



Global corporate visual identity systems: using an extended marketing mix

T.C. Melewar

Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Warwick, UK and

John Saunders

Aston Business School, Aston University, Birmingham, UK

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Abstract *Designers have used Corporate Visual Identity Systems (CVIS) to widen the communications mix. Using name, symbol and/or logo, typography, colour and slogan, a CVIS helps transmit a company's visual identity through fixed assets, such as buildings, vehicles and other business collateral. This wider view of business communications adds an eighth P, publications, to the seven Ps of service marketing: product, price, place, promotion, participants, physical evidence and process. Managerial literature suggests that firms who standardise their CVIS anticipate communications benefits beyond the usual marketing mix. A comparison of multinational companies with and without standardised CVIS supports this view.*

Introduction

Most of the world's greatest brands are corporate names with only one of the world's top ten, Marlboro, being an exception (Kochan, 1996). Companies increasingly recognise that they can promote their products, divisions or subsidiaries across the world to project a single and powerful identity. This view of communications goes beyond the familiar domains of advertising and marketing where brands occur, to the broader domain of corporate identity, visual identity and corporate visual identification systems that are used to position whole companies (Balmer, 1995).

Corporate identity is a broad term referring to "the set of meanings by which an object allows itself to be known and through which it allows people to describe, remember and relate to it" (van Rekom, 1997). Although often projected as a design dominant activity, as in Olins (1989), the corporate identity mix includes corporate culture, corporate behaviour, market conditions, strategy, products, services and communications as well as design (Schmidt, 1995). Being more complicated than "just design", corporate identity embraces all the facets of an organisation that influence the way people see and think about them (Olins, 1989; Birkight and Stadler, 1980). Corporate communications project the elements of a firm's corporate identity to produce a corporate image that people have of the organisation (Ind, 1990). Managers are attracted to this complicated idea by the promise that, if used properly, corporate identity can project what the organisation is, what it stands for and what it does (Topalian, 1984; Olins, 1990).

A business's *corporate visual identity* is part of its deeper corporate identity – the outer sign of the inward commitment (Abratt, 1989) – namely product, environment and communications (Jefkins, 1990). This visual school emphasises graphic design and management through official corporate symbols (Balmer, 1995). Realistically, corporate visual identity is the domain of designers while corporate identity is the domain of organisational theorists.

The *Corporate Visual Identity System* (CVIS) is the graphic design at the core of a firm's visual identity. The elements of CVIS are corporate name, symbol and/or logotype, typography, colour and slogan. At its best, the CVIS provides the graphic language and discipline for the clear, consistent projection of a firm's visual identity (Henrion and Parkin, 1967).

Corporate identity has its roots in American graphics design that first attracted managerial interest (Selame and Selame, 1975). In Europe, designers soon widened the understanding of corporate identity to include behaviour and other communications (Olins, 1989; Birkight and Stadler, 1980). More recently academics have added to the understanding of corporate image and the establishment of corporate identity programmes (Abratt, 1989). Balmer and van Riel's (1997) collection of works is a valuable guide to recent thinking. Even with the widening of thinking on corporate image away from its roots in corporate visual identity, only 4 per cent of British managers equate corporate identity with "culture, values and philosophy" while 44 per cent associate it with only "visual presentation and logotype" (Schmidt, 1995).

Despite this confusion, communications by design is growing. In the UK between 1989 and 1993 the annual growth rates were between 22 and 30 per cent (Croft, 1993). The majority of the revenue of this industry is for the design of corporate visual identities. Increasingly, firms realise that they are part of society and that possessing a positive corporate visual identity is fundamental to the company's growth. An acceptable corporate visual identity not only offers the staff pride and a sense of community, but also enhances the company's reputation and goodwill. A corporate visual identity can give an advantage over competitors, attract employees and help convince financial institutions and local governments that the company is a corporate citizen worthy of support (van Riel and Balmer, 1997).

With rapid technology and product change, a firm's personality and identity become the biggest factors in consumer choice between products (Eales, 1988; Balmer, 1995). Increasingly, customers "buy the company" that makes the product; buying its character, its size, its identity and the confidence it inspires. For consumer and industrial goods alike, a corporate visual identity is a powerful weapon (Northart, 1980; Sorrell, 1990).

The literature suggests that firms who standardise their global CVIS achieve communications benefits beyond the usual marketing mix. This study investigates the extent of this gain. It first reviews the literature on global corporate visual identity and the wider issue of globalisation to generate

hypotheses on the benefits of having a global CVIS. The tests of the hypotheses use information from a sample of British multinationals and cross-checked with managers in their subsidiaries.

Review and hypotheses

The lack of theoretical sources on global corporate visual identity was resolved by reviewing the wider globalisation literature. Publications on international corporate strategy, multinational strategic planning and the international marketing mix elements provided some important insight and guidelines, although the majority are anecdotal, rather than empirical.

In discussing the relationship between corporate identity and facilities management, Lambert (1989) states that organisations consciously or unconsciously exude messages about themselves through “environments”, such as factories, offices, warehouses and retail premises. He adds that a building forms a vital part of an institution’s identity, whether it is the NatWest Tower, Harrods or Buckingham Palace. The elements of visual identity that a facilities manager is responsible for comprise such familiar items as signage, colours, finishes, furnishings, plant provision and space planning. Other important factors include the range of external and internal facilities, the overall appearance of the buildings and the degree of landscaping and gardens surrounding the premises. This inclusion of buildings as part of the communications strategy extends the marketing mix beyond the usual four Ps. Another example is TransAmerica Corporation’s use of their “T” logo as a unifying symbol across their subsidiaries. The programme applied the visual identity to letterheads, publications, advertising, brochures and company vehicles (Gray and Smeltzer, 1985).

In a company-specific study, Lee (1983) explained that Firststar Corporation’s unified visual identity system covered a wide range of applications including signs, stationery, forms, cheques, statements, booklets, uniforms and vehicles. He added that this visual personality extends to Firststar’s advertising, promotional literature, exhibits and all other public exposure of the bank’s identity. In another company-specific study, Kayal (1988) mentioned that at Nynex the first step in building a corporate visual identity is to create a logotype. All companies owned by Nynex use a unified graphic format that builds from that logo. He added that everything that represents the company reflects that unity – for example, stationery, signage and window graphics. Similarly, British Airways’ corporate visual identity is not limited to advertising and brochures or the annual report (Georgiades, 1988). The graphics extend to uniforms, aeroplane interiors, office space, waiting rooms, sales office, anything or any place that reflects the corporation.

Olins (1985), the designer and leading authority on corporate identity in the UK, states that companies are continually producing material that can be designed to convey clear messages. Environments such as buildings, showrooms, offices, factories and canteens; communications material such as forms, stationery, advertising, literature, tenders, instruction manuals and data

sheets and products of every kind, all help shape a company's visual identity. In retail outlets a store's image has many dimensions, each interacting with the others to influence the overall image the store holds for each consumer group (Shimp, 1990). The more important decisions of a store's image are not its marketing mix, but its architecture and exterior design, interior design, personnel, line of merchandise, signs and logos, display and name.

Organisations spend millions of pounds on their identities. They build showrooms, produce packaging, design products, launch advertising campaigns, buy vehicles, train staff, even replace doorknobs. If effectively coordinated, these activities present a clear, strong message that positions the organisation as a whole (Olins, 1990; Balmer, 1995). Some of the potential communicators of corporate image are nomenclature, formal statements, imagery and graphics, permanent media and promotional media (Gray and Smeltzer, 1985). In the financial services sector, the Allied Irish Bank redesigned all documents to express its new visual identity. In addition, corporate identity guidelines applied to the interior design of all aspects of branch merchandising and furnishing (Stewart, 1990).

In detailing the steps in launching a corporate image communications programme, Marken (1990) pointed out that it is important to co-ordinate every channel of communications to build the desired image. Advertising is important, but so are sales people, letterheads, shipping labels, invoices, employee training manuals, brochures, posters, business cards, samples, trademarks, product labels, articles, news releases, trade booth displays and other internal and external promotional vehicles. Sometimes the changes have excited public concern by changing traditional street furniture. Just the threat of changing the visual identity of British Telecommunication's vans, telephones boxes and staff uniforms caused controversy.

Designers suggest that a global CVIS can effectively project a firm's identity using assets and collateral that extend well beyond the conventional marketing mix. Businesses adopting global CVIS not only benefit from the repetition of a uniform image, but also have a broad view of the means of projecting their image. From this follows a series of hypotheses pertaining to this broader view of the communications mix:

- H1:* Firms using global CVIS standardisation view the interior and exterior of buildings as an effective way of projecting their identity.
- H2:* Firms using global CVIS standardisation view stationery as an effective way of projecting their identity.
- H3:* Firms using global CVIS standardisation view publications as an effective way of projecting their identity.
- H4:* Firms using global CVIS standardisation view vehicles as an effective way of projecting their identity.
- H5:* Firms using global CVIS standardisation view signs as an effective way of projecting their visual identity.

H6: Firms using global CVIS standardisation view clothing as an effective way of projecting their identity.

H7: Firms using global CVIS standardisation view forms as an effective way of projecting their identity.

TMS Corporation of America recognised the need for a strong marketing programme because of keen competition among the financial institutions. This led to the development of specific marketing strategies that included a complete graphics system that integrated the marketing mix. The graphics system covered point-of-purchase displays, counter-top posters, booklets, stationery and business forms and newspaper advertising campaigns (Margulies, 1977).

In the Hays Group, the new identity conveyed a strong sense of central identity and direction for the company, which owned 30 diverse companies, before its flotation (James, 1990). The corporate identity activities covered the whole gamut of corporate design, newsletters, brochures and annual reports, corporate advertising, direct mail, promotional gifts, entertainment and media relations. Research indicated a 30 per cent increase in City awareness of the group and its structure.

Ackerman (1988) emphasises the structural presentation of the company as an essential consideration in using “corporate identification” to strategic advantage. This involves co-ordinating the elements of the overall corporate visual identification system such as the various organisational names, nomenclature, symbols and brands. It is necessary to determine how to present these elements in relation to one another on products, packaging, stationery, vehicles, signage, company literature and advertising. Topalian (1984) also sees that CVIS stretches across the marketing mix, and non-mix elements: the appearance of products, correspondence, forms, promotional literature, packaging, advertising, and the exteriors and interiors of manufacturing plants, offices, warehouses, showrooms, retail outlets, etc. This suggests that those businesses using global CVIS view their conventional marketing mix as a means of projecting their visual identity. This view leads to the following hypotheses:

H8: Firms using global CVIS standardisation view advertising as an effective way of projecting their identity.

H9: Firms using global CVIS standardisation view packaging as an effective way of projecting their identity.

H10: Firms using global CVIS standardisation view promotions as an effective way of projecting their identity.

H11: Firms using global CVIS standardisation view products as an effective way of projecting their identity.

Corporate visual identity extends the marketing mix beyond the usual 4Ps (Table I). Booms and Bitner’s (1981) three extra marketing service Ps – Participants, Physical evidence and Process – extends the structure to include

Variation	The P's	Corporate visual Identity components	Visual identity systems
Traditional 4Ps	Product Price Place Promotion	Product Packaging Advertising Promotions	<hr/> 543
Service marketing's extra 3Ps	Participants Physical evidence	Clothing Buildings Vehicles	
Corporate visual identity's extra P	Process Publications	Stationery Forms General publications	

Table I.
The 8Ps of corporate identity

CVIS components of *clothing*, *buildings* and *vehicles*. A final extra P – for Publications – covers the remaining CVIS components: *stationery*, *forms* and *general publications*. By stretching their usual definition, the CVIS components could be in the traditional 4 Ps but this gives them multiple meanings. *Vehicles* and *buildings* could be part of Place, or Physical distribution, but this changes the P's usual meaning from “the task of moving goods” (Kotler *et al.*, 1996) to include the physical entities that move and store goods as well as other buildings. The proposed 8P CVIS mix could be extended further using Schmidt's (1995) corporate identity mix but this more embracing framework would move this research into a more complex domain than visual identity that would include corporate culture, corporate behaviour, market conditions and strategy generally.

Methodology

Dun and Bradstreet's “Who owns whom” provided a sampling frame of 111 British multinational corporations with subsidiaries in Malaysia. The Malaysian subset validated the HQ's views. The companies were split into groups according to the nature of their main business and a quota random sample drawn of 19 industrial goods companies, nine consumer goods companies and 12 service companies.

Data collection was conducted by using personal interviews because of the complexity and length of the questionnaire and the need for a high response rate from the sample frame. The questionnaire was structured but had some open ended questions. The open questions enabled respondents to explain their answers and to facilitate the researcher in checking the respondents' responses to the closed questions. The closed questions consisted primarily of 11-point scale rating with the extremes anchored by definitions. The 11-point scale rating was consistent with measuring the percentage change in corporate

visual elements from country to country: 0 per cent corresponding to completely different, 100 per cent meaning exactly the same and with 10 per cent divisions dividing the scale.

To measure the degree of standardisation for each individual component of the CVIS – name, symbol and/or logotype, typography, colour and slogan – two questions were asked:

- (1) What is the relative importance of the components of CVIS in Britain, in Malaysia and internationally?
- (2) What is the degree of standardisation of each component of the CVIS?

Multi-item measures for each promotional item were developed using Churchill's (1979) method. The validity and reliability of these items is confirmed by the high Cronbach Alpha scores in Table II.

Findings

The hypothesis tests compared the views of firms using a high degree of CVIS standardisation with those who were not. High scores were those scoring an average of seven or above on the 11-point scales. The high and low scores were compared using a chi-square test with Yates correction on two by two matrices (Table III).

The results support *H1*. Seventy-six per cent of the multinational corporations that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation state that the company's exterior and interior are an effective way of projecting their identity. For the companies that apply a low degree of standardisation, 30 per cent state that this is an effective way of projecting their identity.

The hypothesis that firms using global CVIS standardisation view stationery as an effective way of projecting their identity (*H2*) was supported. Among the multinational corporations that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation, a dominant 92 per cent state that stationery is an effective way of projecting their identity. For the companies that apply a low degree of CVIS standardisation on stationery, only 17 per cent state that it is an effective method.

Variable	Measure	Cronbach alpha
Interiors/exterior	A 18-item measure	0.9128
Stationery	A 24-item measure	0.9301
Publications	A 15-item measure	0.9431
Vehicles	A 9-item measure	0.8835
Signs	A 15-item measure	0.9633
Clothing	A 18-item measure	0.9467
Forms	A 18-item measure	0.9813
Advertising	A 12-item measure	0.9398
Packaging	A 18-item measure	0.9725
Promotion/give-aways	A 9-item measure	0.9197
Product	A 18-item measure	0.9423

Table II.
Global promotional
applications of CVIS

Hypotheses	Variables	Significance level	Results
H1	Interior/exterior	$\chi^2 = 4.65, p = 0.05$	Supported
H2	Stationery	$\chi^2 = 18.38, p = 0.001$	Supported
H3	Publications	$\chi^2 = 5.06, p = 0.05$	Supported
H4	Vehicles	$\chi^2 = 9.14, p = 0.01$	Supported
H5	Signs	$\chi^2 = 16.20, p = 0.001$	Supported
H6	Clothing	$\chi^2 = 1.46, p = 0.15$	Not supported
H7	Forms	$\chi^2 = 6.23, p = 0.01$	Supported
H8	Advertising	$\chi^2 = 5.06, p = 0.01$	Supported
H9	Packaging	$\chi^2 = 4.38, p = 0.05$	Supported
H10	Promotion/give-away	$\chi^2 = 14.46, p = 0.001$	Supported
H11	Product	$\chi^2 = 6.74, p = 0.01$	Supported

Table III.
Results of
cross-tabulations

Ninety-two per cent of the companies that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation see publications as an effective approach in projecting the identity compared with only 54 per cent of companies with a low degree of CVIS standardisation. This result supports *H3*.

For vehicles, 17 per cent of the multinational corporations that apply a low degree of CVIS standardisation state that vehicles are an effective way of projecting their identity. For the companies that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation, 79 per cent state that vehicles are an effective method of projecting their identity, thus supporting *H4*.

A hundred per cent of the companies that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation see signs as an effective way of projecting their identity. Forty-six per cent of the companies that apply a low degree of CVIS standardisation state that this is an effective approach. Consequently, *H5* is supported.

H6, that a firm using global CVIS standardisation view clothing as an effective way of projecting their identity, is not supported. More companies with a high degree of CVIS standardisation view clothing as a way of projecting their company (75 per cent) than do companies with low CVIS standardisation (54 per cent) but the difference between the two scores is not significantly different (see Table III).

Twenty per cent of the companies applying a low degree of CVIS standardisation state that forms are an effective approach in projecting their identity. Among the multinational corporations that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation, 74 per cent state that it is an effective way of projecting their identity. These results support *H7*.

Supporting *H8*, the results reveal that 92 per cent of the multinational corporations that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation state that advertising is an effective method of projecting their identity. For the companies that apply a low degree of CVIS standardisation, the results are equally for and against.

The hypothesis for packaging is supported. The findings show that 92 per cent of the companies that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation state

that packaging is an effective way of projecting their identity. Among the multinational corporations that apply a low degree of CVIS standardisation, 37 per cent state that it is an effective method of projecting their identity.

All the companies that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation state that promotion and give-aways are an effective approach to projecting their identity whereas only 25 per cent of the companies applying a low degree of CVIS standardisation agree with the statement. *H10* is therefore supported.

Eighty-seven per cent of the companies that apply a high degree of CVIS standardisation believe that products are an effective way of projecting their identity. Among the companies that apply a low degree of CVIS standardisation, 33 per cent state that this approach is effective. Thus, along with the other hypotheses concerning the conventional marketing mix, *H11* is supported.

Discussion and conclusions

The results reveal a significant relationship between the degree of CVIS standardisation applied to promotional tools and belief in their effectiveness as a means of projecting their identity. For all but clothing (*H6*), there are significant relationships between the degree of CVIS standardisation and their belief in the tools as a means of projecting their identity: interior and exterior (*H1*), stationery (*H2*), publications (*H3*), vehicles (*H4*), signs (*H5*), forms (*H7*), advertising and promotion (*H8*), packaging (*H9*), give-aways (*H10*) and product (*H11*). These results apply equally to the CVIS components within the traditional 4 Ps and those that are not. This suggests that firms standardising their CVIS see the benefits of moving in two directions at once. Besides benefiting from standardising their marketing mix, they see the benefits of moving beyond the usual domain of the four Ps to communicate many other forms of visual communications. Companies using varied CVIS within countries and across the globe, such as RTZ and Nestlé, benefit little from standardising their fragmented visual identities across their many activities. In contrast firms with a standardised CVIS, such as Shell, have a chance to reinforce their identity by broadcasting it by every means possible. They also stand to gain efficiencies as their standardised CVIS instructs subsidiaries across the globe how to manage their visual identity.

The degree of CVIS standardisation is pivotal to the design and implementation of global CVIS. Overall the findings reveal strong evidence to suggest that a high CVIS standardisation provides greater effectiveness in projecting a uniform and consistent corporate visual identity. These findings supported the views forwarded by Gray and Smeltzer (1985), Kayal (1988), James (1990) and Olins (1990) who emphasise the need to have a consistent application of CVIS to promotional tools to project a single and unified corporate identity. The regional executive of an insurance company remarked on the consistency needed in the global application of the CVIS:

The application of our CVIS does not vary at all throughout the world. We insist that all our operating companies use our CVIS consistently in their marketing, stationery, advertising, promotional items, recruitment, clothing (messenger, maintenance, engineer, staff and so on). All of these items are monitored centrally in the UK.

The corporate affairs executive of a major consultancy-based organisation highlighted the issue of the corporatisation of image and identity:

We have made a conscious effort to corporatise our image in literature, visual aids, slides. We have a corporate video which incorporates everything. We have exhibition panels in the same design for all companies, which can be mounted in an exhibition. We have letterhead throughout the group, which again is corporately identified. Every group advertisement carries a CVIS. We have company tie, cufflinks, bag labels, lapel pins, scarves, badges, umbrella, calendars and pocket diaries. They are all being done internally.

The corporate communications executive of a leading construction firm emphasised the widespread applications of their CVIS:

We do consider it is important that the CVIS should be applied in as many instances as possible. We have got it on vans, sign boards, sites, stationery, compliment slips, flags, the lot.

Indigenous UK multinational corporations with high CVIS standardisation have found that this strategy provides far greater effectiveness in projecting a consistent identity. This strategy is most effective when applied to promotional tools used and distributed by the organisation on a regular basis. Identical company name, similar symbol, consistent typography and standardised colours should appear on these items to enable the audience to view the organisation as a single and unified entity. A high degree of CVIS standardisation applied to the promotional tools projects a consistent global corporate visual identity.

The benefit of a stable corporate image projected across a wide communications mix has implications for practitioners, and particularly for marketing. Competition means that products will continue to change, making the role of the extended marketing mix important in providing the continuity and security that customers want. However, firms often meet short-term competitive pressures by changing promotions, the most visible part of their marketing mix. Place and price have limited communications potential so the continuity that people need depends heavily on the four Ps that are beyond the scope of marketing: participants, physical evidence, processes and publications. To avoid the image of a firm being pulled about by rapidly changing products and promotions, firms need to pay increasing attention to obtaining and retaining a strong corporate visual identity at their core.

How far should a company go in communicating its corporate identity across an extended marketing mix? Virgin has a friendly personality but its success depends upon the name being used across diverse products. Using Virgin's name on failing balloons does not seem to damage its identity but unreliable trains do. The Virgin name works on planes and cola but should the company take advantage of its security staff's uniforms and vehicles to extend

its visibility? Although there is good reason to promote a strong corporate visual identity across the extended marketing mix, there are limits for all businesses.

The increasing importance of CVIS creates opportunities for academic research. Much past research has focused on brands yet increasingly tightly targeted brand names (such as Smarties) appear alongside corporate names and symbols (Nestlé) that are used across many markets. When used in combination both the CVIS and brand name communicate their different values to the stakeholders; Smarties communicates “lots, colourful and fun” while Nestlé communicates “Swiss, big multinational and baby milk” (in more than one context). Is this dual use synergistic across all brands and stakeholders? While used together the brand and CVIS absorb some of each other’s identity. What is the magnitude and duration of that transfer? CVIS could also carry values between brands, say from Smarties, through Nestlé, to Alta Rica coffee. Do such transfers occur and what is their long-term impact on brand perception?

Does a well-communicated CVIS limit the ability of the company to address changing market needs that are not in sympathy? Where the products of a company are chasing different market needs, are there sets of values that are sufficiently central and powerful that they add value across all likely market shifts?

Do the elements of the extended marketing mix communicate equally? For example, does the CVIS on a truck convey the same as the CVIS in an ad or on a building? If not, how do the media moderate the message?

Many of these academic research questions ponder the influence of CVIS over time, so suggest tracking studies using econometric analysis as a means of investigation. Live experiments are risky and expensive, so natural experiments, where CVIS changes are introduced as an intervention variable, could measure their impact on aggregated measures, such as share price or sales. Limitations of this approach are the need to wait for natural experiments, access to sales data, its weakness in capturing qualitative changes, and the difficulty of capturing small effects in busy markets.

Laboratory techniques are less realistic than live studies but conjoint experiments provide a powerful tool for measuring the qualitative and quantitative impact of CVIS. Both before and after being shown stimuli including CVIS on products or other “vehicles”, stakeholders could be asked to rank their favoured options and explain their choice. If price is included as a stimulus, conjoint analysis could show the part worth of the CVIS and its interaction with other products, brand names and the rest of the marketing mix. Parallel experiments could measure the contribution of the CVIS in different marketing environments and repeated experiments measure temporal effects.

With the increased churning of new products and the ever-growing chatter of promotions, the brand – that most ethereal phenomenon – becomes the primary source of continuity and trust. As products and competitors

proliferate, it is the names and images most repeated that will dominate. It is the identities with the highest share of “noise” that will lodge in people’s minds. Global CVIS, with all aspects of a company’s activity building awareness and attitudes, provides the greatest opportunity to win a piece of customers’ minds by giving them peace of mind. The results of this study suggest that the users of global CVIS know the breadth and depth of its appeal.

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