Review

New developments in ICM: Image configuration method

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The purpose of this paper is to present the latest format of the Image Configuration Method, created to ensure through proper management, sustainability of organizational reputation as well of its brands and products image. ICM is a method to constantly monitor organization, brand and product image, which reflects on management and communication planning for each year. The method detects problems and opportunities for an organization’s image, helping to sustain and develop a good reputation. It has been theoretically developed and empirically tested since 1998, both in academic research and in management consulting.

Key words: Image configuration, image management, image research, image configuration method (ICM).

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important variables defining the consumers’ behavior is the image they build about the organization, their brands and products. Business’ management abilities include understanding how these images can be accessed and formed in the publics’ minds. The multiple definitions of image without accordance among them, have contributed to an unconsolidated method for image measurement in Marketing and Image Theory. Therefore, the main assumption underlying its development, according to De Toni (2005), states that images are representations, impressions, convictions and meaning networks related to an object (product, brand or organization), stored in memory in a holistic way.

A number of tools, routines and methods have been employed to examine the contents and the image organization of a brand, corporation and store. However, there is not any standardized technique already developed (Stern et al., 2001). This study proposes an Image Configuration Method (ICM) as the best way to capture consumers’ images regarding a certain study object. So, the Image Configuration Method (ICM) was designed to ensure through proper management, the sustainability of the best possible reputation an organization can achieve, among all its publics.

ICM offers a permanent image monitoring for the organization, its brands and products, with a direct influence on communication planning for each fiscal year.

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The method aims to (i) identify the organization image created among each group of stakeholders; (ii) detect emerging problems in the institutional image for each public, so that they can be solved before representing reputation problems and (iii) detect image improvement opportunities that will enable the sustaining of the firm's good reputation, as well as its evolution over time.

This method was developed through the work of many scholars (Sampaio, 1998; Caieron Júnior, 1999; Chala, 2000; De Toni, 2005) and has been theoretically improved and empirically tested since 1998, in academic research. Between 2003 and 2005, ICM development went through its most structured validity and reliability tests. The testing procedures, as well as a summary of the results, will be presented in this paper. For testing purposes, Cell Phones were chosen as image measurement objects. The research population comprised of undergraduate business students at three universities in the South of Brazil. A nonprobability convenience sampling technique was used.

The purpose of this paper is to present the Method's latest format after the constant evolutionary process it has gone through. Therefore, this research presents after a brief introduction, the Image Configuration Process in which the main stages of the ICM are described for both image identification and strategic image management; lastly the final remarks are presented.

THE IMAGE CONFIGURATION PROCESS

The ICM, presents the following steps: (a) defines the wanted image for the Organization (DNA definition), its brands and products; (b) identifies the target publics (segmentation and segment profile) and its stratification; (c) content configuration of the organizational image: (i) selects the target public and a typical sample for an exploratory phase of the research; (ii) identifies the image’s salient attributes, for the target public, as well as to create a distinction among the attributes closer to, and further from, the Inducing Term and (iii) classifies the identified attributes into categories according to the level of perception they refer to (the sensorial, emotional, rational, affective, symbolic, visionary and axiomatic levels); (d) grouping configuration of the organizational image: (i) selects a representative sample for the quantitative phase of the research; (ii) measures the importance and the satisfaction perceived through the image’s attributes and (iii) groups the attributes in importance and satisfaction’s factors; (e) displays the results in the Image Configuration Graph (ICGraph) and (f) provides suggestions of strategic actions for image management, according to the comparison between the results of data treatment and the DNA declaration, through the suggestions of strategic actions table (SSATable).

DNA Definition

To define the desired image in a clear simple fashion, so that it can be broadly shared both with the general public and with any other particular stakeholder group, ICM proposes a workshop, in which participation of the Board of Directors is essential. Defining the organization’s DNA basically means thinking about the nature of its mission, values and vision. These fundamental definitions are the basis for the company’s desired core and secondary attributes, which will also be declared in its brands and products. Because these definitions are not always fully aligned to help in defining DNA, an activity, called Archetype Definition, was designed to help achieve this. This workshop offers company workers the opportunity to interact in a light, entertaining, creative and productive way, taking them away from their usual work routines. The activity can remain restricted to the Board, but it can also be fully shared with the whole organization; this will create a general consciousness about and adherence to the declared DNA, helping the future efforts in internal communication.

Archetypes are examples of some of the innumerous primordial images that exist in collective unconscious. They are symbolic images that personify behavioral patterns and value scales. Symbols are powerful images and exert great influence over consciousness. When an organization’s strategic staff get together to conceive the firm from an archetypical point of view, its essence emerges naturally and effortlessly, helping to generate the most significant, adequate description on which to build the symbol, the organization wishes to present to the world: its image. This approach naturally leads to a syncretic description of its primordial activity (mission, purpose) and its basic action pattern (principles, values), looking for a construction in the long run (future vision). The creation of an archetype, therefore, generates a forceful expressive symbol, easy to communicate and strongly retained. If expressed through a created personage, then the essential set of attributes designed for the organization’s image becomes an easily identified anchor for its stakeholders.

PUBLICS’ IDENTIFICATION

The identification of the several organization publics is the first step, because each public presents common characteristics, in relation to the contact they establish with the organization forming, therefore, images that will probably present different trends. Gathering the public’s into one research effort could result in a scattered model without focus, which would provide the Communication Manager with little help in his future decision-making process. Otherwise, to treat each public individually would result in a simpler and more precise image.
Table 1. Structured interview for attribute survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image Dimensions</th>
<th>Basic Script Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top of mind attributes</td>
<td>1. When I say (Inducing Term), what is the first thing that comes to your mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. What other ideas come to your mind about (Inducing Term)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>3. Which feelings come to your mind about (Inducing Term)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>4. What do you like about (Inducing Term)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. What do you dislike about (Inducing Term)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td>6. What use does (Inducing Term) have for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensorial</td>
<td>7. Which physical sensations do (Inducing Term) remind you of (images, sounds, smells,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>flavors, vibration, temperature, weight)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic</td>
<td>8. What does (Inducing Term) represent to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visionary</td>
<td>9. What do you expect of (Inducing Term) in the future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiomatic</td>
<td>10. Which principles or life values does (Inducing Term) help you practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points of Comparison</td>
<td>11. How do you compare (Inducing Term) to (Similar Organization, Brand or Product)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projection</td>
<td>12. If (Inducing Term) were an animal, what would it be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. What is this animal like?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed by the authors.

Content configuration of the organizational image

During the first survey of an organization’s, product’s or brand’s image attributes, ICM will not determine those attributes *a priori*, but rather leave respondents free to spontaneously verbalize them. Due to the holistic nature of image, measurement models having only previously defined scales (such as hierarchies, attribute listings and rankings) must be complemented by other approaches, for these techniques primarily capture predetermined dimensions, rather than global representations (Dichter, 1985; Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). In order to reveal the salient image attributes for the object under investigation, ICM proposes a structured interview approach using a Basic Script with questions designed to offer the respondent stimuli to reveal the attributes, at all the levels of reality mentioned so far. Respondents are asked to answer questions in a free, spontaneous fashion without tensions or obligations, criticism or judgment. They are instructed to reveal the first idea that comes to mind, using free idea association (Guimelli, 1994).

The advantage of this technique is that it allows identifying the latent elements in people’s minds surrounding the brand’s or organization’s image without much rational control (Poiesz, 1989; Zimer and Golden, 1988). Based on this, ICM includes two initial questions in the structured interview to permit the respondent this free association of meanings. The other questions offer semi conducted stimuli, leading the respondent to evoke the image of the object under study from other points of view (dimensions of reality and perception). This structured interview can be applied orally or in writing. During instrument testing (De Toni, 2005; De Toni et al., 2011), both formats turned out to be equally adequate. It was noted that all the attributes identified through personal interviews are also present in the written form data collection, the latter having generated in all tests, a greater number of attributes.

Questions 1 and 2 in the interview (Table 1) help indiscriminately identify the attributes in the subject’s mind that are more closely linked to the mention of the organization, product or brand name. Those two questions aim to understand generically which type of mental representation the subject holds about the object (Dickson and Albaum, 1977). This way, it is easier to access the often non-rational top of mind contents permeating that image, those which are mostly responsible for the purchase decision. The other questions seek to add further complexity to the approach by repeating the same basic questioning from other standpoints (from the various image dimensions), thus forming a scale designed to offer respondents a larger number of opportunities to reveal the attributes comprising their image of the object in the study. The questions produce stimuli to make respondents position themselves from a sensorial, emotional, rational, affective, symbolic, visionary and axiomatic point of view. The logic behind the structured interview development has helped to achieve a form of questioning about those attributes which stands halfway between being simplistic and an extremely elaborated one, whose complex application could hinder its broad utilization in organizations.

Image attributes identification and their category split

The analysis of the collected data is done in three stages. The first stage comprises a content analysis of the
interview transcripts, in order to list the ideas verbalized by the participants in the study, thus generating the image attributes. The second step involves classifying the identified attributes into categories according to the level of perception they refer to. In other words, the sensorial, emotional, rational, affective, symbolic, visionary and axiomatic attributes are taken as pre-defined categories of the analysis. Since this classification strongly depends on subjective interpretation, ICM’s recommendation to minimize the biases caused by interpretation subjectivity is to have at least three judges identifying the attributes and their categorization (Malhotra, 2006). Analyzing the attribute allocation into categories through ICM, it is easy to perceive which type of predominant relationship the participants involved in the study have, in general with the organization, brand or product (whether sensorial, emotional, rational, affective, symbolic, visionary or axiomatic relationship). This can, quite securely direct the organization’s future communication plans, emphasizing arguments at the level of the predominant dimension. This procedure considers image as a multidimensional holistic event. An image is a mental model that represents an object and enables the mind to deal with this object through thinking. This image constitutes an indivisible whole, joining elements (attributes) of different natures (categories) and it can be understood by appraising its diverse forming components in their intimate interaction and mutual influence (Zielke, 2011).

For ICM, an organization or brand image is made up of seven main dimensions. The first dimension (Sensorial Dimension) is the physical level of perception, which generates information directly linked to the material world and to what is captured by the sensorial organs, example, the sensorial attributes (Stern et al., 2001). The second dimension (Emotional Dimension) is formed by the emotional level of perception. The observer makes a judgment about the perceived sensorial data, an evaluation of their interest, usefulness and goodness that provokes moods, interest or affection. These emotional attributes will constitute an important part of the brand or organization image (Martinez and Chernatony, 2004; Ledoux, 2001; Aaker et al., 2011). The third dimension (Rational Dimension) of consciousness towards a perceived object is the mental level of perception, in which evaluations of a pragmatic, functional and logic kind nature are made. This generates the image’s rational attributes (Deely, 1990). The information captured in the first three dimensions of perception grant to the individual the affective level of perception, featuring the fourth dimension (Affective Dimension) which, differently from the reactive, emotional level, contains more elaborated feelings. Such feelings assess the value of the object for the individual's socialization and affective interaction with the environment, leading to the recognition or denial of its usefulness, to respect show gratitude for its existence and to a valorization of its characteristics. These are the affective attributes that act upon the decision making process in favor of a brand or organization (Park et al., 1986).

The fifth dimension is related to symbolic level of perception (Symbolic Dimension) which allows the already named and categorized phenomenon to be included into the mental sphere, generating closer connections to the signs already present in the individual’s repertory. Thus individuals, getting in touch with an object, also take into consideration its symbolic attributes, for example, whatever it may represent to them (Levy, 1981; Dichter, 1985; Rucker and Galinsky, 2008) and what it may connote and denote about the individuals in their social relations. According to Caryl and Saint Paul (2010), distortion is the process that let us introduce change into our sensorial experience and reinvent what is perceived, generating the sixth dimension (Visionary Dimension), to take into account the visionary level of perception, which re-describes the world according to what we wish, fear or decide. It is not what the individual sees, tests and possesses but what he idealizes about the organization or brand, often projected as future expectations. The visionary attributes constitute an important image dimension for organizations seeking to profit from their stakeholders’ tendencies, in order to favorably improve their image and reputation. Finally there is the seventh dimension (Axiomatic Dimension) related to axiomatic level of perception, involving the main values an object may represent for people, who will search for and adopt it when they realize that it helps them live in this world by their personal life principles (Roehrich et al., 1989; Beatty et al., 1996). This level is connected to the very meaning of a person’s life and to his perception of purpose (mission) and principles.

When an organization or brand image is conceived as a holistic event, made up of many dimensions interacting to constitute its reality, assessing it through research also requires thinking in a methodologically holistic way. Seeking to grant content validity to the procedure, references from other authors, addressing the same issue with similar purposes, were searched (Zimer and Golden, 1988; Abric, 1996; Sà, 1998; Vergès and Tyszka, 1994; Sampaio, 1998; Caieron Júnior, 1999; Chala, 2000; De Toni 2005; Schuler et al., 2009). The results they found inspired designing the format used for questioning the sample in this step of the ICM. Other studies underlying the interview development, apart from the already mentioned, acknowledged the presence of several attribute categories. Some of them defend the holist approach to mental image (Zaltman, 1996; Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008; Dickson and Albaum, 1977); some an informal tone for the interview (Poiesz, 1989) and others the use of projective methods. Some studies deal with the importance that the meaning of the image object holds for individuals (Levy, 1981), while others consider its usefulness (Cardozo, 1974; Stern et al., 2001).
Table 2. Example of value ascription to attributes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SI</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Respondents (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ID</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>F M M F F M F M M F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25 32 48 21 23 33 34 40 38 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Segment</td>
<td>Sales RH Mkt PR PR Mkt RH Mkt Sales RH Mkt</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>VO</th>
<th>VF</th>
<th>VO</th>
<th>VF</th>
<th>VO</th>
<th>VF</th>
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<th>VO</th>
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<th>VF</th>
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<th>VF</th>
<th>VO</th>
<th>VF</th>
<th>VT</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social responsibility</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognized</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profitability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promising</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Visionary</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Rational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed by the authors.

Identifying the attributes centrality

The third stage of content configuration using ICM refers to the frequency and order of appearance of the image attributes generated by content analysis of the interviews, for the organization under study. This procedure was initially proposed by Abric (1996) and Vergès (1992) with the purpose of creating a distinction between the attributes closer to, and further from, the inducing term. In ICM, only the first five attributes cited by the respondent receive order values (the first one cited = 5; the second cited = 4; the third = 3; the fourth = 2; and the fifth = 1). All the attributes cited during the interview receive a frequency value (= 1 per respondent). The attributes generated by the content analysis are listed on a table (Table 2, below) indicating their order values (OV), frequency values (FV) and their total values (TV = OV + FV)

Assigning an appearance order value differentiates the most salient among the several cited attributes. This procedure seems reasonable because, when an attribute is cited in the first place, this indicates a strong connection to the object's mental image in that particular respondent's view. This theoretical assumption has also been adopted by researchers in social representations and central nucleus theory (Abric, 1996; Minayo, 1997; Moscovici, 1997; Vergès, 1992; Vergès and Tyska, 1994; Sá, 1998), when they used a similar procedure to distinguish the structural elements of the central nucleus of social representations, in the methodological design proposed for that goal.

The total values, achieved by combining attribute order and citation frequencies, are utilized as parameters to locate them in different areas of proximity to the inducing term, (that is, the organization’s name). The listing of total values is analyzed using the quartile division technique, which yields four intervals. The interval generated by the highest values, holds the attributes considered pertinent to the core image. The quartile corresponding to the interval with the next highest values is considered as the first image periphery. The quartile with the lowest values is simply called image margin. The quartile division derives from studying the results of other procedures (Abric, 1996; Minayo, 1997; Vergès and Tyska, 1994) and from all the research prior to the development of this instrument (Sampaio, 1998; Caieron Júnior, 1999; Chala, 2000). Both in quantitative as in qualitative studies, the most relevant attributes for image formation made up a percentile close to twenty five percent of the total of attributes revealed. After verifying this, the quartile division was adopted to meet the Method’s purposes. Adopting this criterion as a process has generated constant indications of efficiency (De Toni, 2005).

The image attribute analysis by ICM so far described, constitute the image content configuration stage, whose methodology chosen to verify reliability uses such methods as test-retest,
alternative-forms and internal consistency, as well as convergent and pragmatic validity (Malhotra, 2006). To test-retest reliability, data collection was made at two different times, with a seventeen-day interval and with the same group of respondents (94 undergraduate students in São Paulo, Brazil). As a result, round one interviews revealed 31 attributes, whereas round two interviews revealed 29, with a 2-attribute difference in relation to the first. The procedure’s alternative-forms reliability and convergent validity were assessed by submitting the same data set to ICM and to an alternative procedure, normally employed by researchers for the same purpose. The EVOC, software used in social psychology is a tool, broadly validated and accepted in academia, to define the core set of an image’s attributes (its social representations). A comparative analysis of the results in both tests showed that the five attributes identified as core image components (based on Vergès and Tyszka’ (1994) criteria are 100% present in the core image configured through ICM (De Toni, 2005). The same precision was not found in the image peripheral system, indicating the need for further studies to search for reasons for this divergence and to refine the approach for more precision.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed applying the split-half approach to the sample. The test results show that, among the eight attributes identified as cell phones’ core image components by the total sample, only one is not present in half 1 and only one attribute is absent from half 2, indicating a 87.5% coincidence. Applying the split-half approach to the attribute breakdown by categories, a .85 Pearson correlation coefficient was obtained, being that this correlation significant at the level of .01 (De Toni, 2005). Seeking further evidence of validity, the attributes and their relative positioning generated by the ICM procedure were compared, using content analysis, to the attributes and metaphor levels (deep, theme and superficial) identified in a previous study carried out by Kraft and Nique (2002) using ZMET (zaltman metaphor elicitation technique), also to configure cell phone image among the same universe of university students. From the 18 categories found by Kraft and Nique (2002) using ZMET, only one attribute was not identified by the ICM procedure. Another important comparison between ZMET’s and ICM’s results are the set of attributes grouped at the level of deep metaphors (ZMET) and the attributes comprising the core image (ICM), which present an important level of coincidence. Those two figures can be considered as theoretically equivalent. The results provide evidence of possible convergent validity for this set of ICM procedures and encourage recommending future research to generate further evidence (De Toni, 2005).

In order to verify pragmatic validity in the procedure to distinguish between core and peripheral image attributes, two similar samples were drawn from the same universe. A reverse test was run, in which the respondents in the first sample were administered the set of cell phones attributes located through ICM in the core image, to verify if respondents could identify which product those attributes referred to. The second sample was administered a set of cell phones peripheral attributes, as defined by ICM. So, in the first stage of the research, interviewees were asked to answer what first came to their mind when the product name (Cell Phone) was mentioned. In the reverse test, the opposite was done; in other words, the aim was to identify which product came to mind when that set of attributes was presented to the respondents.

Presenting cell phones’ core image attributes to the first sample provoked recognition by 90.9% of the 44 respondents, while only 4 of them (9.1%) identified those attributes as a computer. But presenting cell phones peripheral image attributes resulted in a significant drop in product recognition: only 47.7% of that sample declared that the attributes belonged to a cell phone. Fifty percent (50%) of the sample identified a computer in the set of attributes and even one respondent (2.3% of the sample) thought of a robot.

These results suggest discriminant validity for the instrument, since the measurement of core image attributes differs significantly, due to product recognition, from the measurement of image margin attributes. Such difference is supposed to be generated by using the instrument. From the results obtained with the sequence of ICM procedures for image content configuration starts the grouping configuration stage, which will be presented in the next section.

GROUPINGS CONFIGURATION OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE

ICM’s next steps in analyzing an organization, brand or product image consist of: (i) measuring perceived importance for image attributes; (ii) measuring perceived satisfaction with those attributes and (iii) grouping attributes into factors (importance and satisfaction factors). Applying ICM in the development and testing phases showed that there is no significant relationship between an attribute’s total value, as revealed in the content configuration phase and the importance given to it. We found attributes with high mean importance scores in the image margin, as well as attributes with low mean importance scores in the core image. Identifying the degree of importance for each attribute, together with their level of perceived satisfaction among participants in the study, is important information for image management, helping to detect problem areas and image opportunities, as well as to define the focus for future management of the organizational image. Importance factors help in identifying the networks of
meaning created inside the mental model of the participants involved in the study. Each generated factor reflects the closest interconnection of a data set in the mental model, according to the idealized image the respondents have formed regarding the organization or brand. Satisfaction factors help in understanding the networks of attributes that interrelate to create respondents’ satisfaction with the organization or brand. Generating satisfaction factors is useful for future image management because, when two closely related attributes (for example: price and quality) are found, improving satisfaction with one of them will probably entail improving satisfaction with the other, as they tend to vary jointly in the minds of consumers in that segment.

The groupings configuration stage is performed with another sample, equally representative of the same universe (same public) and much larger than the sample used in the content configuration stage (this one can be included in the new sample). Using random samples selected via usual sampling methods is recommended.

Measuring the importance and satisfaction’s levels of the image attributes

This segment is intended to measure the importance and satisfaction degree concerning the product attributes raised in the content configuration. Such procedure may be optional according to the objectives of each organization. This is important to identify how important and satisfied one is in respect with the most outstanding attributes in the mind of the target public.

Developing the importance and satisfaction questionnaires is done by using the list of attributes revealed during the first stage survey, accompanied by an importance and satisfaction scale that respondents are asked to check. In the latest ICM format developed, attribute importance and satisfaction are measured using ratio, metric, numbered scales (Hair et al., 2005), for digital media, on which respondents score the importance and satisfaction (raging from 0 to 10, according to Figure 1) for the image attributes previously surveyed. According to Figure 1, the use of a scale to measure the importance or satisfaction is generated by a disposition of an attribute list raised upon the content configuration stage, followed by interval scales of Linker sort, on which the respondents attributed a degree of importance or satisfaction for each analyzed attribute.

Grouping the attributes in importance and satisfaction factors

After this step in the measurement process, attribute importance and satisfaction mean scores are added to the information on the linkage between attributes and the image object. Importance and satisfaction ratings are used to generate the importance and satisfaction factors and to identify the nature of the links among the image elements that are being configured.

The procedures used in the groupings configuration stage were tested for validity and reliability. Evidence of alternative-forms reliability, convergent and pragmatic validity was searched. For the test with cell phones, a mentioned above, a questionnaire was developed using the results of the attribute list revealed in the content configuration phase, and pretested with a sample of 35 students chosen through a judgmental sampling technique. Another sample of 322 students was used to collect the data used in the other testing procedures (De
Convergent validity and alternative-forms reliabilities were tested for the method, through a comparison of its results especially those treatments created by Régis Gras (Gras et al., 2006) for the same purpose (the CHIC software). The same set of data was analyzed, in order to check how precisely factor analysis outlined the groupings as compared to CHIC (De Toni, 2005). The results obtained show that, among the 25 image attributes of cell phones, 21 (84%) of them were grouped the same way both by factor analysis and by the similarity analysis done by CHIC. The chosen way to approach the procedure’s pragmatic validity was a reverse test, or an interinduction test of the aggregated attributes. This procedure uses the attribute with the highest factor loading in each grouping, together with the product name, as a stimulus to evaluate the power, this pair has to evoke recall of the remaining factor components. In average, all the testing done for this procedure yielded an 85% coincidence of the attributes belonging to the factors with the ones cited by respondents, when the attribute with the highest factor loading was used as inducing term.

**PRESENTATION PROCEDURES**

Based on the results in the content configuration and groupings configuration stages, a report is produced, consisting mainly of an image configuration graph and a suggestion of strategic actions table.

**The image configuration graph (ICGraph)**

Based on the results of data treatment, a graph can be drawn to display those results (ICGraph), as in Figure 2, below. It gives an example of employing this method to configure an organization’s internal image. Laying out the research findings graphically help to visualize the studied image configuration synthetically. The graphic presents several basic information and constitutes a practical tool to direct the strategic actions of an organization in relation to its products and services. Visually displaying such important information on a graph helps decision making in areas like institutional, marketing and business communication. The first important piece of information is how close image-forming attributes are to the inducing term. The example of ICGraph in Figure 2 shows that the organization’s core image is made up by the attributes “employees’ personal and professional value recognition” (11); “personal well-being at work” (01) and “current salaries” (06). These attributes conceptually define the organization for this public, for they were the most promptly and frequently mentioned by the sample of workers involved in the study. All the remaining information in the mental model lies in different areas of the image periphery. We could...
build a description of this firm, from people who work there, such as “an organization that valorizes its staff, taking care of their well-being at work and a remuneration that could be better”. The second most relevant piece of information is the possibility to visualize the attributes considered extremely important (outlined in black) and extremely satisfactory (with a grey shade) by that public. At the same time, the graph depicts each attribute in colors representing its dimension (sensorial = red; emotional = orange; rational = yellow; affective = green; symbolic = indigo; visionary = dark blue; axiomatic = purple), forming a complete picture of the necessary information to understand the image at that particular time. Of the attributes forming the core image in the example above, it can be said that “employees’ personal and professional value recognition” (11, affective) is both extremely important and extremely satisfactory. This represents a very positive point for the organization to use as a favorable argument with this public whenever necessary. “Personal well-being at work” (01, emotional) is also an extremely important and satisfactory attribute, indicating a very favorable position for the organization in the view of its employees. “Current salaries” (06, sensorial) were not considered satisfactory; this is not rare, for it is quite difficult to have someone declaring a total satisfaction with one’s pay. It is quite interesting, though, to notice that salaries were not considered extremely important, revealing a reasonable degree of satisfaction by employees, who feel they work for this organization for more important reasons than money alone.

We can infer that the set of attributes considered by the public involved in the study as important elements of the organization’s concept are those corresponding to the idealized organizational image. It is this set of attributes the public desires for the firm. So, Factor 1, in Figure 2, unites some of the attributes referring to the “quality of services rendered by the organization” and is considered important as a whole (including all its attributes) by the internal public. However, most of these attributes are in the image margin, for example, they are not immediately recalled by this public as part of the organization’s mental model. This is an important clue for communication managers, since they can learn from these results that the organizational image could become more favorable for this public, if the quality factor were brought closer to the core image.

The suggestions of strategic actions table (SSATable)

Observing the image configuration graph (Figure 2), some conclusions can be drawn about the current state of an organization’s, brand’s or product’s image in the view of a particular public. ICM offers a fairly standardized way of displaying those conclusions to help concerned managers and top management discuss them. The purpose of the image configuration graph is to become a strategic tool for image management. Thus, from the relative position of each attribute on the graph, it is possible to direct communication strategies according to the organizational goals. A report of the proposed strategies, in table form, analyzes the main attributes according to their positions, values and relationships, showing possible directions for a better management of that particular image.

Table 3, presents the basic format suggested to display and discuss the results of ICM’s application. The table is called suggestions of strategic actions for image management. According to the position of each attribute before the proximity in relation to inductor term and its perceived importance, distinct managerial actions can be out into action according to the organization’s objectives. Therefore, the closer an attribute is to the inductor term and the larger its relative importance for the respondents, the attribute is likely to be stronger upon the purchase decision. For Abric (1996), the attributes located close to the inductor term depends on the frequency, regency and vivacity with which a certain public perceives the attribute attached to the studied product image. Therefore, upon proposing modifications in the proximity of the attributes that belong to the central image, a larger investment of time and resources is needed, since they are vividly present in the target public’s mind.

So, employing ICM generates a considerable volume of information on the organization, brand or product image. This information, spontaneously evoked by the participants involved in the study without any attribute definition a priori, is strategic for organizational communication management as it shows the ways for decision making in strategic planning for the next fiscal year. In this sense, the many applications of ICM are able to reveal its power as a strategic management tool, one which has been gradually adopted by organizations as the main guideline for their yearly strategic planning.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Images constitute one of the most important intellectual for human beings, which is able to influence and direct people behavior. Therefore, the comprehension of images that several publics form about a product constitutes an important competitive edge in the direction of placement strategies of an organization or production in the market, as well as for the communication compound to better support its performance in the market.

Zaltman (1996) states that due to customers’ complex behavior, this phenomenon needs to be approached in a multidisciplinary way, in a holistic way, in which body, mind, emotions and spirit can be equally and interrelatedly considered. A better understanding about people implies understanding them thoroughly, not only one
Table 3. Suggestions of strategic actions for image management (SSATable)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Attribute Type</th>
<th>Strategic Actions for Image Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core Image</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>When an attribute positive for the image and important for employees is in the Core Image, this position should be kept, first by making sure that the attribute is always present and constantly improved. Secondly, the attribute should be stressed in communications to become linked to the idea under investigation. This attribute is an excellent argument and may represent a persuasive differential, in some cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less Important</td>
<td>When an attribute that is positive for the image is in the Core Image but is not perceived as very important by employees, it may require less maintenance, but not to the point of complete neglect. A good internal communication job may stress the attribute’s importance and throw it into the spotlight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Finding in the Core Image an unfavorable image attribute, that is considered as very important by employees, demands disconnecting this attribute from the idea under investigation. This can be done through intense communication efforts, including reinforcement of more positive attributes, over which the organization has control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less Important</td>
<td>These attributes should be separated from the Core Image, while other desirable concepts are reinforced. This is less serious than cases where the attribute is considered important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral Image</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Intense use of communication, linking the attribute to the communication theme to frequently reinforce it and to bring it closer to the Core Image. Depending on the case, it may be convenient to replace a negate attribute in the central position. Whenever possible, use communications to reinforce these attributes, to bring them closer to the Core Image and to increase employees’ perception of their importance. They can be used as substitutes for negative attributes in the Peripheral Image, in efforts to disconnect the negative ones coupled with actions to reinforce the presence of these positive attributes in employees’ minds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less Important</td>
<td>Work, whenever possible, to disconnect these attributes from the image, both in its identity as in its communication. Reduce the perception of their importance, stressing other aspects considered more positive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>The less reference is made to these attributes, the more likely they will be forgotten.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed by the authors.

single aspect. Thus, reality levels through which ICM approaches images match the conscience level to which people have been having access along their vital development. From different studies carried out in both academic and practical contexts (De Toni, 2005) it has been identified that ICM is a valid and reliable tool to measure and better understand how images configurate in the mind of the target public being studied.

Among the managerial implications of ICM, one must highlight that research efforts must be directed to identifying how consumers perceives products, brands, prices, organizations and how these influence their choices (Boom, 2011). The formation of any strategy of communication and image strengthening may begin with an analysis of images consumers have of the studied object. Identifying and measuring the dimensions that compose a product image, brand or organization helps define strategies, mainly when focused on satisfaction and retention of customers within a perspective of customers’ lifetime value in order to reach profitability for the organization (Kamakura et al., 2002). Once identified, the image configuration of the investigated object before a certain public, the communication manager is supposed to influence the organization’s guidelines so that each contact of the target public with the organization can be an agent to form the intended image.

After twelve years of development, application and constant evolution, ICM represents a valid and trust-worthy method for organizational reputation management. Each and every one of its procedures have been repeatedly tested for validity and reliability (Sampaio, 1998; Caieron Júnior, 1999; Chala, 2000; De Toni, 2005) and its application is constantly reviewed for greater practicability. New applications, however, may indicate new paths for development, as well as new evidence of its effectiveness.
Finally, it is worth remarking that this new evolutionary step of ICM, image configuration method of images, brands, products and services, in its procedure of content configuration represents a progress in the efficacy with which ICM reveals an image of objects of marketing management. This extension of sight to several dimensions that compose a market image reduces risk margin for loss of opportunities to explore argumentation, on behalf of organizations, brands and products, taking into account outstanding, important and determinant aspects for consumers’ markets in their purchase decision. As these decisions are recent, forthcoming research suggestions regard active experimentation in this form of image treatment, thus allowing the discovery of refinements more and more meaningful upon the consideration of multidimensional market image.

**Conflict of Interests**

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

**REFERENCES**


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