfilment of corporate strategy.*

This quote illustrates two significant notions found in the literature. The first is that a company is in control of its corporate brand; as Knox and Bickerton (2003, p. 1013) suggest in their definition, the company determines its own “unique business model”, and displays this relatively concrete object for all to see. Balmer (2001, p. 281, italics added) emphasizes the supposed control of the company over its corporate brand when he says it is the “*conscious decision by senior management* to distil and make known the attributes of the organization’s identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition.” The second notion is that there is a true, “accurate” corporate brand in existence. Although these conceptualizations of the corporate brand have facilitated research, it is possible that some of the richness and complexity of the corporate brand and its fluid relationship with stakeholders has thus also been overlooked.

### **Structuralism and the Corporate Brand**

As is apparent from the above review of the corporate brand literature, the underlying assumptions of this research are quite structuralist. According to Sumner (1979, p. 121) “structuralism is a method which examines phenomena as the outward expressions of their inner invisible structures.” Assiter (1984, p. 275) describes structuralism further, saying “structuralists believe that every system has a structure: the task of science is to find out what that structure is.” Also apparent from Assiter’s (1984, p. 276) writing is that structuralists believe or assume that there is a “real essence” under the appearance of entities.

These characteristics of structuralism are inherent in much of the corporate brand literature. In this literature, the corporate brand is viewed as an object created and controlled by a company. Much attention is given to maintaining consistency across time, and tailoring the corporate brand to meet the needs and demands of multiple stakeholders (e.g., Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Ind 1997). The corporate brand is seen as having a set of characteristics such as vision, image and culture (Hatch & Schultz 2003). These are to be identified, set and maintained over time to have a strong corporate brand. The corporate brand is also referred to as a “strategic tool that can support value creation” (Knox and Bickerton 2003), again, something very tangible and with structure. Harris and de Chernatony (2001, p. 446-447) talk about “building the corporate brand through internal mechanisms” and “uniform delivery”; which implies that the corporate brand is a stable artefact that can be internally decided on in advance and communicated externally.

However, the structural approach to studying the corporate brand seems to neglect a significant portion of the richness inherent therein. When researchers and consultants try to stay true to structuralist ideals, and couch the corporate brand in structuralist terms they set up expectations for a company about being able to arrive at some form of an ideal corporate brand. There is a risk of disillusionment if an “ideal” corporate brand is never achieved, or if it proves to be an always elusive, ever moving target. It is not that the corporate brand under a structuralist approach does not change (in fact researchers such as Keller (2000) and Holt (2003) explicitly talk about brands *needing* to change) – it is the notion that there is something real and ideal in existence separable from the company and the society in which it is actually embedded. And

when that particular structure of a supposedly ideal corporate brand is no longer effective as a tool of differentiation, the company must attempt to rationalize why it was not ideal.

Subsequently it must then figure out what ideal it should change to, or become – again a supposedly real artefact that will provide a structure around which to focus company actions.

One does not have to look too far to see examples of companies whose corporate brand has no ‘real’ underlying structure. The Kodak company is one company for which any historical review reveals a fluid process of change. What is the 'real' Kodak today? Is it a digital camera company? Is it a medical imaging company? Or is it now an old, bankrupt, historic company that couldn't keep up with changing technology, and fierce competition? What was Kodak 20 years ago? Was it a film company? What was Kodak 120 years ago? Was it a company that made photography accessible to everyone? Is there an identifiable 'real' underlying structure of Kodak? It is not a singular, identifiable, real entity! Kodak's many different stakeholders will have different ideas of what the company is, and these ideas are in a constant state of flux. Simply looking at the corporate brand at a single snapshot in time would not really provide a good insight into a company such as Kodak. There is more to what makes up the Kodak corporate brand – or any corporate brand – than a single snapshot in time of what happened or of how the company is designed.

Additionally, the literature assumes that the corporate brand is something that can be formulated and decided on within the confines of the company itself. Senior managers are supposed to go away on a retreat and figure out what the corporate brand is, and then hand ‘it’ off to advertising to put together a slick campaign that will convey its message to its customers

and other stakeholders. The underlying assumption in such an exercise is of an identifiable, structural entity/artefact that can be constructed and displayed. In some cases, in an attempt to be market or customer focussed, a company will ask its stakeholders for input prior to putting together a corporate brand (e.g., Gregory 2007; Keller 2000). In relation to a brand audit to help monitor sources of brand equity, Keller (2000, p. 154) says “it’s critical for managers holding the reins of a brand portfolio to get a clear picture of the products and services being offered...”; the metaphor of “holding the reins” implies control – and that control resides with the company and its managers. Holt (2003) also advocates for understanding customer needs and how consumers view a brand in building an iconic brand. However, his list of 5 steps to build a brand icon reside with the company. Getting input from customers and incorporating their thoughts about the brand meaning are important, and fit with a customer orientation – however, there still remains the implication that a corporate brand can be decided on, carefully crafted and displayed for the world to see and react to.

Again this seems to miss out on the rich, iconic nature of a corporate brand. A laundry list of values, vision and attributes for a corporate brand end up being stale and a difficult sell to a company’s stakeholders. A company like Exxon has a corporate brand, but it includes far more than what the company executives have come up with; the corporate brand of Exxon will invariably include the environmental disaster of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Many Exxon stakeholders (consumers, communities affected by the oil spill, environmental activists, etc.) remember the Valdez, and integrate it into their constructed view of Exxon’s corporate brand (e.g., Guterman 2009; Picou et al. 2009). Even though the company would likely rather forget

about the disaster, and definitely does not want it as a part of its corporate brand, it still seems to remain an integral part of the corporate brand of Exxon. The social stakeholders contribute their stories to the meaning of the corporate brand of Exxon, in response to, and in reaction to what Exxon managers and other stakeholders contribute.

This illustrates more than just the richness of the corporate brand beyond what managers can dream up in a board room. It also shows that some of the control of the corporate brand is out of the hands of those managers, and even out of the hands of the company itself. External stakeholders contribute to the meaning of the corporate brand, weaving their experiences into and against what the company presents and what other stakeholders add in (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006). Not only that, but each person inside the company and outside the company will have their own experiences upon which they base their view of the corporate brand.

### **The Corporate Brand Revisited**

If the corporate brand is not fully in the hands of company managers, is influenced by stakeholders external to the company, is a negotiated versus idealized concept, and changes continuously over time, then how can one look at it in such a way as to gain understanding? One approach is to look at the corporate brand in a way that will accommodate these elements. Within organizational studies one approach has been to use storytelling. According to Boje (1991), an organizational story is a narrative performed between two or more people in such a manner that the story interprets a past or projected experience within the organization. From a broad review of storytelling within the organizational studies literature several themes emerge:

stories are socially negotiated and constructed; they involve, inform and engage listeners; and they symbolize, interpret or add meaning to some aspect of the organization (Matear 2009).

Storytelling has a rich research history from many different disciplines: included in these are anthropology, cultural studies, education, religion, communication and business (organizational studies, knowledge management, and marketing) (e.g., Boyce 1996; Robinson 1981; Rosa, et al. 1999). Stories and storytelling are important in spurring both cognitive and emotional responses (e.g., Clark 1972; Fryer 2003), plus they help people to remember events, items and phenomena (e.g., Boje 1991; Boyce 1996; Clark 1972). Also of significance, “researchers from various disciplines have described organizational stories and the process of storytelling as primary ways in which meaning, both individual and collective, is expressed” (Boyce 1996, p. 9). In expressing meaning for the “collective”, issues of who and what the company is, are explored. That is, the identity of the company is being discussed and shaped. Stories enable people to explore and understand the identity of the organization. Boyce (1996) also suggests that as a result, organizational stories foster new member socialization and commitment/loyalty. Mitroff and Kilmann (1975, p. 18) go so far as to say “stories are so central to organizations that not only do organizations depend on them, but stronger still, they couldn’t function without them.”

In much of the organizational studies literature storytelling is analyzed primarily from an internal perspective (e.g., Boje 1991, 1995; Clark 1972; James & Minnis 2004; Mitroff and Kilmann 1975). That is, researchers have looked at the use and impact of stories and storytelling *within* organizations. For example, Mitroff and Kilmann (1975) view storytelling as a managerial

tool used to identify and solve organizational problems, and to help indoctrinate employees into the organization. Boje (1995) delved into the world of Disney, and analyzed how stories were used by Disney himself to shape the culture of the company, and to signal appropriate behaviour to his employees. Storytelling has been used as a method to uncover tacit knowledge within an organization (LeBlanc and Hogg 2006; Swap et al. 2001). And in their review, James and Minnis (2004, p. 26) suggest that “storytelling is one of the most important managerial tools of the decade”, and it is used to “exemplify corporate culture, modify and control behaviour, solve problems and make decisions, manage change, plan strategy, enhance leader image, transfer knowledge and train future leaders”. All of these examples refer to an internal use of stories and storytelling.

However, in some cases storytelling is also thought of as something applicable to external stakeholders. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) linked storytelling with sensemaking and sensegiving, which implicitly include external stakeholders. Lounsbury and Glynn (2001, p. 546) argued that storytelling aids in resource flows to entrepreneurs. Additionally they said “stories that are told by or about entrepreneurs define a new venture in ways that can lead to favourable interpretations of the wealth-creating possibilities of the new venture.” This suggests that stories create the meaning of the company brand, and the stories can come from many sources – internal and external to the company. This situates the meaning of the company brand within culture and society. When organizational stories go beyond internal stakeholders the stories begin to look at and refer to ‘organization’ as an integral aspect of a societal or cultural milieu.

Even when external audiences are included in the storytelling, there is an assumption that the stories are initiated or owned by the company. However, the company is not the only source or initiator of stories about the company. When one thinks of the above example of Exxon, one realizes that many stories about the Exxon Valdez disaster are not started by nor perpetuated by Exxon; environmentalists tell many stories about the situation, the citizens in the affected region of Alaska tell their own stories, and there are still others in media, government, labour, etc. External stakeholders tell their own stories partly in response to stories the company tells, and partly to share their own experiences (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006). The company tells stories in response to what its stakeholders tell, and also to share *their* experiences. The mingling and merging of these stories results in the meaning of the corporate brand; that is, the corporate brand itself is a story.

### **The Corporate Brand Saga**

Twitchell (2004, p. 484) likens a product brand to a story: “to me a brand is simply a story attached to a manufactured object.” He claims that this is possible in part because of the pathetic fallacy, or personification of the brand. This happens to product brands to a certain degree, but it happens even more so to corporate brands. The corporation is, by law, a legal person, so we have little trouble in ascribing personal traits, characteristics and behaviours to a corporation – and by extension we readily do the same for almost any company or organization. The history of a company is really the story created by the company and its stakeholders, and is recognized as the corporate brand. Some aspects of that history get lost in the telling of the story,

some are emphasized more or less in different circumstances, and new parts are added on a regular basis, yet it is still the fluid, dynamic, corporate brand.

With these characteristics it makes sense to extend the notion of a corporate brand “story” to the notion of a corporate brand “saga”. Twitchell (2004, p. 488) describes a saga:

*Since the traditional saga is transmitted orally, the story picks up and discards subplots and characters as it is being continually reformed for new audiences. In fact, the real saga format is interactive. In lit-crit jargon, it is called “dialogic.” The saga is formed of give and take between audience and storyteller in which the audience clearly participates in the choice of subplots. Rather like telling your kids a good-night tale where the kids say, “Tell us Little Red Riding Hood but this time really describe the wolf’s teeth,” so the sagameister cocks an ear in the telling. Hence all the variants. The process is rather like an advertising campaign in which there is a continual shuffling of idioms. Think the Absolut campaign, the Energizer Bunny’s endless adventures, or Coke’s shuffling of claims.*

The saga is in a constant state of flux. Each time it is told and re-told, or when parts of it are told, it mutates a bit. The teller listens to and responds to the audience, and the audience listens to and responds to the teller. Sometimes the listener actually becomes the teller, and co-opts control of the narrative – in spite of the desires of the original teller. One can readily see how this fits with a company; in very practical matters a company chooses what products it will market based on the needs of customers, who in turn buy and use more or fewer of those products based on advertising, availability and how well their needs are actually being met. This in itself is a never ending feedback loop that constantly changes. Similarly, the whole company is involved in a give-and-take exchange of stories and story ideas with all of its stakeholders. The corporate brand is constructed in the interplay of meanings passed back and forth between the company and its stakeholders, and as this constantly changes, is ongoing and control does not

reside with just one actor, it is a saga. For example, a current interest of many stakeholders is going “green” or being “healthy”. These expectations are passed on to companies, so now we have “Green IT”, and a “balanced lifestyle” at McDonald’s – notions that we would not have understood, or would have laughed at a few years ago. Companies are retelling their sagas in response to, and in interaction with their various stakeholders.

This means that something like the corporate brand cannot be an ideal or finalized concept arrived at solely by the company managers. The corporate brand is not just a mixture of a set of elements or attributes. It is more than the sum of its parts, and it can never stand still, because its constituent parts are always changing. A saga is not so much a 'thing', but rather a 'process'. It is a process of interactions between groups of people (including, but not limited to, the company itself) who at various times take on different roles in relation to the saga: teller, listener, explainer, corrector, judge, and so on. A process can be generally described, but trying to isolate and permanently fix it at one point in time is contrary to its nature. If one views the corporate brand as a saga, it too will be a process rather than an entity. The company will by necessity need to negotiate with all of its stakeholders in a struggle over the meaning of the corporate brand. But what a difficult task – the word “negotiate” is used here very deliberately. The corporate brand appeals to multiple stakeholders (King 1991), and as such must deal with a multitude of differing demands; some of which will definitely conflict. A company needs to negotiate between the various demands – which can sometimes be a minefield – and maintain a coherent saga for its corporate brand.

That is, the company responds to the variety of forces and demands in an attempt to understand and determine what its own nature and core identity is or should be. This entails some negotiation as there is history and experience behind the company and the people who founded, built and shaped it. That history corresponds to what the company knows about itself, and thus it influences how it accepts, rejects or modifies the demands on it from its stakeholders. At the same time, the company also tries to respond and behave in a way that is consistent with how it views itself. The resultant saga is the corporate brand.

Conventional research on corporate brands has concentrated on methods and questions around building and measuring the value of the corporate brand. Notwithstanding the importance of these lines of inquiry, the dynamic nature of the corporate brand saga suggests that new insights may be derived through different approaches to corporate brand research. Given that a saga is an ongoing story – as opposed to a snapshot in time – the research questions to be explored in this context are different. We must examine how meaning is constructed in the corporate brand, how it is managed on an ongoing basis, and how the saga ebbs and flows between its stakeholders and itself.

The corporate brand is the simultaneous expression of the company's identity relative to the various demands to which it is subject, and its attempt to sincerely express that identity to multiple stakeholders. This ongoing negotiation and expression of the brand saga is what makes corporate branding so difficult – yet so vital.

Through their words and actions, managers and employees try to – or are exhorted to – achieve consistency between how the company behaves and what the company purports to be.

The corporate brand saga comes about by the interactive, fluid and unremitting struggle of the company to express itself, relative to how its stakeholders understand it. As discussed in the next chapter, the saga describes an ongoing quest for the company – the quest to be authentic. If the corporate brand saga describes the quest for authenticity by a company, then exploring the corporate brand using the combined lenses of the saga and authenticity could provide new insights and a deeper understanding of the corporate brand.

## Chapter 3

### Authenticity

*This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.*

*(Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3, lines 78-80; advice from Polonius to his son Laertes)*

As a concept of interest and concern, authenticity has had significant influence in the areas of philosophy, art, history, tourism, politics, communications, management leadership, marketing and consumer research. Looking at, and considering the breadth of disciplines listed here, it is apparent that authenticity is a significant – even generalized – concern in our society and culture. As such each of these literatures has gone to great lengths to talk about what authenticity is, and what its definition should be. This of course is a critical part of understanding authenticity and its impact on the various aspects of our society. However, an additional issue has not been discussed in as much detail, nor has it been applied to as many areas; that is, why is authenticity so important? Or, why does authenticity matter to so many different disciplines?

The word authentic comes from the Greek word *authentikós* (OED 1989, 1996), meaning: *genuine, entitled to acceptance or belief as being reliable, entitled to acceptance or belief, as being in accordance with fact, or as stating fact; reliable, trustworthy, of established credit*<sup>3</sup>. In the English language, authenticity has been in use since the 17th century. Stemming

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<sup>3</sup> "authentic" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Ed. T. F. Hoad. Oxford University Press, 1996. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Queen's University. 11 February 2008 <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t27.e1013>

from the word authentic is ‘authenticity’: “*something that is authentic; as being in accordance with fact, as being true in substance; as being what it professes in origin or authorship, as being genuine.*” Miriam Webster Online (2007) defines authentic as, “*worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact... not false or imitation... true to one's own personality, spirit, or character.*”<sup>4</sup> Implicit in these definitions is the notion that authenticity is a comparison between the true nature and characteristics of something, and what it professes, claims or projects its characteristics to be. There seem to be two primary ways of looking at authenticity: one an external, other-oriented evaluation, the other an internal, existential view.

### **Other-oriented Authenticity**

In many disciplines authenticity is concerned with an external evaluation of an ‘other’ and a judgment of the other’s authenticity. This entails what some would consider to be objective judgments, where the ‘other’ has some relatively static attributes and characteristics that can be identified, analyzed and compared. MacCannell (1973) builds on Goffman’s (1959) work to talk about the front and back regions of life. There are performers, those who are performed to, and others that are neither. The front regions are where the performances take place; the back regions are where the performers let down their guard, relax and are truly themselves. Some tourists seek to get into the back regions, where they are able to see the unscripted, authentic way of life of the ‘natives’. The performance itself is staged, rehearsed and thus inauthentic.

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“authentic” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 1989, Oxford University Press. Queen’s University. 11 February 2008,  
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50015034?query\\_type=word&queryword=authentic&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=1&search\\_id=1XEK-zWXOA0-11764&hilite=50015034](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50015034?query_type=word&queryword=authentic&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=1XEK-zWXOA0-11764&hilite=50015034)

<sup>4</sup> “authentic” 2009. In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Retrieved January 9, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic>

Historical artifacts are also judged for their genuineness and authenticity. McLeod (1976, p. 31) defined “genuine” (i.e., authentic) African art as “...any piece made from traditional materials by a native craftsman for acquisition and use by members of local society (though not necessarily by members of his own group) that is made and used with no thought that it ultimately may be disposed of for gain to Europeans or other aliens.” Implicit in this definition is the unchanging nature of the artifact. However, also entwined in this is the socially constructed meaning associated with the object. If the same native craftsman made two identical artifacts at the same time, but one was for acquisition by a member of an external group such as a tourist, one would be authentic and one would not (according to McLeod 1976). Merely looking at such an artefact would not be sufficient to determine its authenticity for McLeod; the social context within which the artifact exists becomes instrumental in an authenticity evaluation. However, it is still an external evaluation of an object – although an object whose attributes are more subjective than McLeod probably imagined.

Historians examine artifacts and historical sites in an attempt to gain an understanding of the events that happened long ago: what the people were like, how they lived, the tools they used and how they related to the world around them. In order to carry out their analysis properly, they are concerned with the precise dates of their findings. They need to be sure that the artifacts are really from the time period of interest, and that they are truly from that region versus having been brought in from someplace else (e.g., Cohen 1988; Kolar & Žabkar 2007). If such artifacts are authentic, then historians are confident in their ability to make accurate inferences about the way of life in that time period.

In the world of art, the concern of authenticity is in relation to copies, fakes and imitations of artwork. Collectors of art attempt to ensure that the artwork they purchase is an original. That is, the creator who was purported to have done the work *actually* did the work, and it is not a forgery. On the other hand some artists will at times replicate popular, rare or expensive pieces of art and attempt to pass them off as the originals. In this way they can get more money for them than they would for their own signed work. Interestingly, some forgeries that were done a couple of hundred years ago, have now become valuable and “authentic” in their own right. This illustrates that there is also a shifting, fluid and dynamic nature to authenticity.

Another domain in which authenticity is a key focus of attention is in the communications literature. Within this domain the projected messages of people (e.g., politicians, media personalities, the general public) are analyzed and interpreted. For example, Tolson (2001) examines the authenticity of Geri Halliwell (of the Spice Girls). The attempt here was to separate out what was staged and put on from what was the true Geri Halliwell. Similar to this analysis is a study of politicians’ authenticity in television appearances and coverage (Donsbach and Jandura 2003). In yet another study, Robinson, Johnson and Shields (1995) found that people would rate others’ authenticity based on the others’ self-presentation: both self-enhancers and self-deprecators were rated as inauthentic, but a balance of positive and negative self-information was rated as authentic.

Several authors have also shown the importance of authenticity within the domain of marketing (e.g., Belk and Costa 1998, Beverland and Farrelly 2010, Brown et al. 2003, Holt

1997, Kozinets 2001). Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003, p. 21) say “consumers’ search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing.” This is not a new phenomenon; “consumer demand for authenticity has existed for hundreds of years” (Grayson and Martinec 2004, p. 296) for such items as religious relics (Phillips 1997), travel souvenirs (Harkin 1995), and original art (Bentor 1993). Grayson and Martinec (2004, p. 296) go so far as to say that authenticity has a “long-standing, persistent, and contemporary marketplace appeal.” As will be discussed later, within marketing the view of authenticity is also primarily other-oriented. As Grayson and Martinec (2004, p. 297) stated, “Because our purpose is to examine consumer evaluations of market offerings, we focus on only [evaluating whether something else is authentic].”

### **Existential Authenticity**

Important in the above examples is the explicit evaluation of authenticity of an other – whether that other is an individual, a society, or a particular artefact. Alternatively, in philosophy, authenticity has been viewed existentially, as an internal concern relating to our own attempts to live and behave consistently with our identity. As such there is a corollary in that when we have self-expectations of authenticity, we then also have a drive to assess the authenticity of others. That is, the strong drive to assess authenticity in others is a result of its importance to us individually and internally. This may help explain why authenticity has had such a “long-standing, persistent, and contemporary marketplace appeal” (Grayson and Martinec 2004, p. 296).

As mentioned above, philosophy has concerned itself primarily with the existential view, or authenticity of the self; that is, how can an individual be authentic? The philosophy literature of Heidegger and Sartre (Crowell 2004) maintains that each individual has a core identity or self that is shaped very slowly over time. Individuals engage in activities and speech that represent and project themselves to external stakeholders. When the external representation is consistent with the core self, the individual is not in conflict with himself/herself. However, when the external representation is *not* in alignment it creates anxiety for the individual. This perspective anchors authenticity as a concern of the individual; that is, it is their continual self-evaluation of their own authenticity in relation to their developing identity that is significant.

The exhortation to be true to oneself, as referenced in the Shakespeare quote at the beginning of this chapter, is fairly common, and is really at the core of authenticity in our society. The quote brings out two important assumptions of authenticity: one, that each person has an internal, individual identity to which they must be true; and two, that because of social interactions, authenticity is fundamentally embedded in our culture. The next section looks at these two assumptions: challenging the first one and supporting the second.

### **Be True to Yourself**

Marshall Berman (1970), in his book, The Politics of Authenticity, explores the notion of being true to oneself. He does this through an analysis of the writings at the time of the enlightenment. In current times, being true to oneself is fairly well accepted advice, however in the early- to mid- eighteenth century it could have been a radical, and difficult piece of advice. At that time, some of our taken for granted assumptions of personal liberty and choice simply did

not exist. Individuals' lives were in many ways subscribed by society according to the family you were born into; in Europe the class system dictated many aspects of an individual's life.

On one hand this resulted in many of our current stresses being non-existent. Many life decisions, such as what school to go to, whether or not to go to school, what job to choose, where to live, who to marry, etc. were not available. That is, one was born into a situation where these things were decided for you. Choice was severely limited and constrained – if not completely unavailable – by existing social structures.

When choice was not available, the idea of being oneself, and displaying one's true identity was not very relevant; you were whatever you were told to be, or what you were born into. Ascribed roles force people into a specific, static, pre-defined mold. Even if a person wants to choose one path (e.g., job, spouse) for themselves, the ascribed roles force them onto another. Writers such as Rousseau and Montesquieu, at the time of the Enlightenment viewed the existing social system, with its classes, rigid traditions and ascribed roles, as repressive. "A repressive society creates a radical gap between people's social identities – the roles they are forced to play – and their *real* identities" (Berman 1970, p. 31).

Some philosophers from the Enlightenment era felt that people should not have differing social and real identities. This was particularly relevant when the social identity was ascribed to individuals; they had no choice, and their real identities were largely irrelevant. "No social system, Montesquieu tries to show, can provide human happiness, unless it posits, and its government guarantees, a basic human right: the right of every man to be himself" (Berman

1970, p. 16). Here Berman expresses the belief that imposed roles result in an inability for “every man *to be himself*” (Berman 1970, p. 16). That is, man is not allowed to be authentic.

A problem that arises with this forced inauthenticity is that people may disregard or lose their core identities. “Rousseau understood very vividly the psychic costs of ascriptive identification” (Berman 1970, p. 90). If they are forced into specific social roles by the society and culture into which they are born, then why resist? Fighting against the ascribed roles creates tension.

Rousseau argued that the environment beat down people and made them dull; they were not necessarily born dull. According to Berman’s (1970, pp. 99-100) analysis of Rousseau, peasants

*were made dull, first of all, by the static inertia of the social system in which they lived; and second, by the particularly passive, submissive role which that system imposed on them....the closed, stagnant hierarchy of rural life socialized the men in its lowest ranks – that is, the vast majority of men – into automatons, programmed to live and act mechanically according to traditional routines. Individual thought or feeling, insight or initiative, could only be destructive to these traditions and routines. Hence it was essential for traditional society to keep individuality from developing, at the bottom as well as at the top.*

This repression of individuals helped pave the way for the enlightenment – as well as the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution.

The time of the Enlightenment was notable in that it was a beginning for people to have some liberty in whom and what they were. This liberty was “destructive to these traditions and routines” (Berman 1970, p. 100) that repressed and alienated, and allowed and encouraged individuality to develop. As people began to actually make choices in their lives they were

motivated to question, explore and develop their individual, unique personal identities. The emphasis was on reason and rationality, rather than superstition and submission to arbitrary, born-into-authority. The alienation to one's true self that accompanied traditional systems had a chance to be broken.

However, the liberty from traditions and routines created new challenges. People could no longer sink into the morass of ascribed roles, and simply exist according to what they were instructed to do. They now had to both deal with discovering their identity, and then being true to what they found. And how did they discover their identity? By looking not only internally at what they like and dislike, but also by looking at *others*, and listening to what others expected of them. The benefit of not having choice was not having to think about oneself; the benefit of choice was the freedom to be what one wanted to be. And with the Age of Enlightenment came the pressure to have to make a choice.

When one makes their own choice to be something, then one has a commitment to that choice. Behaving in a way that is contradictory to that choice is not authentic. It is deceptive and manipulative to others, and untrue to oneself. The juxtaposition of one's true self to that which is displayed to others becomes an important consideration. "Philosophers up to now had exhorted man to *know* himself; the point now, far profounder and more difficult – which perhaps should have been the point all along – was for man to *be* himself" (Berman 1970, p. 86).

Why is this important? The philosophers of that time felt that there was a wealth of potential within humans; but that potential was locked up and stifled behind ascribed roles. So the freedom to choose is important, but along with that freedom comes the associated

responsibility of being authentic. At the time of the enlightenment, people gained the freedom to choose what they would make of themselves – according to their inner nature. Along with the freedom to choose came the need to be true to and to live in accord with their inner nature. That is, the *need* for authenticity. Living authentically – being true to oneself – was real freedom; and thus authenticity became an embedded and a necessary part of our society. The breaking of tradition and ascribed roles led people to seek their own unique identities, and then to display those identities in a way that matched their true self. Doing so was both freedom and a route to happiness.

It would be nice if that was the end of the story. However, in spite of the rise of modernity, and the tearing down of many class and traditional roles, the notion of being forced into roles did not actually vanish. Society changed in many ways as a result of the Age of Enlightenment; but in other ways it did not change. Perhaps the predictability that goes along with ascribed roles, or perhaps as a result of issues of power, people are still forced into predetermined roles – just not quite as obviously. We no longer have the same class issues; one can improve (or sink lower) from the status that they are currently in, through effort (or lack thereof). But now one is encouraged (i.e., forced) into choices – family, education, job, spouse – along with any or all of the associated behaviours and values. “Rousseau penetrated beneath the dazzling surface of modern city life, and brought out into the open the contradictions at its core. The great flow of newly liberated human energy was being rigidly channeled, forced into a constantly expanding and unending war for wealth and power” (Berman 1970, p. 315).

In some ways, this is a more difficult situation in that it *appears* one has freedom of choice, when in fact there are many pressures that try to prescribe one's choice. Berman (1970, p. 313) said "the new....social structure....was just as destructive to human authenticity as the system it replaced – in a sense more destructive, because it promised men so much." And as a result authenticity is even more important now than it was at the time of Montesquieu and Rousseau. The new, liberated system purports to give one freedom – *it is even a cultural imperative to exercise that freedom* – yet contrary to what one expects, it actually does not. With conflicting societal demands, it is difficult to know one's core identity, and difficult to then display that core identity in an authentic manner. Perhaps the difficulty with "knowing" one's identity is that a singular, static core identity does not exist. A person's embeddedness in, and interaction with society and culture result in a fluid, ever-changing identity.

At the time when Rousseau and Montesquieu were writing, the notion of being authentic was something that needed to be said. It was new, and went along with the newly developed freedom of choice and liberty of having your own identity. As the choices have expanded, and the appearance of freedom has grown, it is even more important to be authentic – to be true to oneself. Now we take for granted the freedom of choice that we have. And we take for granted that we should be true to ourselves.

Today's society, in essence, still ascribes roles for people, creating a tension in people. We take it for granted that we have the freedom to make choices, and to be true to our core selves; yet pressure to conform within society runs counter to that ideal. Thus when a person follows the dictates of society, and is not true to themselves, it has a jarring effect on themselves,

and on those around them. This results in the importance that people place on authenticity. In many contexts the discovery of inauthenticity results in strong reactions, and there is high value on authenticity. We want our politicians to be authentic, and are dismayed and angry when they are inauthentic (e.g., Elliot Spitzer). Our tourist destinations must be authentic, with original ceremonies performed by real natives. And as consumers in general we have a concern with authenticity: do the companies we deal with really want a relationship with us, or are they only interested in getting as much profit from us as is possible?

Authenticity is still very much a part of who we are as individuals. Our consumption activities thus are used to demonstrate our identity to others, and their consumption activities to demonstrate their true identity to us. Thompson and Haytko (1997, p. 21) talk about consumers use of fashion to create, negotiate and display their identities, rather than simply acceding to the hegemony of the fashion marketplace.

*Through this logic of self-identity construction, the sense of “who I am” is constantly defined and redefined through perceived contrasts to others. Hence, personal identity does not reflect a stable set of essential features but is negotiated in a dynamic field of social relations.*

If our culture and society tries to force us into *social* identities that are different from what we – at any given point in time – perceive our identities to be, then we can assume that others experience the same pressure and tension. We thus desire to see the authentic identity of others. We enter into a social network of relationships where we seek out authentic others.

Critical here are the choices that people have. People are not forced into set roles, but are forced to choose amongst many options. Then they are told to be true to that choice, that is, to themselves. However, given the choices available, and the fact that those choices change every

day, ones' self, or identity can change every day. Thus the notion of being true to oneself changes in a profound way: there is no longer a static self to be true to. There is no such thing as a "real" singular identity. Being true to oneself is a process to live through all the time, and the notion that one can be true to a singular, static self is a socially constructed myth.

Openness and authenticity can be reciprocated, and actually encourage more of the same. However, the opposite is also true. This is seen in the example of the Countess de Vercellis and Rousseau as described by Berman (1970). In this case the Countess seemed to sincerely ask and be interested in Rousseau's life and feelings; yet she completely concealed her own feelings. "Rousseau could express himself only in a context of mutual openness and trust." The Countess eventually stopped asking about Rousseau, and only spoke with him on a formal basis. Thus the lack of transparency on the part of the Countess was reciprocated by Rousseau, and it became a situation where neither individual was being authentic (Berman 1970, p. 102). If they had each been open, then the reciprocation would have been in the opposite direction with mutual support and authenticity.

Thus we can see that while at an individual level authenticity is necessary for freedom and happiness, and is foundational to our sense of self and identity, it also has a necessary role at a social level. As much as we need to be true to our own selves, we also expect others to be true to themselves. With society still ascribing roles – or expectations and norms – to individuals, and at the same time encouraging them to be true to themselves, there is confusion, stress and tension. And if one sees someone else being inauthentic, or not true to themselves, they may react even more strongly to such a situation.

Essentially, authenticity has become a fundamental part of our current society, because of its tie to the idea of freedom and its role as a cultural imperative. It is embedded in all that we do even though it is not at the top of our minds. One's reaction to authenticity or inauthenticity then is quite visceral. More importantly, in all that we do, and in all the interactions we engage in, authenticity flows strongly.

The main argument of Berman's book (1970, p. 87, footnote) "is that the search for authenticity is central to the experience both of modern society and of the modern state." It is therefore no surprise that authenticity figures so prominently in such diverse disciplines as tourism, communications, art, politics, history, advertising, leadership and consumer research. It is embedded in our society and culture so it is natural and to be expected in each of these, and any other discipline. We apply authenticity internally to ourselves, and we also apply it in every facet of our external lives.

### **The Role of Authenticity in Marketing**

The marketing literature has primarily explored authenticity as an external evaluation of an object or experience. There is some research that looks at existential authenticity, but most of this is indirect (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander 1995), or it is referred to in passing (e.g., Grayson and Martinec 2004). An exception to this is the Arnould and Price (2000, p. 140) chapter that looks at "the role of consumption in people's quest for self-authentication." In their chapter consumers purchase and use items or engage in activities as a part of their identity projects. Thus they attempt to display themselves authentically through consumption activities. This view of authenticity is primarily internally focused; it deals with how people feel about

themselves, how they reveal their true selves and the anxiety that arises as a result of conflicts between their core identity and their external actions and communications.

The external application of authenticity in the marketing literature is in relation to market offerings. In this sense, authenticity is an evaluation of an external object; i.e., market offerings (e.g., Grayson and Martinec 2004). This is similar to the work done in the tourism literature (e.g., Cohen 1988; Kolar and Žabkar 2007). One article that intertwines the evaluation of an object with the individual is by Beverland and Farrelly (2010). They find that a consumer's personal goals impact how they evaluate the authenticity of objects, and thus impact their consumption experiences and their self-authentication. Of note, and as reviewed below, is that the primary focus of this type of authenticity research is that of a consumer evaluating consumption objectives, and not within the business-to-business (B2B) environment. Yet even from this external view of authenticity we can see the dynamic, socially constructed nature of authenticity.

Important in this literature are the outcomes of authenticity assessments. In the case of judgments of inauthenticity, consumers chose not to purchase the products (e.g., the New Beetle – Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003), they expressed anger (e.g., Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003; Leigh, Peters and Shelton 2006), and they experienced dissatisfaction (e.g., Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003). Given these types of outcomes, it is clear that companies need to attend to issues of authenticity.

Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003) looked at how two different groups of consumers assessed the authenticity of two “retro brands”, the Volkswagen New Beetle and *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*. Authenticity assessments by these consumers were based on

both objective (e.g., placement of the engine – front or rear of the car), and subjective (e.g., did *The Phantom Menace* do as good a job of portraying an “heroic epic” as the original Star Wars movie?). Interestingly in their study, with both the New Beetle and the Star Wars prequel, authenticity – and all the cues related to it – was debated and negotiated in a socio-cultural context. It was not a fixed singular entity; rather its meaning was actively fought over through online discourses.

Grayson and Martinec (2004) found something very interesting in their study of the authenticity of the Sherlock Holmes museum. They noted that even with fictional settings and characters, authenticity is important to people. The participants in the study were quite comfortable with placing the fictional Sherlock Holmes into a social context, and then applying judgment criteria against that. In essence they were able to completely socially construct meaning and thus allow the notion of authenticity to demonstrably *not* be “real” in an objective sense.

Similar to this notion of the authenticity of a fictional setting (Grayson and Martinec 2004), is the authenticity of advertisements. Advertising is almost always made-up – with a carefully written script, actors specifically chosen for effect, context and location carefully controlled (or even completely manufactured) (Stern 1994), yet advertisements themselves are either judged as authentic, or are used to judge the authenticity of a company (e.g., Beverland et al. 2008; Anderberg and Morris 2006). Even though advertisements are largely contrived, they can be used to portray a company’s authenticity – illustrating the “reality/fictionality” paradox in authenticity (Stern 1994, p. 397).

In another study, the notion of negotiated authenticity is quite clear. Beverland (2006) looked at how consumers evaluate the authenticity of premium wines. Through a series of interviews he identifies six attributes of authentic wines: heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production, and downplaying commercial motives. For a premium wine in *general*, one can say it is authentic if it has these six attributes. Yet these attributes came about from the interaction of wine connoisseurs and wine producers, as they attempted to place and find meaning in the various aspects of wine production and consumption. Additionally, it was apparent that these attributes were dynamic, as some became more or less important over time (e.g., downplaying commercial motives).

Another key point brought out in a marketing study is that authenticity is not absolute. That is, there is dynamism and elements of social construction that contribute to the determination of what is authentic. Belk and Costa (1998) found that the authentic mountain men observed at Rendezvous actually dress *differently* from the factual mountain men of 1830. That is, 20th century Rendezvous mountain men are considered more authentic if they wear moccasins, leather clothes (brain tanned, rather than factory tanned with chemicals), and have a big beard. But according to historical records, the original mountain men preferred boots to moccasins, cotton clothes to leather, and were generally clean shaven (Belk and Costa 1998). But the participants at the Rendezvous have decided (socially constructed) what an “authentic” mountain man looks like, and as they are in agreement, it does not matter too much what the historical facts are. Additionally, even with historical records, it is difficult to know exactly the genuine, true characteristics of a mountain man – at least without a time machine.

Examples of the dynamism of authenticity are given in the tourism literature where craft products and tourist-oriented festivals originally considered to be inauthentic gradually become accepted as authentic. Cohen (1988, p. 379) says

*Since authenticity is not a primitive given [fixed], but negotiable, one has to allow for the possibility of its gradual emergence in the eyes of visitors to the host culture. In other words, a cultural product, or a trait thereof, which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognized as authentic, even by experts.*

The standards reflect the priorities and salient concerns of the stakeholders at certain points in time. There can be disagreement between groups as to the appropriate standard to use. This was evident in the discussion/debate about the authenticity of the New Beetle (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003). Extending this notion even further, individuals can each hold different authenticity standards for a particular object. However, in many studies (e.g., Belk and Costa 1998; Beverland 2006; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003; Leigh, Peters and Shelton 2006) it was apparent that larger groups tended to form around and agree on standards. These groups seemed to have similar interests and similar ideas, and were able to collectively negotiate what authenticity meant to them at a given point in time.

It is important to note that within this body of marketing literature authenticity and brands have also been looked at. The retro-brands (Brown et al. 2003), luxury wines (Beverland 2005, 2006), beer (Beverland et al. 2008), and a group of other product brands (Minor and LeBoeuf 2010). For all of these studies authenticity was found to be a significant factor in how consumers made decisions about and evaluated the brands and products. Interestingly, in Beverland's (2005, p. 1027) article, "Crafting Brand Authenticity", he says, "These images of authenticity

represent a mixture of the real and the imagined, in that product distinctiveness, although somewhat a result of local climatic and topographical conditions is also a creation by winemakers, marketers, governments, consumers, critics, and other relevant stakeholders.” This raises the question of how something that is a “creation”, (i.e., made-up), can be authentic? This comes back to Stern’s (1994) paradox of authenticity, and the general concept that authenticity seems to be negotiated, fluid and dynamic. A key finding through all of this literature though, is that brands themselves are subject to authenticity evaluations. Products and objects are relatively concrete, and have sets of physical attributes that can be evaluated. Brands, on the other hand, tend to be intangible; although in most of these cases they are tied to tangible products. Thus one can see the extent to which authenticity is used and is important to consumers.

As can be seen by the above discussion, authenticity has been studied in the context of consumers and product brands, or consumers and their consumption activities. Consumers are concerned with the authenticity of products and product brands, and it affects their subsequent behaviours (e.g., Beverland 2006; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003; Leigh, Peters and Shelton 2006; Yeoman et al. 2005). However, largely absent from this literature is the impact of authenticity on corporate brands. As indicated by Balmer and Greyser (2006) and others, the corporate brand is gaining recognition as an important strategic factor for companies.

### **Authenticity Defined**

Given this review we can see that there are four important characteristics of authenticity: it is dynamic, it is negotiated, it is a process and it is a cultural imperative associated with freedom of choice. First of all, authenticity is dynamic. Society and culture are in a constant state

of flux. As Berman (1970) highlighted, from society and culture come pressures to conform or to be a certain way. The societal demands and constraints with which one is bombarded are constantly changing, thus one's identity is always not-quite in synch with those demands and pressures. As a person or a company tries to adjust to the pressures, their identity changes – and the changes are ongoing, thus dynamic. Their attempt to behave consistently with their changing identity must then also be dynamic.

Paradoxically, we are told to “find ourselves”, in a way that implies that there is a singular, real, identity in existence to discover. Once we find ourselves we are expected to live according to that rigid identity. So we are expected to have a fixed identity, and to be authentic to that, while at the same time we face demands that force us to constantly change our identity. The real self is actually a myth; it is something that only exists in the stories we tell, and the expectations placed on us.

Second, authenticity is negotiated. This is particularly true as the societal demands on a person will often be in conflict. The only way one can maintain authenticity is to accept some of the demands, and reject others. We cannot be all things to all people. Thompson and Haytko (1997) indicate that consumers negotiate with those around them in order to shape and guide their personal identity.

Third, authenticity is a process. That is, it is not a static concept. The means of negotiating one's identity, and then living consistently with that identity is relentless: it never ends. We can try to take a snapshot at a particular point in time, but the process continues. Identity is constantly negotiated in relation to the demands and expectations of social relations,

which are also constantly changing. As the demands and expectations are continuously changing, authenticity becomes a process of listening to, integrating, modifying or rejecting and responding in a way that is consistent with how it views its ever changing identity. Thus authenticity is a process that involves an integration and reconciliation between what one sees as its identity and how one behaves/acts.

Finally, authenticity is a cultural imperative associated with freedom of choice. As discussed in Berman's (1970) work, freedom of choice in Western society was highly valued. It was in a sense the throwing off of the shackles. As such it was also necessary to seize that freedom of choice, and be the person that one wanted to be. Freedom of choice had come with great struggle, thus if a person did not avail oneself of it, they were betraying all who had argued and pushed to achieve this great step. In essence, society and culture established an expectation that a person *must* exercise their freedom of choice, and be true to themselves. They had no choice but to try to be authentic.

Thus for the purposes of this dissertation, I define authenticity as the following:

***Authenticity is the continuous process of negotiating one's identity within a societal paradox by demonstrating one's achievement of being true to oneself.***

### **Authenticity and the Corporate Brand**

When viewing the corporate brand as a story, or a saga, it is apparent that the journey of that saga is a company's pursuit of itself. It is attempting to respond to the demands, desires and wants of its various stakeholders, while at the same time maintaining control of its own destiny. This is similar to the struggles of people as described by Berman (1970). There are many choices

available in society and the marketplace, however, corresponding to those choices are many pressures and demands that are not necessarily synchronous with each other or with the purported direction of the company. The constant tension between what the company wants and tries to accomplish, and the pressures from its stakeholders carves the path along which the corporate brand saga treads. Yet one needs to recognize that this is not a stable point; this is a negotiated process, constantly in motion. One can modify the quote from Thompson and Haytko (1997, p. 21; **changes to the quote in bold face**, original text in brackets) to have it apply to a company:

*Through this logic of **company** (self)-identity construction, the sense of “who we are (I am)” is constantly defined and redefined through perceived contrasts to others. Hence, **company** (personal) identity does not reflect a stable set of essential features but is negotiated in a dynamic field of **constituent** (social) relations.*

The notion of “finding oneself” – whether applied to an individual or a company – seems to be a social myth, with no possibility of being achieved. It would be more appropriate to say “develop oneself”. The saga traces the development, guides the development, and reports on the development of the corporate brand. When authenticity is linked with a saga, authenticity cannot be a static assessment, it *must* be a perpetual negotiation process.

As discussed earlier, the corporate brand is fluid and socially constructed. It is not an object that exists only in the boardroom of a company, or that is created by an advertising department. Nor is it something that is permanently carved in stone and presented to the world to admire. The corporate brand resides in the public arena as a jointly constructed meaning. That arena includes more than just its customers and employees; it includes all of its stakeholders.

This meshes well with how the company is commonly personified. Legally a corporation is a person, and it is treated and talked about as such. As a person then, the company acts and interacts with other persons, makes decisions, and by the very fact of its existence, generates a history.

The history of the company is told over and over as a saga – by the company, and by its stakeholders. The saga of the company and its stakeholders is the corporate brand. Like a saga, the corporate brand constantly changes; the changes that appear in the saga depend on who is contributing to it – the company, the employees, customers, suppliers, distributors, activists or any other stakeholder. The corporate brand is jointly created and lived by the company and its stakeholders. The implication of this is that the company does not completely own the corporate brand. That is, the control of the corporate brand does not reside solely with the company.

Thus the company is constrained. Inherent in, and taken for granted in the capitalistic free market system, is freedom to do what one wants (within legal boundaries) and to be what one wants to be. Yet with even a cursory glance at companies' actions in response to a variety of stakeholder pressures one can clearly see that 'freedom' is in name only. The demands of stakeholders influence the company to do what the stakeholders want, and in essence put constraints on it. However, the company also attempts to resist, change or deflect some demands, and to behave in a consistent fashion to its self-perceived identity. Hence the freedom of the free market system is somewhat illusory. The corporate brand is located within the cultural paradox of freedom. This freedom insists on one being oneself – it is an imperative. Yet there are societal constraints and demands that prevent a company from doing anything it wants.

One example of this is the now almost ubiquitous call for corporate social responsibility (CSR). Despite Friedman's (1970) assertion that the business of business is making a profit, and that companies are being irresponsible when they engage in CSR programs, many companies now fully embrace CSR (at least symbolically), and ensure that they are socially responsible in all that they do. Not too many years ago companies only thought about manufacturing quality products and meeting customer demand for those products, and trying to survive against their competitors. Now they have to have a department or person who is responsible to see that they are socially responsible. The demands of their stakeholders removed the freedom to ignore CSR. This is consistent with the stakeholder literature where companies are exhorted to attend to the various demands of primary and secondary stakeholders.

Some may argue that there is always freedom to choose – to follow or not to follow the demands of stakeholders. However what kind of freedom is this, when the results of ignoring the demands of important stakeholders are poor performance? A company is actually constrained, and its freedom is limited by the demands of its stakeholders. This is illustrated by the following passage from a Terry Pratchett novel (2004, p. 25):

*Vetinari: "There is always a choice."*

*Moist von Lipwig: "You mean ... I could choose certain death?"*

*Vetinari: "A choice, nevertheless. Or, perhaps, an alternative. You see, I believe in freedom, Mr. Lipwig. Not many people do, although they will of course protest otherwise. And no practical definition of freedom would be complete without the freedom to take the consequences. Indeed, it is the freedom upon which all the others are based."*

So the company struggles to balance the demands on it, with what it believes itself to be. The company tries to maintain the values and vision it has, and to be true to what it believes about itself. That is, the company is not a passive recipient of the demands of its stakeholders. It actively picks and chooses from the demands to help shape its identity, and from thence flow its behaviours.

This is very similar to the quest for authenticity discussed by Berman (1970). People at the time of the enlightenment were beginning to experience freedom. They were being given choices. They could follow their own desires, be who they wanted to be, and do what they wanted to do. But as pointed out by Berman, this freedom from the societal restrictions of a structured class and culture were soon replaced by a myriad of other restrictions – not as structured, but just as powerful. Along with the apparent freedoms came the assertion to be true to oneself; be authentic. It was, and is, difficult to balance what one believes to be true about oneself with the demands of the surrounding world. Every person struggles with this responsibility to be authentic. Importantly this is not a unilateral process; rather each person tries to understand and develop their inner self, but it is in response and interaction with people, places and things around them that helps them to accomplish this. Furthermore, as a person ages they change in response to experiences and in interactions with those around them.

This process is relentless. A company needs to continuously balance and negotiate the demands of its stakeholders with its own history and experience in order to understand who it is. Against this fluid identity it must then exist and act in society. Adding to this complexity is the

notion that its stakeholders also change in response to the company's actions. And so the process continues.

From the above discussions one can see how the salient aspects of authenticity can be applied to the corporate brand. The same notions of freedom of choice (or lack thereof) apply to the company as they do to individuals; they both exist and function in the public domain; they both struggle to balance what they believe about themselves with what others demand of them, they both change over time in the struggle to figure out who they are, and they both must engage in the pursuit of being "true to themselves" in order to reduce both internal and external tensions. Thompson and Haytko (1997, pp. 15-16) found that consumers appropriate marketplace items and use them to "address a series of tensions and paradoxes existing between their sense of individual agency (autonomy issues) and their sensitivity to sources of social prescription in their everyday lives (conformity issues)." That is, consumers are not dominated by the authority of the marketplace; rather they are influenced by it, and they also use it for their own self-identity projects in an attempt to be true to themselves – in other words, to be authentic. In the same way, companies negotiate their place in society via their corporate brand.

For a person it is important to be true to what he/she negotiates for him/herself. In the case of a corporation, this should also be the case: is the image of the corporate brand true to itself? However, as with people, a corporation changes over time through a negotiation process between the corporation and its stakeholders. The corporate brand saga develops over time, during which the corporation tries to follow this process, but part of doing so involves a search for and development of its own identity. Tapscott and Ticoll (2003) talk about the "Naked

Corporation”, and the push by stakeholders to see through to the core of the corporation – even if the notion of a “true” core identity is a myth. The stakeholders want to know if the corporation is authentic. If there is a disconnect between what the corporation projects, and what it is beneath the clothes, the corporation is in trouble. In other words, there is a concern with the authenticity of the corporation.

People are concerned with a company’s authenticity; as they recognize the critical importance of authenticity to themselves, they expect others (including companies) to be authentic. No matter how much a company invests in projecting and communicating an image of itself (or maybe because of how much it invests), people seem to have a level of suspicion that the company is different from that image; maybe a little bit different, or maybe a lot. In any case, they want to know what that difference is, so that they know how to relate to the company. When a company is more inauthentic, people will likely be a lot more careful about trusting the company, and will put more safeguards in place.

Therefore it is logical to apply the lens of authenticity to the corporate brand. Digging into the saga of how the company struggles to negotiate its meaning in the face of the various, and often conflicting demands of its many stakeholders can be understood in greater depth with this lens. One could actually say that the corporate brand is the ongoing manifestation of the company’s attempts to be authentic. The more traditional views of the corporate brand typically view it as a singular, identifiable object, and through that view miss out on so much of the richness that is encapsulated in the corporate brand. The change and dynamism can be explained and understood through the company’s quest for authenticity.

In this way the concept of authenticity is relevant to the corporate brand. There is an ongoing struggle for the company to be true to its dynamic self. It is not easy to do this as the company is constantly changing, and the social context within which it exists is also constantly changing. The company must continually work to keep in synch with its own changes, societal and cultural changes, and how it behaves. As the company's identity changes, its actions and responses to its stakeholders must also change. If either of these change, and the other does not, then the corporate brand risks being viewed as inauthentic by its stakeholders who respond in unfavourable ways. On the other hand, authenticity garners positive responses.

Applying this logic to the corporate brand makes one realize the increased importance of authenticity. When a corporate brand is evaluated as authentic or inauthentic, that evaluation may flow through to all of its product (or service) brands. Additionally, as a corporate brand is important to more stakeholder groups than a product brand, the extent of an authenticity evaluation is wider spread. With the product brand, a consumer would influence another consumer regarding their authenticity evaluation. With the corporate brand, stakeholders could attempt to influence each other both within a type (e.g., distributor to distributor) and across stakeholder types (e.g., distributor to consumer, supplier to financier). The thrust here is that the corporate brand is a leverage point for the corporation and its stakeholders. The impact of the authenticity of the corporate brand is generally further reaching than that of a product brand.

Therefore it is appropriate to apply a lens of authenticity to the corporate brand. It has the potential to explore the nature of the corporate brand, how it develops over time, and how it is managed. In particular it goes farther than other notions commonly used to look at brands in that

it allows for the fluidity inherent in the corporate brand as a saga. The depth of understanding that will come from such an analysis will provide both researchers and managers an expanded view of the corporate brand which will facilitate future research and help with the management of the corporate brand.

This dissertation thus attempts to develop a new theory of the corporate brand. In particular it will explore how the corporate brand is a dynamic aspect of an organization that is involved in an ongoing search for its own identity through interactions with multiple stakeholders, and at the same time is an attempt to be true to that fluid identity. This examination provides a view into how a company negotiates its way through the cultural paradox of freedom: that is, the imperative to be true to itself within a social context that actually constrains its ability to do so. In researching this, I will attempt to answer questions such as: how do companies' managers negotiate with stakeholders in creating the meaning of their corporate brand while maintaining its authenticity? Which stakeholders are important in contributing to, and influencing the corporate brand saga? How do these stakeholders interact with the company in constructing the meaning of the corporate brand? What is the stakeholders' view of the company's authenticity over time? How does this view integrate with the corporate brand saga?

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methodology**

As described in previous chapters, the corporate brand can be viewed as a complex, fluid, multi-stakeholder constructed saga of a company's quest for authenticity. This corporate brand saga is an intricate social and cultural process with no clear beginning and end. However, there is a simultaneous cultural expectation and imperative that the corporate brand should be a clearly defined ideal that stakeholders can judge. How does a company negotiate its way through this paradoxical social space?

Given that the corporate brand's quest for authenticity is an ongoing process that involves the company, its employees and all of its stakeholders, attempting to look back at a given point in time in the past and attempting to analyze the corporate brand as it was, misses the thrust of this dissertation; that is, there is a process underway. To pick a point in time in the past will only provide a snapshot, which is by nature fixed. Even if the attempt was made to understand the process that was occurring at some period in the past, it would be difficult to accomplish. Thus the focus of this empirical work is to explore the process itself at work. Of particular interest will be issues with current relevance that are being shaped now, or are the result of recent interactions with a company and its stakeholders.

In order to look at this process, it is necessary to explore richness and depth in a research site. Rather than trying to gather and analyze information from many different companies' corporate brands, I focus on one company as a research site, and use multiple sources of information in order to attain depth of detail about its corporate brand. This requires the use of

several approaches to gathering information, and some unstructured sources of data. The primary sources of data are depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders, Twitter™ feeds, Blogs, media articles and interviews and presentations by key stakeholders. By using one research site it will be possible to explore, in detail, the corporate brand saga of one company. The mix of perspectives of a company and its multiple stakeholders over a period of time provides an opportunity to reveal the interactive nature of a saga. This should help to provide a rich understanding of how a company navigates its search for authenticity when it is a fluid process, while culturally there are demands for a static objective authenticity.

IBM is the central research site for the empirical work of this dissertation. There are a few reasons why IBM makes a good research site. First IBM has a well-recognized corporate brand – according to Interbrand’s 2008 through 2011 reports, IBM was the number two best brand in the world. IBM seems to recognize the importance of its corporate brand and takes specific steps to help shape and manage it. One example of this are the regularly conducted “Info-Jams”, which are online collaborative forums, held over two or three days, that seek stakeholder input, discussion and debate on strategic (or otherwise) issues such as what IBM is, and where is it going. As Info-Jams are online forums, they are able to attract thousands of participants from around the world – generally including both IBM employees, and non-IBMers. With the importance of their corporate brand clearly recognized, IBM actively attempts to understand and manage their corporate brand.

IBM has also been in existence for a long time; its roots go back to the late 1800s when it included such products as time recording equipment, weigh scales and card punch machines. In

the more than 100 years since that time, the company has expanded to have more than 386,000 employees, revenue of nearly \$100 billion, and has operations in more than 170 countries. The changes that have occurred over that time frame have likely required significant re-thinking of IBM's mission, values, ways of operating, and overall identity. Thus there have been issues and phenomena at IBM that are representative of the authenticity process with which a corporate brand is involved.

Another reason for using IBM in this particular research project is that there are clear indicators that they recognize and act on the notion that multiple stakeholders are involved in shaping the IBM corporate brand. As an example, Sam Palmisano, CEO of IBM said (Innovation Jam™ 2008 Executive Report, p. 7)

*You have to understand and accept some responsibility for an extended business ecosystem – a supply chain of companies, of individuals and communities you can't control...but their actions and decisions can have a material impact on your results and on your company's brand and reputation. No individual leader...no matter how big the company, can control such truly global consequences and contexts.*

This quote from the head of IBM provides clear evidence that IBM acknowledges that there are external influences on its corporate brand. Palmisano's use of the metaphor "ecosystem" brings to mind an interactive, interconnected, interdependent and ever-changing group of stakeholders; he also recognizes that even a company as large as IBM cannot fully control this process. IBM thus needs to go to its stakeholders, work with them, and react to them as it attempts to maintain its authenticity.

Finally, IBM would be an excellent research site, because of my personal knowledge of the company, its background, some of its cultural norms and the industry in which it operates.

Thompson (1997, p. 452) says,

*A research method or interpretive framework cannot in and of itself generate marketing insights. To bring these consumption stories to life, marketing researchers must possess the background knowledge needed to recognize the relationships between the narratological structure of consumers' consumption stories and the rich texture of their self-identities and life-world contexts.*

Although Thompson was referring specifically to consumer research, the same is applicable to marketing strategy research, and in this case the analysis of the corporate brand of IBM. As a researcher, I have the background knowledge necessary to “recognize the relationships between the narratological structure of” stakeholders’ stories. I worked for IBM on two separate occasions: once for almost five years, and the second time (10 years later) for two years. This means that I am intimately familiar with some aspects of IBM, and passingly familiar with many other parts. This benefits me in that I understand much of the terminology used, issues raised, and history of the company. In addition to specific knowledge about IBM, I am informed about the industries in which IBM functions. This understanding extends beyond simply technology familiarity, to that of also knowing people and companies in the industry and issues that are salient to the various stakeholders. All of this was valuable in terms of gaining access to participants and understanding the ‘lingo’ and ‘jargon’ used in interviews, articles, blogs, on Twitter, and in videos. Significantly, and in agreement with Thompson (1997), it is also beneficial in facilitating my in-depth analysis of the data.

However, my relatively detailed and in-depth knowledge of IBM also affects my data analysis. Clearly I am not a disinterested person, and as such it is important to explicitly recognize the fact that my own experiences act as a lens in interpreting data. My experience with IBM – both as an employee and as someone working in the IT industry and interacting with IBM from time to time – has provided me with a good perspective with which to analyze the data. That is, it gives me the insight to understand many of the nuances and subtleties going on under many of the high level announcements, presentations and assertions from and about IBM. As such, even though I am relatively “close” to IBM as a researcher, my bias is towards exploring and understanding those nuances; my experience only provides me with additional knowledge with which to do deep analysis and provide rich description of the phenomena I am exploring.

### **Data Sources**

As is discussed later, IBM has been, and still is in the midst of a campaign called “Smarter Planet”. This appears to be a major campaign to the extent that IBM wants its corporate brand to be associated and linked with the Smarter Planet. Thus data has been gathered from the time frame leading up to their announcement of the Smarter Planet campaign up until the present time – while the Smarter Planet campaign is ongoing. Data sources include data from IBM, ex-IBMers, business partners, customers, competitors, industry experts, suppliers, media outlets and others who have a specific interest in IBM. Details on each of these follow.

And is it reasonable to utilize blogs, Twitter feeds, media interviews, YouTube videos, along with depth interviews to construct the story of IBM’s corporate brand? Jenkins (2003, 2004) talks about a phenomena called “transmedia storytelling”. The context he writes about

(and from) is embedded in the entertainment industry – where good stories and storytelling are the engine of success. Jenkins et al. (2006, p. 46) very simply define Transmedia stories as “stories told across multiple media”. That is, a story will emerge from the combination of telling from a variety of media. Scolari (2009, p. 587) says “transmedia storytelling is not just an adaptation from one media to another. The story that comics tells is not the same as that told on television or cinema; the different media and languages participate and contribute to the construction of the transmedia narrative world.” The multiple media accounts and sources I have analyzed combine together to create a narrative; looking only to a single source means that a portion of the narrative will not be known. Applying this to the world around us, and to the world around IBM, one can see how a narrative is constructed about IBM; and a narrative about IBM’s corporate brand is feasibly – perhaps even necessarily – constructed from these various sources.

### **IBM Data**

From IBM itself there are several data sources. First are speeches given by senior IBM executives – in particular Sam Palmisano, President, CEO and Chair of IBM. Second are interviews between senior IBM executives and media or industry consultants/experts.

A third source is a blog hosted and moderated by IBM. According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online a “blog” is the shortened form of “weblog”, and is “A frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc.” It is a kind of perpetually running personal editorial on material that interests the author or authors (also referred to as ‘bloggers’). This particular blog is called “Building a Smarter Planet blog” and at the time of this writing is found at <http://asmarterplanet.com/>. It describes itself thus:

*Building a Smarter Planet is a blog intended to provide readers with thought-provoking content and a place to talk about the issues raised within the content. It is our hope that you will feel compelled to share some of the things you see, read and hear on this blog with your friends, family and peers. We feel strongly that this blog is not going to deliver final answers to the issues raised, but that it will represent a starting point for conversation around the issues.*

This blog has been running since November 15th, 2008, the beginning of the formal Smarter Planet campaign. Its authors are primarily IBMers from various departments and business units within IBM, but occasionally non-IBMer authors have a blog posted (e.g., Josh Catone of Mashable, September 29, 2009; Mark Greenwald, chief of research and planning at the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, April 14th, 2010). As with most blogs, the information does not stop being created – thus new data is being produced on almost a daily basis. For the purposes of this research, the blog postings used covered from November 15, 2008 until the end of June 2011. During this time there were 302 separate blog postings, (although not all of these were read as a small number were not in the English language) with a varying number of comments associated with each blog.

This blog is extremely helpful for the presentation of one perspective from IBM; or rather not one perspective, as there are multiple authors. However, this blog is a formal IBM presentation, so it is clearly designed to be one key source of IBM's contribution to the saga. Postings on the blog are generally chronological (but also categorized in a variety of other ways), so the home page shows the most recent blog posting. It is also possible to go back to the first – or any previous – posting by looking at the archives. The postings also often link to videos, podcasts, graphics, other web sites and other blogs. Thus there are thousands of pages of

information available through this web site, which provide a rich source for seeing IBM's contribution to its own corporate brand

In addition to IBM's Building a Smarter Planet blog, another source of online, almost constantly updated data is IBM's SmarterPlanet Twitter feed. Twitter is essentially a 'micro' blog. That is, people enter information about what they are doing, saying, seeing or what they find interesting around them on a regular basis. Often times the IBM SmarterPlanet Twitter feed refers to events that are happening (e.g., a SmarterCities conference), and provides a link to that event. The difference between Twitter and a regular blog is that Twitter is limited to 140 characters of text in each posting; long blogs are not feasible, and pictures, videos, etc., are not possible (although people link to such items from Twitter). Another difference is that Twitter is a company/web site in and of itself, whereas a blog is a more generic term relating to a framework that people can create on their own (if they have a few web programming skills), or they can create on a number of web sites that provide a useful interface. That said, Twitter seems to be the most commonly known micro-blog web site, and is probably the most widely used such site. For many users, Twitter is almost a real-time broadcast of their thoughts, actions, whereabouts and doings. This is possible as users can access Twitter from a wide variety of devices in addition to computers – for example smart phones can be used. Thus Twitter is very mobile.

In addition to information from IBM itself in relation to the corporate brand saga, a core concept of this dissertation is that external stakeholders also contribute to the telling of the saga, thus data was also gathered from a variety of these stakeholders. This included eleven depth interviews, media articles, blogs, and Twitter feeds; all of which related to IBM in some fashion.

## **Depth Interviews**

Eleven interview participants were purposively chosen in order to ensure coverage and input from a variety of stakeholder types. In some cases the participants were drawn from my own industry contacts, some came from using a snowballing technique (i.e., getting referred to a contact through previous participants) and others were through cold calls – finding a reference to a person through reading about IBM, and contacting them directly. The range of experience of the participants is extremely large and covers a wide array of facets of IBM, the IT industry and areas that might contribute to or be relevant to IBM’s corporate brand. A summary of the interviewees and their backgrounds is presented in Table 4-1 below.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Current Stakeholder Type</b>	<b>Description</b>
Brad	39	Male	Reseller/business partner	Brad is the owner of a technology reseller business. He focuses on mid- to medium-sized businesses, and supplies them with computer hardware, software, professional services and technology. His company is an authorized reseller for IBM. Brad started the business five years ago. Prior to running this business, he had worked for other resellers for about 15 years as a sales representative (primarily). He has had a lot of experience over the years working with IBM and with other major information systems suppliers.
Lynn	Mid-30's	Female	Industry Consultant	Lynn specializes in working with value added resellers in the computer industry – at a business-to-business level. In particular, she assists them in dealing with their vendors and suppliers; one of her specialties is with IBM. She is also an ex-IBMer, and has worked for two other large IT companies.
Scott	48	Male	Business partner	Scott is currently starting a new company in the IT industry. He has 25 years of prior experience working in the IT sector with some of the largest companies in that industry: some direct competitors of IBM, some with complementary products and services, and some partners of IBM. Scott has also had IBM as a customer.
Bruce	Mid-50's	Male	Customer	Director of IT Services of large organization. Previously worked as IT director of other organizations also as a customer of IBM. Before going into management, Bruce worked in systems integration roles with companies that used IBM equipment, and as such he dealt directly with IBM personnel on a regular basis.
William	50	Male	Customer/liason	William works for a large customer of IBM. Within his organization he works primarily in an administrative role managing software assets. As such, he deals with the producers of many of the different software packages used by his organization – including software produced by IBM. Prior to this position, William has served as a business analyst, evaluating client software needs, and helping to find and guide the development of information solutions to meet those needs.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Current Stakeholder Type</b>	<b>Description</b>
Richard	25	Male	Ex-employee	Richard worked for IBM while he was a university student. He was a business analyst with a start-up department that was responsible for the development, sales and implementation of leading edge technology in a specific industry setting.
Larry	46	Male	Integrator, Consultant	Larry is a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer. He owns his own business that does information systems consulting for a variety of organizations. Some of the activities that Larry does include recommending hardware and software solutions for organizations, installing and supporting systems and setting up processes to help organizations to more effectively and efficiently manage their information systems. He works with and interacts with a number of information systems resellers (some of which are resellers for IBM). He has been involved in this type of work for over 25 years, but has owned his own business for 6 years.
Paul	47	Male	Customer	Paul currently works for a large organization that is a customer of IBM. His role there is a senior business analyst, in which he is responsible for determining the information system needs of his organization (and its employees), finding appropriate solutions, implementing them and ensuring that the solutions meet the originally identified needs. IBM is a major supplier for this organization, and thus he has significant interactions with them. Paul is also an ex-employee of IBM; he worked for them for 14 years as a systems engineering representative and as a sales representative.
Grace	53	Female	Consultant/ Systems Integrator	Grace worked for a company that provided computer and network integration and support services for other companies. Typically the work involved Microsoft Windows based networks of up to 50 users. This included dealing with IBM resellers when necessary. Previously she had worked on a variety of IBM based hardware and software including mainframe systems (in the 70s) and some mid-range computers doing some configuration work.

Name	Age	Gender	Current Stakeholder Type	Description
Justin	37	Male	Customer, integrator	Justin works for the computer department of an organization. They use a variety of IBM hardware and software products, so have significant experience as a customer. In addition to helping his organization decide on hardware and software acquisitions, he is responsible for integrating and supporting the various systems. Prior to this position, Justin worked as a systems engineer for a company that was an IBM reseller; with that company he worked closely with customers of IBM, and often times closely with IBM employees.
Simon	Mid-60s	Male	Business Owner, computer reseller (non-IBM) - competitor	Simon's company sells and services a variety of personal computer related hardware, software and services. His company is an authorized dealer of several products/brands that compete against IBM. Prior to owning his own business, Simon worked on computers – including IBM systems from the earlier 70s on up to the early 80s.

**Table 4-1: Participant Descriptions**

All of the interviews were unstructured, similar to what is described by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) where the goal of the interview is to focus on getting the respondent's experiences rather than their view or interpretation of causal factors of a situation. With unstructured interviews complete sets of questions are not brought in to the interview. As the goal here was "to attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience" (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989, p. 138), "grand tour" questions were used to initiate dialogue in a particular area. Once the conversation had begun, further questions arose out of the conversation itself. The idea was to allow the participants to describe their personal experiences in detail, with the interviewer only providing prompts that help delve deeper into those experiences. As such, although a set of questions was prepared in advance (see Appendix A for an example), often, very few of the specific questions were asked; rather the overall subject was

explored through the experiences described by the participants. This tends to be a circular, rather than linear type of dialogue (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and included in the data to be analyzed and interpreted. It should be noted however that the interviews comprise only one portion of the saga of IBM's corporate brand. As described before, the saga of IBM's corporate brand is a transmedia story (Jenkins 2004), of which there are many parts; interviews are one part, but other parts – such as the blogs, Twitter feeds, video clips, media articles – are also included in the total data set that needs to be analyzed.

### **Media Articles**

A significant stakeholder in the telling of the saga of IBM's corporate brand is the media. This is particularly true as IBM is such a large, well known company. When IBM makes significant changes or announcements, many people take notice and then publicly comment on what they think. This results in a wide variety of media outlets writing stories about IBM from a multitude of vantage points. For example, when IBM reduces its workforce, perhaps because it has outsourced some manufacturing to another country, there are very negative reports in some newspapers, and news broadcasts. Alternatively, when IBM creates a new solution that addresses traffic congestion in urban areas, it receives accolades in those same media outlets. There are also industry specific outlets and people that follow IBM. These include CRN.com, eWeek and others.

Output from media sources is sporadic, and cannot be predicted much in advance. However, the articles are important as they are read by many people who may be interested in

IBM and what IBM is doing. The information in the articles helps them to form an understanding of IBM – who IBM is, what its values are and what its character is like. That is, they form an important part of the saga of IBM’s corporate brand. In this role it is important to include such articles in an analysis of IBM’s corporate brand.

The question may arise as to how articles were selected to be included in the data analysis. A combination of approaches was used to first find articles about IBM, and then decide whether or not to include the article. First, I am on a mailing list for one of the industry specific publications – CRN.com. Almost every day I receive a group of articles about what is happening in the IT valued-added reseller world. I scanned these articles for mention of IBM. When I found an article on IBM I then added it to the list of articles that I would analyze. This analysis was carried out over the period beginning June 2009 and going until June 2011. Prior to June 2009 I had not been actively screening CRN.com emails for articles pertaining to IBM; in order to include articles dating back to the beginning of the Smarter Planet campaign, I did an archive search of CRN.com going back to November 2008, and was thus able to get additional articles.

In addition to daily tracking of CRN.com, I tracked the business news in the Globe and Mail newspaper (a national Canadian newspaper with excellent coverage of world business issues) on a daily (or multiple times daily) basis – with particular attention to technology reports. From time to time there were articles that mentioned IBM, or were specifically about IBM; these too were added to my data. Finally, from some other sources of data (Blogs, Twitter, and interviews) there were sometimes references to articles or videos about IBM. I attempted to retrieve these media reports and include them in my data set.

## **Blogs**

In addition to the IBM Smarter Planet Blog, this study accessed and read several different blogs. Much in the same way that various media reports came to my attention, blogs are often referenced by other people (e.g., on Twitter™, in the media, on other blogs) in relation to an aspect of IBM. Thus when a reference seemed relevant I tracked down the particular blog and read the relevant section or sections. These blogs were typically not followed on a regular basis (or not for more than a few days or weeks), as they usually were not dedicated to IBM, and thus they would have only one or two relevant posts.

## **Twitter™**

In this research there were two prime Twitter™ feeds that I followed: one from IBM itself (discussed above), and the other from an organization that would like to form a union at IBM: AllianceIBM. From their website, [www.AllianceIBM.org](http://www.AllianceIBM.org), they are “an IBM employee organization that is dedicated to preserving and improving our rights and benefits at IBM....While our ultimate goal is collective bargaining rights with IBM, we will build our union now and challenge IBM on the many issues facing employees from off-shoring and job security to working conditions and company policy.” This Twitter™ feed serves to inform its followers about the organization’s actions towards achieving its goals, actions of IBM, pointing followers to news articles about IBM, and referring followers to other Twitter™ feeds, blogs and media articles that relate to IBM and IBM’s poor labour practices. This feed was a useful one to follow as it provided a close perspective of IBM, but not the management ‘spin’ on the company.

I followed both of these Twitter™ feeds closely from approximately June 2009 until mid-2011 (and I still follow them), on a daily basis.

### **IBM's Smarter Planet Campaign**

A key part of this research, and an apparently important part of IBM's branding of itself is the Smarter Planet Campaign. This was officially launched in November 2008. In order to provide some context for the reader, a brief description of the Smarter Planet is provided here.

According to IBM, three very significant factors are at play on the planet; these are known as the three "I's". The planet is **I**nstrumented, **I**nterconnected and **I**ntelligent.

1. **Instrumented:** There are billions of transistors embedded into much of the infrastructure in the world around us. This includes objects like computers, clocks, fridges, cars, watches and so on. It also includes buildings, transportation systems, utility systems (e.g., power generating plants), water systems, and roadways (and the list goes on). But the list goes even further and even includes animals (e.g., livestock) and could easily include humans.
2. **Interconnected:** While the number of transistors in and of itself is staggering, this becomes even more impressive when one realizes that through the internet, many of these are linked together and actually communicate and share information. This creates a vast network of devices, objects and beings.
3. **Intelligent:** With so many devices networked together and sharing information, there is an incredible amount of data being produced all of the time. By itself it is not extremely useful. However, at the present time there are analytical tools

available that enable people to extract useful information from that ocean of data and use it to make smart decisions; decisions that can benefit the planet.

Thus with the juxtaposition of the three I's, IBM proposes that we live in the age of the Smarter Planet. Furthermore, IBM suggests that the world needs to take advantage of the Smarter Planet (and the three I's) to solve the problems the planet is facing (more on this in the Analysis and Interpretation chapter). The Smarter Planet campaign then is IBM's promotion of and activities in relation to the Smarter Planet characteristics. It seems to be a foundational part of almost all that IBM does, and seems to be linked fundamentally to their brand (for more information go to <http://www.ibm.com/smarterplanet/us/en/overview/ideas/index.html?re=spf>).

### **Data Analysis**

Guiding the overall analysis was a method called “thematic analysis” (Braun and Clark 2006). This guides the interpretation of the data and applies experience and judgment to “draw out themes that improve understanding and generate insights” (Beckman et al. 2009, p. 194; Braun and Clark 2006; Spiggle 1994).

### **Traditional Brand Management**

The first section of analysis looks at IBM's actions compared to what traditional corporate branding would advise. In this case, the template for comparison comes from Aaker (2004). This section shows how IBM has worked at developing and managing its corporate brand from quite a structuralist perspective.

## **The IBM Story**

As detailed earlier, in the conceptual development section, I view the corporate brand as a story. As such, it makes sense to draw from story analyses methods in order to analyze the data that I have gathered.

At its core, a story is simply a narrative about people and events held together by a plot. Generally the stories that we read in books and magazines, or watch on television or in a movie, are stripped of any extraneous information that is not particularly relevant to the plot. Taking IBM as the focal point, a story can be told (or written) about the company, its people, the companies that it deals with, the various people that know about and deal with IBM, and other interested stakeholders (such as industry analysts and media outlets). The plot and characters of this story can be analyzed, and meaning can be extracted. Looking at the interactions amongst the various stakeholders (including those within IBM itself), and how meaning is created through a transmedia story provides valuable insights into the nature of the corporate brand and how it is formed, maintained and interpreted.

Viewing IBM's corporate brand as a narrative then suggests the use of some form of narrative analysis as a method to interpret the collected data. Within marketing and consumer research this is not an unusual initiative, as several notable researchers have used or proposed the use of narrative methods (e.g., Brown 1997, Bush et al. 1997, Grayson 1997, Hirschman 1988, Stern 1989, 1995). Thus in order to analyze the data collected for this dissertation I draw on three types of narrative analysis. The first is simply the use of a storyline or plot structure (Freytag and MacEwan 1900) to illustrate that some of the data can be viewed as a story. The second is the

use of narratology, using some of the concepts and codes developed and used by Barthes (1974) to illustrate how the story could possibly be interpreted. Third, I use Reader Response Theory (RRT) (Scott 1994) to analyze the story still further, as a deliberately constructed narrative directed towards a sceptical, cynical audience. Each of these narrative analysis methods is described in more detail directly before the section in which it is used.

### **The IBM Saga**

The final section looks in more depth at how the story is actually a saga, where the audience can become the storyteller. This draws on and extends “intentional readers” of RRT to get at the complex interactions of all of IBM’s stakeholders and how they impact IBM’s corporate brand.

## Chapter 5

### Analysis and Interpretation

As mentioned briefly at the end of the previous chapter, the analysis and interpretation of IBM's corporate brand falls into three main sections: according to traditional brand management concepts, as a story and as a saga. The purpose of these sections is to provide stepping stones from where the common view of the corporate brand is, along to a new view of the corporate brand.

The phrase "stepping stones" in the above paragraph is chosen quite deliberately. That is, each section and view of the corporate brand has a place and is important in and of itself. However, there is also a progression that occurs in the thinking about corporate brands. This progression occurs because even though the first section of analysis using traditional corporate brand concepts provides valuable insights about corporate brands, it also raises questions that cannot easily be answered within its paradigm. One of the factors that is raised is the ownership and control of the corporate brand, and the general assumptions that these reside with the company itself. There can be (and should be) input from some stakeholders, but the responsibility for the corporate brand lies with the company.

The second section broadens this view and looks at the corporate brand as a story. Implicit in viewing the corporate brand as a story is the interpretation of that story by readers, and also the knowledge of the author (the company in this case) that the story will be interpreted in a variety of ways by the readers, thus it should be crafted/told in a way that maintains the

interest and attention (in a positive way) of the readers. This view provides a more fluid and interactive version of the corporate brand with more engagement of its stakeholders (readers).

However, from the data collected from external stakeholders, it was apparent that the talked about corporate brand was not always in synch with what IBM was saying. That is, the stakeholders themselves actively contributed to the story, and expressed their own demands and expectations as to what IBM should be, and how it was or was not being true to itself. This extends the notion of a story to that of a saga, in which the storyteller can change; that is, it is not always IBM in charge of the story, at various times, the external stakeholders take over the story. Thus in the third section we see the third stepping stone, where now IBM's stakeholders are active storytellers along with IBM in the saga of IBM's corporate brand. The corporate brand then emerges from the ongoing intertwining of the portions of the story that IBM and its stakeholders tell.

Taken together, these three sections help us to understand how companies negotiate and interact with their stakeholders as the corporate brand emerges.

### **Theme 1: The Development and Management of IBM's Corporate Brand**

#### **Following the Script**

When one sees that IBM consistently ranks near the top of Interbrand's "Best Global Brands"<sup>5</sup> ratings (Ranked #2 for 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and ranked #3 for 2001 – 2007) it should come as no surprise that IBM seems to be developing and managing its corporate brand very well. What does one mean by the phrase "developing and managing" a corporate brand?

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.interbrand.com/en/best-global-brands/best-global-brands-2008/best-global-brands-2011.aspx>

Well, if the corporate brand is “the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organisation’s unique business model” (Knox and Bickerton 2003, p. 1013), then “developing and managing” is what a company does to its visual, verbal and behavioural expression of its unique business model.

There are several different prescriptions for how this is done, one of which is laid out very well by Aaker (2004). Aaker highlights five challenges to managing a corporate brand: staying relevant, creating value propositions, managing negative associations, adapting the corporate brand to different contexts and making the corporate brand identity happen. In the launch and running of IBM’s Smarter Planet campaign one can see elements of each of these five points.

### **Maintaining Relevance**

The first challenge to IBM in managing its corporate brand is maintaining relevance. This deals with articulating the business IBM is in, and the product areas where it has credibility. It also relates to its heritage. Beginning with heritage first, even the title of the campaign evokes IBM’s history.

The first part of the campaign title, “Smarter Planet”, is a cultural reference to the past, and to the founder of IBM, Thomas Watson, Sr.. Watson coined the one word slogan “Think”, which was (and is) seen on the walls of IBM facilities, and in the company publications; it was even the title of IBM’s employee publication for many years. Smart people are also known as “thinkers”; thus the use of the theme “Smarter Planet”, and the use of the word “smarter” and “smart” makes a direct link back to the “Think” slogan. This provides continuity, consistency and a connection to past initiatives within IBM. That is, even though there is a new campaign,

and IBM is moving on to new initiatives, with new technology, new approaches to doing business, there is still a strong connection to its venerable past. This aspect, in particular is important to convey, as past accomplishments have made IBM one of the top global brands. They do not want to distance themselves from what made them successful in the past; rather IBM wants to reinforce an image suggesting that the core values that made them so effective in the past are still in place today and for the future, which will ensure IBM's brand continued top placing in the world. Thus the reference to the well-known IBM slogan "Think" is a crucial aspect of maintaining the relevance of IBM's corporate brand, and an effective way of drawing on a strong cultural code that resonates with IBM's stakeholders.

IBM also emphasizes the business it is in, and focuses on the product and service areas in which it has credibility. In CEO, Sam Palmisano's Smarter Planet launch speech, he describes a potential catastrophe that is facing the world: environmental problems, financial crises, energy shortages, supply chain inefficiencies, traffic congestion, water shortages and more, all combining to bring disaster on the world. However, the solution is to become a Smarter Planet, which involves information technology – something in which IBM is renowned for its expertise. IBM has significant credibility in this arena, and thus emphasizing it as a solution to many of the world's problems resonates with its stakeholders.

The information technology solution involves the world being instrumented (billions of transistors), interconnected (the transistors share information with each other), and intelligent (the analytics require to make sense of the share information are available) – the three I's. This allows IBM to broaden the scope of the business that they are in. That is, traditionally people

have viewed IBM as being a computer system manufacturer. By linking itself to the three I's, IBM is positioning itself as an authority on the hardware, the interconnectivity, the analytics side, and importantly, in business consulting that allows the application of the three I's in the resolution of the world's problems.

Thus even in this first section, one can see how IBM is carefully and strategically maintaining their corporate brand's relevance.

### **Creating Value Propositions**

A corporate brand also needs to create a point of distinction; a way to differentiate itself (Aaker 2004). One of the overall purposes of the Smarter Planet campaign is to create that distinction for IBM. Yes the world is instrumented and interconnected, but it becomes smart when intelligence is gleaned from the first two "I's". IBM makes it clear that it is the analytics involved in realizing that intelligence that is so important. At the same time, IBM has strategically purchased and developed the expertise to provide the all-important analytics capability. In the last few years IBM has aggressively sought out and purchased a broad variety of analytics type companies, including some very big names: SPSS, Cognos, Netezza Corp., Coremetrics, Sterling Commerce, Unica, Cast Iron Systems, OpenPages and several others. The acquisition of this particular expertise has not gone unnoticed; many industry observers have noted the analytics focus of IBM's spending spree – e.g., PCWorld, TechCrunch, and Fierce Content Management websites. It even seems that IBM has created a new term, or industry with their use of the word "analytics". Joab Jackson of PC World (2010) said:

*But what is analytics and how is it different from a seemingly similar, though more widely used term, business intelligence, or BI?*

*At IBM, "the term analytics is used in a very broad sense. BI is just one of the capabilities. Data warehouse, information integration," are all also part of analytics, explained Arvind Krishna, who is an IBM information management general manager.*

‘Creating’ a new business area – analytics – positioning itself solidly in that business area, and then launching a campaign – the Smarter Planet campaign – where that business area is critical and central to saving the planet is a great way of creating a value proposition.

### **Managing Negative Associations**

Are there negative associations for IBM’s corporate brand? Well given IBM’s size and significance in the market, along with its approximately 100 years of existence one would naturally expect there to be some negative associations. However, are there any identifiable negative associations within the Smarter Planet campaign? As much as this seems like a positive campaign, and one that will benefit the world, there are potential negative associations.

The core premise of the Smarter Planet is the gathering, sharing and analyzing of information about almost everything – including people. While the goal is to use the information towards positive outcomes, there is also the fear that it could also be used for not so positive reasons. That is, there is a loss of privacy and thus loss of personal freedom; there is a potential for abuse in the Smarter Planet that may counter-balance the benefits. The problem for IBM is that they are specifically enabling this environment and making it more powerful and more far-reaching. This negative association is obvious, and rather than trying to avoid it, IBM takes it head-on before anyone can make a huge deal about it and accuse IBM of having a hidden agenda.

Just over a year into the campaign, Palmisano presented a speech at the *Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, London, UK* (January 2010). In it he says,

*... That's the promise of a smarter planet.*

*But with that promise come some disquieting implications. That's the final learning of the past year. Consider two of the more obvious ones: privacy and security.*

*Cameras here in London and in Chicago can help alert police and other first responders to emergencies far faster and more precisely than ever before. That saves lives. But, as you know, some citizens have expressed discomfort at living in... not a safer society, but a "surveillance society."*

Palmisano recognizes the issues – privacy and security – and brings them to the forefront to demonstrate that he is aware of them, takes them seriously, and agrees with the likely critics that something needs to be done to mitigate any risks, and thus still reap the benefits. His solution?

*These are serious issues. And they will require serious consideration and collaborative decision making across all the stakeholders of civil society. We need to build more than systems. We must build constituency.*

*That's why IBM has taken a coalition-building approach in many areas of our smarter planet agenda.*

Palmisano offers to include a variety of stakeholders who can and will safeguard the integrity of the use of all of this information. And he includes groups that are reputed to care for the interests of the everyday person, and the underdog : labor unions, consumer groups and patient quality organizations (for the Patient-Centered Primary Care Collaborative). By “building constituency”, Palmisano places IBM on the side of the people who want to protect privacy and security. Building constituency also places IBM within society where it is more

transparent to stakeholders and its authenticity can be demonstrated. The result of this proactive managing of negative associations strengthens IBM's corporate brand in an area where they could have been very vulnerable.

### **Managing the Brand in Different Contexts**

The fourth challenge of managing a corporate brand is to be consistent across different contexts. Aaker (2004 p. 15) says, "the core and extended identity should work everywhere." The Smarter Planet campaign seems designed to achieve this. That is, IBM has positioned themselves at a higher level than product or industry – both of which could potentially cast the company in a unidimensional (or narrow multidimensional role). But by focusing on "analytics", IBM solutions can be applied almost anywhere that it chooses. Everyone – individual, company, industry, product, service, municipality, province, state, country, regional trade area and the world – have the potential to benefit from analytics.

### **Making the Corporate Brand Identity Emerge**

According to Aaker (2004 p. 15), a brand identity is "a set of aspirational associations for the corporate brand to perform its assigned roles." Important in prioritizing aspirational associations is being able to actually deliver on the identity; that is, there needs to be substance behind the claims. IBM has managed this very well since the launch of the Smarter Planet campaign.

One key part of the campaign has been collaboration – as emphasized in how IBM sees a mitigation to the privacy and security risks. That collaboration goal has demonstrable substance in that in the year following the announcement of the campaign IBM held "nearly 100

conferences on the subject of Smarter Cities alone, attended by more than 2,000 civic leaders” (Palmisano 2010).

But there were not just conferences, real solutions were developed that addressed real problems. The evidence of the results of Smarter Planet initiatives include situations where the three I’s (including the analytics piece) have resulted in the reduction of transportation congestion in many cities, improved clinical results and operational efficiency in hospitals in Spain, better risk control in banks around the world, decreased household power usage by consumers through the use of smart meters, a reduction in supply chain costs by retailers, and many other examples (Palmisano 2010).

Thus IBM has *demonstrated* the substance of their brand identity. IBM did not just build a façade of a Smarter Planet, but they appear to live what they have described; they are partaking in the role of a collaborator that they portrayed. By both describing aspirational images for their corporate brand, and then showing their commitment and substantial involvement with those images, IBM has taken the appropriate steps to make the brand identity emerge.

### **The Result: A Strong Corporate Brand?**

Aaker (2004) described five challenges for a managing a corporate brand. Other authors (e.g., de Chernatony and Harris 2000; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Knox and Bickerton 2003) provide similar and overlapping frameworks and advice for companies in building and managing corporate brands. IBM seems to have followed the advice quite well – regardless of the model one compares them to. It is thus not surprising to see the ensuing strong corporate brand of IBM. However, one also notices that this is a very one-way process: from IBM outwards. That is not to

say that IBM is ignoring its customers and other stakeholders (nor would Aaker and other corporate branding authors advocate that approach). IBM has taken significant steps to try to understand its various stakeholders, and then to develop programs and initiatives that meet the needs of those stakeholders. A very good example of this is their use of Crowd-sourcing through Info-Jams where they purposively gather information from as many stakeholders as they can, analyze the information and make use of it in their strategic planning and operations.

At the same time though we can see evidence that the process is not quite as straightforward as the above description seems to imply. It is clear that IBM's stakeholders will react in a variety of ways. Are stakeholder reactions such that they simply assume IBM's statements to be true? Put another way, is IBM being authentic? Scott (1994) suggests that stakeholders – the “readers” – are motivated to respond to the communications of companies. One particular news article clearly reflects a reader response; the title of the article is, “Are we ready for IBM's Smarter Planet?”, which already indicates an analytic response to IBM's communications. In the article itself, there is a section where, in reference to the Smarter Planet, the author (Webster 2010) says

*...and while they may put a new face on a venerable IBM, the ad campaign is very much in keeping with a marketing technique IBM has honed for decades...Smarter Planet is yet another way to sell computing – one that encompasses a myriad of sensory devices and compute nodes all working within some big harmonious system.*

Webster recognizes, cynically perhaps, that IBM is selling something through this new campaign. Even though IBM is positioning itself as a provider of analytics capabilities that will help solve the world's problems, or even save the world from catastrophe, Webster knows that

IBM is a profit motivated entity, and thus this campaign is ultimately about sales. To Webster, it seems that his expectations of who IBM is revolve around it selling technology, and this Smarter Planet campaign is simply a good example of IBM being true to itself.

However, in IBM's Smarter Planet blog, IBM tries to portray itself in a different light, as the societal helper, rather than the salesman. Jack Mason (an IBMer in the Global Services Division) posted the following:

*I'll end by taking on two questions about Smarter Planet that if not rumors, are two speculations or misconceptions that I'd like to address.*

*The first is the sceptical notion that Smarter Planet is not much more than a marketing or publicity campaign. I think the simple answer is if it is, then it will fail. I don't think IBM would be staking so much of its reputation and its strategic focus on something it didn't believe in, both in terms of its business objectives and corporate values. (November 18, 2008)*

IBM is trying to show itself to truly be about supporting and fostering a Smarter Planet and through that, saving the planet. It is trying to demonstrate through its activities (e.g., Smarter Planet conferences) that it is being true to its values. Yet external stakeholders such as Webster see it differently, and place expectations on IBM, that IBM has to react to.

Scott (1994) suggests that not only is the reader – in this case, Webster – motivated to be sceptical of IBM's message, but also that IBM knows that the reader will be sceptical (in advance in this case, as the blog posting comes nearly two years prior to Webster's article); and IBM knows that not just Webster will be sceptical – most of its stakeholders will presumably be sceptical "readers" or "audience" members. In recognizing the reader's scepticism, IBM does not just put together a communications plan explaining its relevance, value and identity – IBM intentionally attempts to break through that scepticism. IBM's choice of the Smarter Planet

campaign as a backdrop or framework for the development of their corporate brand involves a lot more than just meeting the requirements of a list of challenges and thereby following a well planned and executed script. Exploring IBM's corporate brand beyond that script, and as a story, with all the literary devices that implies, provides further insight into that corporate brand and its relationship with IBM's stakeholders.

### **Theme 2: The Corporate Brand as a Story**

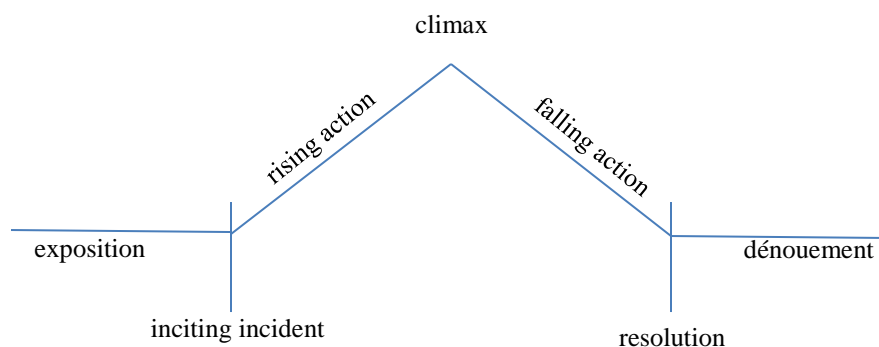
A key part of this thesis is the concept that the corporate brand is a story (Twitchell 2004). If a story is a useful metaphor for a corporate brand one should see the characteristics of a story emerge from an analysis of IBM. Theme Two thus explores IBM's corporate brand as a story. First is a general overview of what a story is, and a common framework used for providing structure to stories. This is followed by placing IBM's presentation of itself into that story framework. Next is a section that illustrates the richness of meaning that resides in the IBM story by applying a story analysis method called narratology, using a set of codes developed by Barthes. Next is another look at the story of IBM's corporate brand as a commercially motivated story using reader response theory (RRT) (Scott 1994) which recognizes and brings in the interactions of external stakeholders and how they influence the story.

### **The Story of the IBM Corporate Brand: A Smarter Planet**

#### **Stories**

Fundamentally a story is an account of events that have taken place, are taking place, or are going to take place. Generally a plot is a key part of this as it helps to give direction and meaning to the story. Most stories have a common set of characteristics. That is, there is a structure to a storyline, characters, character development, plotlines and other general elements.

In general, stories also follow a particular pattern. Freytag and MacEwan (1900) building on work by Aristotle, suggested that a story contains five main elements: the inciting incident, rising action, climax, crisis or turning point, falling action, and finally either catastrophe (for a tragedy) or some other type of resolution (e.g., happy ending). This is often depicted as a pyramid (Hartley 2011) (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Storyline Pyramid**

Leading to the pyramid is an exposition phase, and following the pyramid is the dénouement.

1. **Exposition:** setting the scene. The writer introduces the characters and setting, providing description and background.
2. **Inciting Incident:** something happens to begin the action. A single event usually signals the beginning of the main conflict. The inciting incident is sometimes called 'the complication'.
3. **Rising Action:** the story builds and gets more exciting.
4. **Climax:** the moment of greatest tension in a story. This is often the most exciting event. It is the event that the rising action builds up to and that the falling action follows.
5. **Falling Action:** events happen as a result of the climax and we know that the story will soon end.

6. **Resolution:** the character solves the main problem/conflict or someone solves it for him or her.

7. **Dénouement:** (*a French term, pronounced: day-noo-moh*) the ending. At this point, any remaining secrets, questions or mysteries which remain after the resolution are solved by the characters or explained by the author. Sometimes the author leaves us to think about the THEME or future possibilities for the characters.

The story of IBM's corporate brand – the Smarter Planet story – is currently in progress; that is, it is not over yet. We do not know what the end of the story is, but the first stages of the story are well set up. Has the story reached its climax yet? We do not know. It will only be in the future, and looking back that we will know when the climax occurred. For now we can see the exposition, inciting incident and rising action. The rest of the story remains tantalizingly out of reach – but like any good story, we desperately want to know how it ends!

### **Exposition**

The exposition is the broad context setup of the story. The scene for the story of the IBM Corporate Brand is set by a few people from IBM. Setting the scene is important for establishing the background against which action will take place. It is also important in introducing some important characters. First from IBM's own Smarter Planet blog itself, the blog's editor, Adam Christensen (Nov. 15, 2008) wrote:

*It isn't hard to rattle off a long list of problems facing the world these days. The systems that make the world work – food, healthcare, traffic, energy, and financial systems to name a few – are in dramatic need of change. They are all in need of becoming smarter to meet the needs of a complex world.*

Although this does not even mention IBM (nor does the rest of the inaugural blog post), it really lays the foundation for the story of the Smarter Planet. The world has issues. The aspects of the world that we relate to stability and continuity for our perception of a civilized way of life

are – in the words of Christensen – “in dramatic need of change.” Even this phrase suggests some impending crisis that will affect the world if there is no change. The use of the phrase “systems that make the world work” suggests to the listener that the world will not work if changes are not made.

The exposition part of a story also serves to provide some history to the story, and introduces some (but not all) of the characters. Evidence of this comes from an interview between Diane Morello of Gartner, Inc. (Gartner from here on) and Nicholas Donofrio, Executive V-P IBM, with 43 years of experience in the company (Morello 2007). Donofrio’s role at IBM is transforming it into a strategy focused company rather than being a technology focused company. Gartner is a leading information technology research and consulting company, with a very good reputation for being objective. In this interview between Morello and Donofrio, Donofrio talks about IBM, and how innovation has a big role in the company. He describes the company, its skills, and how it can get things done. Really he sets up IBM as a solid keen character in the story, who has the skills and experience to come up with new things. But IBM is not a ‘loner’, IBM is working alongside many other people in the world – being friendly and inclusive as is evident through the collaborative InnovationJams it runs.

In the interview, Morello focuses on innovation, and IBM’s general views on innovation. Donofrio emphasizes the importance of *external* stakeholders in innovation. Early on in the following quote he specifies that real innovation is not even in the organization alone – rather it includes employees, partners, clients and the marketplace. Thus for innovation, IBM cannot do

this alone – it needs to be part of a broader network of stakeholders, which implies collaboration and cooperation.

*Donofrio: Real innovation is usually at the bottom of the organization or out in the marketplace. It's with your employees, it's with your partners, it's with your clients. So, you have to be willing to look down and out to find it. If all you do is look up or out, you're not likely to find it. And if you're looking just at places where you normally would – that is, research, marketing – those places are not necessarily where people generate innovation. You have to build this extended network. You have to enable people to get connected.*

*We have a couple of ways we've done that, to be candid with you.*

*What InnovationJam does is literally get people connected at the moment. So, it's a finite period of time, 72 hours. It's well-structured – as much as 72 hours of online discussion can be – and it's structured by subject matter experts. So, we're not talking about everything in the world, we're talking about these four topics in the world. Fit yourself into one of them, fit yourself into the environment and climate, fit yourself into healthcare, fit yourself into financial services.*

The InnovationJam is not just IBMers, it also includes their families and clients; when you add these to the IBM employees and their partner, one can see the range of potential characters in the story. This is not simply a business story.

Donofrio clearly positions IBM in a network of relationships. He talks about the location of innovation being with “employees....partners....clients....families” and IBM enabling people to get connected. But importantly he doesn’t seem to claim a controlling role for IBM, more of a contributor/facilitator. Each member of the network has a role to play, and IBM is simply one member of that network. So we begin to see the character of IBM emerge in this early exposition. IBM likes to work with others – it will facilitate the process but not control it.

At the beginning of the story, the world has many problems, in many areas; the nature of the world is different now than it was in the 20th century, and the source of innovation ideas that may help solve this century's problems have been gathered together in a co-operative, collaborative, inclusive manner. Into this setting Donofrio even more clearly lays out the role that IBM will play by saying,

*I'd like to believe that people are starting to think of IBM as more than just a technology-based company, more than just a hardware company, they're thinking of us more as an innovative company. We want to be the company that helps other companies be innovative – the innovator's innovator, so to speak.*

IBM the helper – not the provider, but the helper. This may seem to be a subtle difference, but it is very significant. This does not exalt IBM over others, it humbles the company. It is not just in the above instance where this characterization of humility is brought out. In a speech at the Atlantic Council of the United States (May 2009), IBM CEO and Chairman of the Board, Sam Palmisano also shows IBM's humility by referring to himself and IBM as being "honoured" to be there, as being "amateurs", and implying that IBM is ready and willing to try really hard, but is rather shy and not wanting to put themselves forward. However, for the good of the world, they hope that they can be of some assistance; he says "IBM could participate, maybe in a modest way." All of this suggesting that IBM *wants* to help, even though the other partners in society may be at a higher level of expertise, knowledge, or experience. Nevertheless, IBM will give it the old 'college try'; IBM is the eager assistant, desiring to learn and aid at the same time.

In some ways this is an unusual characterization for IBM. Given the history of IBM as a leader in computer technology, and being one of the largest information technology companies in

the world, readers would typically expect IBM to take the lead and be a leader in initiatives involving areas of its functional expertise. Taking the lead would allow IBM to have greater control of the agenda, perhaps establish technological standards, and position it out in front of its competitors. Nevertheless, IBM has not pushed itself to the forefront in this story, rather it has developed a Joe Average, humble type of character; the Joe Average who is collaborative/cooperative and likes to work with others, he is a part of a network, he is a responsible citizen, a helper, innovative and smart yet humble.

Other characters are also important in the story. IBM the protagonist suggests in general who these characters will be. In another blog posting (Nov. 20, 2008), Christenson says,

*When you read Sam's speech, it's obvious what a smarter planet would mean for the large, complex systems that constitute the way the world works. It's obvious that our cities, organizations, supply chains, economies and the planet's environment – from water systems to climate systems to forests and beyond – could become manageable and sustainable in wholly new ways...*

*...Sam's speeches so far have been directed to leaders. For them, the challenge is to seize this moment, to embrace the world's eagerness for change and use it to be bold, game-changing.*

*But as families, as neighbors, as employees, as partners, as suppliers, as scholars, as global citizens... we can seize the same opportunity, too – the chance to change our lives, our work, our communities, our future. And the way to do that is to participate, to co-create, to network, to jam. The key is to understand that these amazing new capabilities make the planet's infrastructure available to the individual, to every individual, without regard to wealth or physical location or power.*

The list of characters is long, and at this point in the exposition of the story, we do not know who the specific characters will be or who will play leading roles. We know that there will be people and companies external to IBM. This is clear from the involvement of the variety of

people in the InnovationJam that Donofrio refers to – the 150,000 participants included not just IBMers, but also their family members and clients. It is even clearer when one looks at a subsequent InnovationJam in 2008 (IJ2008); it was based on the insights from an IBM CEO study of more than 1,100 external CEOs, included employees from more than 1,000 companies, and was helped by the input of “subject-matter experts from Mars Incorporated, Eli Lilly and Company, Citigroup, and the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship” (IJ2008, p. 3). But the specific involvement of these characters will only come with the unfolding of the story.

Thus in the exposition of the story we see the issues/problems that the world is facing, we are introduced to the main character – IBM as Joe Average – and given a nice overview of who IBM is, and then introduced to some of the potential characters that will have roles in the development of the story.

Additionally, we are introduced to, and begin to get an understanding of the diegesis of the story. That is, the time and space boundaries of the story. We know that this story is taking place ‘now’, in today’s world. It comes about as the result of actions and decisions from the earth’s past. We also see that significant organizations and institutions are involving themselves in the situation, and a collaboration or fellowship has the potential to occur.

At this point in the narrative, IBM appears to be the protagonist and the storyteller. Thus the diegesis is set out primarily by IBM. Importantly at this point, the story is not about IBM selling a solution. Built into the exposition is a setting that can be seen as a bit unusual to the readers. They know that the answers to all the problems will likely come from IBM. But thus far

IBM is not presenting a sales pitch for IBM products and services. Consequently, the readers are willing to stay engaged in the story – at least until the sales pitch comes.

So the story begins with a potential catastrophe for the world. But what can be done to avert such a catastrophe? Christensen, in the Smarter Planet Blog (Nov. 15, 2008) does not leave the listener completely in the dark; he says, “Technology can play a big role in helping find answers to these problems.... But technology is just part of the solution. Without the people, policies and culture to inspire and execute the change, nothing ultimately gets done.” So we know that technology is an important tool to be used in bringing about the dramatic changes in the worlds’ systems, but it needs to be wielded appropriately, carefully and wisely in order to save the world. Even though IBM is not mentioned by name here, IBM is widely associated with technology so there is an implied relationship between the solution (technology) and IBM. This is a good example of IBM drawing on the cultural knowledge of its audience to help position itself in a positive light.

### **Inciting Incident**

The exposition of a story lays the foundation and backdrop of the story that is to come so that the readers will have a better understanding of the plot. It also leads to the inciting incident, where the complication of the story arises. For a story, the complication can be a seemingly unresolvable issue, something where there is no apparent solution. But it is not just a conundrum; it is a situation that needs resolution. The complication that IBM presents and explains (alluded to by Christenson in his blog) – through CEO Sam Palmisano – is a looming catastrophe for the world. That is, the inciting incident was presented by Palmisano on November 6, 2008 in his speech to the Council on Foreign Relations.

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), according to their own web site (<http://www.cfr.org/about/mission.html>, 2010):

*is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource for its members, government officials, business executives, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other interested citizens in order to help them better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries.*

This organization is a key place to make an announcement or proclamation that has impacts on the entire world. It could also be a key place for IBM to state who they are and validate that self with a variety of important external stakeholders. Within the CFR are some of the most prestigious, powerful and influential people in the United States, and indeed in the world. The context of this organization indicates the importance of and involvement of many and varied stakeholders. Thus choosing this venue to launch the Smarter Planet initiative, and indeed the Smarter Planet story is wise.

Palmisano goes on in his speech to make the story and the situation more salient to the readers. He lists specific examples of waste and destruction that touch everyone in the audience: energy waste, city traffic gridlock, supply chain inefficiencies, antiquated healthcare system, water supply shortage and crisis in the financial markets. When these are combined, the loss – indeed waste – equates to hundreds of billions of dollars annually. Palmisano has made the story even more personal – familiar aspects of peoples’ lives plus wasted dollars equates to high interest. The numbers are somewhat staggering. The list paints a dismal picture for us, and if we extend that picture out into the future it could seem that there is no hope; our population is growing, and all of the issues raised will only get worse with that growth.

However....there is hope. Like any good story, there is a glimmer of hope here for us. Just think of the Lord of the Rings: the enemy is gathering its forces, threatening to overcome the bastions of all that is good in the Middle Earth. Those forces appear to be overwhelming, especially as some of the traditional defenders are weakening (the men of Gondor), and others are leaving (the Elves). Yet in the midst of this prediction of doom comes a ray of hope – the one ring of power. If it can be destroyed, the threat of evil domination of all races just might be stopped. Thus Palmisano introduces the plot device of a “smarter planet”: an instrumented, interconnected, intelligent (3I’s) planet that just might provide the means to stop the world’s descent into environmental disaster, poverty, poor health, and financial and economic ruin.

The story of the smarter planet is thus a quest; stories that are quests are easily recognized by readers. That is, a quest is an archetype story where there is an impending catastrophe and a group sets out against all odds to avert that catastrophe. Readers understand how the story will flow, from the identification of the impending doom, to the journey (even if it is at times metaphorical), the hard work, the ups and downs of early successes, and early failures. In a book, readers know that the quest will be successful (usually) – in real life that is not so certain, but if there is cause for hope, then people tend to have faith that everything will work out. IBM’s presentation of the Smarter Planet provides that element of hope for people to grasp onto.

While a Smarter Planet with the 3I’s may be the ultimate solution, it will not come easy. The story would be short if the 3I’s could be used to solve all the problems by tomorrow. Palmisano recognizes the difficulties and highlights them in order to set the stage for rising action in the story.

*The importance of this moment, I believe, is that the key precondition for real change now exists: People want it. But this moment will not last forever.*

Palmisano focuses on “this moment” that is a crossroads for the world. If we ignore it, then the world is doomed – all the ailments he listed will continue to get worse and bring down society. But if we take action, and embark on the Smarter Planet quest then there is a chance to save the world.

Thus, with the inciting incident introduced, the story is underway.

### **Rising Action**

Included in this part of the story is further development of the character of IBM. We get this not just from IBM, but also from external stakeholders. The image we have of IBM is that of a solid, dependable, but not flashy, character; it does not come in and ‘steal the show’. Lynn, a channel partner consultant who also is an ex-IBMer described IBM in the following way:

*...the customers know who they [IBM] are and there's a lot of trust. I'd say one of the great things about going with IBM is that it's a no-risk solution, so if you're in times where security is an issue or you're looking for quality and dependability, or you're growing, IBM is always there.*

This quote reflects a solid, dependable, but also humble or modest character. Consistency and trustworthiness stand out about IBM. One does not see this huge company as a show-off who is looking to take charge of the crisis our world is in. Thus IBM appears to be this modest, happy to help – but not the leader – type of character in the story of the Smarter Planet.

At this point the tension in the story begins to build. The issues raised in Palmisano’s speech are actually not unfamiliar to many people. However, bringing them together all at the same time creates a sense of hopelessness. What can we possibly do to resolve these crises? The

answer that is humbly put forward by IBM is to gather stakeholders together to leverage the 3I's in finding solutions – that is, to put together fellowships to seek out and create solutions to each of the problem areas. That is, IBM wants to find solutions, even though some of the problems seem overwhelming – such as traffic congestion, which costs more than \$78 billion annually in wasted time and energy, plus the impact on the environment. And with the population growing, especially in countries like China and India it seems like an impossible problem to overcome.

To that end though, conferences are organized to bring together key stakeholders who might be able to together arrive at some sort of solutions. Happily, IBM is working away at organizing, hosting, sponsoring and facilitating such conferences: smarter cities conferences (over 100) to focus on traffic congestion, healthcare, and energy usage problems and solutions.

All the while, IBM is merely a willing labourer in the cause. The administration work is done by IBM – and lo and behold, IBM is able to step in with critical tools that allow the 3I's to be exploited. Even so, IBM maintains its role as a helper and citizen to society – not in it for the money or business opportunities that will come out of it. CNBC's Maria Bartiromo interviewed IBM CEO Palmisano at the New York Smarter Cities conference (Oct. 2, 2009).

***Palmisano:** Take, for example, data centers. We've done a lot of work – in fact, we're building data centers ourselves – where instead of using the expensive energy like air conditioning, you can use ambient air, the external air, and bring it in. We're building one in Colorado that actually, for 75% of our cooling, we're using ambient air versus air conditioning.*

*We're working with people that actually, in cities where they have big data centers, and they're using the heat from the data center to actually warm their buildings.*

*Think about the hydrocarbons, or cars. A lot of the gasoline in the city is wasted with people sitting in traffic, or trying to find a parking space. It's a*

*tremendous amount of inefficiency as people just sit there. The car is idle. Certainly they're wasting the gas, certainly they're emitting a lot of CO2 into the air, so the ability to have a traffic system function, to have them find a parking space if necessary, or use alternate forms of transportation, all will address the energy consumption of a city.*

**Bartiromo:** *So you've built a new facility to build smarter cities.*

**Palmisano:** *That's correct, yes, the analytic center.*

**Bartiromo:** *Tell me about the analytic center, and what kind of an opportunity is this for IBM, the business opportunity?*

**Palmisano:** *Right. Well, what an analytic center does is basically brings together a lot of these problem sets, and will apply a combination of consultants, very, very advanced software that will analyze the data, and then vast supercomputing, and fundamentally we'll combine all of that together in the analytic center. We've opened three others around the world.*

...

**Bartiromo:** *There are some expectations that this is potentially a \$105 billion market opportunity for IBM. Is that right?*

**Palmisano:** *Yeah, that's for the analytics. Exactly. We have invested, today, probably close to between \$8 billion and \$10 billion. That's a combination of organic R&D, we've purchased probably about 20 or 30 software companies, the biggest one being Cognos – that was a few billion. We just bought a company in Chicago called SPSS. It does the advanced analytics for financial services – a modeling company. So, acquisitions, and then we're building up skills. We're going to have, by the end of the year, 4,000 consultants dedicated to the area of analytics, and I expect that will be 10,000 or 15,000 in the next couple of years.*

**Bartiromo:** *Where do you want to see the company in five years?*

**Palmisano:** *I think if you look at our profit mix today, hardware is about 9% of our profits; software, services and finance is about 91%, so we've remixed it, and our margins have grown in 19 of the past 20 quarters. And as you know, we had a record year last year, and we're off to a pretty good start this year. So, that's the financial transformation.*

*Where we see it headed, it's all about outcome, so we're moving more and more to thinking about it as a convergence of software and services,*

*underpinned by the hardware. I mean, you're going to have massive supercomputers, a lot of cloud things, all the things we do, we just got out of the commodity PC space, so that will be the underpinning, but it's the ability to analyze this and apply the data that will provide the systemic solutions we were talking about earlier.*

From these exchanges, and from the interview as a whole, one could see that Bartiromo was trying to get into the profit motive that IBM must have as a free market, capitalistic, shareholder driven company. Bartiromo knows that IBM is profit driven, so she attempts to find out how much IBM will profit by all of this smarter planet work. Palmisano is focusing on solutions to world problems through the 3I's, but Bartiromo asks “what kind of an opportunity is this for IBM, the business opportunity?” – that is, what kind of profit will IBM get from this? To which Palmisano brings it back to solutions, rather than profit, by talking about helping out financial services, in particular by working with systemic risk; this doesn't answer the question about benefit to IBM. So shortly thereafter Bartiromo tries again, this time more directly by asking, “There are some expectations that this is potentially a \$105 billion market opportunity for IBM. Is that right?” Palmisano does answer this in the affirmative, but quickly and deftly steers the conversation away from the profits and benefits for IBM, and again focuses on the outcome of this work that matters by saying “Where we see it headed, it's all about outcome.” He agrees that there is some opportunity, but he focuses on the fact that IBM is investing lots of money in order to help the world – e.g., South Africa, India, China, Brazil. IBM is building up their analytics capability, which will allow them to be a strong helper in creating a smarter planet. This helps maintain the image that IBM is just working away, doing what they can

(through organizing the conference, and investing in solutions for the world) – a great team player.

Although there is opportunity here for IBM to appear like more than Joe Average, and for IBM to come across as a profit driven and focused company, this is clearly not what happens. The reporter is seemingly sceptical of IBM's intentions in the work – thus her question about “what business do you see coming out of this?” The implications are obvious: a company would only do this kind of work if they saw some significant profits coming out of it. But again, Palmisano deflects the inquiry away from IBM's gains, to how the world will benefit – and how IBM is just a humble helper in the ‘good fight’.

In this exchange, Palmisano is attempting to illustrate that IBM is being true to itself, which is the Joe Average helper of society. He even mentions how IBM itself is using smarter principals in the building of its own data centres, where “for 75% of our cooling, we're using ambient air versus air conditioning.” Palmisano is showing how IBM not only talks about Smarter Planet issues and solutions, but it actually lives them.

In a traditional storyline the “rising action” phase continues on to a climax, which is essentially the point of greatest tension in a story. Often the most exciting action takes place at this time, and it is the event that the rising action builds up to and that the falling action follows (Freytag and MacEwan 1900) . In the story of the Smarter Planet, this peak has not yet been reached; but it is on the horizon. We are constantly being reminded of the unresolved crises that threaten our world. The lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis, now reincarnated in the threat of another financial crisis in Europe, triggered by the problems in Greece. And if the

financial problems of Greece spread through Europe, then they will most likely spread globally. Environmental catastrophe looms large with the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico – a symbol of our unquenchable thirst for oil that highlights the need to solve transportation issues (e.g., traffic gridlock). The massive strain on health care systems as the needs of an aging population begin to take their toll.

As highlighted in Palmisano's January 2010 speech (Chatham House, London, U.K.), progress is being made. In cities that employ transportation congestion solutions, there are savings of \$15 million annually through reduced travel delays, CO2 emissions from vehicles were reduced by 14 percent, and public transit use has increased by up to 7 percent. Health care systems in some countries have improved (e.g., in Spain), smart energy systems are helping to decrease peak power usage, and improvements in supply chain management have resulted in decreased costs, decreased inventories and increased sales. All of these improvements flowing from taking advantage of 3I's – these smarter planet panaceas touted by IBM.

However the rising tension comes in the same speech – shortly after the good news story. And it involves the dark side of the 3I's. How could the force for good in the world – the 3I's – have a dark side? Palmisano brings up the conflict inherent in an instrumented, interconnected and intelligent world:

*As I said, all this data is far more real-time than ever before. Most of us today, as leaders and as individuals, make decisions based on information that is backward-looking and limited in scope. That's the best we had, but that is quickly changing.*

*You may be thinking that the last thing we need is more information raining down on us, more noise. But we now have the capability, with advanced software analytic tools, to extract value from data—to see the patterns, the*

*correlations and the outliers. Sophisticated mathematical models are helping us begin to anticipate, forecast and even predict changes in our systems. That's the promise of a smarter planet.*

*But with that promise come some disquieting implications.*

*That's the final learning of the past year. Consider two of the more obvious ones: privacy and security.*

*Cameras here in London and in Chicago can help alert police and other first responders to emergencies far faster and more precisely than ever before. That saves lives. But, as you know, some citizens have expressed discomfort at living in... not a safer society, but a "surveillance society."*

*You may have read an article a few years ago that reported that the London flat in which George Orwell wrote "1984"—and introduced all of us to Big Brother—has 32 closed-circuit cameras within 200 yards, scanning every move. They weren't put there to watch his flat, of course. They're scanning traffic and providing security for businesses. Still, the irony—and the potential concern—are self-evident.*

*Yes, people like lower crime—less traffic, shorter queues, better health and all the other benefits of smarter systems. But they may be increasingly uncomfortable having so much information known about them. Who has all this data? What will they do with it? Do I trust them? Is it secure?*

*These are serious issues. And they will require serious consideration and collaborative decision making across all the stakeholders of civil society. We need to build more than systems. We must build constituency.*

The spectre of an Orwellian world terrifies many people and mobilizes them to fight against the tools and techniques that implement such a civilization. Yet Palmisano describes how the smarter planet can actually bring that about. He lists the benefits of a smarter planet again – “lower crime, less traffic, shorter queues, better health” – and then he repeats that critical word “But” which again brings us back down out of the optimistic mind-set. Why did he feel the need to repeat this interjection in his own speech? Was it to emphasize how serious an issue this is? We do not know all of the difficulties that could come along with a smarter planet, however, if

Palmisano makes the effort to repeat the warning, the difficulties must be significant. Thus IBM's solution – the 3I's – are also a potential problem. Not only is there tension in the story as the world approaches a catastrophe, there is even more tension in that an alternative doom may exist in the solution itself.

So we end up with another critical factor in the story; we have the threat of imminent global catastrophes, the 3I's that may be our salvation, and now the menace that the 3I's may doom us to a life of Big Brother controlling our every move.

### **Story Climax**

Thus the story progresses towards its climax, when the double-edged sword of the 3I's must avert the planet and civilization's catastrophes without plunging that world into the dystopias that George Orwell and Aldous Huxley envisioned. The outcome of that climax is unknown at this point; but the story draws us on as we hope for a happy ending, yet fear that this may be a tragedy.

IBM has put into practice what Aaker, Balmer, Keller and many others would have them do in putting together their corporate brand. The story IBM is telling seems like an internally thought-out and developed, and now relayed (advertised/promoted) message that will resonate with its customers and stakeholders. IBM is now responsible, and a good citizen. This is reflected in the new tag line that goes with their logo, "Let's build a smarter planet.", and the addition of the stylized drawing of the earth with the five little rays coming off the top – arguably the pictorial logo for the smarter planet campaign.

This is illustrative of IBM telling the story from their own perspective – trying to control the message and their appearance in the story. And it is a good story, with a good plot that we are

all familiar with: catastrophe looms over the world, with little hope for the future, when a seemingly unassuming character appears, ready and willing to help with a solution that could save the world or precipitate it and make it worse.

### **Analyzing the Story for Meaning – Barthes Codes**

While the previous section provides the skeleton or shell and structure of the story of IBM's corporate brand – the Smarter Planet story – this section looks at that story in more detail. That is, the story, once presented by its author (IBM) can be viewed by its readers and analyzed for deeper meanings. Stories are not simply taken for granted by their readers, rather they are analyzed and interpreted in many different ways.

The story presented by IBM is of a quest, and as described in the previous section, follows a pyramid shaped plotline. But there are details and nuances within that plotline that readers want to understand, or want to extract meaning from. Readers' interpretations of the story may or may not conform to what IBM thinks it has presented; thus control over the corporate brand and its meaning can slip from IBM's grasp even in these interpretations. Narratology is one method for doing such an interpretation.

Within narratology, Barthes (1974) developed a set of codes used in the analysis of a story. This section of Theme 2 provides an example of how IBM's story can be analyzed using Barthes' codes, and illustrates how a reader's interpretation might vary from IBM's intended meaning.

This example looks at the first part of Palmisano's introductory speech given at the CFR (November 6, 2008). The purpose of this analysis is to show how the narrative provided by IBM

can be viewed as a rich, detailed story with potentially multiple meanings out of the control of IBM.

In order to understand Barthes narratology method, a relatively brief overview of the method is provide here. This is then followed by the example using Barthes method.

### **Barthes Narratology**

The concept of discourse versus story is important to understand in analyzing a story. The actual chronology of events that occur in a narrative is the story itself. However, the manipulation of that story in the presentation of the narrative is called discourse. That is to say that as a narrative unfolds, we do not necessarily only get the chronological picture; rather it is only retrospectively that one can see, determine or reconstruct the events in their chronological order (Felluga 2011; Chatman 1978). Unravelling and reconnecting the elements of the narrative is an important aspect of narratology that helps one to understand its meaning.

Once we see the basic framework of a narrative we can dig deeper to gain a better and richer understanding. Barthes suggested that we should view texts in a “writerly” manner. He says (Barthes 1974, p. 4) “Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.” In the case of a corporation and its corporate brand, the reader, or stakeholder, is writerly in that they do not simply receive the story; they also produce the story. The stakeholders (including the corporation itself) may be considered as co-creators of the corporate brand.

In order to do this, one needs a way to evaluate the text (narrative). Barthes (1974, pp. 5-6) gives a clue as to how this can be done:

*Here, we require a second operation, consequent upon the evaluation which has separated the texts, more delicate than that evaluation, based upon the appreciation of a certain quantity – of the more or less each text can mobilize. This new operation is interpretation (in the Nietzschean sense of the word). To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it. Let us first posit the image of a triumphant plural, unimpoverished by any constraint of representation (of imitation). In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one....the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.*

Barthes is generally referring to a book or a poem in this section. If one however looks at a set of actors in society, and their actions in society and between themselves (i.e., in this case a company like IBM, its employees, and its many and diverse stakeholders), a living narrative is created to which narrative methods can also be applied. This living narrative is a text that can be interpreted. As Barthes suggests, it is a “plural” whereby there is no constraint on what it represents. It exists in a set of networks which can be the interrelationships between the stakeholders, and the many different ways that they connect and interact. Depending on how one looks at the networks, one will find a different significance, and a different meaning. No one instance is considered a main one, only a view of how one looks at the network at a given time. That said, one has the ability to make an interpretation of a narrative, examine the network of relationships and describe the meaning that emerges in a consistent and cohesive manner. The corporate brand narrative is amenable to this, and seems to lend itself to Barthes method, given its dynamism, process-like nature and constantly shifting network patterns. Thus any corporate brand can be analyzed using narratological methods. However, it must be noted that whomever

analyzes the corporate brand narrative using this method will likely generate different interpretations – according to their own perspectives and experiences.

Using narratology – as developed by Barthes – allows one to take a deeper look into the structure of a corporate brand story. In particular, it helps one to see that there are two parts of significance: the story as a serial, contiguous set of actions and elements; and the story as a discourse, with the elements moving back and forth in time, and relating to each other in different ways.

Further, there are five “codes” described by Barthes (1974) that can be applied to segments of the narrative that help us to uncover meaning in the narrative: hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic and cultural. These codes are assigned to segments of the text according to what is happening in the text.

The first of these is the hermeneutic code (HER). This is a plot element that raises questions in the mind of the reader/listener of a narrative (Felluga 2011). That is, something is said or occurs which is incomplete, or is only a fragment of a larger situation, or does not match with what else is happening within the narrative. As such, it makes the listeners sit up and take notice, and pose questions to themselves. For example, in a recent movie, *Edge of Darkness* (2010), the opening scene is at night, looking at a body of water. Suddenly some objects that appear to be bodies bob to the surface of the water. The viewers naturally are lead to ask a number of questions: Who are these people? Are they dead? If so, how did they die and why? Where is this? The viewers thus want to watch more of the movie to get the answers to these questions (which in due course are all answered in the movie, but not until much later).

Listeners/readers/viewers want to know all of the answers that have arisen in the course of a narrative; they are uncomfortable with unfinished business. Thus they are drawn to these questions, and are drawn forward in the narrative in a search for the answers.

The use of hermeneutics is not unfamiliar within marketing (e.g., Arnold and Fischer 1994; Hirschman 1990; Holbrook 1988; Mick 1986; Thompson et al. 1989, Thompson 1990). In general, hermeneutics is the interpretation of understanding. It is the close reading of a text from a “being-in-the-world” (Bleicher [1980, p. 118], citing Heidegger [1949]) perspective, and developing an understanding of the text based on one’s own experiences (Arnold and Fischer 1994). Hermeneutics is also the consideration of a section of text related to the whole text within which it is contained, and the consideration of the whole text in relation to the section of text contained therein – which relates to the notion of an hermeneutic circle (Arnold and Fischer 1994).

More than texts can be interpreted: “While early versions of hermeneutics would suggest that these texts be written, philosophical hermeneutics’ emphasis on ontological understanding may lead to the study of a broader variety of textual forms. Forms originating with the consumer include interview transcripts, verbal protocols, and audiovisual recordings. Photographs and artefacts may also form the basis for an interpretation” (Arnold and Fischer 1994, p. 61).

This is a particularly important point to consider for this research, as the transmedia type of story (Jenkins 2003) includes a wide variety of “text” sources.

Barthes’ hermeneutic code then, is a piece of text that helps to drive understanding of the whole narrative. Barthes has taken the concept of hermeneutical philosophy and adapted it to an

analysis of narratives. Labelling a portion of text as a hermeneutic code, forces a close reading of the text, and positions that text against the whole text in a manner that brings about understanding of both the text piece and the whole document.

Typically in hermeneutics and the analysis of consumers' stories, the purpose is to juxtapose the consumers' personal history and their specific experience against a more generalized set of culturally established meanings in order to understand notions about a person's self-identity (e.g., Thompson 1997; Arnold and Fischer 1994; Mick and Buhl 1992). In this research however, the identity being shaped is that of the corporation – not an individual. The corporate identity is then conceptualized and symbolized as the corporate brand.

The second code is the proairetic code (ACT). It too creates suspense in the narrative that gives it momentum, but in a different manner. The proairetic code is based on actions within the plot that lead to other actions (Felluga 2011). For example, in a hockey game, a player shoots the puck at the goal, and we wonder whether he scores a goal or the goalie makes a save. It is the action itself, and its potential resolution, that creates the suspense.

Both of these first two codes function to create suspense in the narrative. Within a story, suspense works to keep the 'reader' (or listener) engaged in the narrative, and wanting it to move forward. The reader has a natural desire to resolve the suspense – to tie up all the loose ends. Thus suspense works to keep the story moving forward, and keeps momentum. It also helps to focus attention and interest on the story itself and to its various parts. That is, readers tend to pay closer attention to the story as a result of the creation of suspense.

The third code is the semantic code (SEM). This is generally a word or element of text that has secondary meanings, usually connoted through the relationship with other words or elements of the text. A semantic code does not relate to a free-form connotation, but is closely inferred by the surrounding text, or the context within which it is contained (Felluga 2011).

The fourth code is the symbolic code (SYM). This is somewhat similar to the semantic code, but it relates to broader meanings than just those connoted in the surrounding text. It is used to organize the semantic meanings through antithesis or mediations between antithetical terms (Felluga 2011; Barthes 1974).

The final code is the cultural code (REF). This signifies a reference to a common body of knowledge or a science. That is, it is something to which the reader is expected to already have knowledge of without any explanation. Implicit in this code is that the common body of knowledge will be somewhat localized according to a person's culture.

Table 5-1 provides a reference for the subsequent analysis.

The structure of the analysis as suggested and used by Barthes (1974) is unique, and thus requires some explanation. That is, the actual formatting of the use of the codes needs to be described for it to be understood.

First of all, Barthes provides description, explanation and interpretation of the narrative text wherever it seems to be relevant. However, more critical for a reader's understanding of Barthes analysis is how the codes are used.

<b>Code Name</b>	<b>Code Symbol</b>	<b>Code Description</b>
Hermeneutic code	HER	Any element of the story that is not explained, and thus creates an enigma for the reader. Occurs when details are held back from the reader. This creates suspense, which draws the reader into the story in a desire to resolve the enigma.
Proairetic code	ACT	An action that implies further action in the story. This also creates suspense for the reader, as the reader wants to know what the results of the action are.
Semantic code	SEM	An element in the text that suggests an additional meaning via connotation – but connotation that is relevant to the story.
Symbolic code	SYM	A deeper structural organization of the semantic meanings in the text – usually by way of antithesis or mediations.
Cultural Code	REF	Any element of the story that refers to our shared cultural body of knowledge.

**Table 5-1: Barthes' Codes**

From the narrative, a segment of text (a word or words) are chosen to which a code or codes can be assigned. This segment is called a “lexia”. Its choice is driven by the reader/interpreter. In the following analysis of IBM a lexia signified by a number (which allows for reference to a specific lexia by codes that come up later in the text), it is italicized and in bold faced text. Typically lexia are displayed in the order in which they appear in the narrative text.

The lexia is often briefly described, and then a code (or codes) is assigned to it along with an explanation of why the code is appropriate or what it signifies. The assignment of a code is indicated by two asterisks ‘\*\*’ followed by the three letter short form of the code (e.g., REF).

Depending on the code, there will be varying amounts of other information included after the short form of the code. For example, if it is a hermeneutic code, which is an enigma, there could be a number which tells the reader which enigma is presented in this lexia. Following all of the information related to the code are another two asterisks ‘\*\*’ indicating the end of the code.

### **Barthes analysis - Inciting Incident**

Necessarily there must be a point at which to begin an analysis. Many possible points could be used for a variety of good reasons, any of which would be acceptable. But as one of these must be chosen, I choose the inaugural speech that formally launched IBM into its Smarter Planet story. Thus, a starting place for a writerly (Barthes 1974) interpretation of IBM’s story is the speech given by Sam Palmisano to the Council on Foreign Relations, November 6, 2008 in New York City. As indicated previously, this particular speech is the inciting incident of the Smarter Planet story. We can look at this narrative in more detail to get at the richer meaning contained in the story.

#### ***(1) A Smarter Planet: The Next Leadership Agenda***

The first lexia is in the title of the speech. The first part of the title is a cultural reference to the past, and to the founder of IBM, Thomas Watson, Sr.; Watson coined the one word slogan “Think”, which was (and is) seen on the walls of IBM facilities, and in the company publications; it was even the title of IBM’s employee publication for many years. Smart people are also known as “thinkers”; thus the use of the theme “Smarter Planet”, and the use of the word “smarter” and “smart” makes a direct link back to the “Think” slogan. \*\*REF: Smarter.\*\* This provides continuity, consistency and a connection to past initiatives within IBM. That is, even though there is a new campaign, and IBM is moving on to new initiatives, with new technology,

new approaches to doing business, there is still a strong lineage. In particular this is important to convey, as the accomplishments of the past have made IBM one of the top global brands – they do not want to distance themselves from what made them successful in the past, rather they need to reinforce an image that the core values that made IBM so effective in the past are still in place today and for the future, which would ensure IBM’s brand continued top placing in the world. Thus the reference to the well-known IBM slogan “Think” is a crucial aspect of telling the story of IBM’s corporate brand, and an effective way of drawing on a strong cultural code to help in the telling of that story.

This title also raises a set of questions: Since the title asserts that this speech is about “The Next Leadership Agenda”, it raises the question: What was the previous leadership agenda? Who will be the leader? Who will be lead? In any story with a quest, there needs to be a leader. In the Lord of the Rings, Gandalf the Wizard is the leader (at the beginning) who gives direction and motivation to the quest to deal with the One Ring – even though the humble Frodo is the protagonist. So in the quest to save the world, the question of who will be the leader is very apropos. These questions will be answered gradually through the speech, and even later in other texts. However, the answers will vary depending on the situation and who is providing the answer. As an enigma, this is the first hermeneutic code \*\*HER. Enigma 1.Leader. \*\* The word **Leadership** is also symbolic (SYM) code. That is, it is the first indication of one key structure in the text, which is an antithesis, or contradictory set of concepts. This is the first element of the antithesis, or the ‘A’ of the A/B. As will come later, and has been discussed in the first section, the contradicting element, ‘B’, is the follower or helper that I named Joe Average. Throughout

the text tension is created by the struggle of IBM to find its place as a leader or helper; as a business titan or Joe Average. \*\*SYM. Antithesis: A: Leader. \*\*

***(2) It is a pleasure and an honor to be here today in this distinguished assembly, and at this extraordinary moment: a major political transition in the United States, the global economy in flux, our financial markets restructuring themselves – and an acutely felt need for leadership.***

\*\*HER. Enigma 2: extraordinary moment. \*\* The opening paragraph of the speech presents a startling enigma, regarding a “moment” that is “extraordinary”. It raises the questions, what is the moment? And why is it extraordinary? Seemingly these questions are answered in the same lexia where Palmisano draws on the common knowledge of that day (November 6, 2008) in referring to the major political transition: the U.S. Presidential election had been held two days earlier, on November 4, 2008, at which time the first African-American president had been elected. Additionally, the reference to the global economy and financial markets restructuring themselves would resonate with the audience as the U.S. economy was in the midst of a crisis of epic proportions. As such, the “acutely felt need for leadership” seems to make sense. However, even though these are significant events, these are not really the “extraordinary moment” of which Palmisano speaks; that moment remains an enigma for the time being.

***(3) Our political leaders aren't the only ones who've been handed a mandate for change.***

\*\*HER. Enigma 1: Leader. \*\* Here again Palmisano brings in the concept of leaders, and by implication, leadership. Are the political leaders the answer to the initial questions? Apparently not – or at least not completely, as he says “political leaders aren't the only ones”, which leaves us with the question of who are the other leaders? Additionally we are now presented with the first signifier in the text: \*\*SEM. Change. \*\* This is a key theme that

underlies IBM's Smarter Planet campaign, and yet it is used both to signify positive change, negative change, or positive non-change, and negative non-change. Change is an imperative in IBM's story, as without change, the world will be doomed. As further text is interpreted, lexias related to change will be so denoted. This also resonates with the political leader reference, in that Barack Obama (the incumbent president on that day) campaigned on a platform of change, and the importance of change.

***(4) Leaders of businesses and institutions everywhere confront a unique opportunity to transform the way the world works.***

\*\*HER. Enigma 1: Leader. \*\* Leaders in addition to political figures are brought into the picture here. Although it is still unclear who exactly these people are; in particular we do not know who the "institutions" are, and thus we do not know who their leaders might be. As business leaders are mentioned, it raises the question of whether Palmisano is referring to himself? He is the leader of IBM, so in some respects it makes sense. \*\*SYM. Antithesis 1: A: Leader. \*\* Again we see reference to half of the dichotomy of the business titan/Joe Average. If Palmisano is referring to himself, then this is a particularly strong allusion to the business titan view of IBM.

The "unique opportunity" is a continuation of the "extraordinary moment", and raises more questions. \*\*HER. Enigma 2: unique opportunity. \*\* What is the opportunity? What is unique about it? Although the words "unique" and "extraordinary" are different, they have similar connotations. The word "opportunity" is not the same as "moment" from earlier in the text, but it expands, and begins to explain what that "moment" is. The moment is an opportunity – at this point we are still not sure what that opportunity is, so we are drawn into reading the text

further. The word “transform” again brings us to the theme of change. \*\*SEM. Change. \*\* Here we have even more clarification and another part of the answer to what the extraordinary moment is and what the unique opportunity is: a chance to change the way the world works. While this seems to answer the questions of HER. Enigma 2, it still leaves out vital details about why this is important, and why this is necessary. A political transition and the economy in flux by themselves do not seem to warrant the use of the phrase “extraordinary moment”. Thus the enigma remains.

Palmisano ends this sentence with the phrase “the way the world works”. But does the world “work”? This phrase is actually neutral in that it does not say the world works well, or poorly. Later we see that Palmisano believes that the world does *not* work, so it is a backhanded way of suggesting that a change or transformation is needed. If the world does not work, and cannot be made to work, we should despair. IF we can make the world work, then there is hope for the future. Thus it is also a symbolic reference to the contrasting themes of hope and despair for our world. \*\*SYM:2:antithesis hope/despair. \*\*

***(5) We have this chance for reasons no one wished. The crisis in our financial markets has jolted us awake to the realities and dangers of highly complex global systems.***

The word “crisis” is a semantic code in this lexia. It has connotations that go beyond the text to which it is adjacent. Culturally we are attuned to 24-hour news reports, covering everything anywhere in the world; but what really makes news is a big disaster. A disaster can be man-made, or natural: terrorist attacks, earthquakes, epidemics, tsunamis, hurricanes, and so on. All of these disasters wreak havoc on parts of the world, or the entire world, leaving confusion and chaos in their wake. It also brings up fears of the end of the world, or the end of life as we

know it. \*\*SEM: disaster. \*\* Here the reference is to the specific economic crisis of 2008 that impacted the whole world, to which nobody seemed to have a solution.

This phrase also contains a symbolic code showing an antithesis. The word crisis is one half of the antithesis in that it leads to despair. The other half of the antithesis is the word “chance”; it relates to the possibility, or the hope that we as a world/civilization/society have in the future. \*\*SYM:2:antithesis:hope/despair. \*\* Palmisano positions his speech at the boundary between these two elements. We do not know which way the balance will tip, but we are getting a better understanding of what the extraordinary moment is all about. In particular, the word “chance”, while it can be related to hope, also means that there are multiple possible outcomes. We therefore sit on the cusp of something good *or* something bad. There is both reason for hope and reason for despair. IBM places itself at the mid-point of this situation.

Another symbolic code is apparent here. Palmisano says “jolted us awake to the realities and dangers”, which directly implies that previously we have been asleep, and in contrast to the “realities” of being awake, the world has likely been dreaming, or at the very least, viewing our situation unrealistically. Additionally, the real world to which Palmisano refers has dangers of which we were not aware when we were asleep. \*\*SYM:3:antithesis sleeping/awake. \*\* At this point the world is awake, but *just* awake; or perhaps in the stage in-between sleep and wakefulness. Again we see a balance point where we could slip back into sleep, or come completely awake. There is an action here as well: “jolted us awake”, which is a proairetic code in that it builds some suspense. An action occurs, and we want to know the resolution of the action. \*\*ACT:wake-up. \*\* In this case we want to know if the world will completely wake up,

and if so, will it recognize the dangers that abound? What will be the result of waking up to reality?

***(6) Two years ago, I published an essay in Foreign Affairs that described the changing structure of the corporation, which I felt had been largely left out of the discussion on globalization. I described the emergence of a new kind of corporation – the globally integrated enterprise, which was replacing the multinational.***

\*\*SYM:1:antithesis leader/helper. \*\* Palmisano here contrasts the typical business titan type of organization, the “multinational”, with a company that is globally integrated. Multinational companies are often thought of as being arrogant and doing things their way, and using their influence as large organizations to get their own way. On the other hand, a company that is globally integrated seems to be part of the world, part of the different parts of the world – countries, regions, cities – in a way that suggests adaptation to the different cultures it encounters. A company of this type may work together with the people of a particular region to accomplish their goals and objectives. This type of company could be viewed as a “helper”, or fellow citizen. Palmisano does not directly state that IBM is the “new kind of corporation”, but the implication is that he sees IBM in this guise. If IBM is globally integrated it is well positioned to help out in fending off a global catastrophe. This reinforces IBM’s role as helper in the story.

***(7) In the last few years, our eyes have been opened to global climate change, and to the environmental and geopolitical issues surrounding energy. We have been made aware of global supply chains for food and medicine. And, of course, we entered the new century with the shock to our sense of security delivered by the attacks on 9/11.***

\*\*SYM:3:antithesis sleeping/awake. \*\* By saying “our eyes have been opened”, Palmisano again makes a reference to the notion that society has been asleep – asleep to the dangers of our lifestyle and way of doing business. This is somewhat typical of save-the-world

stories where much of society is oblivious to the impending doom around them, or that they may be contributing to through their actions or inactions. This transition from sleep to wakefulness emphasizes the “extraordinary moment” referred to in the opening of this speech. Where previously we had been unaware of how our way of existing was creating a dangerous situation on a global basis. Now we are awake though, and seeing the dangers we must do something about them, or risk disaster. However at this point Palmisano has not yet indicated the way to avoid this disaster, nor has he shed light on IBM’s role in this scenario.

**\*\*REF:9/11.\*\*** Palmisano draws on the cultural code of the infamous terrorist attacks on the New York World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., September 11, 2001. This event is ingrained so deeply on our cultural memory that by using the term “9/11” he conjures up a whole set of fears and concerns. These are particularly relevant for Americans, but the consequences of the 9/11 attacks have been so far reaching on a global scale that really this reference is one which resonates deeply with most of the world. This reference emphasizes the seriousness of the impending catastrophe in the story.

***(8) These collective realizations have reminded us that we are all now connected – economically, technically and socially.***

**\*\*REF:collective.\*\*** In the television series Star Trek: The Next Generation, one of the threats the Starship Enterprise (and indeed the entire Federation) must deal with is the Borg. Because of the nature of their collective consciousness, they are often referred to as the ‘collective’ or ‘the Borg collective’. According to StarTrek.com, the official website for the Star Trek television and movie franchise, the Borg are “A cybernetic life-form thousands of years old which is part organic, part artificial life....Born humanoid, they are almost immediately

implanted with bio-chips that link their brains to a collective consciousness via a unique subspace frequency emitted by each drone” ([http://www.startrek.com/database\\_article/borg](http://www.startrek.com/database_article/borg)). The Borg were almost unstoppable with their collective consciousness. In this speech, not only does Palmisano use the term “collective”, but he follows up with “we are all now connected – economically, technically and socially”. In essence he is describing the Borg. However, we (“we” here on planet earth in today’s society) have not yet discarded the personal pronoun in our communications, so clearly we are not at the same stage as the Borg. But this cultural reference to a feared entity (even though it is fictitious) is one that is well known. It brings up fears of loss of individuality, loss of privacy, loss of freedom and loss of control. Interestingly though, in this case Palmisano is not trying to frighten us with this reference; rather he is apparently trying to encourage us with the positive possibilities that technology and interconnectedness bring. However, inadvertently Palmisano has introduced this unsavoury comparison between an evil character and IBM.

***(9) But we’re also learning that being connected is not sufficient. Yes, the world continues to get “flatter.” And yes, it continues to get smaller and more interconnected. But something is happening that holds even greater potential.***

\*\*HER:Enigma 3. Being connected is not sufficient. \*\* This lexia raises another question – what is needed to get beyond the point at which we currently find ourselves? This also raises the question of what link this has with the collective consciousness implied in the reference to the Borg? This reminds the reader that we are at an extraordinary moment, which actually is a tipping point where we might be plunged into disaster, or we might be saved. But we still do not know how we can be saved. This hermeneutic code though takes us a step closer to the solution. That is, being connected is part of the solution, but it is insufficient; something more is needed.

***(10) But something is happening that holds even greater potential. In a word, our planet is becoming smarter.***

**\*\*REF. Smarter.\*\*** Again a reference to the cultural code linking IBM to its past. This cultural reference permeates the entire campaign – never allowing the audience(s) to forget the concept. This ubiquitous cultural reference creates an ongoing link to IBM’s past, and keeps IBM’s past successes at the front of the audience’s mind and thought processes. The term goes further though; we tend to respect smart people, and probably tend to believe them as well, both of which would be very positive things when applied to IBM. Thus the associations created by consistently linking the terms “smart” and “smarter” with the corporate brand of IBM are likely strengthening and creating positive affect around the corporate brand.

An additional result of this linkage between smart and IBM is that the audience may begin to see the character of IBM in the story as being smart. A smart character can be relied on to find solutions to problems encountered along the way – think of the “smart” characters in the stories that we are familiar with: Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, Dr. Gregory House (from the T.V. series House), even Velma (from Scooby-Doo!). Interestingly from this list of characters, they tend to be either extremely arrogant (Holmes, Poirot, House), or quite unpretentious (Miss Marple, Velma). As seen earlier, IBM appears to desire the unpretentious characterization. However, as is seen in SYM:1:antithesis leader/helper we see that there is ambiguity as to which character IBM actually is.

***(11) This isn’t just a metaphor. I mean infusing intelligence into the way the world literally works – the systems and processes that enable physical goods to be developed, manufactured, bought and sold...services to be delivered...everything from people and money to oil, water and electrons to move...and billions of people to work and live.***

**\*\*REF: The Borg.\*\*** Palmisano brings another description of our world that includes a transformation that seems to be very Borg-like: “infusing intelligence into the way the world literally works...everything from people and money to oil, water and electrons to move...and billions of people to work and live.” The thought of infusing intelligence into people brings to mind an image of the Borg who look like they are half-human, half-robot. Palmisano is trying to build a positive image of the future, but the images that come from cultural cues within the text of his speech have a dark side to them, that does not paint a magnanimous picture of IBM.

***(12) First, our world is becoming instrumented.....Second, our world is becoming interconnected...Third, all things are becoming intelligent.***

**\*\*REF: The Borg. \*\*** Again, thinking of everything, and everyone (i.e., “our world” and “all things”), becoming interconnected echoes the quote of the Borg: “You will be assimilated.” On the surface, the message from Palmisano is a positive one, full of hope. He seems to be saying that we have the setting and infrastructure in place for a wonderful new world; a world where the seemingly insurmountable problems can be dealt with. However, underlying the hope is the possibility of a different menace – one where we lose our freedoms and become part of a collective just like the Borg.

One sees Palmisano attempting to carefully craft and control the corporate brand of IBM. It is going to be an integral part of saving the world. IBM will aid and assist as a solid, upstanding citizen of society. Yet even within his own words one can see other meanings emerge, with references to other cultural codes that he may not even realize that come through. So even in his attempt to carefully manage the corporate brand in an official and published

speech, Palmisano does not have complete control of the meaning that emerges. The story is developing a different meaning than IBM likely intends.

### **Interpretations**

The above analysis of Palmisano's speech using Barthes codes is just one example of how a reader might look at IBM's narrative, and extract meaning. However, every stakeholder that looks at this narrative will come up with a different interpretation. Each stakeholder has his or her own experiences and expectations against which they will juxtapose the narrative, and from this they will create their own writerly interpretation. Perhaps rather than seeing the interconnections spoken of by Palmisano as leading to a Borg-like society, a reader could see the world of the Matrix (the movie); or maybe the reader only sees the interconnections as being functional tools which can be of benefit to society as a whole.

This example also illustrates the notion that a reader of IBM's narrative can be very critical and analytical in looking at the story. As such there is the implication that the reader is in some manner responding to the story, and is not just a passive reader. As Barthes (1974) labelled it, this is a *writerly* approach to looking at a story. The non-passive involvement of readers adds complexity to the story, and to a company like IBM that is trying to tell its corporate brand story. This also makes the point that the company is not fully in control of its own corporate brand. That is, the company's stakeholders are going to apply their own lens in interpreting the company's story. They will impose their own expectations on what the company does and says, and generate meaning about the company in their own way.

## ***Reader-Response Theory***

In order to incorporate the complexity of stakeholder involvement in the story one needs to extend the analysis beyond simply a story being told, or a textual analysis of that story. One approach that goes a long way to that aim is the Reader-Response Theory (RRT).

Linda Scott adapted RRT to consumer research in her 1994 *Journal of Consumer Research* article. Central to her work was the concept that advertisements have many of the characteristics of literature and drama. She is supported in this assertion by other consumer researchers (e.g., Deighton 1984; Stern 1988, 1989). Scott (1994) was concerned with what she observed as a gradual separation of the act of acquiring brand information from an ad from the act of reading the ad. She saw RRT as a means of bringing the two together where one could look more at the process that was occurring rather than emphasizing the textual analysis itself. By doing this, some of the complexities arising from interactions between advertiser and reader can be better understood.

A core part of Scott's (1994) application of RRT to advertisements and consumer research is that an advertisement is fundamentally about an economic transaction. Consequently readers are naturally suspicious and cynical about the advertisement and the company behind it. The company knows that readers are suspicious and cynical, thus they design their advertisements in such a way to break through any defenses that the readers may erect. We thus have both intentional readers and intentional authors (companies) that interact with each other.

As discussed earlier, Twitchell (2004, p. 484) suggests that branding is a "commercial variant of storytelling." Twitchell goes on to say that "stories are fictions filled with character, plot, points of view, and an implied purpose called a meaning." Typically, the purpose is thought

to be that of the author of the story. When one views a brand as a story, the inference is that it too has an implied purpose, or intentionality. When the author of the story is a company, the assumption is that the intention of the company is to make a profit. Of course this is not a surprise to any “reader” (stakeholder) of a corporate brand story.

Similar to advertising (although perhaps not quite so obvious), branding has a commercial intent. Scott (1994, p. 468) says “when we read an ad as an ad, we know the text refers to a desired economic exchange to occur at another point in time.” Similarly, when we (“we” broadly viewed as any stakeholder of a company) consider a company, or listen to a spokesperson for a company, we understand that the “text” (i.e., the story of the company’s brand) is related to an entity devoted to making a profit. Therefore, it is probable that stakeholders will view everything the corporation says and does as relating to, or contributing in some way to the company achieving that profit-centred aim.

The texts of speeches and interviews by IBM executives are created by people who share a cultural experience or experiences with the audience who consume that text. IBM is, however an intentional author of that text, and the stakeholders who receive and respond to that text *know* that IBM is an intentional author, and thus respond according to that knowledge that IBM is ultimately trying to make a profit. Nonetheless, the story includes a lot of information from many sources, and ultimately it is one way that information about the corporate brand is transferred. Scott (1994) claims that this is part of a social process.

Built on this social process, Scott (1994, p. 474) outlines the “Reader-Response Theory”:

*In reader-response theory, the reading experience becomes a dialogue between a historically situated, intentional author and a culturally informed, self-*

*motivated reader. The meaning of the text is then open to all the potential uses and meanings that are recoverable by different motives and strategies for reading. In such a theory of reading, the status of the text is mutable. Any assertion of a single right reading becomes impossible without the appearance of naiveté or elitism or both. Ultimately, all reading becomes interpretation.*

When viewed as a social process, one sees that the corporate brand cannot be delivered in a unidirectional manner; managing a corporate brand thus becomes a more complex and sophisticated process. There are more nuances to be considered when communicating with stakeholders than simply being effective and consistent in delivering the brand identity. RRT shows that readers will discount – and ignore – text that is from a profit-driven entity. Readers are sceptical and suspicious of the company’s intent. That is, the readers know that the company is doing what is good for the company, but they are not so sure that it will be good for the reader. Accounting for and dealing with this kind of scepticism thus requires sophistication beyond a set of clearly and logically laid out corporate talking points.

While the challenges of managing a corporate brand as laid out by Aaker (2004) are important, in the context of IBM’s corporate brand, there is more going on than IBM simply constructing and projecting their corporate brand. IBM likely recognizes that its stakeholders are really a sceptical, cynical audience to the story of their corporate brand. Consequently IBM knows it needs to work quite hard to capture the interest and attention of their audience. Scott (1994) outlines a number of literary devices that a company such as IBM can use to capture an audience’s interest and attention in spite of its scepticism and cynicism. Additional literary tropes can be found in other story analysis methods. The codes developed by Barthes (1974) for a narratological textual analysis are instances of such literary tropes. For example, using an

hermeneutic code can be an effective way to catch and keep the attention of a sceptical reader. By applying these to IBM’s corporate brand story we see more of the complexities contained within IBM’s corporate brand than by simply viewing IBM’s literal one-way communications.

Within a story framework one can apply the RRT as described by Scott (1994). That is, in deciding on, assembling and telling their story, IBM (the author) intentionally uses a number of methods and tools and considers many issues. Very briefly, these are listed in Table 5-2 below (taken from Scott 1994):

<b>Intentional Authors</b>	
Framing, Intonation and Visual Signals	The general context used by and setup by the company within which it presents its story.
Addressing the message/story	Role/character of the storyteller/speaker.
Target audience	Ideal or fictive reader the speaker envisages.
<b>Tools and methods used by the company, the intentional storyteller</b>	
Defamiliarization of the proposition	Use of tropes (e.g., metaphors) to knowledgeably break through the habits of the readers.
Rhetorical Fiction	Selection of plot and characters of the story to work with the beliefs and cultural knowledge of the readers.
Suasiveness & Reading Experience	Manner and order of presenting and processing the story. Often makes use of current timeline to link up with cultural experiences of readers.

**Table 5-2: Intentional Authors**

In the same way that the author (company) is intentional about its story, the stakeholders who are the readers of the story are intentional in how they read and respond to the story. The

aspects of a reader’s interpretation of the company’s story are listed in Table 5-3 below (taken from Scott 1994).

<b>Intentional Readers</b>	
The fictive (voluntary) reader	The reader is willing to pay attention to and be involved in the story.
Motive for reading	“People read things for a reason, for a purpose, to accomplish something” (Scott 1994, p. 472)
Using the Text	Readers use the text to negotiate their lives, they use the text to fulfill a purpose of the reader’s own.
Text Rejection	As they know the intentions of the company (i.e., to make a profit), the readers are actively sceptical. If the persuasive act of the company fails, the reader may outright reject the company’s proposition.
Reading and Community	There can be a shared interpretation of the story text across stakeholders.
Multiple Readings, Mutable Text	Even though the meaning of the story can be shared, it is also possible for it to be individually varied.

**Table 5-3: Intentional Readers**

In order to apply this framework to the data in this thesis, the data can be loosely split into two sections: that of the author (IBM) and that of the reader (all stakeholders). This next section looks at the story that IBM tells, and according to some of Scott’s (1994) categories, looks at IBM’s intentions, or what they might be attempting to accomplish in the way they tell their story. The reader’s intentions according to Scott are looked at in more detail in Theme 3 to try to better understand the meaning of IBM’s corporate brand story.

### **The Intentional Author**

This section provides an analysis of what IBM the author is doing in its intentional, motive filled storytelling. As discussed earlier, the exposition part serves to lay the groundwork for the story. One can see the exposition as the “framing” talked about by Scott (1994). The descriptions by Palmisano in his speeches (2008), Christenson in his blogs (2008) and Donofrio in his interview (2008), let the readers know that the world is in trouble. Our world and society that are facing doom provide a solid frame for the story, and for IBM to launch a new initiative. It is also the type of framing to lure the readers into the story – wanting to know where the story is going to go. Included in both the exposition and the inciting incident parts of the story are the introductions of characters – notably the Joe Average character of IBM itself.

At this point one also sees that IBM has assumed the role of storyteller or speaker. Palmisano delivers speeches and some interviews where he frames the story, as is also done through IBM’s Smarter Planet blog, edited by Christenson.

Against this background the inciting incident occurs: the world is doomed unless we do something! There is hope though in the three I’s of which the smarter planet is comprised. If utilized properly, a smarter planet will allow us to deal with any threats or risks that could lead to global catastrophe

In this inciting incident – the description of the world’s doom – is a great opportunity for IBM to claim it has the capabilities and solutions to deal with any troubles the world is facing. In fact, a sceptical person, knowing that IBM is profit driven, would expect IBM to do so at this point – there is impending doom, the solution is the “smarter planet”, and the readers know or

expect that IBM has the products and services to make it happen. This would be logical, as it could solidify IBM's corporate brand relevance, provide important value propositions and help its corporate brand identity to emerge, along with complementing IBM's long and impressive history. Yet IBM does not make linkages or claims of being the company to fix the problems. Rather, IBM suggests that other stakeholders are required to take care of the world's problems and avert the looming catastrophe – taking advantage of the infrastructure and capabilities of the smarter planet.

As an intentional author, IBM understands the scepticism of its readers. If IBM were to make all of these seemingly logical direct links between the problems of the world and solutions from its own products and services, the readers could say, 'yeah, yeah, nice story – all leading up to IBM making a bunch of sales. That's all this is about.' But in RRT, the approach of telling the story in a way that is not completely expected by the readers is very logical. So even though the absence of the direct links may be somewhat contradictory to Aaker's (2004) suggestions, or might be seen as a weak way of addressing the challenges he identified, according to RRT (Scott 1994), there are no immediate or apparent problems with this approach. IBM knows that it could lose the interest or attention of its readers if it made obvious, predictable connections between the story it is telling and its own products, and thereby fuelling and confirming the readers' scepticism and cynicism. By being unpredictable in telling the story, IBM maintains the interest of its readers, as they are curious as to what is coming next. Thus it allows IBM to tell more of its story.

Aaker's (2004) approach does not rule out or contradict this method for a company managing its corporate brand. But Aaker suggests a far more direct and minimal approach that does not explicitly incorporate the responses of a company's stakeholders. RRT recognizes much greater complexity in the interactions between a company and its stakeholders in relation to the company's corporate brand. RRT recognizes that stakeholders will not simply pay attention to any message delivered by a company – there is a multifaceted interaction taking place in the playing out of a social process.

In the inciting incident segment, we see an example of Palmisano using a literary trope to further capture the interest of the readers. As described in the previous section, Palmisano (November 6, 2008) uses the phrase “this extraordinary moment”, and it was identified as a hermeneutic code. A hermeneutic code provides a strong hook for readers to remain engaged in the story; it causes them to ask questions that at the moment are not answered (e.g., What is the extraordinary moment? Why is it extraordinary?). When the readers ask these questions in response to something in the story, they then pay more attention to the story, looking for answers. So even though they know that IBM is motivated by profits, and that this story is likely to lead to some IBM-profit-driven conclusion, they stay attentive in an attempt to have their questions answered. The suspense of not knowing the answers actually gives the story momentum and makes it interesting for the readers (Barthes 1974).

Looking at the earlier example of narratological analysis using Barthes' codes provides many more examples of tropes used to break through the habits of sceptical readers (Scott 1994). The use of such tropes is indicative of an awareness by IBM of the cynical nature of its readers.

It is not just the use of literary tropes that we see in the Smarter Planet story, we also see rhetorical fiction at work. This is where the plot and characters of the story work with the beliefs and cultural knowledge of the readers. As described earlier, the Smarter Planet story is a quest. People know what a quest is, and they know how a quest works. This knowledge is generally a part of their cultural experience, and it does not need to be explained – people just know it.

Likewise with characters, IBM's adoption of the Joe Average character type does not need a lot of description; people just know about the character. Joe Average is typically a humble, hard-working, good guy, who is great to work with. While Joe Average is not the leader-type, he is useful to have on a team setting out on a quest, and in the stories, he may just have the answer that the leader is looking for at a crucial moment. But all of these things do not need to be spelled out to the readers of IBM's Smarter Planet story. When the readers recognize the story as a quest, and IBM as Joe Average, their cultural knowledge fills in the list details.

However, it is not simply the knowledge of how the story will progress that intrigues and captivates the reader; while the reader knows the general form and structure of a quest, the specifics are not known. That is, each different story has its own specific unique aspects. The reader needs to pay attention to the details in order to understand a specific story, like the Smarter Planet story. Thus creating a quest engages the readers in the story such that they desire to follow the story to its conclusion.

Another part of being an intentional author is drawing on the cultural experience of the readers in a slightly different way than the use of rhetorical fiction does. The reading experience can be affected by the order of presenting material and by making use of current events that tap

into the cultural experience of readers. Creating links between the story and the cultural experience of readers further engages the readers. IBM does this quite effectively by making reference to some very recent significant events: the election of the first African-American president, the global economic meltdown of 2008, and not-so-recent, but just as significant, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. All of these are deeply engrained in the cultural experiences of the readers: IBM's stakeholders.

Scott (1994, p. 470) argues for the persuasive power of a story in delivering a message that would be resisted or ignored if delivered directly. She says,

*The selection of characters and the plotting of story work with beliefs held by readers to evoke sympathies, elicit judgments, form opinions – in sum, to coax the reader toward the point of view intended by the author. Authors encourage readers to identify with particular characters by making them seem attractive and sympathetic and discourage identification with other characters by making them appear foolish or wicked.*

We can see in the above examples from the Smarter Planet story that this is what IBM has done. The readers are drawn into the beginning of the story of a quest to save the world; and the protagonist (IBM) is a humble, regular, hard-working Joe Average that everyone can relate to, sympathize with and cheer for. Palmisano ends his November 6, 2008 speech with a challenge to the “leaders” and a call to action to everyone to join in the quest to save the world.

*Leaders will need to hone their collaboration skills, because we will need leadership that pulls across systems. We will need to bring together stakeholders and experts from across business, government and academia, and all of them will need to move outside their traditional comfort zones....*

*There is much serious work ahead of us, as leaders and as citizens. Together, we have to consciously infuse intelligence into our decision-making and management systems... not just infuse our processes with more speed and capacity.*

*But I think one thing is clear: The world will continue to become smaller, flatter... and smarter. We are moving into the age of the globally integrated and intelligent economy, society and planet. The question is, what will we do with that?*

*The world now beckoning us is one of enormous promise. And I believe it is one that we can build—if we open our minds and let ourselves think about all that a smarter planet could be.*

Even at this early, introductory part of the story one can see how the use of literary devices helps to engage the readers, in spite of their scepticism. It seems apparent that IBM recognizes the intentionality of readers, and that any message or narrative will be analyzed for meaning by the readers. IBM has built a story that tries to counter the scepticism of its stakeholders, and thus maintain and further build a strong corporate brand. The sophistication of this process – which explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the reader in the story goes further towards understanding the corporate brand than the five challenges to managing a corporate brand as suggested by Aaker (2004). To reiterate, this does not mean that these challenges are not important; rather, while the challenges seem to be directly applicable, in and of themselves they do not seem to fully explain what IBM is doing in developing and managing its corporate brand. But the RRT framework does match up quite well, and provides a logical explanation for the story IBM is telling and how and why the story is being told.

### **Theme wrap-up**

In the above analysis we see a story unfolding – told by its protagonist, a company. Thus it is reasonable and informative to use a story analysis to look at a corporate brand. It helps to view what the company is doing, and how it fits into and interacts with the stakeholders around it. The story as described above follows the first part of a traditional plotline. Of course as this is

an ongoing situation there is development yet to come in the story, and thus the ending or resolution is still hidden from us.

In the storyline described above, the plot is laid out and controlled by IBM. It is neat, compelling, and ultimately shows IBM to be the hero – just as the senior management of IBM would want. This fits with the advice from current literature on the corporate brand. Traditional corporate branding researchers (e.g., Aaker 2004; Balmer and Greyser 2006, Balmer, Stuart and Greyser 2009, de Chernatony and Harris 2000; Hatch and Schultz 2003) would have a company plan and implement a storyline for their corporate brand.

It is interesting and significant to note however that the scope of what IBM is doing by placing itself into a storyline as the protagonist is larger than one would imagine from traditional corporate branding literature. De Chernatony and Harris (2000) recommend paying attention to internal and external stakeholders; Hatch and Schultz (2003, p. 1058) conclude that companies should “integrate your organisation behind the corporate brand”, and Aaker (2004) perpetuates an underlying assumption that the corporate brand is a separable entity from the world in which it resides, and that it can be removed or shifted as the company decides from time to time. IBM extends these notions by making the assumption that it is fundamentally part of the world around it, and that it is in an ongoing relationship with the stakeholders around it – how it relates to them and is integrated with them is something that IBM works at managing. IBM does not just pay attention to the stakeholders, it is a fellow citizen in the world. IBM does not just integrate its organization behind its corporate brand, but it integrates its organization and corporate brand within society. As Berman (1970) talks about, being in society leads to the tensions inherent in

trying to be authentic; that is, trying to be true to oneself, while trying to figure out who one is in relation to the expectations and demands of the various people and organizations in society.

Thus we see elements of IBM managing, or attempting to manage its corporate brand, and assuming that it is in control – just as the literature would suggest. But this is extended by how fully integrated IBM’s corporate brand is with the stakeholders, and indeed the citizens and world in which it exists. IBM draws on the mythology and culture of that world in telling its story. Thus, even at this stage of analysis we begin to see that a corporate brand is not separable from the context and culture within which it exists; the story of IBM’s corporate brand is intertwined into the world.

Earlier I discussed that the corporate brand is more than just a story, it is a saga. A key part of the differentiation between a saga and a regular story is that the audience of the saga provides input into the story – at times in spite of the main storyteller’s purpose.

The next section introduces elements of the saga – where in spite of IBM’s aim to be Joe Average as the protagonist, events conspire to change and complicate the plot. The saga allows for the involvement of RRT’s intentional readers – the readers are no longer passive, and in fact, at times the “author” can become the reader.

### **Theme 3: The Saga**

As was seen in theme two, a corporate brand can be viewed as a story, with IBM as the intentional author telling the story to an intentional audience. Theme two illustrates the complexity of IBM’s corporate brand as it begins to emerge. Clearly this is a significant step beyond what we saw in theme one, where the view was simply that of IBM following a

structured script. However, even considering the corporate brand as a story does not uncover the complexity and dynamism that is inherent in a corporate brand.

As discussed earlier, in a saga the storyteller role can shift from one character/person to another; and the storyline itself can be influenced by the particular storyteller of the moment. Additionally, the concepts of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2003) – whereby a mix of different media are used to construct and propagate a narrative – can amplify and contribute to the multiple storyteller perception. Jenkins et al. (2006) and Scolari (2009) point out that transmedia storytelling is not in control of any single entity; it is complex, confusing and seems to progress and develop in fits and starts, being driven along by many different contributors. Although Jenkins did not equate the two, one could envision transmedia storytelling as the modern form of a saga.

In this theme we will see that even the story told by IBM, an intentional author, encounters inconsistencies that are contradictory to the plot and characters. Here we see that IBM's audience, the "intentional readers" in RRT, interpret the story in a variety of ways (see Table 5-3) (Scott 1994). But we also see that they actually go beyond what RRT suggests; they actually become the authors of the saga. They are not merely sceptical and cynical such that they reject (or not) the text, or are willing to pay attention to it. Their response is to actually assume the role of the storyteller, and for the moment, all of the other stakeholders are the sceptical, cynical "readers". Thus IBM's version of the story begins to unravel as many different stakeholders begin to add to it – as it takes on the characteristics of a saga, with many storytellers. The first part of the theme provides evidence of IBM's own managers deviating

from their corporate brand's plot. While this is an important piece to demonstrate how IBM's corporate brand story becomes messed up from within, even more significantly is how other stakeholders take over the role of storytellers and tell parts of the story from *their* perspectives. These new storytellers are not guided by the script from theme one, nor are they concerned with following an IBM created story plotline. The input of these non-IBM storytellers interrelates with that of the IBM storytellers to create a rich saga that is complex and dynamic far beyond what has been seen in either theme one or two.

First in this theme is a discussion of the fractures to the corporate brand story from within IBM. Next is an analysis of external stakeholders' contribution to the saga. This includes stakeholders who are very supportive of IBM, those who are relatively neutral towards IBM, and some who are quite antagonistic towards IBM. But all contribute – in a large way or a small way – to the ongoing saga of IBM's corporate brand, and ultimately to the socially constructed meaning of that corporate brand.

### **Fractures within IBM**

The story thus far is laid out much as one would expect a protagonist/storyteller would have planned. That is, all of the elements of the story are under control, well managed and laid out quite neatly. From the standpoint of the traditional approach to corporate branding, this is exactly what a company would want; a consistent story, planned and managed to highlight the points that the company wanted highlighted.

However, maintaining this position, and keeping the story going along the same track is a very difficult matter. Looking a bit closer we see *IBM's* control of the story begin to slip. Even with IBM itself inconsistencies are apparent.

As discussed earlier, IBM has portrayed itself as being humble, modest: the “Joe Average” character of the story. CEO and Chair, Sam Palmisano and others at IBM have made a point of building up this image of IBM, for example in the very public arena of the Atlantic Council of the United States, which subsequently was posted as a video on the internet on YouTube and other sites. However a later speech by Palmisano reveals a different and very contradictory role for IBM.

In a speech at a press conference with Barack Obama (January 28, 2009) Palmisano talks about the forthcoming stimulus package that is aimed at helping to bring about economic recovery in the United States. So we see on stage, the Chair and CEO of IBM, Sam Palmisano standing comfortably next to the President of the United States – Barack Obama. In the video of this event, it all looks very natural and ordinary. But when one considers the “Joe Average” character previously espoused by Palmisano, this is a very jarring and unexpected picture. “Joe Average” should not share a platform with the president of the United States! Only the highly regarded, highly esteemed people stand shoulder to shoulder with the president. So this raises many questions: how can an “average” person be so comfortable with the U.S. President? How close is their relationship? Why would the CEO of IBM be chosen for such a prominent position and role? And overall, what is going on here with the supposedly – but apparently not – Joe Average and the U.S. President?

Not only is the picture itself at odds with the humble, average character of IBM, but the words that Palmisano uses further highlight this disconnect. In his speech, the stimulus package and national job creation issues that he refers to come from a leader – not a simple collaborator/helper. He even says, “I’m honoured to be speaking on behalf of the business community”. “Joe Average” does not speak on behalf of the business community of the United States. He may support, help out, encourage, or provide assistance – but taking the lead does not fit the role.

So in this example, we see IBM in the role of the leader. IBM, in essence, says to the country, ‘we think the stimulus package is great, follow along behind us on this challenging journey.’ How does this reconcile with the image of IBM as the collaborative, helpful world citizen previously described? Simply put, it does not. Here we see a different side to IBM, almost the opposite. With the Joe Average image, IBM sees an important role for itself within society: that is, not as a super slick salesperson, dynamic leader, telling society what is good for it. Society wants companies to be responsible (e.g., Smith 2003) – working with and for society – and as Joe Average, IBM is trying to do this.

However, at the same time, when crises arise in society – e.g., the financial crisis of 2008 – society also seems to want strong leadership, and someone (including organizations) taking charge of the situation, and guiding the way to a prosperous conclusion. Thus IBM, as one of the largest and most prominent companies in the U.S., faces societal expectations of filling this role.

What does this do to the story? First it breaks the consistency of the story. The storyline has been interrupted, and diverted from where IBM intended it to go. One of the main characters

in the story is now shown to be in an identity conflict. For IBM, its attempt to control its corporate brand has been made more difficult. IBM finds itself in a situation where it cannot even maintain consistency of its brand from within. This also creates confusion in the minds of the stakeholders: who is IBM really? A question like this from IBM's stakeholders is not something advocated or recommended in current corporate branding literature, nor would one imagine that this is IBM's goal.

Another example of where IBM's role as fellow citizen/helper becomes somewhat confused, and shows IBM as perhaps not being so collaborative comes from the interview between Gartner and IBM Senior Vice President, Donofrio (Morello 2007).

***Gartner:** So, how do people contribute to innovation at IBM?*

***Donofrio:** We believe that everybody can be an innovator, even if everybody can't be an inventor or a creator or a discoverer. For IBM, innovation is in the large, not in the small. So yes, it's product and services, but it's also processes, it's also management systems, it's also business models.*

*Of course, it's societal as well, because, if society isn't innovating at the same time you're innovating, many of the things that you're counting on aren't going to work: Society will either take you in a different direction, or they're not going to be ready for it in a more positive sense.*

This quote can be split into two segments: one for each of Donofrio's paragraphs. In the first segment Donofrio refers to "everybody" having the potential to be an innovator. But who does that include? It seems to be an all-inclusive phrase. This is supported by the phrase "For IBM, innovation is in the large, not in the small". This seems to include people and contributors outside of IBM. In conjunction with the notion of IBM being a good fellow citizen, with the Smarter Planet narrative, this makes a lot of sense; that is, all members of society have a role and

ability to contribute to the innovations that will make a Smarter Planet, and prevent the doom from occurring. IBM, as Joe Average, is just one of those societal members, working along as a good citizen.

However, the second segment presents a contradictory text. Donofrio says, “if society isn’t innovating at the same time you’re innovating, many of the things that you’re counting on aren’t going to work.” Who is the “you” that Donofrio refers to? Why are they separate from society? It seems that Donofrio is equating IBM with “you”, and thus creating a divide between society and IBM. If society does not agree with the innovations of IBM, then it will take IBM in a direction not wanted by IBM, or it simply will not be “ready for it” – both situations creating tension between IBM and society. That does not sound like a helpful, collaborative citizen. It sounds much more like a loner, or strong confident leader; the hero sees the right way to go in spite of what anyone else says, and stands by his convictions.

This interview does take place prior to the announcement of the Smarter Planet initiative, yet it is likely that the Smarter Planet initiative is well into its planning stages by this point. Speculation about where IBM would go from this point forward could lead one to assume that IBM is ready to make a bold step in a different direction from where society is going. You could even assume that IBM would step up as the strong, charismatic leader in this endeavour. Perhaps there could even be opposition from society to the initiatives of IBM: “if society isn’t innovating at the same time you’re innovating, many of the things that you’re counting on aren’t going to work: Society will either take you in a different direction, or they’re not going to be ready for it in a more positive sense.” This sets up IBM as the lone hero type of character, bucking the

popular trends, and going against the grain. Given the size of IBM, and its long influential history, this would be a reasonable direction for IBM to go; and it would be a reasonable type of character role for IBM to assume.

However, with the Smarter Planet initiative and story on the near horizon, IBM's role as Joe Average is likely in the works. But this small segment gives us an insight into the possible conflict within IBM over what the role will be.

Donofrio's comment shows that IBM is not always collaborative. Reading this comment might lead one to assume that IBM does not seem to be willing to work with society – if society is not going along with what IBM wants. In this case, Donofrio is referring to innovations (which are at the heart of the upcoming Smarter Planet initiative). His comment seems to indicate that society may in fact be an unwelcome participant, and that at times it gets in the way of what IBM wants to do.

This statement gives a good insight into how some parts of the company view IBM in relation to the rest of the world. Donofrio, as an IBM V-P with 43 years of experience, certainly represents a significant viewpoint within the company. Palmisano's version of IBM as a collaborative partner, good fellow citizen, Joe Average character is at odds with Donofrio's characterization. Interestingly, Donofrio resigned from IBM October 2008, at the time the Smarter Planet initiative was announced. He did not however retire; he stayed in the industry with another organization. Was this a result of his different view of IBM's character? Could it be a way for IBM to remain true to itself – the Joe Average self that it was developing?

In and of itself, being a lone hero is not a negative characteristic for a company and its corporate brand; but in this case it really reduces the consistency of IBM's message about being Joe Average. This also provides us with evidence of the complexity of the corporate brand even *within* a company. A planned script from the corporate boardroom is not always followed, nor is the intentional story agreed upon. As much as it is logical to try to follow Aaker's (2004) prescription, it is easier said than done.

On one hand – as shown in the first theme – we see IBM, through its Chair, President and CEO (Palmisano) following a neat, tidy and coherent script about IBM and the Smarter Planet. In the second theme, according to RRT, we see how IBM is an intentional author, telling a story of Joe Average, helping to save the world. The second theme adds complexity to the concept of a corporate brand, but the fractures to the story from within – from Senior VP, Nicholas Donofrio and CEO Palmisano – indicate even more complexity. Or to put it another way, this shows how difficult it is for a company to maintain control of its corporate brand. If the storyline goes off track because of senior executives, what will happen to it when it makes its way further down the corporate ladder? Or to the front line employees?

Despite IBM's efforts to control and manage its own story, that story seems to be, in fact, somewhat out of IBM's control. Even within IBM itself there are significant lapses where the narrative just does not seem completely consistent. Companies are complex, difficult-to-manage entities made up of individuals and influenced by external stakeholders. It is not surprising to see that there are difficulties in trying to control a company's corporate brand story. For many good reasons the consistent, well-planned story of the corporate brand begins to deviate a bit as the

company and its individual employees interact and mingle in the world in which the company exists.

And that is just from IBM's *own* employees' communications and contributions. What happens when one looks at what external stakeholders contribute to the saga? The next section explores the role of other storytellers and how they influence and perceive IBM's corporate brand.

### **Other Storytellers**

The first two themes of this research focus on the information that IBM presents about its own corporate brand. Even with the source being IBM it is clear that the story gets to be very complex. Then as the evidence of fractures to the story from IBM itself is added to the story, one sees how the story unravels (from the perspective of IBM) even more. All of this information is 'out there' in the public, available for anyone to 'read' and make their own interpretation. And this is in fact what happens.

Stakeholders look at IBM from their own standpoint, interpret what they see, hear and read, and develop their *own* unique understanding of IBM's corporate brand. Additionally, these stakeholders then talk about IBM; that is, they tell stories about IBM. The end result is that the stories of IBM's stakeholders mix in with the story that IBM is telling. Anyone attending to IBM will have a whole set of story pieces to fit together and in which to try to find meaning. As one can see, this broader story is far more complex than the story proposed by RRT. This broader story is more of a saga, where the plot twists and turns over time, according to the emphases of the different storytellers.

Every time a new story is added by a stakeholder it has the potential to change the meaning of IBM's corporate brand, and it has the potential to draw IBM into a complex, dynamic pit of work to maintain, and protect its corporate brand.

This section looks at some external stakeholder contributions to the saga of IBM's corporate brand. Through these quotes and reports one can see the tangled saga that is so complex that it shows a sharp contrast to the clean script IBM is supposed to follow (Aaker 2004) and is even a contrast to the author's intentionality as described by RRT (Scott 1994).

### **Reactions to the Smarter Planet**

First is the direct response to IBM's Smarter Planet initiative by stakeholders. Not everyone who knows IBM is aware of this initiative, but there are a number of people who are. However, what is interesting is these stakeholders' interpretation of the initiative; in particular their view of IBM's motivation behind the Smarter Planet story. As one would expect from a reader – an audience member or stakeholder – there is an anticipation of a profit motive. From RRT we know that the readers are intentional, and thus cynical about companies. Whatever a company sets out to do, the intentional reader assumes that it is about making money. In section two this was described and illustrated, and it was shown how IBM tries to tell its story in a way to defamiliarize the proposition, and keep the readers engaged. IBM does this by de-emphasizing its business/profit orientation, and focusing on its Joe Average role, the good citizen that wants to work hard to benefit the world.

Palmisano's interview with Bartiromo is a good example of this. Where Bartiromo was intent on questioning Palmisano about how much money IBM was going to make through Smarter Planet deals, Palmisano was trying to focus on how IBM was going to help others to

save the world. In that instance, Palmisano was trying to add to the story of how IBM is a good citizen, working to save the planet through smarter planet implementations and smarter planet conferences. But the questions from Bartiromo were focused on the IBM profit part of the story. While Palmisano wanted the story to be about an overall identity for IBM, Bartiromo wanted the story to be about the consequences to IBM's bottom line. RRT suggests that readers are cynical, and are looking for a profit motive. But RRT stops short of suggesting that the reader's cynicism would be manifested so directly, and in such a way that a company would have to respond in a way that was really off the storyline. Yet that is what happens between Bartiromo and Palmisano. Additionally, this is an interactive, dynamic, fluid situation, which is not easily (or at all) accounted for in the RRT framework.

Another interpretation of the Smarter Planet initiative comes from the press. In 2010, John Webster wrote an article for CNet.com about IBM's Smarter Planet. Webster seems to admire the campaign: "By now you've surely seen at least one of the IBM 'Let's Build a Smarter Planet' TV ads. I like them. They talk about computing possibilities that are truly big-picture." However, Webster views the campaign as a way to sell more computer technology and services: "And while they may put a very new face on a venerable IBM, the ad campaign is very much in keeping with a marketing technique IBM has honed for decades....Smarter Planet is yet another way to sell computing."

Webster does not view the Smarter Planet initiative as a way of doing business, as a philosophy for IBM, or as a way to save the planet – as IBM does (see Jack Mason's blog posting quote from earlier). Rather, Webster retells the story as essentially a new sales campaign.

This is not even just a sceptical reader, looking for a way to discount IBM's story; Webster seems to like what IBM is doing. But his interpretation of IBM's story is different from IBM's interpretation. It is understandable that there will be different interpretations. However, Webster publicizes his interpretation through a popular technology news web site (CNET.com, owned by CBS). If the readers have not seen or heard the story IBM originally told, then they will base their understanding of IBM's Smarter Planet initiative on Webster's version. If they have heard IBM's original version of the story, then this piece gets added to it, and there is possibly a modified understanding constructed in their minds. IBM's corporate brand at this point has morphed from what IBM intended – the meaning has shifted. In addition to the meaning shift, there is now tension between how IBM sees itself and how Webster (and perhaps others) see IBM: who really is IBM? Webster is inadvertently characterizing IBM as a sales driven entity that is simply using the Smarter Planet campaign to further its sales. For the tension to be resolved, IBM needs to react to, or in a broad sense negotiate who it thinks it is, versus who Webster (as a representative stakeholder) thinks IBM is. This negotiation – even though it does not necessarily occur directly between IBM and Webster – motivates more parts of the saga to be told, and thus keeps that saga moving.

The concepts proposed by Aaker (2004) to manage corporate brand challenges do not hold up in this shifting meaning saga. RRT goes further and talks about mutable text, where there is not a single right reading of a text (advertisement, speech, etc.). However, RRT does not look at what happens when the story is passed on, or retold by a third party. Yes, each reader has a different interpretation of the text, but when they retell the story according to their interpretation,

other readers now actively interpret the interpretation. If there was just a dialogue between a company and a reader, then control of the story could conceivably be maintained. But as the story gets passed on from interpreter to interpreter, as a saga does, any hope of keeping direct control of the content and meaning of the story really evaporates. The saga is far more complex than a story as described by RRT. The intentionality of the author and reader is passed on along with the role of storyteller.

The outcomes of this can be illustrated by the children's game of 'telephone'. In this game the children are in a long line. The first child in the line whispers a phrase in the ear of the next child; that child whispers what they heard to the next child in the line. This continues until the last child in the line. The last child says the phrase out loud. Invariably the phrase that is spoken at the end of the line is so different from the original phrase that it is impossible to know how it morphed. The key though is that each child passes on the phrase that they hear. If a word or words are unclear, then they essentially have to interpret what they hear, try to make sense of it, and pass it on.

This little example is of course more extreme than how the saga of the corporate brand gets passed along. However, the same principal is at play: the audience interprets a message or messages, and then when they repeat the message it is according to their personal interpretation, and according to their personal or corporate needs (e.g., a media outlet needs an exciting story). As the audience tries to make sense of some part of the corporate brand story it will necessarily change when they retell it.

It is important to note that the saga changes in the retelling regardless of the current storyteller. One might expect that supporters of IBM would be motivated to tell the story the same way IBM is trying to tell it; and that stakeholders opposed to IBM would deliberately try to twist the story to show IBM in a poor light. However, the following examples illustrate how even supporters of IBM end up modifying IBM's storyline.

The first example of this comes from an ex-IBM employee – Lynn – who still works alongside IBM as a business partner and with IBM's other VARs (value added resellers). Her closeness and familiarity to IBM suggest that Lynn might have a fairly good insight into IBM. Certainly this came through in the interview. Additionally part of Lynn's business is helping IBM VARs understand what IBM is doing, so from one perspective, she provides an educated interpretation of the meaning of IBM's corporate brand for some of those VARs. Her contribution to the saga definitely has the patina of credibility, based on her experience.

Lynn was one of the few interviewees who was familiar with the Smarter Planet campaign. In talking about where IBM as a corporation was heading, she said:

*Lynn: If you look at what they're really pushing, they're pushing The Smart Planet. ...*

*Interviewer: ...What does that mean to you, The Smarter Planet and The Smart Shift kind of notions that they're doing?*

*Lynn: Well again, it's all very specialized services. Smart Planet – what does that mean? It means things like server virtualization and lowering your carbon footprint, using your IT but using it smarter and tying it into energy efficiency, and all of that kind of stuff. I think that's what it means. And again, the connectivity with the technology and that kind of thing.*

*I haven't looked too much into it. It's basically an umbrella for their services that they provide, is how I see it.*

Interestingly Lynn uses the phrase “Smart Planet” rather than “Smarter Planet”. She is referring to the same campaign as propagated by IBM, but just in passing has got the name wrong. In and of itself, this is a small slip. However, it is a small example of how control of the message is very tenuous for IBM. Even someone who is very close to the company can get the message a bit wrong. As the saga is told by stakeholders who are farther removed, or who have less of an interest in IBM one can imagine that the message and meaning can evolve even more.

In this quote, Lynn uses the metaphor of an umbrella to indicate that the Smarter Planet campaign is just a bundling of IBM product and services. In contrast, IBM’s version of a Smarter Planet is a way of being that will change the way our world works. These are significantly different views, and significantly different paths for the saga of IBM’s corporate brand.

Lynn is not alone in her view of IBM’s Smarter Planet initiative. Another ex-IBM employee, Richard, also views the Smarter Planet as a more tactical initiative rather than as state of being for IBM. Richard had been involved in a special unit that IBM set up to sell specialized hardware and software solutions in what was thought to be a cutting edge and rapidly growing market. He was one of the hand-picked people that were brought in to work in a relatively autonomous group with the goal of making a big impact in short period of time, and to try to stake IBM’s claim to a new market area. Talking about the Smarter Planet, he says:

*That’s neat. But I feel like that’s like Richard Florida’s shift called “Who’s Your City?” I feel like this is what’s happening and they’re [IBM] kind of capitalizing on that, which is great. I guess that’s where the money is, too, the government contracts, the businesses, the ones who are actually making change happen, not consumers who want to buy laptops.*

Richard suggests here that the impetus behind IBM's Smarter Planet initiative is to take advantage of a popular movement, and go to a new source of sales where there is opportunity to make lots of money, very quickly. Given that Richard had worked in a special unit with very high and aggressive sales targets it is only to be expected that he would have this perspective. At one point during his time with IBM he made a presentation to senior managers where he suggested that his unit within IBM could be more successful if it utilized a customer orientation.

***Richard:** I had a lot of opportunities for improvement. I think it was actually related to customers and that kind of thing. When we go to these expos and things like that, we didn't package it as a solution as much, even though we were selling solutions. They would say that this hardware does this and this one does this, but it wasn't customized to: this is your problem, now how do you solve this problem? I said that at these different trade shows and things, you need to focus more on the problem, as opposed to the solution you have. You'd ask if they have this problem. If so, ba-bing! You know?*

***Interviewer:** Did he agree with that?*

***Richard:** Not really. [laughs] Not really, but he said, "Richard, we need to be able to push out what is IBM's contribution. What is our stuff? What is it we do that's different from everybody else, as opposed to saying that everybody has this problem?"*

Richard's manager demonstrates a product focus here that is a contrast to Richard's ideas. At this front-line level where IBM employees deal with customers one sees a more pragmatic approach and view of who IBM is. The manager views his job as selling what he has; differentiate his products and services, and find a way to sell them. It seems that the manager thinks Richard's idea of finding out what the customers' need and then coming up with a solution just will not sell enough fast enough. Thus it is not surprising that Richard's

expectations of IBM, and of its reasons for using the Smarter Planet initiative are similar to Lynn's: IBM has found a slick new approach to drives sales and profits.

While this view of the Smarter Planet is attractive, and has benefits (e.g., increase sales), it does not fit with the story Palmisano started with. Using the theme of a Smarter Planet in order to drive sales is contrary to the notion of saving the planet from disaster with everyone working together and *everyone* taking advantage of the 3I's. Yet when stakeholders such as Lynn and Richard talk about the Smarter Planet, their contribution to the saga shapes the meaning of IBM's corporate brand. Additionally, their view coincides with John Webster's view expressed on CNet.com. This confirmation from multiple sources adds layers to the saga in a way that further removes control from IBM, and further develops the meaning of IBM's corporate brand and places stakeholder expectations on who IBM is.

Why is it that Lynn and Richard see the campaign is such a different light from IBM's presentation? In relation to Lynn's and Richard's businesses, this interpretation fits well with the type of work that they are involved with. That is, they take elements of IBM's saga as they apply to, and are important to themselves and their businesses. Through this lens it is understandable that Lynn's and Richard's telling of the story is different from IBM's – it matches their own needs and expectations. Looking back to Palmisano's press conference with President Obama we can see a similar explanation. That is, even though we can question why Palmisano seems to present IBM in a different role from Joe Average (when he, of all people, should know better), when we look at his own personal interests and aspirations (e.g., perhaps to achieve fame and recognition) this makes more sense. Lynn, Richard and Palmisano each take elements of IBM's

Smarter Planet story and use it for their own ends. And while they may have personal reasons for which elements they refer to and how they use them, the saga of IBM's corporate brand is thus furthered. It is, however, more than just beyond the control of IBM. The saga is added to *and* subtracted from as it travels farther and farther from its origin. Stakeholders take meaning from the IBM story, and modify that meaning to suit their own needs, but it also ends up altering the meaning of IBM's corporate brand. And how can IBM control this? These are not simply random, happenstance, once-in-a-while modifications of IBM's corporate brand. Rather, these are to be expected on a regular and ongoing basis: every stakeholder extracts meaning from IBM's messages, according to their own situation and their own expectations, and then re-packages that meaning with their own motives and interests which gives a new boost of life to the saga that keeps it moving along.

#### **Allusions to the Smarter Planet**

Paul, another ex-IBMer now working for an IBM customer contributes to the IBM saga in a somewhat special way. Having worked for IBM for 14 years (prior to his current job) he is simply interested in what IBM does; he also maintains contacts within IBM – both on a professional basis (associated with his current job), and on a personal basis. He shared both a personal overall view of IBM, as well as the perspectives of IBM that he encounters in his work. It seems that Paul has a generally positive view of IBM, but it is apparent that this opinion is influenced by what he hears around him.

One of the first things Paul related was an overall perspective of IBM as a services company.

*I mean it was clear from when I worked with IBM that it was at least one of the major directions that IBM wanted to go and certainly my interactions with over the last seven or eight years has certainly shown that my impression is that IBM is very much a services company. From what was when I first understood or joined IBM it was very much a product company and now the interactions and the experience and whatever I think of them as is a services company. In particular a services company provides infrastructure support and large application development. So I think of IBM as a services company.*

Although this statement does not mention the Smarter Planet, it certainly fits into the Smarter Planet story. That is, the role of IBM in the Smarter Planet story is not to provide products, rather it is to provide assistance to others in coming up with solutions to problems facing the world. A general “services” company in the IT field nicely fills that role. Paul fills in even more details that match the Smarter Planet story:

***Interviewer:*** *What message are they trying to convey through their current public advertising?*

***Paul:*** *I think it is more that they are the technical specialists. If you want to solve a complicated thing that is, you know, much more than just hardware, whether it be, the new technologies like service-oriented architectures that’s the way, or there are systems management, they [IBM] are the ones to go to. And that’s not something that resonates with the general public.*

***Interviewer:*** *Do they have anything that resonates with the general public do you think? I mean ‘cause that’s... when you talk about, application development and middleware and all that kind of stuff, that’s really for a business.*

***Paul:*** *Absolutely. Yeah, I don’t know. I don’t know if they really do have anything that really would benefit them... would resonate with the general public except the general public also includes IT people.*

Here Paul emphasizes the notion that IBM provides help to solve problems; almost exactly what the Smarter Planet story suggests that Joe Average does. IBM has the role of a helper, trying to solve the world’s problems by offering its expertise in the areas of technology

and systems management. Where Paul's story differs from IBM's is in the scope of applicability of the help; he sees IBM as focusing on businesses and only being relevant to businesses rather than to the general public. IBM touts itself as helping the whole world, or at least its efforts will help the whole world. Nevertheless, these two positions are not that different, with the general public likely not in a position to work with technology directly in solving the world's problems.

Hearing Paul talk about IBM in these broad, high-level terms lets one see a story that is compatible with the Smarter Planet story, without specifically mentioning Smarter Planet. However when sharing more specific interactions with IBM from his work experience, different aspects of IBM's character emerge. Interestingly, these get at a much finer level of detail than we see from the larger storyline from IBM. This should not be surprising, as there must be the practical aspect of how the story is played out. Paul, in his interview, was one of the only participants who incorporated both aspects into his responses.

### **Merging Stories**

On the more practical, day-to-day side of working with IBM, the organization that Paul works for had relatively recently outsourced all of their IT systems, support and management to IBM. Paul was and is involved in various aspects of that project. Consequently, Paul gets to know other workers' opinions of who IBM is, and what IBM is about; plus he sees and experiences IBM himself in a way that further shapes his view of the IBM saga.

Something that had not emerged in other interviews was contrasting, contradictory perspectives of IBM. Paul related that within his organization, some people, when they heard that IBM was coming to do the work, they

*...knew who IBM was, generally feel that they're a trusted, respected, capable company.... a camp of individuals that were also very much supportive of IBM. And so their equipment throughout the simple hardware and software services, you know they thought that IBM had a lot to offer. So that central support organization certainly had people with biases and the people that didn't like IBM typically what their concerns were: not flexible, too slow to react, not open enough I think was still probably a concern.*

The first “camp” seemed to have a perspective of IBM that fit with Joe Average; on the other hand, the other people’s view of IBM did not fit. Conflicting opinions within an organization are to be expected – especially one with more than 25,000 employees such as Paul’s. In a way, this is a microcosm of the broader marketplace, where different stakeholders make different contributions to the saga of IBM’s corporate brand. Here, Paul has an overall view of IBM, and he also hears a variety of contributions to the saga from his fellow employees. But what does Paul do with all of this information?

One possibility is that he looks at the pre-decided (by IBM) aspects of IBM’s corporate brand, as put forth by IBM. Given the unique context of his own experience, and the organization that he works for, it is unlikely that he would take IBM’s message at face value. Another possibility is that he is a sceptical reader of all that IBM says, and thus perhaps he engages in interactions with IBM, sometimes discarding what IBM says because he recognizes that they are motivated by profits, and are trying to engage him using a variety of tools, such as defamiliarizing the proposition (e.g., Scott 1994).

The third possibility is that neither of the first two possibilities allow for the richness and complexity of the environment in which Paul sees IBM. Paul has to balance – in his own mind – saga contributions from: IBM; his personal friends from IBM; his fellow employees (both

supportive and against IBM); and any other sources such as advertisements and IBM competitors to come up with his overall perception of IBM's corporate brand. From some of Paul's statements it was apparent that he was negotiating the meaning of IBM as he spoke.

***Paul:** It actually happened where we were rolling out and we said "Stop, it can't happen. You have to change some things." And they did. But there's also... Unfortunately the lines blur whether it was an IBM decision to be inflexible or whether it was a general organizational decision that was inflexible. 'Cause really the relationship from the operational business units to this new outsourced wasn't directly IBM. It was the... in a lot of cases that's how it ended up being the ... that's how you ended up getting things done more quickly. But the idea was to let OSS workstation... no office systems services... whew! Office systems service. OSS is still the organization the business unit is talking to.*

***Interviewer:** Right.*

***Paul:** It just so happens... OSS has hired IBM to actually provide the services behind them. So OSS provides the pricing and the packages of what services are provided for our desktops. And OSS has the individuals you go to if there is a problem. And it is not directly to IBM. With the initial roll-out, though, it was more of a discussion more with IBM, but the decision, though; what type of service, what was offered, and how things would be configured, wasn't necessarily just an IBM decision.*

Here Paul brings in the opinion of some of his co-workers that IBM is "not flexible", but at the same time, he provides reasons for why this might be the case, and that really they are capable as other of his co-workers believe. This back and forth looking at IBM is related to the context where IBM is providing services to an organization, and having to work together with the organization to accomplish a joint goal. Paul seems to recognize the biases that various people have in speaking about IBM, and so he considers IBM's actions from both perspectives, and constructs his own meaning of IBM that he can then share, or contribute to the saga.

He continued his saga with the following:

*Paul: That's where I have some sympathy... or it's hard to know if the problems that occurred were completely IBM's fault or if it was part of an overall planning decision with the business units.*

*Interviewer: So it is... It sounds like... in particular at this point, that there is some real blending of the IBM with OSS in almost all of the organization's IT side of things?*

*Paul: Yeah, I mean that is where the inflexibility of IBM is sometimes again blurred because depending on where you are looking at it, in any of these services they are delivering, including some of this application development stuff they are engaged in, they can't make all of the decisions. They are given some parameters and boundaries about how they need to proceed; standards, interfaces... So long ago... the days are long past that any organization comes in and says, "This is the way it's done, and you will conform to the way it is done because I know better than you and you're going to conform to the system like it's been built". So it's very much collaborative now, that kind of approach.*

In this segment we can even see emotion for the character of IBM, and the situation that IBM is in; Paul feels “sympathy” for IBM. As Paul constructs his part of the saga, he shows some feeling for the character who, according to Paul, is working hard, but may actually be constrained by the partner organization itself. Thus some of the criticisms of IBM are not fully justified – although implied is that IBM is not perfect either.

Interestingly, this also fits well with a Joe Average character; nobody expects Joe Average to be perfect in all ways. Joe Average is expected to try hard, work hard and help out as much as he can. If the people (organizations) that he is helping are also imperfect, then problems may arise. A good outcome would be one as described by Paul: “So it's very much collaborative now, that kind of approach.”

Through the entire interview, Paul was drawing on a variety of experiences and sources of information upon which to base his view of IBM. He merged this jumble of information

together to construct his view of IBM – at least his view on the day that I spoke with him. That is, earlier he had held a different view of IBM as is clear from his statement, “From what was when I first understood or joined IBM it was very much a product company, and now the interactions and the experience and whatever, I think of them as a services company.” This is indicative of an ongoing, dynamic formation of his view of IBM. And as he relates this to other people, he becomes one of the sources of information that someone else will use to construct their view of IBM.

Such is the saga of IBM’s corporate brand – something that is not just more complex than the story according to RRT, or the delivered corporate brand of Aaker (2004), rather it is a different concept. The view of a corporate brand as a saga includes Aaker’s (2004) model as a contributing source to the saga, but it does not stop there. Even though IBM has put forward a strong, compelling story of the Smarter Planet, Paul, and others simply use that information to create their own contribution to the saga. Paul has not negated the Smarter Planet story, rather he has added some pieces, left off other pieces, and made the saga far richer by his experiences.

Another example of how the saga is constructed by a participant comes from Brad. Brad runs his own company with 15 employees and is a business partner of IBM’s. Prior to starting his company, Brad had worked in the IT industry for almost 15 years, much of that time with companies that were business partners of IBM’s. Thus Brad is very familiar with IBM, with what IBM does, and who IBM is. Brad’s construction of his understanding of the meaning of IBM’s corporate brand is somewhat different from Paul’s. Brad expresses some contradictory views of IBM, which in the end result in him not having a clear perspective of who IBM is.

Very early in the interview, in talking about his company's relationship with IBM Brad says "IBM is a pretty big onion." This is an interesting way to describe IBM, and when asked about it, he elaborated:

***Interviewer:** Okay. All right, now, you used an interesting phrase; you called IBM a "big onion". What did you mean by that?*

***Brad:** Well, there's a lot of layers to it, right? And it's a very difficult organization to really cut into. And you never really feel that you're at the core of it. You know, we've got our channel partner...channel manager, Brenda<sup>6</sup>, and she's sort of that first layer of the onion, right? And behind her there's different divisions, and there's different companies, and there's different people. Now even you take their hardware side of the business; well there's a storage guy, there's a standard storage, an advanced storage, an enterprise storage, and within each of those different storage divisions, there's a sales champion, there's a services person, a pre-sales, post-sales....and it goes on, and on, and on, right? And literally I say an onion, and it may or may not be the most accurate, but it's kind of like one of these branch diagrams that just goes, um....you start with Brenda, and then it goes...she's got maybe 20 or 30 different divisions under her. And then within each of those divisions there's probably another 20 or 30 people, and then under them another 20 to 30 people. And it's real hard to...it's a real challenge trying to figure out, okay, you want to go from point A to point B, but how do you do that. And you really do need somebody to guide you through it, who's an insider, because it's extremely daunting, if you're not familiar with the people.*

On one hand the notion that IBM is a complex organization with many different divisions, departments and specializations is completely expected. However, this is at odds with the characterization of Joe Average. Joe Average seems to be a straightforward, uncomplicated person willing to come alongside and help out. But in Brad's contribution to the saga we see a character that has unknown complexities that should be able to help – but first one needs assistance in navigating the myriad mazes of IBM's bureaucracy. Additionally, Brad implies that

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<sup>6</sup> Not her real name.

somewhere behind all of these layers is the true identity of IBM, but one simply cannot know what it is, because “you never really feel that you’re at the core of it.” This complexity is not talked about in the Smarter Planet story, yet to Brad, they are critical to his relationship with IBM.

Although Brad does not specifically say that the complexity in IBM is a negative aspect, it is implied in his description of the difficulty in dealing with IBM. He also specifies other aspects of IBM that he thinks are poor quality, or negative.

*You know, you go to an IBM site – and I’ll just tell you this from my perspective. You try and configure a server. Well their configurators sometimes they work, and sometimes they don’t work. They’re hit and miss. You go to the HP site – pretty easy to configure a server. You go to Dell’s site – it’s absolutely simple to configure a server. All the parts are there; you get something that’s complete. You know, you go to the IBM site, it’s confusing. And it doesn’t pick, it’s not intuitive. That was one of my issues that I brought forward when I was in Denver, was the configuration site was atrocious. It’s hard to use, and it’s a lot of telephone type intervention that has to take place to actually figure out what pieces you need – by myself, and by my customers. So, it’s not very intuitive. Also, the general feedback is, the tools that IBM puts out, the software tools, are very hard to work with.*

Not only is this story critical of IBM, at the same time it boosts competitors of IBM.

Within the Smarter Planet story it makes one want to have either HP or Dell alongside, rather than IBM! Although Brad suggests this is from his own perspective alone, when he refers to the difficulties experienced by his customers, one sees that he has heard the customers’ stories, and he has integrated them into his own saga.

Another comment by Brad suggests IBM as a character is somehow above Brad and his company. Not only is IBM beyond Brad’s company, but because of its complexity, IBM would not be a great partner for a company like Brad’s.

*They almost seem, a little bit, unreachable. In a way, unapproachable. Just because there is a mixed message in the marketplace – certainly if I was starting out again, and I didn't have the [inside contacts], I'd probably look to HP or Dell first. I think their messaging is clearer. They are a technology, hardware, software, services company. It's certainly a lot less confusing.*

Because Brad's company is relatively small, it seems that a Joe Average type of company would be great to work with – straightforward, down-to-earth, and eager to help solve problems. But in the day-to-day work environment, IBM is not at all like a Joe Average. In fact Brad puts them lower on his priority list than two of IBM's competitors. Even though Brad works with IBM as a business partner, he still sees IBM as “unreachable” or “unapproachable”, which he claims impacts what he would do if he had to start again. Of note is that he bases this view at least partly on what he hears from the marketplace where he hears a “a mixed message”. Two things are important in this short statement. First, Brad's understanding of IBM is formed by the stories about IBM that he hears around him. Although the sources are not specified one can assume that the sources are not all IBM sources but they may include IBM. The second thing of note is that Brad's understanding of IBM has changed over time. The way he built his business, he formed a relationship with IBM before HP and Dell. While there are many reasons for this particular order, he now thinks that he would have pursued IBM after HP and Dell. If he now thinks IBM is unapproachable, then earlier he must have believed that IBM *was* approachable.

This shows both how the saga of IBM's corporate brand is beyond the complete control of IBM, and that it is dynamic. Similar to Paul, Brad is trying to make sense of IBM, and they both refer to a variety of sources for stories about IBM. With Paul being an ex-IBM employee and Brad being a business partner (and having previously worked for IBM business partners for

many years), they both know about, see and experience the stories that IBM tells about itself. But for Brad and Paul they do not form their understanding solely on a script that IBM follows; nor do they form their understanding of IBM through IBM trying to overcome their cynicism of IBM's profit based motives. In the marketplace around Brad and Paul – in their workplace, in the media, with friends, colleagues, from IBM's competitors and even with their own competitors there are many stories about IBM. Brad and Paul take this mess of stories and blend them together into a flowing saga that is their understanding of IBM. It appears in this that Aaker (2004) and Scott's (1994) views and theories do not extend far enough to capture the complexity and dynamism of the corporate brand as we see here. Rather the suggestions of Aaker (2004) and Scott (1994) feed into and become parts of the totality of a corporate brand saga.

Nor do Aaker (2004) and Scott (1994) address or explain some contradictions that appear in the multiple stories that make up the saga. We saw that Paul attempted to reconcile contradictions and rationalize opposing stories about IBM as he developed his own understanding of IBM. However, Brad's contribution to the saga actually highlights a contradiction from Brad himself. In two places in the interview with Brad, he unequivocally states his support for IBM. Yet in other places he expresses very negative views of IBM. At one point Brad says:

*Interviewer: But within [your] community – which is not that large – but there's a fair bit of business going on – in your interactions with other vendors and business partners, and, you know, whatever, the group of you, I assume, talk about IBM, and what IBM's future plans are.*

*Brad: Yeah.*

*Interviewer: And so, you've kind of got a view as to what IBM is up to.*

*Brad: Yeah, it's really interesting. I think we're probably one of the few IBM champions out there. I think there's a lot of people who are "yeah, yeah, we're authorized. Yeah, yeah, we sell IBM", but I go to a lot of events, and really on the server and storage front, most channel partners, like myself....most channel partners that I talk to don't sell IBM. At all. They sell HP, uh, they sell Dell, to a small degree.*

Using the term “champion” is quite a strong endorsement of Brad’s company’s support for IBM. He also juxtaposes his company against other IBM business partners, and says that he is a bigger supporter of IBM than they are. Close to the end of the interview Brad also says: “You know, they’re a good company to work with. They’ve been a good partner to us.” Seeing both of these statements, one would expect Brad and Brad’s company to be whole-hearted IBM fans; one would expect that overall Brad has a positive view of IBM’s saga. But as one can see from some of the earlier examples, Brad’s view of IBM is not all positive. And one of the last comments made by Brad expresses a viewpoint that seems to contradict the positive views:

*You can hear the rhetoric, and you can hear [IBM employees] toeing the company line: “No, we are a hardware company. That’s our heritage, this is what we do. And we’re continuing to make investments.” And you hear that, and you’re sceptical, but you know, you talk to IBM folks and that’s what you hear. And life is good, and you carry on – and that’s one thing. But when, you know, I’m a lot more involved with the IT community and peers. And it’s a point of discussion that always comes up, and everybody’s got a different opinion on it, and certainly I think that feeds a lot of the distrust or the concern that I have about the future of how my relationship with IBM is going to be. Yeah, but I think it is sort of spawned by the community in general. Not necessarily, you know....some of the actions that IBM are doing are certainly feeding that. But if I’m just listening to what the company line is – they’re not changing – but I don’t believe it!*

In this quote one sees both concern and scepticism about IBM – the point that Brad even questions what his relationship with them will be in the future. Then he shows a level of distrust in what IBM says that goes beyond scepticism and basically says that IBM is lying to its

stakeholders. It seems hard to comprehend that Brad says that IBM is a “good company to work with” and then express such distrust in them. RRT (Scott 1994) might predict the scepticism and distrust, but it would not predict the contradictions evident in Brad’s interview. The corporate brand is not a static, single-authored, single-reader story. As is illustrated in Brad’s comments, and in the comments of other participants, one sees that the story is a tangle of threads that comes from multiple sources, each of which add depth and colour to a saga. And this view of the corporate brand as a saga goes quite a bit further than previous attempts to understand and define the corporate brand.

### **Segments of the Story**

In looking at Brad’s comments, one does not specifically see mention of the Smarter Planet or see references to the Smarter Planet story. However, the actions of IBM, as seen through the filter of Brad’s experiences should in some way exemplify the Smarter Planet storyline. Most of what Brad talked about, and related to was the day-to-day aspects of what IBM did that were salient to him and his business. However, Brad also mentioned some IBM actions that fit with what we know about the Smarter Planet story. He spoke quite a lot about IBM getting out of the PC hardware business, and focused on services. For example, he said

*But they’re looking at it really from a global management – and very strategic – and looking at it from a services perspective, and they’re looking at it not just from a hardware perspective...Personally I see them probably selling off a lot of their server and storage technology, sort of in the ...sort of in the mid-market and lower. They would probably end up selling that off to a company like Lenovo. A natural fit there. And maybe keep the very, very high end storage and server technologies, you know that go into the life sciences, or universities, or really where they need grid computing, like really, really high end solutions.*

This fits with IBM's Smarter Planet initiatives of having service-related, high end analytical capabilities that allow them to provide the third 'I' – Intelligence – where the information that is interconnected can be made sense of. That is, the role that IBM plays in the Smarter Planet story is to help others to analyze and pull intelligent meaning from the plethora of data that is now available. Brad's description of what he sees IBM doing is consistent with IBM's telling of the story. So although Brad doesn't mention the Smarter Planet, he describes one aspect of how IBM is living out the story. This illustrates one way IBM's Smarter Planet saga is being further disseminated by stakeholders other than IBM. This also shows the story is 'told' by more than just words – it includes actions as well; the actions of IBM as reported by Brad.

Another example of how someone unaware of the Smarter Planet story can influence its meaning comes from Scott. Scott has been in the IT business for almost 25 years. Over those years he has worked for competitors of IBM, IBM business partners, he has been a supplier and a distributor for IBM, and at all times has been cognisant of IBM and its doings. In being involved in the industry Scott has been an astute observer of the IT industry, which has allowed him to start his own companies when good opportunities arose. As such, his path has crossed IBM's many times, and thus he made a number of interesting observations about IBM.

Somewhat surprising, given his knowledge of IBM and the industry was the fact that he was unaware of the Smarter Planet initiative. However, his analysis of what IBM was involved with, and what IBM was doing really echoed IBM's view of itself in light of the Smarter Planet. In response to the question of what IBM would be like in the future he said:

*I think what they've done is, part of this morphing process is that they've decoupled themselves from technology. It used to be that successful computer vendors had religion, and what that meant was that they believed in their technology and that their technology was the right technology and the best technology, and everybody else's was wrong and didn't work. IBM no longer has religion when it comes to technology, so they're not arrogant and they're not biased to the fact that a lot of technology companies are: our stuff is the best.*

*So IBM will continue to morph in terms of the actual delivery of solutions, in terms of what the technology makeup looks like. But businesses will constantly be looking for advisors on how to implement technology to maximize the value of their own businesses, and where IBM will continue to be dominant is in that interrelationship with major corporate enterprises in the United States, and how to work with them and how to help them improve efficiency and operational productivity, if you will, through the use of an application of technology. So I don't know that you could say that IBM will be that different, but the technology that they deliver to the marketplace will be different.*

By perceiving IBM as not being arrogant, Scott was seeing the Joe Average character emerge. Also, his description of decoupling from technology, and building on interrelationships between major corporations seems to mirror the notion of IBM being a good citizen, working alongside others to implement advanced solutions. Scott had not heard of the Smarter Planet campaign at all. Yet he was able to articulate portions of the campaign quite well. Important in this example is that he had internalized only part of the story, and then retold it. He missed the concept that IBM was doing this for the benefit of the planet.

Thus from Scott, the saga is perpetuated but only part of it is passed along. This has the effect of highlighting some areas, and diluting some areas. In talking about IBM Scott modifies the saga and thus other stakeholders' perceptions of who IBM is. Whether this helps or hinders IBM is not really that important at this juncture, rather it is the fact that here IBM has limited control of its own corporate brand. With his long tenure and experience in the IT industry, people

who hear Scott talking about IBM will tend to believe that he knows what he is talking about, and his contribution to the saga ends up being solid.

### **Alternate Views of IBM's Story**

As a contrast to Scott's perception of IBM not being arrogant is Justin's experience. Justin also has many years of experience in the IT world. He has worked in a support role at a company that was a reseller of IBM solutions, and now he is working in the technical department of an IBM customer. This has put him in the position where there is direct contact between IBM employees and the customer frontline. As a customer he has a great deal of respect for the quality of IBM products and services, even though they may have their downsides:

*Now we've explored doing our own backups internally, and it just became almost impossible for us to manage. We just don't have a culture of backups, internally. So we're very happy with the Tivoli solution. It works. Typical with IBM though, I find it's complicated. At least it's very functional. I always know the IBM stuff is going to work; it's just not always going to be pretty when you do it. That's always the caveat when I'm working with IBM.*

Illustrated here is trust in IBM at an organizational and product level where 'the rubber hits the road'. If Justin's contribution to the saga ended here, it would be consistent with the Joe Average image, trying to do his best to help out. With Joe Average one would not expect a slick, polished image – but one would expect solid functionality; exactly as Justin described.

However, Justin continues with his story, and presents more information about the character of IBM. As mentioned above, Justin's experience is a contrast to Scott's in relation to the arrogance of IBM:

*And often it intimidates me when I go in, dealing with IBM directly: "these are the best practices, this is the way it needs to be done, our research has proven it's done this way." But often, we struggle as a small shop. We can't buy that,*

*and convincing them that they're going to lose a sale if I can't get part of it, and I'm going to have to look elsewhere, is sometimes a struggle.*

One would not expect to be intimidated by Joe Average. But the organization Justin works for is relatively small, so perhaps IBM treats it as if it were of no importance. It is not just Justin's organization that feels this lack of priority from IBM; other small companies that have to deal with IBM appear to not really be valued, and other stakeholders see IBM as shifting its focus away from small organizations to the extremely large. This is supported by Larry's statements about IBM and its nature. Larry runs his own business which installs and supports computer systems for a variety of customers. He is not a business partner with IBM, but he often deals with IBM equipment, software and IBM business partners. From his experiences in the industry he sees a realignment of IBM's priorities.

*Obviously there's got to be a lot of money in the big businesses. So maybe they just figure, "hey, you know what? We don't care about these small guys anymore. We're just going to focus our market on the big guys." And you know, if that's working for them, that's great. And maybe they're making piles of money because they're targeting that area.*

IBM does not specifically talk about the size of organizations it will work with in its Smarter Planet campaign. But in some of its Smarter Planet conferences it includes and highlights small companies as partners. This seems to imply that small is certainly acceptable. Thus Larry's view of IBM as wanting to deal only with the large corporations or large organizations, runs contrary to the vision of Joe Average wanting to work alongside its fellow citizens, to save the planet. In these two examples we see that the character development attempted by IBM has opposition from two different stakeholders – a customer and an industry consultant. They each shape the saga regardless of IBM's desires.

Further, Larry mentioned a focus on money as motivation for IBM not dealing with small guys anymore. In IBM's Smarter Planet story, money (in the form of profits for IBM) is not the primary focus. However Larry brings it back to the forefront, as Bartiromo did in her interview with Palmisano. With Bartiromo, Palmisano attempted to suggest the money making was a natural offshoot of the Smarter Planet type endeavours, and thus is acceptable and natural. Larry does not put such a positive spin on the money-making efforts; at best his perception is neutral, but a more realistic interpretation is a negative view. When he says "We don't care about these small guys anymore" we see a large IBM that cares only for itself. That way of thinking is different from trying to save the planet as a whole.

Larry is not the only stakeholder to mention IBM's profit motivation. Another participant, William works for one of IBM's large customers. One of his primary responsibilities is to purchase and manage various vendors' products – of which IBM is possibly the largest. He deals with both IBM directly and with IBM business partners. This gives him significant insight into the direction that IBM is taking. He is much more specific than Larry with his view of IBM's approach to money making. He says:

***William:** You know, crassly I would say that IBM is very proud of making money at every opportunity. And they're very capable of charging and exacting for every bit of work that they do...exacting recompense, you know.*

***Interviewer:** So in some ways, that fits into kind of a marketplace, capitalistic system because that's what they should do. And so that's what's expected, and they're kind of fulfilling that?*

***William:** But in terms of a philosophy, you know, if you were to say "making money, by making the world a better place", or "making money by bringing technology to people's fingertips", or "making money by creating opportunity" ...I can't put the second phrase...I can't put the "by" clause into*

*place for IBM. And that's ...that's at the heart of my understanding of the IBM brand. It's that it's blue and it's cold.*

It seems that William would be content with a company that achieves positive ends while they make money. But he does not see IBM doing this. William really tells the opposite story from what IBM tells. IBM says it wants to save the planet, and is happy to make money along the way. William thinks that IBM just wants to make money.

Brad also seems to see IBM in a similar light. Perhaps he is even more cynical than William. Brad says:

*I think at some level there's somebody who actually cares. And I think like any company, there's a marketing component to it. It's the right thing to do. It's the right message to send out. And at the end of the day it's about profits. And a good corporate, global citizen, and looking out for mankind, making a difference is really popular right now. And if it drives more revenues, and profits, then it's the right thing to do. But I don't think....you know, like Bill Gates is out there, and he's a philanthropist now, and he's doing a lot of things personally to make a difference. I don't really see IBM in the same light. You know, I think IBM, because they are this big, behemoth, that they're putting the messaging out there, but I think they're doing what everybody else is doing just in terms of using it to....to their advantage, to increase revenues, and paint a picture of them as somebody who cares, and is trying to make a difference. And like I said, I'm sure there are people within IBM who really, truly do want to make a difference. And there's people who see this as an opportunity to send the right message out, and impact the bottom line in a positive way.*

This quote illustrates again that Brad feels IBM is all about revenues and profits. But the indictment comes from the notion that IBM will be a “good corporate, global citizen” if it helps IBM make more money. Palmisano’s version of the Smarter Planet story says that IBM will be a good citizen in order to save the planet. Brad is essentially questioning the authenticity of that motivation. It seems that this is almost a deception on IBM’s part. William says that “at the heart of my understanding of the IBM brand. It’s that it’s blue and it’s cold.” But he does not accuse

IBM of trying to appear like a good corporate, global citizen. Brad's description seems to be a worse caricature of IBM's brand, as it implies duplicity.

Thus William's and even Brad's – the IBM champion - contribution to the saga quite actively fights against IBM's contribution to the saga. And William works for a customer of IBM, and works directly with IBMers on a regular basis, so his credibility seems to be high.

When a different storyteller adds to the saga, the plotline can take unexpected twists and turns. Here we see that rather than a company with pure and magnanimous intentions, IBM seems to have characteristics that are just the opposite: cold, calculating and money hungry.

If IBM heard Scott's contribution to the saga, they likely would not do much to try to change it. His storytelling is close enough to their version that they would likely let it go, and perhaps seek to emphasize the parts of the story (e.g., saving the planet) that he neglected to include. However, they might want to counter Justin's view that they are intimidating to deal with. They might also want to counter Larry's view that they are just after the big companies, and don't care about the small guys because of the money. On the other hand, both Justin and Larry work for small organizations, so their influence might be small enough to be ignored.

William, however, works for a large organization. His contribution to the saga would be more of a concern for IBM.

But how can IBM know about all of these pieces of the saga that are being told in the marketplace? And if it is a challenge to know the pieces of the saga, how can IBM respond? More likely, IBM would hear the impact of these saga pieces through information aggregators such as a media outlet, or through single contact points with organizations. Thus they would not

be able to address the actual sources. The result is a messy, complex storyline, dynamically creating the meaning of IBM's corporate brand somewhere in the space between IBM and its stakeholders.

### **Diversions from the Story**

In the above examples we see a variety of interpretations of what IBM is doing, and what it is all about. These are impressions and perspectives of IBM, and complicate the story immensely. However, there are other contributions to the IBM's corporate brand saga that add even more complications, and do even more to throw IBM's version of the story off track.

One such contribution to the saga turns out to be a factually inaccurate view of IBM's products. In 2005 IBM sold its personal computer division to a Chinese manufacturer – Lenovo. However there are still people that think IBM still manufactures and sells personal computers. If this perception was only in the consumer marketplace that would be an issue for IBM. But when that concept is perpetuated in the IT community, it can be a major problem. All of the participants I interviewed had knowledge of the IT world, were directly involved with and had experience in that specific area. Yet two of those participants perpetuated confusion in their marketplaces by saying that IBM makes personal computers; one who was unaware that Lenovo was not a part of IBM, and the other who was fully aware that Lenovo was not part of IBM.

***Grace:** Yeah, I still thought Lenovo was a division of IBM, because it was. Right? Wasn't it? Was it farmed off?*

***Interviewer:** No, it's a Chinese company. They sold it. Now, I don't know what percentage of the stock IBM maintains, but it's supposed to be an independent company much like Lexmark on the printer side.*

**Grace:** *Oh, OK. Yeah. Well see, I wasn't aware of that. I've worked on Lenovo laptops thinking they were IBM.*

Given that Grace has worked in the industry for over 30 years, including some computer consulting, it is somewhat surprising that she did not know (prior to the interview) that IBM had gotten out of the personal computer business. However this is important to note, as even five years after IBM's divestiture of that part of its business, to Grace, IBM's corporate brand saga included personal computers. That is, the meaning of IBM's corporate brand included personal computers, when in actual fact IBM no longer made or sold them. Furthermore, as Grace is still involved in the IT industry, working specifically with personal computers her understanding and taken for granted knowledge of IBM and its products is likely perpetuated to her customers and colleagues.

Larry also brings in a measure of confusion about IBM and Lenovo personal computers. However, different from Grace, he *knew* that IBM had sold off its personal computer division.

**Larry:** *Well, I think the only thing I think that I would say was the big thing that contradicted what I felt about them was when they got rid of their PC delivery....um, PC manufacturing aspect. Because, that to me....I always thought that that was IBM's....I personally felt that was IBM's main stream of getting into the workplace. "Now we're going to give you the PCs, and now we're going to show you that we can do this other stuff." Well, now they've gotten rid of the PCs...um...but the thing I'm not so sure about is: do people still equate Lenovo with IBM? Or have they just figured out that Lenovo is no longer IBM? You know what I mean?*

**Interviewer:** *Yeah.*

**Larry:** *Like there's sort of that grey area.*

**Interviewer:** *So is it...and actually I don't know, maybe you know....is it...is Lenovo just taking IBM manufactured product, and putting the Lenovo name on it?*

*Larry: Yep, pretty much. That's the way I see it. The products, in my opinion are still top-rate products.*

*Interviewer: So they're still IBM products?*

*Larry: Yep...in my opinion....when I say...when I talk to people about laptops, I don't say "go buy a Lenovo laptop", I say "go buy an IBM laptop" still.*

*Interviewer: And they know what you mean?*

*Larry: Well, for the most part, yeah. And if you go into a store, they know.*

In this quote there are a few things of note. Of course there is the seemingly deliberate use of the IBM brand for a product made by Lenovo. One would think that this would cause confusion for Larry's customers or stakeholders of his company, but this does not appear to be the case. Even though he tells people to go buy an IBM laptop, which has not existed since 2005, he claims that they understand what he means. Apparently to Larry, and others, IBM equals personal computers; or to put it another way, the meaning of IBM's corporate brand includes personal computers. This can be seen beyond the examples from Grace and Larry. When people compare Apple computers to Microsoft based computers, they often say: 'Mac versus IBM PC'.

Larry's insistence or persistence in referring to Lenovo laptops as IBM laptops is perhaps related to his overall perception of IBM, as a personal computer company.

*Larry: ....like I know that Lenovo has taken over their PC aspect. And that, to me, used to be what IBM was in my mind. When they got rid of that arm of their business, I personally believe that was a crippling move on their part. From my perspective, because that was where I thought they had excelled greatly. Since they've gotten rid of that part of their business, they're left with their servers, and they have other high-end software products that they build, and they've almost, in my opinion, made themselves into this kind of elitist company that targets towards large businesses only. Because I deal primarily with small and medium sized businesses, the actual IBM products that are available nowadays don't even impact me at all.*

Larry's involvement with IBM has revolved around the personal computer end of the business, so when that was sold off to Lenovo, the company lost the core of its meaning. But he still projects that meaning onto IBM through repeatedly equating Lenovo with IBM.

But how does this relate to and impact the Smarter Planet saga? At first glance this confusion between Lenovo and IBM does not seem to relate to anything in the Smarter Planet realm. However, digging a bit deeper one can see that this is a major distraction to IBM. Because this is not directly in the Smarter Planet story it may even be more significant. IBM has to step away from the Smarter Planet story it is trying to tell, and try to correct the misperceptions about its products. When it takes its attention off of the main story, opportunities for that story to deviate from the main plotline may arise. Given that we have already seen how difficult it is to manage the story, issues such as factual inaccuracies about products will have an even greater impact.

A more extreme example of how IBM can be distracted away from its storyline comes from allegations of ethical lapses. Two high profile examples are IBM's involvement in Nazi Germany and in South Africa's Apartheid system.

The story told about IBM in Nazi Germany is that it was complicit in the holocaust that occurred in World War II. A book has been written, and at least one video has been made describing IBM's role in the holocaust, with claims that IBM knowingly contributed to and aided in the holocaust.

*IBM and the Holocaust takes you through the carefully crafted corporate collusion with the Third Reich... one of our century's greatest minds, IBM founder Thomas Watson, who cooperated with the Nazis for the sake of profit. (from the website <http://ibmandtheholocaust.com>)*

IBM has also been accused of knowing that its computers would be used to facilitate the segregation of races in South Africa, thereby enabling apartheid to exist. In 2009, a United States judge ruled that lawsuits could proceed against IBM for helping the South African apartheid-era government. Although IBM claimed that it could not control how its clients used its products, the judge said that was “wilful blindness” on IBM’s part (BBC 2009).

Again, neither of these stories – contributions to the saga – deal directly with the Smarter Planet story. However, they distract IBM from its focus, and they raise doubts in stakeholders’ minds about the nature of IBM. In particular, the notion that IBM is Joe Average, trying to help save the world has implications of a good, ethical, responsible company. But if the company was involved in Nazi Germany, or apartheid-era South Africa, that raises questions about IBM’s trustworthiness. It actually agrees with the profit/money motivation characteristic of IBM as talked about by some of the interviewees such as William and Larry.

By incorporating these pieces into the saga the meaning of IBM’s corporate brand changes yet further. It also further complicates and unravels the storyline that IBM is trying to stick to. With the examples presented above one can see that compared to the story told by IBM – of Joe Average setting out to save the world by working alongside his fellow citizens – the saga that we now see is a tangled web that changes all the time.

But the complications do not end there. One last example here illustrates a stakeholder that attacks IBM’s storyline, and deliberately tries to disrupt IBM’s story. Alliance@IBM is “the official national site for the IBM Employees’ Union CWA Local 1701, AFL-CIO” (<http://www.endicottalliance.org/>). On their web site their “Statement of Principles” says:

*Alliance@IBM/CWA Local 1701 is an IBM employee organization that is dedicated to preserving and improving our rights and benefits at IBM. We also strive towards restoring management's respect for the individual and the value we bring to the company as employees. Our mission is to make our voice heard with IBM management, shareholders, government and the media. While our ultimate goal is collective bargaining rights with IBM, we will build our union now and challenge IBM on the many issues facing employees from off-shoring and job security to working conditions and company policy.*

In reading through their web site and following their Twitter feed, it is clear that Alliance@IBM is making every effort to hold IBM accountable for its actions – as seen through their labour activist lens. That is, they are especially concerned with protecting jobs, especially in the United States, and protecting worker rights. The fact that IBM has embarked on a Smarter Planet campaign in an effort to save the world does sway them from their mission to protect the workers. But they do take note of IBM's efforts in this regard; in a newsletter posted on their web site (<http://www.endicottalliance.org/IBMrefusestodivulgeinformation.htm>) by the “Alliance@IBM Team” they said:

*It is ironic that a company that advertises itself as an information services company and wants to build a smarter planet refuses to divulge crucial information and wants the planet kept in the dark.*

*But that is the case with IBM.*

*Take job cuts. Last year IBM cut an estimated 10,400 jobs. This information came from Resource Action documents sent to the Alliance. The true number, which is probably higher, is only known to corporate executives.*

*On March 1st another 2900 jobs were cut. Probably higher. Once again only IBM knows the true number and appears to be violating the intent of the WARN Act.*

*The jobs were cut all across the United States and some in Canada. What locations and communities had job cuts? Nobody knows because IBM no longer gives out that information.*

*Now IBM has decided that it will no longer inform employees, the government, communities, the media, or stockholders how many employees work at IBM in the United States.*

This quote points out an apparent contradiction between what IBM claims it wants to do (build a smarter planet), and what it actually does. Highlighting this contradiction causes one to question IBM's claims and its motives. But on a deeper level it does more. In this example, IBM is shown to be cutting jobs, and hiding information. Responsible companies are often thought to do everything they can to avoid lay-offs of employees; here IBM violates that tenet. This appears to make IBM out to be a *not* responsible company.

Also, by saying "IBM has decided that it will no longer inform employees, the government, communities, the media, or stockholders how many employees work at IBM in the United States", Alliance@IBM is essentially claiming that IBM is actively hiding important information from its key stakeholders. The Smarter Planet is all about connectivity and sharing of information, and using that to better the world. Concealing information, as Alliance@IBM claims IBM is doing, is counter to the Smarter Planet ideals.

Alliance@IBM also makes contribution to the saga through its Twitter feed. Twitter is a real-time transmission of information, which gives Alliance@IBM an opportunity to directly respond to IBM messages and actions; in other words it is an opportunity to deliberately become involved in the saga. This is a bit different from some of the other stakeholders who do not seem to calculatingly plan on affecting the saga, nor do they purposefully set out to publicly challenge IBM's assertions.

One particular Tweet was aimed at showing the negative side of IBM:

*IBM fired 30,000 US IBMers in the past 5 years. In 2009, IBM's CEO asked Obama 4 \$30B to create 900k jobs & fired 5k the same day! (1 July 2010)*

The obvious message here is the hypocrisy of IBM in asking for money to create jobs, yet cutting jobs at the same time. Less obvious is the notion of IBM creating societal problems by firing so many people in the United States. The Smarter Planet story by IBM suggests that they are working to solve societal problems – not create problems. Alliance@IBM is doing its part to show another part of the saga. In fact, this particular Tweet was repeated several times (close to 25 times), and was sent to specific people (via Twitter) in politics and the news media.

Another Tweet by Alliance@IBM is almost mocking the Smarter Planet initiative put forth by IBM:

*Build a smarter IBM. Sign-up for IBM USA employees today! Join Us!  
<https://secure.ga3.org/08/join> #cwaunion #IBM. (17 Nov 2009)*

The term “smarter” refers to the Smarter Planet, but rather than being connected to the instrumented, interconnected, intelligent definition put forth by Palmisano on IBM’s behalf, this is a plug for the union. Again Alliance@IBM repeats this call to “Build a smarter IBM” many times by Tweeting it many times – 35 times between May 1, 2009 and November 17, 2009!

By adding this information to the saga, Alliance@IBM is trying to dilute the original Smarter Planet message IBM presented. That is, the strength of the instrumented, interconnected and intelligent planet – the Smarter Planet – is reduced if IBM itself fails to live up to its ideals, and thus appears to be a hypocrite. This would almost be the antithesis of humble, Joe Average. The saga is somewhat hijacked by Alliance@IBM in these instances. That is, the control of the saga is wrested from IBM when Alliance@IBM Tweets or sends out newsletters or posts

messages on its web site. The people – other stakeholders – who take note of Alliance@IBM's contribution to the saga include this contribution in constructing their own understanding of IBM. It seems almost inconceivable that IBM's version of the story would be the only version accepted by, or used by stakeholders in forming their view of IBM's corporate brand. Here then is another example of where the corporate brand is constructed beyond the immediate reach of IBM, and is constructed from the multiple threads of the saga told by IBM and its many stakeholders.

Other stakeholders – IBM employees, customers, suppliers, distributors, media, etc. – need to make sense of this information where even current IBM employees are highly critical of IBM's actions. If there are employees at IBM who question the Smarter Planet initiative, and IBM's motives, how will other stakeholders view IBM? Likely there are some stakeholders who will simply believe that as with any organization there are some disgruntled people, or people who are just not happy with life in general and it is being taken out on IBM. However, the old saying of 'where there is smoke there is fire' may cause others to not fully believe IBM's storyline.

Alliance@IBM's contribution thus adds a new dimension to the saga. This piece further chips away at IBM's control of their story. This group has credibility as some members are current IBM employees, while others are recent ex-IBMers. While IBM is trying to tell and live an overarching story of saving the planet, Alliance@IBM is focused very narrowly on labour issues. In having to deal with narrow labour issues, IBM is drawn away from the big picture of the Smarter Planet; it is drawn away from telling the larger story about being a humble, good

citizen helping to save the planet, and drawn into defending its actions in one specific aspect of its operations. The storyline thus has unravelled further.

### **IBM's Frayed, Ragged, Disjointed Story = A Rich, Powerful, Interesting Saga**

As illustrated in the above examples of IBMers, customers, business partners, industry experts, ex-IBMers and media people, the story that IBM tried to tell is extremely difficult to follow. It would be frustrating for IBM to try to maintain the control needed to meet the challenges of corporate branding as suggested by Aaker (2004), or even to apply the methods suggested by Scott (1994) as an intentional author. The frustration and difficulty come from the assumption that the corporate brand is something created, managed and controlled by IBM. The frustration also comes from the tension created in its interactions with its stakeholders. IBM's stakeholders put forth their demands and expectations of who IBM is and should be (e.g., a leader, a sales organization, a personal computer company, a profit driven corporation, etc.), and IBM attempts to define its own identity (e.g., as Joe Average, the helper in saving the planet), as our "free" society would also demand that it does. The result is an ongoing negotiation both as to who IBM is, and what it should be doing.

Looking through the examples from this chapter one can see that inherently resolving the tension, and relieving the frustration does not seem possible (except perchance in the simplest and least controversial of all companies). Yet this should not cause despair for IBM; rather the alternative view that IBM's corporate brand is an ongoing saga (versus a discrete story) may provide a richer, deeper and more powerful meaning for the company and its stakeholders. A saga does not have the unidimensional perspective of one storyteller; as a saga the corporate

brand does not have the unidimensional perspective of the company, it includes the rich and varied perspectives of many stakeholders. When we weave together and include all of the different stories and experiences of the stakeholders and IBM the corporate brand saga truly comes to life. Is this not a far richer and more interesting corporate brand perspective for a company like IBM that just celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary (in 2011)? Does not this provide more depth for IBM to draw on to guide the company into the future, and for various stakeholders to identify with?

When Palmisano announced the Smarter Planet initiative, and provided the inciting incident for IBM's corporate brand story, he was in control, and he was the only storyteller. However, immediately thereafter, the story took on a life of its own. Many different people took the information from that speech and retold it: other IBMers (e.g., the blog by Christenson), the media, and other people in the audience. It is very likely that Palmisano was speaking from a carefully crafted speech. But every retelling of the story by someone different gets farther from the original text, or adds more layers and angles to the text. But IBM's corporate brand as a saga inherently incorporates the expectations and needs of all of its stakeholders. The more that IBM can recognize this joint construction of the meaning of its corporate brand, the more market oriented it will be.

Through the analyses in this chapter one can see four distinct ways of looking at the corporate brand: as a monologue, a story, an extended story (with a sceptical audience) and as a saga. While each of these views brings some understanding of corporate branding, it is only the corporate brand saga that allows one to see the complexity and richness inherent in the corporate

brand, and that brings out the difficulties associated with a company trying to manage its corporate brand. A summary of some of the key points that came out of the analyses of IBM’s corporate brand is contained in Table 5-4 below.

Nature of Corporate Brand	Assumptions	Who Owns?	Who controls?	Major influencer(s)
Monologue	Created, managed and delivered by company.	Company	Company	Company (with some input from stakeholders)
Story	Created and delivered by company, interpreted by stakeholders.	Company	Company – although each stakeholder interprets as s/he sees fit.	Company
Extended Story	Created and delivered by company, knowing that it will be interpreted by sceptical, cynical stakeholders.	Company	Company, with an eye to what the stakeholders might be thinking.	Company, some stakeholders
Saga	Socially constructed on an ongoing basis by the company and all of its stakeholders. Motivated and driven by authenticity.	Nobody owns the corporate brand. It emerges as a social construction in the space between all of the stakeholders – including the company.	Control is passed from stakeholder to stakeholder. The company is usually (likely) involved the most. Nobody really totally has complete control.	Variable – can be company or any stakeholder at any given point in time, depending on the situation. Usually the company.

**Table 5-4: Summary of Corporate Brand Views**

The above does not suggest that IBM must abdicate responsibility for its corporate brand by any means. IBM itself is usually the most significant and influential stakeholder that contributes to the saga – the primary sagameister, so to speak. But as the lead sagameister, IBM

needs to be aware of the threads of the saga, and needs to respond to those in ways that are appropriate – sometimes steering, sometimes adding to, sometimes refuting, sometimes changing, sometimes supporting – leading to a strong corporate brand. If stakeholders see or feel that their piece of the saga is part of the overall corporate brand then perhaps the loyalty and relationships across all of the stakeholders will be stronger. The shared construction of the corporate brand, and the shared ownership of the corporate brand saga can be powerful and potentially long-lasting.

## Chapter 6

### Discussion

*The marketer doesn't get to run the conversation. It's not really brand journalism that's happening, you see. It's brand cocktail party! You get to set the table and invite the first batch of guests, but after that the conversation is going to happen with or without you. (Seth Godin 2004)*

The corporate brand is a complex idea. This is evident in the literature on corporate branding where one sees a multitude of ideas on what the corporate brand is, and of what it is made up. Within this literature are some core issues and assumptions about the corporate brand. The first of these is the notion that there is a system or structure around which the corporate should be built and managed (e.g., Aaker 2004; Balmer and Greyser 2006; Hatch and Schultz 2003). The second issue, and a common thread in this literature, is the central and controlling role of the company in its own corporate brand. Essentially there is a taken for granted assumption that the company can control and *does* control its own corporate brand. The third issue flows from the first two and revolves around the notion of who the company *really* is; that is it gets at the authenticity of the corporate brand.

The “discussion section” of this dissertation delves into these three core issues, comparing the current literature to the findings associated with IBM and its corporate brand. Following from this integration are the implications for companies as they wrestle with how to deal with their corporate brand.

## **What is the structure of the Corporate Brand?**

One of the fundamental assumptions of the current corporate brand literature is that the corporate brand has structural characteristics. That is, under the descriptions of what a corporate is, lies a structure that can be discovered if one looks closely enough. This also works in reverse in that for the building, development and management of a corporate brand, a company needs to identify a specific foundation – a structure – and fashion the corporate brand around that (e.g., Juntunen et al. 2010). For example, Urde (2003) describes an exercise of identifying a company's core values upon which the corporate brand can be based; the core values being the identifiable, tangible structure upon which the corporate brand hangs. Hatch and Shultz (2003, p. 1046) echo this, saying “corporate branding...expresses the values and/or sources of desires that attract key stakeholders to the organisation.” They also suggest that the foundation of the corporate brand rests on the company's strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate image.

Part of this structuralist assumption is that the corporate brand emanates from the company itself. That is, there is a process (deliberate or otherwise) in which a variety of information from within the company and from without the company is pulled together in a cohesive fashion to try to understand the *true* nature of the company. When that true nature is understood, the company can then create the corporate brand. This is then displayed, used and managed by the company to gain a plethora of benefits for the company.

However, from the analysis of IBM's corporate brand, a different view appears. In the analysis one could see multiple meanings of IBM's corporate brand, depending on the storyteller

of the moment. The focus for the meaning of the corporate brand had shifted away from solely that of IBM to each individual stakeholder. Furthermore, each stakeholder amalgamated the stories from a wide variety of stakeholders, according to their own identities and needs to then construct a version of IBM's corporate brand.

These multiple versions of a socially constructed corporate brand differ from each other, and can even conflict with each other. This occurs within IBM itself, as was evidenced by Palmisano's portrayal of different roles (Joe Average and Business Titan); it also occurs between IBM and its business partners, both situations where one would expect there to be consistency or convergence in stories. As one expands the stakeholder web further to include customers, industry experts, competitors, and antagonists, the view and meaning of IBM's corporate brand varies even more. If one attempts to parse the corporate brand according to all of these different stakeholders, a defined structure does *not* become evident. In fact, the meaning shifts constantly, as each stakeholder relates their version of the corporate brand.

The above highlights the illusion of a singular meaning of a corporate brand. Each stakeholder takes what is relevant to their own identity to construct the corporate brand. What we are left with is a constantly shifting, socially constructed corporate brand. From a marketing perspective, this suggests a poststructuralist view of the corporate brand.

At first glance it may appear that the various viewpoints expressed by all of the stakeholders are simply individualistic, biased, at times mistaken and unrelated perspectives. However, these shared perspectives build on each other and are passed along on a continuous basis. One good example of this was the perception that IBM's Smarter Planet initiative was

simply a carefully planned program put in place so that IBM could sell more products and services. This notion came through from three different sources – one a newspaper writer (Webster), one an ex-IBMer but still working in the industry (Lynn), and one an ex-IBMer who is now pursuing a completely different career (Richard). Even Bartiromo in her interview with Palmisano seems to be getting at the same point when she pushes Palmisano to find out how much profit IBM will get from Smarter Planet related work. To my knowledge these folks have never met and do not know each other. Yet they all tell the same story; and they all share that story with others – perpetuating their perspectives, and in a way forcing IBM to respond (as Jack Mason did in the IBM Smarter Planet blog, even though it occurred prior to *these* examples).

However, even though a defined, stable structure does not exist, the corporate brand of IBM is not amorphous, vague and wraith-like; the various stakeholders know about and recognize the strong character of IBM, and as such it has been ranked as one of the top global brands (e.g., Interbrand 2011). Can it therefore have both no structure and a structure? From the differing views of its stakeholders, IBM's corporate brand seems to have a combination of structure/no structure. This is a socially negotiated and constructed corporate brand that takes on different forms, shapes and meanings over time and in response to various pressures and input from stakeholders. Yet at the same time it maintains recognizable elements over time so that people – IBMers and external stakeholders – know that the corporate brand that they see is IBM's.

A useful metaphor that may lend further understanding of this combinational nature of a corporate brand is that of an ice hotel. An ice hotel starts out as a plan for the building – a

structure in the eyes of its designers – that will serve the needs of a variety of people. Metal forms (designed by the ice hotel company) are placed along source of water (like a river) in what they feel is an order and plan that will best create a hotel. Onto these forms snow is sprayed – from snowmaking machines. Once the snow has frozen, the metal forms are removed, leaving “a maze of freestanding corridors of snow” (<http://www.icehotel.se/uk/ICEHOTEL/About-ICEHOTEL/>, 2011). Within these corridors, partitions, walls, doors, ice-artwork, ice-block beds, ice-block bars, etc. are installed to create an hotel that is able to accommodate and serve guests. The ice hotel lasts for a season, and then literally melts away, and all that remains are the memories and pictures – but the structure is gone. The next season the ice hotel is created again – but it is different each year in both subtle and significant ways. The artwork changes each year, as different artists are invited to provide artwork. The metal forms are reused from year to year, but through use they gradually show signs of wear that may or may not be apparent to the eye; and at some point, new forms are introduced, which again adds differences. Additionally, the positions of the forms may change from year to year in order to create different layouts. The rooms themselves are also designed differently from year to year.

Over the years the general concept of the ice hotel carries on in a similar fashion – and with it, people understand that there is a hotel “structure”: reception desk, guest rooms with sleeping facilities, restaurant, bar, hallways, lights and so on. But the actual physical structure changes from year to year, and even within a particular season. That is, even in one winter, weather conditions can have an impact on the shape of the hotel when more or less snow falls onto the “buildings”, or if there are warm spells mid-winter. In addition to weather impacts, the

actual usage of an ice hotel creates wear. Ice and snow are not as durable as concrete and steel, and thus as people use the hotel it actually changes through the season. Thus some areas are eventually closed, and new areas are constructed and opened all through the season.

So what is the structure? It certainly starts out quite like the designers envision, but as different elements (climate, guests, employees, animals) interact with the hotel the structure changes, and this happens every year. This illustrates how even a hotel – which we typically associate with a solid, relatively stable structure, can both have a structure, and not have a structure. A corporate brand's structure can be seen in this metaphor. It clearly begins as the vision of a company, and the initial pieces are decided by the company. But the interactions of so many different forces – stakeholders – begin to shift the structure, and remove the certainty from it. From time to time, a company may take significant steps to change the direction the company is heading, and thus set out a new plan for the corporate brand. As with an ice hotel, there are clear, recognizable elements from what they remember of the past, but there are also many differences; then as the plan is implemented, the corporate brand emerges. However, as a result of the pressures and expectations of the stakeholders with which the company interacts, the corporate brand emerges somewhat differently from the company's plan. Not only is it different from the plan, but it is involved in a constant state of change as the market and stakeholders interact with it over time, much the same as an ice hotel is constantly changing according to the weather and the usage by guests and employees.

Implicit in the above description is that the 'vision' is *not* the core of the corporate brand. The vision that launches the corporate brand is the original setting of the table, as described in

the Seth Godin quote at the beginning of this chapter; or it is like the initial concept for the ice hotel; or like the first tale that introduces the saga. The point being that the vision, in and of itself does not remain as the core of the structure of the corporate brand.

What is the structure of IBM's corporate brand? On one hand, it is that of a leading IT company, which makes and sells computers, computer equipment and services. But, like the ice hotel, it also depends: what year is it? From the respondents in this study, some of them talked about IBM in the past as a computer hardware company. That was their experience, and what they remember. Thus, when they contribute to the saga of IBM's corporate brand, that is necessarily a component. Other respondents spoke about IBM becoming a services company – in the much closer past. Although these respondents remember the hardware days of IBM, the services version of IBM is far more salient to them, and dominates their contribution to the saga.

What angle are you looking at it from? What are the recent changes in the market? Is this a time when IBM is trying to lead and dominate the market? Or is it a time when it is trying to be a Joe Average helper to society? Some respondents (e.g., William) view IBM from an angle that sees his organization and his role in a sort of oppositional relationship, where each is attempting to get the best of the other; IBM trying to maximize its profits, while William's organization is trying to minimize costs. To William, IBM is not trying to help the world, it is trying to help itself. So his viewing angle of the ice hotel (i.e., IBM) shows it blocking his progress, and not making his life comfortable, rather thwarting his objectives. Yet William has the ability to make changes within his organization and with IBM that might put a slightly different shape to the ice hotel.

It is the saga then that is the core of the corporate brand. Thus the corporate brand has the characteristics of a saga: constantly changing, multiple storytellers, no identifiable end, no one storyteller has complete control, etc. In essence then, the dynamic, continuous saga is the structure of the corporate brand, while at the same time – by definition - is not a structure; this is an interesting new view of the corporate brand. The company envisioned structure is a good beginning, but thereafter the corporate brand is shifting and changing according to the expectations and demands of its employees, customers, suppliers, distributors and other stakeholders. Importantly, this perpetual regeneration of the corporate brand is to be expected – it is not a random occurrence to be dealt with once in a while. And as with the ice hotel, the corporate brand is shaped and modified by many forces other than its primary stakeholder (the company).

Removing expectations of a stable, rigid, identifiable corporate brand structure changes how management deals with its corporate brand. Assuming a structure exists leads to relatively fixed messaging about the corporate brand. It also tends to encourage confrontations when there are disagreements about the corporate brand from stakeholders. This is a bit like swimming against the current to try to get to safety; it rarely works, and uses – wastes even – a tremendous amount of energy. It is better to swim at an angle to the current, or with the current.

Importantly this also changes how a company interacts with its stakeholders. A ‘take it or leave it’ approach generally will not work in the long term. Rather, the company needs to engage with its stakeholders, listen to them, and contribute to the saga on a regular and ongoing basis. This is the basis of a company’s quest for authenticity. That is, even though in our free market

system a company should have the freedom to choose its own path, and be who it wants to be, in reality, its stakeholders are placing demands and expectations on the company to be true to a mythic ideal. The company then must negotiate and wrestle back and forth with its stakeholders in the ongoing process of trying to be authentic. This does not mean that the company will always agree with any or all of its stakeholders. No. But it does mean that there is a recognition of a negotiation process, in which it is simply one participant and contributor. It also means an acknowledgment of the place of the corporate brand in the socially constructed space between it and its stakeholders.

Thus we see a corporate brand that intertwines both structure and no structure. This actually could result in a stronger corporate brand, as it is more flexible in dealing with changes in the market and society in which it exists.

### **Who Controls the Corporate Brand?**

Another significant assumption about the corporate brand is that the company controls its own corporate brand. There are many books and articles written about how a company should control its corporate brand. This control includes the creation, development and management of the corporate brand. As such, companies need to carefully plan out a strategy for their corporate brand. This entails activities like identifying core values, company vision and salient aspects of the corporate culture (e.g., Hatch and Schultz 2003; Urde 2003), packaging them into a neat bundle that can be communicated clearly, consistently and coherently to the world at large and protecting that corporate brand in the marketplace (e.g., de Chernatony and Riley 1998).

The view that the company itself controls its corporate brand is seductive; people and companies feel better when they are in control of a situation. To suggest that a company is not in control of its corporate brand creates an uncomfortable sensation, and is best avoided. Or to suggest that a company is not in control of its own corporate brand may imply that the company is failing in its duties, or not doing things properly.

However, as seemingly non-intuitive and uncomfortable as the notion feels, the analysis of IBM shows that it is *not* fully in control of its own corporate brand; nor is full control possible. We saw this repeatedly where different stakeholders, with different motives come up with different views of IBM's corporate brand. If IBM truly was in control, one would expect a consistent (relatively) portrayal of IBM's corporate brand. This clearly was not the case when some stakeholders view IBM as helpful, supportive and ethical, while others view them as profit-driven above all else, evil and deceptive. Or some stakeholders view IBM as a personal computer company, while others see IBM as a services oriented company. Each of these perspectives of IBM forms a part of the saga of IBM's corporate brand. IBM's contribution is part of that saga, but it is only one part. Thus it becomes apparent that none of the stakeholders (including IBM) have control of IBM's corporate brand. They all contribute to it, and influence it, but they do not control it.

Part of the exhortation about good corporate brands is to be consistent (e.g., Aaker 2004). From the analysis on IBM, one might be lead to conclude that because of the inconsistencies, and the changing perspectives on it, IBM could not be considered a good corporate brand. Yet for

several years, IBM has been at or near the top of Interbrand's "Best Global Brands" listing. How can this be possible? And how does it work?

This leads one to the notion that a strong corporate brand is not about control. For some this might be a frightening thought, to recognize that one does not have control of one's own corporate brand. However, this can also be a liberating notion; this can allow a company to stop fighting absolutely everything that seems to contradict their internal view of the corporate brand. The alternative is to be actively and consistently engaged in a negotiation process with one's stakeholders to socially construct the corporate brand. Or to put it another way, the corporate brand is co-created by its stakeholders.

In their article, "Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing", Vargo and Lusch (2004, p. 10) say that the "customer is always a coproducer". Although they were referring to products and services, subsequent authors have extended the notion to brands and branding. Merz, He and Vargo (2009) explore the role of the network of stakeholders in co-creating brand value. Their concept links co-creation to brands, but within the context of product/service brands and to brand *value* rather than the brand itself. Although they recognize the importance of all stakeholders, they separate the company from the stakeholders, as if the company is not really a stakeholder of the brand. While bringing in all stakeholders fits with this dissertation's findings, the authors' assumptions indicate that they still view the branding process as a prerogative of the company and its managers; that is, the managers should include stakeholders in the process, and if the branding strategy is "isolated from any stakeholder" (Merz, He and Vargo 2009, p. 341) there could be opposing influences and forces from society. This sounds similar to what IBM

faces with its corporate brand, however there is a subtle yet important distinction: it is the matter of choice. Merz, He and Vargo (2009) implicitly assume that the company has a choice of whether or not to include any stakeholders in the branding process (they do suggest that it would be a mistake to exclude any stakeholders). Hatch and Schultz (2010, p. 603) follow this same line of reasoning when they outline some implications of brand co-creation: “These trends toward increasing stakeholder/company engagement and organization self-disclosure bring attendant risks, one of which is the loss of control that companies have over their brands and ultimately their organizations.” But as seen from the analysis of IBM’s corporate brand, stakeholders are a part of the branding process regardless of the company’s plans, strategies or desires. It is not a matter of “increasing stakeholder/company engagement” – this already exists! Not only are all stakeholders already involved in the co-creation of the brand, but the loss of control foretold by Hatch and Schultz (2010) is also a misleading statement; it mistakenly assumes that the company was in control to begin with.

One obvious question that arises from this is ‘which stakeholders are important?’ Naturally, the company itself is an important and influential stakeholder. And, in the same spirit as the notion that the corporate brand does not have an underlying structure or core truth to it, the stakeholders to work with will change from time to time, and from situation to situation. That is, at a particular point in time, or when a particular situation arises, a different stakeholder, or set of stakeholders will gain prominence and will be more important in the negotiation process. The implication of this is that the company is – or should be – always cognizant of the external environment looking for how it impacts that environment, and how that environment impacts all

that it does. By being alert and involved in that environment, the company can more quickly and perhaps more appropriately be involved in and respond to the changing market.

The company is simply another stakeholder that helps in the ongoing construction of its corporate brand – albeit the most significant (in the long term) stakeholder. As such, one would expect the company to be the most influential contributor to the corporate brand saga. However, at certain times it is feasible that a different stakeholder or set of stakeholders will have more influence in the saga. For instance, in the Burberry example from the introductory chapter of this dissertation, the chavs, and people writing about and paying attention to the chavs became the most influential sagameisters for Burberry for a while. These days, Burberry is once again one of the top luxury goods brands in the world, and thus apparently having more influence on the saga than the chavs. However, the chavs part of the saga still exists, and is a part of the corporate brand. In some ways, the chav history of Burberry adds to the corporate brand, and makes it richer and more interesting.

The Burberry example also illustrates how a non-economic stakeholder can be influential. Another example of this would be how environmental activists can be so influential with the big oil companies. Even though economically they are not related to the company, they have the influence to significantly alter the meaning of the corporate brand. Greenpeace has been very successful in this endeavor, as was illustrated in their impact on Shell over the disposal of the Brent Spar oil storage facility (they ultimately forced Shell to completely change their disposal plans of the Brent Spar, and in the process caused Shell to look like an environmental pariah).

Thus in recognizing that a company does not have control over its corporate brand, it needs to change the way it views and interacts with its *fellow* stakeholders. The co-creation of the corporate brand is not a choice that the company makes; it is a process that it participates in. Once a company accepts that it does not have total control of its corporate brand it can relax and work with other stakeholders in constructing the corporate brand.

### **Authenticity and the Corporate Brand Saga**

How then does a company negotiate with other stakeholders, and why does it do so? That is, on what basis does a company provide input in the construction of its corporate brand? We see that IBM has worked at developing a Smarter Planet theme for its saga, with a portrayal of itself as Joe Average. But that role has also varied from situation to situation, and according to whoever was involved in those situations. Additionally, the role and story changed, shifted and morphed as it developed through time. The negotiation, or co-creation process resulted in a dynamic corporate brand.

Within the dynamism of its corporate brand IBM was trying to respond in a way that made sense to its stakeholders – both internal and external. Thus when Palmisano is thrust into the role of the leader of American business interests, he does not turn down that role, or shy away from it because it is not consistent with his Joe Average role. Rather, he adapts to the expectations of the stakeholders in the moment. But if Palmisano claims that IBM is Joe Average in one instance, and then in another instance he acts as if IBM was a business titan, does this mean that IBM is inauthentic? By taking on the role of a business titan, is IBM not being true to itself as Joe Average?

A look back at authenticity as reviewed earlier in this paper (chapters 3 and 4) will help us to understand this apparent paradox. In chapter 3 (p. 49), authenticity was defined as *the continuous process of negotiating one's identity within a societal paradox by demonstrating one's achievement of being true to oneself.*

Through the analysis of IBM, one sees that authenticity is actually the driving force behind the saga of IBM's corporate brand. For a company as large and diverse as is IBM, it is not easy to think about dealing with the expectations of so many different stakeholders. How could IBM hope to negotiate its identity with the raft of stakeholders all clamouring for attention? It might seem easier to pick a position and character for one's corporate brand, and stick to it through repetition and stubbornness. Although not stated in these terms, the popular press implicitly advises companies to do so. But this does not work out so well when there is also a high expectation of authenticity. That is, companies are confronted with the societal paradox described earlier: they are exhorted to be true to themselves, and be anything they want to be (freedom!), but at the same time they are constricted by stakeholder expectations. Therefore companies need to engage in a negotiation process with their stakeholders to construct their corporate brands on a continuous basis.

As highlighted by Berman (1970), at the time of the enlightenment people were given freedom to make choices as to what they would do with their lives and themselves. But along with that freedom also came the responsibility to be true to themselves and the choices they made. Being embedded in society and culture provided – and still provides – an infinite array of choices for people to shape their identity. Yet the changeable and changing nature of society, and

what a person sees in society creates conflicting choices, and also demands on a person that result in a fluid, ever-changing identity. However, maintaining authenticity, and being true to oneself in such an environment is a difficult and ongoing process. Additionally, Berman posits that the freedom of choice is largely illusory, and that even in removing the ascribed roles, society replaced them with other restrictions that “rigidly channelled” and “forced” the newly liberated human energy “into a constantly expanding and unending war for wealth and power” (Berman 1970, p. 315).

This paradox creates a tension that a person constantly strives to resolve. This is also true for companies like IBM. Who and what is IBM? On one hand our free market society encourages – or demands – that IBM chooses for itself. Yet from the interviews, we can see that IBM’s stakeholders are constantly thrusting options at IBM – e.g., to be a personal computer company (like the issue with Lenovo), to be a profit centred organization, to be a business leader extraordinaire (and help bring the world out of recession); IBM is also seeking out options for itself – e.g., Joe Average, helper and good world citizen – to add in with the choices that external stakeholders provide. Then, in order to remain authentic, it has to try to match the changing, dynamic identities that it chooses or are thrust on it. In striving to be authentic, there is no longer a single ideal self to be true to. Thus IBM is constantly driven by this quest for authenticity, and must continuously provide new contributions to its corporate brand saga; *that is, the saga continues because of the constant quest for authenticity.*

Berman (1970) wrote about authenticity in terms of individuals in society. Clearly IBM is not an individual, even though we often anthropomorphize companies. So even though IBM as a

corporation can at some times be viewed as an individual, and we can speak of it as having an identity, and trying to be authentic, there is more to consider. The thousands of employees within IBM will have their own views (constantly changing) of IBM's identity; the thousands of external stakeholders will see different facets of IBM through customer interactions, supplier interactions, media coverage, competitor battles, etc. The number and variety of these people will tend to multiply the effects of a quest for authenticity and search for identity.

This quest for authenticity is apparent in IBM's actions as described in the previous chapter. IBM sets out to facilitate a Smarter Planet for the betterment of mankind, and play the role of Joe Average, the helper. Yet events transpire that result in IBM taking a leadership role in some situations (eschewing the Joe Average role), or senior executives are embroiled in criminal activities that taint or cast a bit of a shadow on the more positive work the company is doing. In each of these situations, IBM does not simply try to repeat, reinforce and regurgitate the same scripted story of their corporate brand; rather IBM shifts a bit, and attempts to respond in a manner that makes sense, given its history, and the previous threads of the saga. As with any negotiation, there is no Shangri La reached, only a continuation of the saga and negotiation process.

In order to aid the negotiation, IBM gets involved with its stakeholders. As noted earlier, Palmisano says that IBM is trying to build "constituency" with all stakeholders in civil society. By doing so, IBM can be more actively involved in the telling of the saga. That is, when an external stakeholder takes over the role of storyteller, IBM is there to understand the direction the saga is going, what the "new" expectation of IBM is, and to respond with an appropriate,

authentic continuation of the saga. For example, Palmisano talked about the use of technology in monitoring resources in cities – including cameras. But that use of technology has also raised fears and concerns in people, in particular about privacy issues. So Palmisano plainly and transparently acknowledges the concerns – even though there are benefits like lower crime – and talks about how through a process of coalition building and stakeholder involvement trust can be built to help mitigate the risks.

In this example we see that IBM's apparent 'freedom' to pursue its business as it wishes is actually constrained by parts of society. Why should IBM care about anything other than the technology and information systems services it provides? But Palmisano recognizes that there are unwritten societal expectations that will not let IBM do anything it wants; the paradox is clear here – the free market system is not so free. The result is that IBM negotiates its identity within this paradox, trying to meet the expectations of society while at the same time being true to itself. This negotiation process is reflected in the saga told by IBM and its stakeholders; and the saga is driven by the need for IBM to maintain its authenticity in the face of the shifting expectations of its stakeholders. Therefore we see that IBM's quest for authenticity contributes to and drives the dynamic corporate brand.

### **A New Understanding of the Corporate Brand**

The above discussion lays out three key components of the corporate brand: the blended unstructural/structural nature of the corporate brand; the notion that the corporate brand is co-created by its stakeholders, and that none of them (including the company) have complete

control; and the notion that the corporate brand saga is propelled by the company's quest for authenticity. These are wrapped up within the idea of the corporate brand as a saga.

One common aspect of these three components is the dynamic nature of the corporate brand. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates, the initial layout for a corporate brand may be set at a company's inception, but thereafter it is constantly changing. Recognizing the dynamism of a corporate brand can actually be very positive for a company; it provides opportunities to change with the environment and market around it, and can even instill a sense of excitement both within the company and for other stakeholders.

The three components above also highlight a complexity within the corporate brand that has been previously unexplored. It is important at this point to review some of the implications of this new view of the corporate brand. In Chapter 2, a definition of the corporate brand was provided from Knox and Bickerton (2003, p. 1013), "a corporate brand is the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organization's unique business model". We now see that this is too restricted, and does not adequately represent a corporate brand such as IBM's. First, there is a lot more than a "business model" included in a corporate brand; at the very minimum it also includes the interactions a company has with its stakeholders. Second, this definition suggests a unilateral corporate brand, coming from the company. Even if stakeholder input is considered in the formation of the corporate brand (as some literature suggests (e.g., Hatch and Schultz 2003)), the final arbiter of that corporate brand is implicitly the company. The underlying assumption of the unilateral corporate brand is the control of the company over its corporate brand. Again, as seen with IBM (and other corporate brands such as Burberry), when the saga shifts to other

stakeholders, the control of the corporate brand also shifts. Third, Knox and Bickerton's definition implies an ideal corporate brand. That is, a company figures out what its corporate brand is, and then expresses it. From IBM's example we can see that even within a fairly focused Smarter Planet campaign, the nature of IBM's corporate brand changes constantly, according to who is in the role of sagemeister at the time.

Therefore, a new definition of the corporate brand is necessary. A definition that accommodates these fundamental concepts that the corporate brand is not a monologue produced and controlled by a company, it is dynamic, it includes the active involvement of a company's stakeholders, it is driven forward by the company's quest for authenticity, and in fact it is not even owned by the company, but exists in the space between the company and its many stakeholders.

**Definition: Corporate Brand** – *the socially constructed meaning/understanding of a company that emerges from the interactions and communications of a company and its stakeholders as the company attempts to be true to itself while meeting the expectations of its stakeholders.*

### **Managerial Implications**

There are several significant ways in which companies and their corporate brand managers will need to change how they attempt to manage their corporate brands. The first of these is to develop a culture of sensitivity to the environment and stakeholders around the company. That is, throughout the entire company, including all of the employees there must be an awareness of the ongoing stories about their company. Arie de Geus (1997, p. 6) put this as “keeping their feelers out, tuned to whatever was going on around them.”

This culture of sensitivity would go a long way towards a company more clearly understanding the expectations of its various stakeholders, and also understanding how it could best negotiate with its stakeholders over those expectations. This has an additional importance of expanding the responsibility for the corporate brand beyond a constrained circle of senior managers, and includes all employees. A company needs to be constantly evaluating the market and environment for the identity choices that are available. With all employees involved, it is more likely to be able to sense the market's expectations on a company. A company must be still be prepared to negotiate its identity within the array of opportunities, but that array may be larger.

Another key implication behind this new view of the corporate brand is the importance of relationships with stakeholders. It is well known that relationships are important to organizations (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994), but that importance is even more pronounced when one looks at the corporate brand as emerging from the interactions between the company and its stakeholders. Strong relationships will allow a company to better understand the expectations of its stakeholders. And perhaps as important, relationships provide the company an opportunity to more clearly articulate its identity to its stakeholders, and thus aid in its authenticity negotiations.

It could be easy to think of relationships being the business partnerships, or linkages with suppliers, distributors and customers. However, the relationships can really be with any stakeholder, either formal or casual, and in keeping with the culture of sensitivity, they should be between any employee and outside stakeholders. That is, the culture of sensitivity and a focus on

relationships really integrate well together in helping a company manage its evolving corporate brand.

Flowing from these first two implications, and one of the most important implications that managers will have to deal with is the issue of control of the corporate brand. This should not be mistaken with the influence a company has on the corporate brand. The company will likely be the most influential contributor to the saga of a corporate brand over time: the products and services the company chooses to produce, how the employees conduct themselves, and how they react to what occurs in relation to the company, its products and services. Additionally, within a company its employees are dedicated almost exclusively to its own concerns. All of these add up to the company being the primary sagameister for its corporate brand, and to having the most influence on it at most times. In times of relative calm, or no controversy, this can give the impression of control – but it is not truly control. Nevertheless, the company's influence is significant, and as such it needs to pay attention to all it says and does.

The co-creation process suggests that the company can formally work with some stakeholders, informally with others, and with others they may even need to contest matters. In order to do so, the company must pay attention to the attitudes, feelings and stories of its stakeholders, and not simply discount them out of hand when they disagree. This suggests that a company needs to change its perspective from controlling, protecting and managing its corporate brand, to one of observing, understanding and influencing its corporate brand. This may seem like a subtle difference, yet it is significant. The company needs to understand that its corporate brand exists in the space between it and its stakeholders, and that it is socially constructed.

This does not mean that a company should or must simply throw up its hands in despair because of the lack of control of its corporate brand. In some ways it means that the company needs to pay even closer attention to that corporate brand, and try even harder to understand what it is in the context of the moment. More care and attention likely need to go into product, managerial, advertising and corporate decision making, as everything has to fit into the saga in a way that the company can be viewed as being authentic. And this is not a once a year undertaking – it is a dynamic continuous process. This should result in the company being more involved in its corporate brand than less involved. Gone are the days when the company could set up a task force to figure out what their corporate brand is, develop messaging for it, implement it, and then try to keep it locked down (i.e., consistent) for five years until the next time it is so out of line with stakeholder expectations that a new task force needs to be struck!

## Chapter 7

### Conclusions

What this dissertation set out to do was to gain a new understanding of the corporate brand. It seemed as if the literature on corporate brands did not encompass the full range of the corporate brand – that literature being based on a relatively stable and structural view of the corporate brand. Some aspects of corporate brands did not fit into the strictures of a structural view – there seemed to be dynamism, lack of control (by companies) and a give-and-take with stakeholders – which suggested a socially constructed view and approach. In order to research the corporate brand in a way that would allow exploration of its richness and diversity, a qualitative study was used. This study looked at IBM's corporate brand as a saga – a special type of story – to try and fathom the nature of the corporate brand. The analysis showed that the corporate brand is a blend of structure and lack of structure with the corporate brand saga dynamically supporting that blend. It also showed that this dynamic saga was a negotiation between IBM and its stakeholders as IBM strove to be authentic. As authenticity is a dynamic process, motivated by a never ending cycle of attempting to meet expectations, trying to be true to itself, and always changing, this negotiation is a paradox for IBM (and all companies) that creates a tension which propels the corporate brand forward. Coming out of this analysis is a new definition of the corporate brand:

*the socially constructed meaning/understanding of a company that emerges from the interactions and communications of a company and its stakeholders as the company attempts to be true to itself while meeting the expectations of its stakeholders.*

Viewing the corporate brand as outside the control of a company has significant implications for companies and their managers. As indicated in the new definition, the corporate brand is the result of an ongoing negotiation between a company and its stakeholders; the corporate brand is also ‘outside’ the company and out of its direct control. As such, a company needs to observe the corporate brand to understand what it is at any given point in time, and the company needs to constantly listen to its stakeholders as they talk about, make assertions about and interact with the company or as they interact with others on matters that might pertain to the company. These observations and hearings allow the company to see the saga of the corporate brand. The company can then, and must then decide how it will contribute to that saga. They may want to simply keep the saga going – as it might seem to be following a plotline that is amenable to their plans and their identity. However, they may want to nudge the saga a bit, or they may even want to change its direction quite significantly. In any of these cases, the company must provide its contributions to the saga, and at the same time attempt to be true to itself and that portion of the saga; that is they need to strive to be authentic. We see in this approach a more flexible, dynamic and complex method of interacting with (as opposed to “managing”) the corporate brand.

Also of interest are the stakeholders and their roles in the construction of the corporate brand. The beginning of this research asked about which stakeholders are the most important to the corporate brand saga – to which the answer is a resounding “it depends”. However, it does not necessarily depend on the industry a company is in, nor on the size of the company, nor any other fixed reference points. Rather it depends on the context of the saga at any given point in

time. What is happening with the company and its stakeholders at a specific point in time?

Clearly there are times when a company's customers are the most important contributors to the corporate brand saga. However, at other times there could be activists who are making the most important contributions to the saga (e.g., Greenpeace protesting against Shell's method of disposal for the Brent Spar oil platform), or it could be a competitor (e.g., Apple iPhones competing against Research in Motion's Blackberry products), it could be the company itself as it launches new products, services or initiatives. The nature of a saga is that the storyteller can change from time to time, and control of the saga can shift. Thus it is not possible to single out a stakeholder that is most important, all of the time.

With that said, it then leads to the question of how does one know which stakeholders are most important, or when do their contributions assume "primacy" in the saga? It is possible that the notions of power and legitimacy may shed light into these issues. It is possible that having some measure of legitimacy (Suchman 1995) could affect how seriously a particular stakeholder's contribution to the saga is taken, or whether it is listened to at all. If so, it could also raise issues of what type of legitimacy is at play (i.e., pragmatic, moral or cognitive) (Suchman 1995), how a stakeholder can gain legitimacy, and with whom? Associated with legitimacy are issues of power. If certain stakeholders have more power, perhaps they could use that power to attempt to exert more influence over the saga. Again, this could raise issues of how stakeholders – particularly non-economic stakeholders (e.g., activists) – gain and use power. Either together or separately, the exploration of the legitimacy and power concepts could further our understanding of how the corporate brand evolves over time.

These stakeholders also shape and motivate the saga by their expectations and demands of the company. As discussed earlier, there is a cultural and marketplace imperative for people and companies to assert their freedom of choice to be whoever they want to be. Yet paradoxically at the same time the stakeholders have expectations, which actually limit the freedom of the companies. As a result, the companies' negotiation with its stakeholders about these expectations, and the stakeholders continually coming up with new expectations, all give the saga momentum and drive it forward. There is always a need for a new chapter in the saga, provided by the company or by its stakeholders.

One limitation of this study is that only one company's corporate brand was looked at. The study involved many different organizations and other stakeholders, but there was only one central corporate brand that was looked at. While this is an appropriate approach for this type of research, it is important to expand the research to more corporate brands, in different industries, and in different contexts to develop it further and flesh out more details.

Additionally, as this is a new understanding of the corporate brand, an important extension to this research would be to explore how this new view of the corporate brand links with and impacts other important constructs such as corporate brand equity. It would also be interesting to determine how these concepts – studied here in a corporate context – apply to product and service brands.

Overall, this study provides a significant contribution to the corporate branding literature. A new definition of the corporate brand has been developed, and a new understanding of its nature has been elaborated. This study also contributes to the authenticity literature in showing

how authenticity is an important motivator and driving force at a corporate level – not just at a consumer level. With these contributions the study of the corporate brand has new directions in which to proceed, and new lines of research can and should be explored.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Sample Interview Protocol – Distributor**

1. Organization – tell me about your company and what it does (size, specialties, customer types, etc.).
2. What are your job responsibilities?
3. What is your company’s relationship with IBM?
4. What kind of interactions do you have with IBM or IBM employees? How often?
  - a. Can you tell me about a typical interaction you have had with an IBM employee?
5. In addition to your job, do you keep an eye on what IBM is doing in general?
  - a. What sorts of things do you notice about IBM?
6. How long have you personally dealt with IBM?
  - a. Can you describe some of those dealings?
7. When did your company become a distributor for IBM?
  - a. Can you describe the circumstances around becoming a distributor for IBM?
8. What was IBM like at the beginning of your experience with them? How about when your company became a distributor for them?
9. Has IBM changed over time? How so?
10. What have you noticed about IBM recently (the past year or so)?
11. What is IBM to you now?
12. Does IBM ever do anything that contradicts what you think about it? Examples? How do you react?
13. What do you think IBM is trying to say about itself?
14. What do you think IBM as a company thinks it is?
15. Where do think IBM is headed as a company?
16. Tell me about a good experience that you have had with IBM.
17. Tell me about a bad experience that you have had with IBM.
18. Tell me how those experiences fit into what you think of IBM.

**Appendix B**  
**Ethics Approval**

June 21, 2009

Terrence Beckman  
PhD Candidate  
School of Business  
Queen's University

**GREB Ref # GBUS-232-09**  
**Title: "Authenticity and the Corporate Brand Saga"**

Dear Terrence Beckman:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "**Authenticity and the Corporate Brand Saga**" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB; of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage [www.queensu.ca/vpr/greb/addforms.htm#Adverse](http://www.queensu.ca/vpr/greb/addforms.htm#Adverse) ). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that any adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at <http://www.queensu.ca/vpr/greb/addforms.htm#Change>. These changes must be sent to Linda Frid at the Office of Research Services or [FRIDL@queensu.ca](mailto:FRIDL@queensu.ca) prior to implementation. Ms. Frid will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,



Joan Stevenson, PhD  
Professor and Chair  
General Research Ethics Board

JS/af

copies: Chair, Unit REB: Dr. Jane Webster  
Faculty Supervisors: Dr. Jay Handelman and Dr. Peggy Cunningham  
QSB Research Office: Amy Marshall



April 30, 2010



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Terrence Beckman (PhD Candidate)  
School of Business  
Goodes Hall  
Queen's University

**GREB REF #: GBUS-232-09**  
**Title: "Authenticity and the Corporate Brand Saga"**

Dear Terrence:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB) has reviewed and approved your request for renewal of ethics clearance for the above-named study. This renewal is valid for one year from June 21, 2010. Prior to the next renewal date you will be sent a reminder memo and form to reapply.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB if applicable, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available at webpage <http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html> - Adverse Event Report Form). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at <http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html> - Research Ethics Change Form. These changes must be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or [irvingg@queensu.ca](mailto:irvingg@queensu.ca) prior to implementation. Mrs. Irving will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joan Stevenson".

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.  
Professor and Chair  
General Research Ethics Board

c.c: Jay Handelman, Faculty Supervisor  
Peggy Cunningham, Co-Supervisor  
Dr. Jane Webster, Chair, Unit REB  
Research Office, c/o Amy Marshall

JS/ll

*think* Research  
*think* Queen's