The dynamics of corporate brand charisma: Routinization and activation at Carlsberg IT

Mary Jo Hatch [a,*], Majken Schultz [b]

[a] Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School, Kilevej 14 A-2000, Copenhagen F., Denmark
[b] Copenhagen Business School, USA

Summary This article describes how Carlsberg Group's IT unit (CIT) made use of Carlsberg's corporate brand to develop its identity following centralization and downsizing of the IT function. Our observations suggested using the concept of brand charisma and thereafter we framed our analysis with Weber's theory of the routinization of charisma. The study took place in the relatively unusual context of a truncated rollout of a formal corporate branding program, which allowed us to study the processes by which brand charisma was routinized. Findings indicate the important intermediary role played by middle managers who selected and systematized the set of brand beliefs taken up within the CIT project, and how employees accommodated these beliefs to their everyday work life. Accommodation was found to take place within four subdomains of activity: subculture, communication, technology, and hierarchical control. A key finding is that, through their reception and activation of brand charisma, the CIT employees contributed greatly to the endowment of charisma their brand carried. A revised Weberian model of the dynamic relationships between the routinization of charisma and its reception and activation constitutes our contribution to corporate branding theory. The article also offers empirical evidence in support of extending Weberian scholarship further into the field of brand management.
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In response to Marshall Meyer (1990), who questioned Max Weber's relevance to contemporary organization studies, Lounsbury and Carberry (2005) countered that, although Weberian scholarship in organization studies has dwindled, Weber's theories continue to offer fertile ground to organizational researchers. To illustrate their point, Lounsbury and Carberry used Weber's work to explain globalization, post-industrialism, and varieties of capitalism in the information age. We think that corporate branding is another contemporary phenomenon amenable to Weberian analysis and devote this article to exploring what Weber's theory of the routinization of charisma might reveal about corporate branding.

Interest in corporate branding migrated into organization studies from marketing, mainly in relation to research on organizational identity. In the realm of management practice, Olins (1989), Kapferer (1992), Ind (2001, 2003), Hatch and Schultz (2001) and Balmer and Greyser (2003) were among those who made connections between organizational identity and corporate brand management. Somewhat later, in the academic literature, Hatch and Schultz (2008) proposed organizational identity theory as a foundation for understanding how corporate branding works, while Kärreman and Rylander (2008) and Tarnovskaya (2011) presented

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 978 356 8742; fax: +1 978 356 8742.
E-mail address: mjhatch@virginia.edu (M.J. Hatch).

empirical evidence of how employees used corporate brands as sources of meaning in their organizational identity work.

Our study of the role corporate branding played in a case of organizational identity building in Carlsberg Group's IT function prompted us to investigate the concept of brand charisma, a term Smothers (1993) introduced into marketing in relation to product branding. Following Weber (1922/66), Smothers argued that brand charisma is a social construction of the consumers and customers who give a product brand its legitimacy. This article extends Smothers' concept of brand charisma from product to corporate branding and thereby turns empirical attention from consumers' relationships to brands to those of employees. We then move considerably beyond Smothers' thesis to investigate whether Weber's theory of the routinization of charisma explains *how* Carlsberg's corporate brand exercised charisma.

We begin by reviewing the literature on brand charisma and Weber's definition and theory of how charismatic leadership becomes routinized. We then abstract from Weber a framework for the analysis of our case consisting of three more or less sequential stages, each operating in a different hierarchical domain: (1) introduction of brand beliefs by top management; (2) their systematization by middle management; and (3) their reception and activation by employees. The empirical data to which we apply the framework comes primarily from interviews conducted with members of the IT unit of Carlsberg Group (CIT), and from material they created to document their process. In conformance to the theory of routinization laid out by Weber, our data analysis describes the role middle management played in systematizing brand beliefs, and the CIT employees' accommodation of these beliefs to their everyday life.

Discussion then focuses on how the activities we observed not only accomplished the routinization of charisma, but also account for the endowment of charisma the brand carries. Endowment, we postulate, consists of at least two interrelated processes defined as the reception ↔ activation of brand charisma. We conclude that interactions between the endowment and routinization of brand charisma observed in our case study extend Weber's theory and reveal the dynamics of corporate brand charisma. Finally we present some implications of our findings for practicing brand managers.

Corporate brands and Weber's theory of charisma

Although Smothers introduced the concept of brand charisma back in 1993, few have followed up on this idea. Those referring to his work tend either to underplay or dismiss it. In their review of brand equity theory, Thakor and Kohli (1996) lumped brand charisma together with brand image, brand personality, brand affinity, brand relationships and brand attitude, as if there were no significant differences between these constructs. Meanwhile McWilliam (1997), in justifying his study of low involvement brands, accused Smothers of reifying brands by suggesting they could have charisma. Reification being at the time and for some time since considered a mortal sin among the ranks of social scientists, the debate seems to have ended with McWilliam's critique. However, after studying Carlsberg Group employees'

strongly emotional reception of a corporate brand initiative and what prompted it, we are inclined to come down on Smothers' side.

The case for brand charisma Smothers (1993) presented departs from the observation that many more powerful brands exist than can be accounted for by the presence of charismatic leaders, for example, Coke, Nike and BMW. Although instances of leaders providing significant personal charisma to their corporate brands can be found — Apple's Steve Jobs and Richard Branson's Virgin — considerably more products and brands ignite the fervent passions of their constituents than there are charismatic corporate leaders to account for their power and influence.

Smothers (1993) relied on Weber (1922/66) to provide a definition and an explanation for product brand charisma. Weber (1947: 329) defined charisma as ''a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities.'' According to Smothers, establishing that a brand has charisma amounts to demonstrating it is endowed with exceptional qualities by those it touches.

Reasoning by analogy, Smothers then argued that, if the social construction of a leader's charisma occurs among his or her followers, consumers similarly construct what charisma a brand or product can claim. Although Smothers follows Weber in assigning responsibility for the social construction of brand charisma to consumers, he does not specify clearly how this process unfolds, which is one contribution this article will make. Another contribution is the extension of Smothers reasoning to employees' constructions of corporate brand charisma. A third is to bring the *routinization* of charisma into view. A major premise of our argument is that employees engage in the same processes that consumers use when they endow product brands with charisma, and that these processes are similar if not identical to those Weber used to explain the endowment of a leader with charisma and how that charisma comes to be routinized.

Weber had much to say on the matter of the processes through which charisma is routinized, somewhat less to say about its endowment. According to Weber (1968/78), although significant societal change originates in the introduction of new beliefs by a charismatic leader, the processes by which such change comes about take place within everyday life where the beliefs are subjected to routinization, which includes both systematization and accommodation processes (see Fig. 1).

According to Weberian scholar Schroeder (1992: 17, 20), Weber claimed that:

> ... the struggle between charisma and routinization describes the flux between the initially revolutionizing impact of beliefs and their eventual accommodation to everyday life. Not the origin of world-views, but their subsequent force in shaping conduct and social relations is important ... once beliefs have come into existence through the assertion of charisma, their reception among certain strata depends on the predispositions of these strata ... These predispositions, in turn, depend on the social circumstances of the various strata, on their position in relation to other strata and on their common way of life.