Mnemonic Entrepreneurship: The Visual Rhetoric of Corporate History

By Roy Suddaby & William Foster, University of Alberta

Mnemonic Entrepreneurship: The Visual Rhetoric of Corporate History

Roy Suddaby & William Foster, University of Alberta

There is a growing awareness that the modern business corporation competes, simultaneously, in two environments. First, corporations compete in the physical environment for material resources such as financial capital, input commodities and human labor. This element of competition forms the basis of most research in management and organizational theory. A second, and somewhat less understood arena of competition occurs in the *symbolic* environment, where firms compete for non-material resources such as legitimacy, status and reputation.

Much of our knowledge of the symbolic life-world of the modern corporation comes from two streams of management research. Studies of organizational culture have focused attention on the role of symbolic behavior in the *internal* environment of the firm (Martin, 2002). This stream attends to the use of techniques of symbolic management to facilitate the productive capacity of the corporation by generating stronger employee commitment through routines of socialization. By contrast, neo-institutional theory research attends largely to the role of symbolic behavior in a firm's external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This research focuses on understanding how the shared symbolic meaning systems facilitate conformity and change across groups of organizations.

Unfortunately, these two streams of research exist, largely, independent of each other, in spite of calls for greater unification (Schultz & Hinings, 2012). That is, there are few constructs in theories of organizational culture or neo-institutionalism that address phenomena that span both the internal and external life-worlds of modern corporations. There are, however, a few important exceptions. Legitimacy is one such exception. Legitimacy is well understood to address issues of a firm's alignment with externally established norms and values (Suchman, 1995). But there is also a new understanding of legitimacy as a form of judgment that occurs internally in the organization and, in some new research, internally in the cognition of individuals (Bitektine, 2012; Tost, 2012).

History is another construct that appears to unite the internal and external symbolic life-worlds of organizations. That is, history is increasingly understood to be a symbolic resource that firms can manage for competitive advantage (Gioia, Corley, & Fabbri, 2002; Suddaby, Foster, & Quinn-Trank, 2010) and is also seen as a powerful symbolic resource that can be used to socialize employees and help construct cultural coherence (Brunninge, 2009; Cutcher, 2008; Ericson, 2006; Holt, 2006). These researchers are intrigued by the observation that some corporations use history strategically to motivate employees, facilitate change, to promote a brand image or product and to crystallize a corporate culture. This approach to studying history as a manageable symbolic resource is quite different from prevailing economic approaches, which tend to see history as an empirical "given" that confers a competitive advantage on some firms, but serves to disadvantage others because

of its inertial (Oliver, 1996, 1997) or path dependent (Holbrook, Cohen, Hounshell, & Klepper, 2000) limitations on agency.

In order to distinguish these two approaches, theorists have adopted the term "rhetorical history" to refer to the understanding of history as a malleable and subjective cultural resource and "the past" to refer to the objective passing of events and time experienced by all organizations. Rhetorical history is defined as the "strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm" (Suddaby, Foster & Quinn-Trank, 2010: 157). This construct is built on a long-standing view of history as a discursive practice, rather than an objective account of the past. Writers as diverse as Thucidydes, Herodotus, Adam Smith and Hayden White have recognized that history is often used as a narrative designed to motivate change, construct the illusion of continuity and to create social meaning, rather than a scientific account of past events (Gronbeck, 1995).

We use the concept of rhetorical history, thus, as a theoretical lens to investigate how history is used as a tool for sense-making (Weick, 1995) or sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1996) in corporations. Our theoretical interest is in elaborating our understanding of rhetorical history as a managerial tool in organizations. For the past year we have been engaged in a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada to investigate how rhetorical history is used to create value and meaning inside Fortune 500 corporations. Empirically, we focus on three questions; *who* constructs rhetorical histories within the firm; *how* are they

maintained, and *what* specific rhetorical narratives of history are deployed within these corporations and to what purpose are they used.

Our initial results point to the use of "visual rhetoric" as a key mechanism of constructing rhetorical history. Visual rhetoric refers to the study of visual symbols from a rhetorical perspective – i.e. with an understanding that images are a form of text used to persuade audiences. Like all rhetoric, visual rhetoric occurs in a social context and is subject to certain conventions or socially agreed upon rules of communication (Burke, 1962). Corporations construct their own conventions of communication, particularly in the context of advertising (Pracejus, Olsen & O'Guinn, 2006), corporate art (Meggs, 1998; Wu, 2002) and corporate architecture (Berg & Kreiner, 1990; Gagliardi, 1990).

Fortune 500 corporations employ a broad range of mnemonic devices to articulate their rhetorical history. Perhaps the most common is the corporate museum (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2007) which is largely, devoted to external audiences. Internally, the most common media used to communicate rhetorical history to internal audiences are photographs (Trachtenberg, 2008) and mixed media that are combined to form a device known as the "history wall". Corporations also use a range of other media to articulate their history including monuments and installations (Wagner-Pacifici, 1996), pamphlets, brochures and websites (Delahaye, Booth, Clark, Procter, & Rowlinson, 2009; Gatti, 2011).

For purposes of the discussion I plan to present some illustrative examples of these various types of visual rhetoric. I will rely on three sources:

a) A digital pamphlet used to celebrate Coca Cola's 125th anniversary

b) A digital timeline used to celebrate General Mills' 75th anniversary

c) A digital timeline on the Google website

I hope to use this material to stimulate a discussion of the key research questions identified above – i.e. who creates rhetorical history, how is it presented and what are its intended and unintended uses.

Bitektine, A. (2011). Towards a theory of social judgments of organizations: The case of legitimacy, reputation, and status. *Academy of Management Review*, 36 (1): 151 - 179

Brunninge, O. (2009). Using history in organizations: How managers make purposeful reference to history in strategy processes. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 22*(1), 8-26.

Cutcher, L. (2008). Creating something: Using nostalgia to build a branch network. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 8*(3), 369-387.

Delahaye, A., Booth, C., Clark, P., Procter, S., & Rowlinson, M. (2009). The genre of corporate history. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 22*(1), 27-48.

DiMaggio, P. & W. W. Powell. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review,* 48: 147-60.

Ericson, M. (2006). Exploring the future exploiting the past. *Journal of Management History, 12*(2), 121-136.

Gatti, M. C. (2011). The language of competence in corporate histories for company websites. *Journal of Business Communication, 48*(4), 482-502.

Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Fabbri, T. (2002). Revising the past (while thinking in the future perfect tense). *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 15*(6), 622-634.

Holbrook, D., Cohen, W. M., Hounshell, D. A., & Klepper, S. (2000). The nature, sources, and consequences of firm differences in the early history of the semiconductor industry. *Strategic Management Journal, 21*(10-11), 1017-1041.

Holt, D. B. (2006). Jack Daniel's America: Iconic brands as ideological parasites and proselytizers. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 6*(3), 355-377.

Martin, J. (2002). Organizational Culture. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Oliver, C. (1996). The institutional embeddedness of economic activity. *Advances in Strategic Management, 13*, 163-186.

Oliver, C. (1997). Sustainable competitive advantage: Combining institutional and resource based views. *Strategic Management Journal, 18*(9), 697-713.

Schultz, M. & C.R. Hinings (2012). A comment at the Border between Institutional and Organizational Culture Theories. *Journal of Management Inquiry,* 21(1): 107-108.

Stigliani, I., & Ravasi, D. (2007). Organizational artefacts and the expression of identity in corporate museums at Alfa Romeo, Kartell and Piaggio,. In L. Lerpold, D. Ravasi, J. Van Renkom & G. Soenen (Eds.), *Organizational Identity in Practice* (pp. 197-214). London: Routledge.

Suddaby, R., Foster, W. M., & Quinn-Trank, C. (Eds.). (2010). *Rhetorical History as a Source of Competitive Advantage* (Volume 27 – The Globalization of Strategy Research ed. Vol. 27).

Tost, L. P. (2011). An Integrative Model of Legitimacy Judgments. *Academy of Management Review,* 36(4): 686-710.

Trachtenberg, A. (2008). Through a Glass, Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory. *Social Research, 75*(1), 111-132.

Wagner-Pacifici, R. (1996). Memories in the Making: The Shapes of Things That Went. *Qualitative Sociology, 19*(3), 301.

Wu, C. 2002. Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s. London: Verso.