ORGANIZATIONAL PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The phenomena of organizational perception management is hardly new. The efforts of organizational spokespersons to protect and manage positive images, identities, or reputations of their organizations can be found in historical accounts of the Roman Catholic Church, and the universities of ancient Greece. The same perception management problems that plagued these early organizations (e.g. threats of illegitimacy due to changes in social norms; face-saving following scandals or accidents), continue to confront organizations today. During the past thirty years, these types of issues have been studied by organizational scholars in attempts to understand how perception management tactics affect the views and support critical audiences' (i.e. those audiences on which the organization depends for support). This paper provides an overview of this research and a framework defining the primary components of organizational perception management. This framework distinguishes organizational perception management from individual perception management in terms of its practical implementation and strategic nature.

INTRODUCTION

In the waning months of 1996 the National Rifle Association (NRA) found itself at a low-point in terms of public perceptions and support. Over the previous two years,

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the non-profit organization – incorporated in 1871 to provide firearms training and promote shooting sports – had been forced to end its high-profile assignment as the governing body for U.S. Olympic shooting (Longman, 1994), lost almost 1 million dues-paying members (Broder, 1996), and run up a debt of more than forty million dollars in its attempts to promote pro-gun legislation (Zremski, 1996). These events reflected growing criticism of the organization's focus by mainstream gun owners.

Beginning in the early 1980s the NRA began to shift its focus from supporting sportsmen and hunters, to political battles over gun control (Zremski, 1996). The organization's extreme political stance on gun control was embodied by NRA president, Wayne LaPierre. In late 1996, LaPierre claimed that that the U.S. government agents who stormed the, now famous, Waco compound of the Branch Davidian cult (whose members were protecting themselves with an arsenal of personally-owned firearms) were no more than, "jack-booted thugs" (Zremski, 1996, p. 1A). This remark led former president George Bush to publicly tear up his NRA membership card, and eventually led LaPierre to step down from his position in the organization (Zremski, 1996).

In light of these events, the activist group, Handgun Control Inc., through its legislative director, suggested, in late 1996, that the NRA was in "very severe difficulty," adding that "it's political clout is diminished, and its very future is in doubt" (Broder, 1996, p. A14). In short, it appeared that perceptions of the NRA, among both members and potential members, were increasingly negative. The organization was clearly in need of perception management.

DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

Organizational perception management involves *actions that are designed and carried out by organizational spokespersons to influence audiences' perceptions of the organization*. This definition is grounded in psychological research on individual impression management and identity management (Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981), as well as in empirical studies of impression management and identity management strategies by organizations and their spokespersons (Elsbach, 1999, 2001a; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Staw et al., 1983).

I use the term perception management, instead of the more commonly-heard term of impression management, as a means of providing a more inclusive, overarching nomenclature for tactics used to affect audiences' perceptions. The term "impression management" has been typically used to refer to the management of externally-focused perceptions of individuals, groups, or organizations (i.e.

images and reputations). In one of the most oft-quoted primers on impression management, Schlenker (1980, p. 6) defines impression management as "*the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions.*" This definition implies that impression management is used to influence "projected" images only, and that self-perceptions – such as individual and organizational identities – are not included under the umbrella of this term. I use the expression "perception management" to signal the use of both internally-focused, identity-management management strategies, as well as externally-focused, image and reputation-management strategies.

My definition of organizational perception management contains four key components (summarized in Fig. 1) that are important to understanding the unique

Perceptions

1. Organizational Images:
- organizational legitimacy
- organizational correctness and consistency
- organizational trustworthiness

2.Organizational Reputations:
- status categorizations
- overall "quality"

3. Organizational Identities:
- distinctive identities
- status identities

Actions

1. Verbal Accounts
- defensive accounts
- accommodating accounts
- accounts referring to norms
- accounts including imagery
- anticipatory accounts

2. Categorizations/Labels
- inclusive categorizations/labels
- exclusive categorizations/labels

3. Symbolic Behaviors
- primary business activities
- treatment of employees
- affiliation with other groups
- escalating commitment to a chosen course of action

4. Physical Markers
- Permanent building/artifact
- Logos, letterhead, signs
- office decor and layout

Spokespersons

1. Leaders and officials

2. Employees

Audiences

1. Internal audiences

2. External audiences

Fig. 1. Components of Organizational Perception Management.

nature of this phenomena. These components include: (1) perceptions of the organization; (2) actions or "tactics"; (3) organizational spokespersons; and (4) organizational audiences. The purposes of this paper are to explicate and illustrate these four components, to demonstrate how they interact following events that trigger organizational perception management, and to distinguish them from the components used in individual-level perception management.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE ORGANIZATION

A first component of organizational perception management is the form of perception that is being managed. Organizational perception management is designed to influence perceptions of the organization as an *entity*. Such perceptions include organizational: (1) images (e.g. current perceptions of legitimacy or trustworthiness); (2) reputations (e.g. being consistently viewed as a tough competitor); and (3) identities (e.g. being categorized as "top-tier"). In many cases, perceptions of *specific organizational actions* (e.g. perceptions of an organization's fairness in implementing a downsizing, or the quality of organizational decision-making that affected economic performance) may motivate organizational spokespersons to engage in perception management of the organization as a whole.

While prior research on organizational perception management has tended to focus on one of these three perceptions (i.e. images, reputations, or identities), it is important to note that, for any given organization, all three kinds of perceptions likely exist, simultaneously. Recently, organizational scholars have made attempts to clearly distinguish these three types of organizational perceptions from one another (Fombrun, 1996; Schultz et al., 2000). This research suggests that organizational images, reputations, and identities may be compared and contrasted along four dimensions: (1) their primary perceivers; (2) their defining categorizations; (3) their typical endurance; and (4) their specificity. In the following sections, and in Table 1, I describe how organizational images, reputations, and identities are defined by these four dimensions. I also illustrate the most common forms of these three types of organizational perceptions.

Organizational Images

Research on organizational perception management suggests that organizational images are *relatively current, and temporary perceptions of an organization, held by internal or external audiences, regarding an organization's fit with particular distinctiveness categories* (e.g. organizational legitimacy, organizational

Table 1. Comparing Organizational Images, Reputations, and Identities.

	Organizational Image	Organizational Reputation	Organizational Identity
Primary perceivers	Insiders and outsiders	Outsiders	Insiders
Defining categorizations	Distinctiveness	Status	Distinctiveness and status
Typical endurance	Short-lived	Long-lived	Long-lived
Specificity	Specific	General	General and specific
Common impression management context	Organizational crises: • Industrial accidents • Product recall	Organizational competition: • Performance reports • Quality ranking	Organizational change: • Leadership change • Membership change

correctness and consistency, organizational trustworthiness) (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Mayer et al., 1995; Staw & Ross, 1993). This definition suggests that organizational images are relatively short-lived, specific perceptions of an organization, and that organizations may possess several distinct images at the same time. These attributes distinguish organizational images from organizational identities and reputations (defined below), which tend to be more enduring, and are more likely to be defined by status-oriented categorizations of the organization. This definition also suggests that, in contrast to identities and reputations – which are perceived solely by internal or external audiences, respectively – organizational images may be perceived by *both* internal and external audiences. For example, organizational perception management researchers commonly refer to organizational images as external audiences specific attributions of an organization (Fombrun, 1996; Sutton & Callahan, 1987). In addition, researchers have defined what insiders think outsiders think of the organization as construed external image (i.e. they suggest that insiders can have an image of the organization) (Dutton et al., 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). I describe some of the more common organizational images (that are the focus of organizational perception management) below.

Organizational Legitimacy

The most commonly studied organizational image is organizational legitimacy (Elsbach, 2001b). Organizational legitimacy may be defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Legitimate organizations and their leaders are perceived as "more worthy, . . . more meaningful, more predictable, and more trustworthy" than illegitimate organizations (Suchman, 1995, p. 575). As a result, organizations perceived as legitimate are likely to receive unquestioned support and resources from constituents (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Tyler, 1990). Legitimate organizations are also more likely to gain the commitment, attachment, and identification of members (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Mueller et al., 1994).

Organizational researchers studying legitimacy have typically been concerned with how firms use their legitimacy as a resource to attract and maintain valued stakeholders (i.e. employees, customers, favorable media representatives, industry analysts, concerned public citizens) (Suchman, 1995). The opinions of these stakeholders can influence an organization's performance and survival. For example, organizational strategy researchers have shown that corporate legitimacy allows firms to command premium prices from loyal customers, and gain support from industry experts and analysts, without excessive advertising or promotional expenditures (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988). This focus in organizational research on legitimacy as a resource for improving firm performance differs from the approach of much psychological research, which tends to view individual legitimacy as an attribute that is valued in and of itself (Zelditch, 2001).

The value of legitimacy for organizations and their spokespersons appears to be most evident in times of crisis or controversy when legitimacy is challenged or threatened (Chen & Meindl, 1991; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). When organizational legitimacy is called into question, public support and the media's positive portrayal of the organization may diminish (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). For example, following the consumer fraud investigation of its auto repair shops in 1992, retail giant Sears, Roebuck & Co. suffered its first quarterly loss in profits since the Great Depression. Sears attributed much of this loss to a 10 to 15% decline in automotive repair sales and the $27 million settlement in its consumer fraud case.

Organizational Correctness and Consistency

A second form of organizational image, that has been an increasing focus of perception management research, is organizational correctness and consistency (Staw & Ross, 1987). Although, much of the work on organizational images of correctness and consistency has focused on how the behaviors of top managers, such as decision-making regarding on-going organizational projects (i.e. a negotiation, a merger, a new product launch), affect images of the organization as a whole. This research suggests that consistency in top-managers' decisions over time may lead audiences to view the organization, as a whole, as more stable, as well as more correct in it's past actions (see Brockner, 1992 for a review).

Similarly, a few studies have examined escalation behaviors by top management *teams* (McNamara et al., 2002; Ross & Staw, 1986, 1993). Research on escalation in such group situations suggests that the need to manage images of correctness and consistency are increased in group situations because groups tend to polarize the initial attitudes of groups members (Brockner, 1992). In this vein, Ross and Staw (1993) describe organizational escalation that occurred during building of the Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant. They describe how Long Island Lighting Company's (LILCO) decisions to continue to support the Nuclear Power Plant project – despite growing evidence that the costs were severely underestimated –

were influenced, in part, by the top-management teams' desire to manage organizational images of correctness and consistency (Ross & Staw, 1993). The top management of LILCO perceived a threat to the organization's images of correctness and consistency when stockholders and the public utilities commission challenged the managers to defend their investment decisions. In response to these image threats, the upper management of the company attempted to justify it's past decisions and maintain its images of correctness and consistency by continuing to back its original plan to build and run the Nuclear Plant. This example suggests that pressures for organizational correctness and consistency may lead to more dysfunctional image management in group or organizational settings than in individual settings.

Organizational Trustworthiness

A third type of organizational image involves perceptions of organizational trustworthiness. Recent work has defined the image of organizational trustworthiness as the perception that an organization displays competence, benevolence, and integrity in its behaviors and beliefs (Mayer et al., 1995). In this definition, competence refers to the abilities and skills that allow an organization to achieve desired goals, benevolence refers to an organization's apparent willingness to do good, and integrity refers to an organization's adherence to principles or ideals that conform to social norms (Mayer & Davis, 1999).

Research on employees perceptions of organizational trustworthiness has shown that equity in compensation practices may be a focal point for determining the integrity and trustworthiness of an organization's actions (Pearce, 1993; Pearce et al., 1994). By contrast, when external audiences (e.g. stockholders, potential business partners) gauge the trustworthiness of organizations, strategy theorists suggest that they will look to the culture and control systems of the organization (Barney & Hansen, 1994). According to these theorists, if an organization is viewed as having a culture and set of control systems that limit its actions through values, standards, and principles of behavior, then it will be perceived as having an image of trustworthiness. In both cases of insider and outsider perceptions, organizational trustworthiness appears to be dependent on the presence of industry or organizational structures and procedures that delimit organizational action. By contrast, research suggests that compliance with broad societal norms are more likely to influence images of individual trustworthiness (Elsbach, 2003a).

Organizational Reputations

Organizational reputations differ from organizational images in several ways. First, reputations are more general than are images. As Cowden and Sellnow (2002, p. 199) note, "image reflects a set of specific associations, whereas reputation denotes an overall judgment regarding the extent to which a firm is held in high esteem or regard." Similarly, Fombrun (1996, p. 37) defines organizational reputation as "the overall estimation in which a company is held by its constituents." Second, organizational reputations have been defined as external audiences' enduring perceptions of how a "firm's products, jobs, strategies, and prospects compare to those of competing firms" (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). That is, while images are defined primarily by distinctiveness categorizations, reputations are defined by status categorizations (although they may include status based upon a distinct trait – such as "best small school" or "most admired large company"). Finally, organizational reputation and identity researchers have commonly agreed that reputation is both perceived and legitimated by external audiences (vs. internal audiences) (Dukerich & Carter, 2000; Dutton et al., 1994; Fombrun & Rindova, 2000). Together, these findings suggest that organizational reputations involve *enduring status categorizations of an organization (relative to other organizations) as perceived by external audiences and stakeholders.*

Theory and research on organizational reputations has primarily come from the domain of strategy. In particular, strategy researchers have identified two perspectives on the use and management of organization reputations: resource-based views (Wernerfelt, 1984) and market-based views (Milgrom & Roberts, 1982). Resource-based views of organizations focus on the capabilities, attributes, and resources of a firm that are distinctive, rare, durable, and generally inimitable. One key resource is the firm's reputation: "Intangible resources such as reputation significantly contribute to performance differences among organizations because they are rare, socially complex, and difficult to trade and imitate" (Rao, 1994, p. 29). In contrast, market-based views of organizations focus on reputations as strategic attributes that firms use to gain a competitive advantage in incomplete information settings (Milgrom & Roberts, 1982, 1986). In these cases, outsiders are forced, by their lack of information, to predict a firm's future decisions based solely on its past behavior (Camerer & Vepsalainen, 1988). A significant amount of research in both paradigms has shown that attractive or distinctive reputations favorably influence organizational customers and competitors. Researchers have also shown that positive corporate reputations improve inter-organizational bargaining outcomes, allow firms to command premium prices, or help firms to gain support and resources from primary constituents (D'Aveni & O'Neill, 1992; Tsui, 1990; Weigelt & Camerer, 1988).

In recent years, organizations scholars have built on this strategy work and have focused on the cognitive and social antecedents of organizational reputation (Fombrun, 1996; Mohamed et al., 2001). These studies suggest that the stability and positive distinctiveness (a form of status) of an organization's performance will help its audiences form enduring perceptions of the firm. In particular, these studies suggest that stability or consistency in behavior and performance is important in reputation-building because it helps increase audiences' confidence that they can predict future performance based on the past (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988). For example, Rao (1994) showed how many firms in the auto industry built reputations for performance, in part, by repeatedly publicizing their early successes in automobile contests. In addition, researchers have shown that positive distinctiveness is important to reputation-building because it helps audiences to categorize individual organizations on status-relevant traits (Shrum & Withnow, 1988). In this vein, Staw and Epstein (2000) found when a company became associated with new management techniques (e.g. total quality management programs) it gained a reputation of being more innovative than peer organizations that did not adopt these techniques. Ultimately, the techniques were shown to have no effect on organizational performance, and the researchers suggested that they were adopted because they provided a salient signal about the organization's reputation.

Organizational Identities

Organizational identities are the answers organizational members' question: "who are we?" (Dutton et al., 1994; Elsbach, 1999). As a result, organizational identities may be relatively complex and include both status (we're "top tier") and distinctiveness (we're creative) categorizations, as well as specific (we're the most family-friendly company in Sacramento, California) and general (we're one of the most admired companies in America) foci which define the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). By contrast, organizational images or organizational reputations typically answer questions about an organization's fit with one type of distinctiveness or status categorization at a time. Similar to organizational reputations, organizational identities are commonly perceived as being enduring (Dutton et al., 1994). Yet, researchers have suggested that they are not immutable (Gioia & Thomas, 1996), and that identity management can successfully change and organization's identity (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Based on these findings, organizational identities may be conceptualized as *insiders' relatively enduring perceptions of their organization's fit with distinctiveness categorizations and status categorizations along both general and specific dimensions* (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Dutton & Penner, 1993; Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Kramer, 1993).

Individual members who identify with their organization (i.e. who define their own self-concept, in part, by their membership in the organization, and who perceive their own identity to overlap with the organization's identity), are likely to perceive that their own identities are threatened by events that threaten the organization's identity (Dutton et al., 1994). As a result, organizational identity management may be motivated as much by members' desires to maintain positive perceptions of their own individual identities, as by desires to maintain positive perceptions of their organization's identity (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). This link between individual and organizational identities also makes the management of organizational identities more complex because individual members often vary in terms of their level and focus of identification with the organization. Individuals who strongly identify with an organization's identity as a top-tier organization may engage in symbolic actions to affirm that status-categorization, while other individuals who weakly identify with the status categorization of top-tier may opt-out of such identity affirmation, or even disidentify with that aspect of the organization's identity by distancing themselves from the organization (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Further complicating the management of organizational identities is the fact that organizations may be defined by more than one identity (e.g. a business school may have a teaching identity and a research identity). In some cases, these multiple identities may appear to be in conflict with one another. That is organizations may have *hybrid identities* that are "composed of two or more (identities) that would not normally be expected to go together." (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 270). For example, Elsbach (2001a) described the California State Legislature as being defined by an often-derided "political" identity and a more noble "policy-making" identity, which were often in conflict. In other cases, these multiple identities may define distinct, yet compatible aspects of the organization (e.g. a University that prides itself on both excellent teaching and research). In these cases, the dual identities may support each other (e.g. research informs teaching, and teaching provides a context for research). Also, because they are not vulnerable to the same types of threats, they may provide a good offense against overall identity damage (e.g. a University that loses a top researcher to a rival institution, can still tout its excellent teaching faculty) (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).

SYMBOLIC ACTIONS

Symbolic actions are a second component of organizational perception management. Symbolic actions include *any activities by organizational spokespersons that are used, at least in part, to affect audience perceptions of the organization.* Such actions may be primarily symbolic (e.g. changing the name *Kentucky Fried Chicken*, to *KFC* – to minimize unhealthy images associated with the word "fried" – without changing the menu), or may be primarily practical (e.g. adopting, without fanfare or publicity, a Total Quality Management program based on a desire to improve product quality), or somewhere in between. In most cases, researchers have not been able to completely separate the symbolic from the practical aspects of such actions, and they suggest that most cases of organizational perception management involve both (Russ, 1991).

Research in this area has identified four specific types of symbolic actions used to manage organizational perceptions: (1) verbal accounts (e.g. justifications for a corporate downsizing included in an annual report); (2) distinctiveness and status-oriented categorizations and comparisons of organizations (e.g. defining a business school as "top-tier" in promotional materials); (3) symbolic behaviors (e.g. contribution to charitable foundations and causes); and (4) the display of physical markers (e.g. American flags hung in retail stores following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist acts).

Verbal Accounts

Psychological frameworks of individual and organizational perception management suggest that verbal accounts may be defined as explanations that are designed to influence perceptions of an organization's responsibility for an event, or for the valence of an event (whether it is positive or negative) (Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981). Verbal accounts – which have been studied more than any other type of organizational perception management tactic – are used primarily to manage external organizational images and reputations (vs. internal identities). This body of research has defined three primary features of accounts,: (1) form; (2) content; and (3) communication medium.

Account Forms

A number of account forms commonly follow negatively perceived events. *Excuses* are accounts that are designed to minimize perceptions of responsibility for a negative event ("it wasn't our fault"), while *justifications* are accounts that are designed to minimize the perceived negativity of an event, when responsibility is not in question ("it wasn't as bad as you think" or "we had a good reason for doing it"). Similarly, *denials* are accounts that attempt to refute any responsibility for an event ("we didn't do it") or that claim that an event was not at all negative ("it didn't happen"), while *apologies* are accounts that accept full responsibility for a negative event, but claim regret ("we did it, but we're sorry).

Other accounts, are designed to follow positively perceived events. *Entitlings* are accounts that are designed to increase perceptions of responsibility for a positive event ("we did it" or "we were more responsible than you think"), while *enhancements* are accounts designed to increase the perceived positiveness of an event, when responsibility is admitted (i.e. "it was positive" or "it was better than you think").

Organizational studies have routinely characterized the accounts that organizational spokespersons use following negative events as either *accommodative or defensive* (Elsbach, 1994; Marcus & Goodman, 1991), and those that follow positive events as *acclaims* (Benoit, 1999). These more general terms have been used to describe the form of organizational accounts because such explanations tend to include more than one form of accounts (e.g. excuses and denials may be combined in defensive accounts, while justifications and enhancements may be combined in accommodative accounts), and because organizational accounts tend to be designed to meet general the goals of aggressively defending organizational perceptions, accommodatively meeting audience needs, or proactively managing perceptions (Conlon & Murray, 1996).

Sutton and Callahan (1987) provide an example of the use of defensive accounts to manage perceptions of organizational legitimacy. They found that, following corporate Chapter 11 bankruptcy filings, organizational spokespersons commonly combined the excuse that the bankruptcy was due to a national recession, with the denial that a Chapter 11 filing was, in fact a failure (i.e. they claimed that it was a normal and rational business procedure for an organization in certain circumstances). These defensive accounts suggested that the organization was attempting to pursue reasonable and logical goals, but was thwarted by extenuating circumstances or was mistakenly attributed with responsibility for a negative outcome. In another example, Allen and Caillouet (1994, pp. 59–61) found that spokespersons for a recycling facility routinely responded to challenges to the organization's legitimacy (e.g. challenges to its licensing status and disposal methods for hazardous waste from environmental groups like Greenpeace), by offering verbal accounts that combined denials of wrong-doing (we're not an "incinerator" – "we never put one drop of anything in the river") with denouncements of the challengers (e.g."the Department of Environmental Quality is acting unlawfully, illegally, and totally outside their constitutional authority in making the latest hearing and other information requests of the organization").

By way of contrast, Allen and Caillouet (1994, p. 60) found that the recycling facility also used a combination of enhancements (e.g. " The ... U.S. Patent office recognized (our) technology as the first and only process in the country with the ability to substitute large quantities of contaminated soils and other materials for feedstocks and still economically manufacture products that exhibit no hazardous characteristics"), and flattery (e.g. "I want to applaud the efforts of the EPA ... for putting together a very find and excellent draft permit") in acclaims that suggested that the evaluation of the facility was, in fact, a positive event. In a similar example, Elsbach's (1994) study of perception management in the California cattle industry revealed that spokespersons often combined justifications and enhancements in accommodative accounts they gave in response to public concerns about the potentially harmful effects of treating beef cattle with hormones. Company spokespersons justified the use of hormones, arguing that the drugs helped to keep cattle healthy (a common concern of consumers), and added that the reduction in costs achieved by producing larger beef cattle was passed on to consumers as reduced prices (an enhancement).

Account Content

The content of accounts includes the arguments, evidence, and illustrations that back up the basic account form. Research on organizational accounts has shown that, in general, "accounts are seen as more adequate to the extent that they are detailed (e.g. Shapiro et al., 1994), based on sound reasoning (e.g. Bies et al., 1988), (and) sensitive (e.g. Greenberg, 1994)," (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, p. 155).

More specifically, a small number of studies suggest that adequate accounts often contain of *references to social or industry norms* as a means of indicating sound reasoning and sensitivity to audience needs (Elsbach, 1994). Elsbach and Sutton (1992), for example, found that spokespersons from radical social movement organizations often used references to normative and widely endorsed procedures (i.e. conducting press conferences or non violence workshops) in their accounts of illegitimate protest actions. Similarly, Taylor and Bogdan (1980) described how accounts used by spokespersons for mental health institutions to manage organizational perceptions of legitimacy often referred to new, widely endorsed organizational goals (e.g. habilitation vs. custodial care) and organizational structures (e.g. team approaches, formal policies, and unitization). Finally, Dutton and Dukerich (1991) found that police officers in the New York City Port Authority Bus Terminal backed up their justifications for removing homeless persons from the terminal by noting that they were enforcing an anti-loitering law (i.e. a normative procedure). Later, Port Authority spokespersons backed up their enhancements of their organization's image by highlighting their use of new, socially endorsed structures, including a paid consultant and a human resource administration to provide sensitivity training for police.

In many cases, references to social norms are contained in a "legitimating label" of the organization. For example, when Chrysler was charged with committing fraud by selling used vehicles as new (i.e. the vehicles had been driven by Chrysler executives with the odometers disconnected prior to sale), CEO Lee Iacocca attempted to manage Chrysler's reputation for trustworthiness by denying that the company had done anything wrong, and labeling the actions in question as a "test program" rather than a fraudulent executive perk (Hearit, 1994). In a similar case, the automaker, Volvo, came under attack after it was demonstrated that its car showcased in an advertisement as withstanding repeated overruns by a "Monster Truck" while other vehicles were crushed, had been reinforced with steel and wood. In response, Volvo spokespersons engaged in image repair by claiming that the advertisement was not a hoax or sham as it had been described in the media, but a "re-enactment" of an actual event that had been witnessed by hundreds of people at a Vermont truck rally (Hearit, 1994).

A second, specific type of content used to bolster accounts is *ideological imagery or illustration*, which adds to detail and sensitivity (Benoit, 1995). In a case study of the Apollo 13 space mission, for example, Kaufman (2001) describes how NASA spokespersons used a "frontier" narrative and imagery to portray the space agency in a positive light in enhancements following the mission's failure. At post-mission press conferences, NASA administrators characterized the mission an " 'epic struggle' in which the astronauts were 'pitted' against the 'hostile environment of space.' " (Kaufman, 2001, p. 442). NASA spokespersons also described the astronauts who "dare to brave the perils of space" as possessing "bravery, skill, discipline, courage, ingenuity, resourcefulness, teamwork, and character." (Kaufman, 2001, p. 442). At the same time, then president Richard Nixon claimed that the astronauts' actions reminded Americans of their "proud heritage as a nation." (Kaufman, 2001, p. 442). This type of imagery provided substance to NASA's claims that the Apollo 13 mission was "A Successful Failure" (Kaufman, 2001, p. 443).

Account Medium

Finally, it's important to keep in mind that there are many mediums through which verbal accounts may be communicated. Organizations can seek to communicate directly with audiences through paid advertisements, company newsletters, annual reports, websites, or e-mails. These routes employ media gatekeepers and allow organizational perception managers to craft their accounts to portray specific images (Hearit, 1994). In, perhaps, the only study of account effectiveness based on account medium, Shapiro et al. (1994) found that face-to-face oral communication of an unpopular decision led to more positive reactions from audiences than written communication. This finding suggests that, to the extent that organizational spokespersons can communicate negative news directly to audiences, the more likely they are to effectively manage those audiences' perceptions of the organization.

In other cases, organizations communicate through the news media, where the form and content of their accounts may be altered by the reporter (e.g. an industry-friendly newspaper may report an account of corporate downsizing in a more positive light than would a labor-friendly publication). In fact, it is not uncommon for the media's treatment of the story to create a peripheral controversy, drawing attention away from the facts of the case. For example, the *New York Times* was embroiled in an perception management controversy after they refused to print two sports columns that sided against an organization (the National Council of Women's Organizations, NWCO) that was attempting to get women admitted as members of the Augusta National Golf Club (Johnson, 2002 December 5). This "spiking" of the news stories led critics to claim that the *New York Times* was taking on NWCO's crusade as their own. In this manner, the newspaper, itself, became a player in organizational perception management related to the controversy.

Organizational Categorizations Comparisons

A second verbal strategy for managing perceptions of organizations is to offer organizational categorizations and comparisons. In particular, organizations wishing to affirm desired identities, use categorizations and comparisons to define who they are and who they are not.

Inclusion in Social Categories

Social psychologists have shown that, on dimensions that are self-relevant (e.g. one's stand on ideological issues such as gun control), individuals prefer to see themselves as relatively unique compared to others because "similarity (to many others) on self-defining dimensions may imply that one is undistinguished or mediocre"(Wood, 1989, p. 241). As a result, individuals may affirm their distinctive identities by categorizing themselves in ways that display these unique attributes (Brewer, 1991). Researchers have also shown that individuals often prefer social categorizations that emphasize comparisons to inferior social groups as a means of affirming or enhancing their self-concept (Crocker & Gallo, 1985; Wood, 1989). This form of self-categorization tends to be used in response to threats to self-concept or identity (i.e. mistaken inclusion into an undesirable social group such as "right-wing gun enthusiasts") (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Recently, organizational researchers have found that members and spokespersons for an organization may perceive these same types of identity threats when the organization to which they belong is categorized in ways that run counter to their perceptions of its identity. In this manner, Terry et al. (2001) showed that members of higher-status organizations that merged with a lower-status organization perceived the merger as an organizational identity threat because it diluted their organization's relative status. Similarly, in their study of business school members' reactions to the *Business Week* rankings, Elsbach and Kramer (1996) found that members experienced cognitive distress or perceived that dissonance when, as a result of the school's ranking in the survey, they perceived that their organization's identity was threatened by inaccurate categorizations or misleading (and, by implication, unfair) comparisons to other organizations.

Elsbach and Kramer (1996) showed that, in response to this cognitive distress, members attempted to restore and affirm positive self-perceptions, as well as positive perceptions of their organization's identity, by describing their organization in terms of alternate social categories (not included in the *Business Week* rankings) that confirmed its established identity (e.g. being an entrepreneurial school, being a top public institution). These organizational categorizations and comparisons were most commonly claimed for attributes that were widely-known within the organization (e.g. being a research institution). In contrast to individual self-categorizations and comparisons (which need only be verified by their claimant), organizational categorizations and comparisons must be verified by many members to be perceived as legitimate.

In other cases, researchers have suggested that organizational leaders may wish to clarify their categorization along a number of different identity dimensions, as the organization's identity becomes more complex (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Pratt and Foreman (2000) suggest that organizations may choose to manage multiple organizational identities by compartmentalization (e.g. keeping the identities separate by maintaining multiple identity categorizations), integration (e.g. fusing the identities through a single new categorization), deletion (e.g. removing some identity categorizations), or aggregation (e.g. creating a hierarchy of identity categorizations). Organization's may perceive the need to manage multiple identities as new identities are taken on (e.g. through a change in business practices, or a merger or divestiture), or as the value of existing identities change (e.g. a once important line of the business becomes obsolete).

Exclusion from Social Categories

In addition to denoting the categorizations to which an organization belongs, identity managers identify categorizations to which the organization does not belong. That is, organizational identity management may underscore an organization's disidentification from specific, negatively-viewed categories (Elsbach, 1999; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). For example, organizations that are proactively changing their identity due to a merger, acquisition, or management directive may want members to give up old identifications so that they can more readily embrace new ones (Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999). Yet, if new organizational identities are too disparate from existing ones, members may have difficulty understanding and embracing them (Reger et al., 1994). Understanding the dynamics of disidentification may allow organizations to help their members make this identity-transition.

Along these lines, the Saturn division of General Motors used identity categorizations (e.g. the slogan "A different kind of car company. A different kind of car") to separate themselves from their parent company, General Motors (Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999). Their commercials and print advertising worked to separate the company from people's stereotype of a car company as big, impersonal, and adversarial. In one advertisement, an African-American sales representative talks about how his father was treated unfairly by a big-company car salesman in the 1950s, and how his approach at Saturn is designed to be in distinct contrast to this approach. All of these tactics by the company appeared designed to help members to disidentify with out-dated and undesirable identities associated with a "traditional car company." Such disidentification helps people to then identify with the "different kind of car company" Saturn professes to be.

Symbolic Behaviors

Symbolic behaviors involve both routine and special actions that are used to indicate something about an organizations image or identity. Symbolic organizational behaviors are most commonly used as perception management when they are perceived to be visible and salient (e.g. the use of patriotic displays in retail stores has been perceived as much more salient since the events of 9/11), and when they affect a salient aspect of the organization's image or identity (e.g. introducing a new product or service related to an organization's central mission, such as on-line education by a renown university). Such behaviors are effective perception management tactics because they literally show the organization "living" its image, identity, or reputation (Arnold et al., 1996). As a case in point, Rao (1994) describes how early auto manufacturers (i.e. at the turn of the 20th century), used speed or endurance contests to display specific features of their cars, such as performance in hill-climbing, or reliability on a rugged, cross-country course to legitimate automobiles as viable alternative to horses, and as noted earlier, to build their reputations for performance in these areas.

Yet, to maximize their impact, symbolic behaviors are often coupled with verbal accounts or communications that explain them. In the study described above, Rao (1994) found that auto manufacturer's used newspaper advertisements to publicize their contest wins and increase public awareness about the automobiles' capabilities. In another case, Arndt and Bigelow (2000), found that hospitals that adopted a diversified corporate structure during the 1990s (in place of their previous not-for-profit structure) used verbal accounts in their annual reports that justified the change as a response to the institutional environment (e.g. pressures on hospitals from HMO's to carry out such restructuring) and desires to maintain high status in their relevant comparison group (e.g. "other hospitals of our caliber are making these changes, so we must also change to keep up").

Organizational research points to four primary forms of symbolic behaviors used to manage perceptions of organizations: (1) behaviors related to primary business activities; (2) treatment of employees or prospective employees; (3) visible affiliation with groups or organizations; and (4) escalation behaviors.

Behaviors Related to Primary Business Activities

The most common forms of symbolic behavior used as organizational perception management involve visible actions (e.g. attacking competitors, re-calling products) related to primary business activities (e.g. serving customers, manufacturing products, or complying with government regulations). Typically, this means signaling organizational reputations or images through activities related to putting out products or services (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988).

Extensive research from the domain of management strategy suggests that organizations may attempt to signal a reputation of "toughness," for example, by enduring performances losses (e.g. by pricing below cost, or by proliferating their product line to fill every market niche – even unprofitable ones) to deter other firms from entering their market (Kreps & Wilson, 1982; Milgrom & Roberts, 1986; Schmalensee, 1978). In other cases, firms may attempt to signal a reputation for "high quality" by lavish expenditures on advertising (Nelson, 1974), social causes, or costly office furniture, none of which provide direct information about products, improve costs, or increase demand (Milgrom & Roberts, 1986). Finally, organizations may attempt to build reputations for distinctive competencies (e.g. a business school's academic orientation) by offering specific products and services (e.g. large number of faculty on editorial boards, high use of doctoral students as teachers) that meet the particular needs of a primary constituency, such as faculty (D'Aveni & O'Neill, 1992). As noted earlier, Staw and Epstein (2000) describe how several corporations adopted popular management techniques, such as total quality management programs, to enhance their reputation for innovation.

Treatment of Employees

Symbolic behavior related to the treatment of employees (or prospective employees) can also be used to enhance or affirm an organization's identity (Turban & Greening, 1997). Murrell (2001) found that firms that engaged in employment practices that promoted family life (e.g. good advancement opportunities for women, available on-site childcare, leave for childbirth, job sharing, flextime, and work-at-home options), signaled an identity categorization of "family friendly" and were recognized by *Working Mother Magazine*.

Similarly, researchers of organizational justice have suggested that fair and equitable treatment of employees in decisions regarding hiring, firing, promotion, performance evaluation, and compensation are important to maintaining distinctive identity categorizations of fairness and trustworthiness (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1990). For example, research on hiring decisions has shown that applicants view cognitive ability tests, personality tests, drug screens, and biographical inventories as unfair means of employment selection (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Further, applicants subjected to these types of procedures are more likely than those who are not tested to view the organization negatively (e.g. perceive the organization as having an image of "unfairness") (Smither et al., 1993; Stoffey et al., 1991).

Finally, recent empirical studies have described how managers or organizational leaders can enhance organizational identities of trustworthiness among employees through daily interactions. A recent review of this work (Whitener et al., 1998) suggests five behavioral characteristics that are important to achieving organizational identities of trustworthiness among employees. First, they suggest that *behavioral consistency* (i.e. reliability or predictability) by leaders increases employees' confidence in the organization's competence, and willingness to take risks on their behalf (Butler, 1991; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Second, *behavioral integrity* (i.e. telling the truth and keeping promises) by leaders, reduces the risk employees associate with working in an organization (Mayer et al., 1995). Third, a leader's willingness to *share control* enhances employees' abilities to protect their own interests, and affirms their self-worth as valued part of their organization – thereby increasing their perception of the organization's benevolence (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Fourth, *accurate, open, and thorough communication* by leaders about decisions and organizational issues helps employees to feel that there is a sharing and exchanging of ideas, and increases their perceptions of the organization's integrity (Butler, 1991; Hart et al., 1986). Finally, *demonstrating concern* for employees' well-being (e.g. showing consideration and sensitivity for employees' needs and interests, acting in a way that protects employees' interests, and refraining from exploiting employees) by leaders helps employees to perceive the organization as loyal and benevolent. In support of these recommendations, a fourteen month field study of management performance appraisal systems by Mayer and Davis (1999) showed that enhancing perceived benevolence, integrity, and competence by implementing a new performance appraisal system, increased employees "willingness to let top management have control over" employee and organizational well-being.

Affiliation with Other Groups or Organizations

A third, common, symbolic behavior that has been used as an organizational perception management tool involves formal or informal affiliation with other groups or organizations. In some cases, affiliation behaviors and their advertisement can be used to manage an organization's identity. For example, visible affiliation with a high-status or distinctive organization (e.g. advertising one's recent inclusion in *Fortune Magazine's* "most admired" list) can enhance an organization's identity by creating the perception that the organization is in the same league as other, perennially admired companies (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). At the same time, visible disidentification from a low-status or distinctive organization (e.g. touting one's title as the corporation "most hated" by the National Rifle Association) underscores that a company is not in the same league (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Affiliation with well-respected groups can also be used to manage organizational images of legitimacy. For example, research on the uses of philanthropy by organizations (Himmelstein, 1997) shows that many organizations that are facing legitimacy threats donate money to prestigious causes and organizations as a means demonstrating that their underlying values and ideals are aligned with those of the recipients (e.g. the oft-attacked tobacco giant, Phillip Morris, has sponsored the Arts for over 40 years, including donating money to Lincoln Center, The Whitney Museum, The Dance Theater of Harlem, and the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater (Sisario, 2002 November 18)).

Escalation Behaviors

Finally, as suggested earlier, a fourth symbolic behavior that has been used to manage organizational images of correctness and consistency is escalation of commitment to a previously chosen (often failing) course of action (Brockner, 1992). Such escalation behaviors commonly occur in the following situations:

> ...decision makers allocate some resources...in the hope of attaining some goal or goals. After having made an investment, however, ...they receive negative feedback suggesting that, at the very least, they have not yet attained their goals; moreover, they are not certain that additional investments will be sufficient to bring about goal attainment (Brockner, 1992, p. 40).

As noted earlier, organizational theorists suggest that, in these situations, the decision makers continue to invest resources toward their originally stated goals as a symbolic means of "self-justification" (i.e. to justify that their past actions were correct). Further, such actions demonstrate consistency in behavior over time, which has been shown to be a valued trait (at least in Western societies) (Staw & Ross, 1987).

Research has suggested that these symbolic goals motivate organizations and their leaders to go on devoting resources to a failing course of action (Ross & Staw, 1986, 1993). Ross and Staw (1993, p. 717) described this phenomena in their discussion of escalation behaviors during the construction of the Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant:

> ...external justification effects are particularly strong among those who are politically vulnerable or whose initial policy choice has met with resistance. In constructing Shoreham,

> LILCO's management continually faced LILCO's management continually faced the need to assure external constituencies, such as shareholders and the public utilities commission, that it's investment was a wise one . . . It seemed that as the management of LILCO's commitment was challenged, each challenge was met with renewed justification (and investment), only serving to further increase commitment to Shoreham.

Physical Markers

Physical markers include the display of temporary or permanent physical artifacts, at least in part, to signal an organization's images, identities, and reputations. In connection with organizational perception management, such physical markers commonly include size, style, and location of office buildings (e.g. investment banks located on or off Wall Street), type of furnishings (e.g. traditional vs. contemporary office furnishings), and decor (e.g. the presence or absence of artwork and live plants), as well as company logos, signs, and letterheads.

Research from the area of environmental psychology (Sundstrom & Altman, 1989; Sundstrom & Sundstrom, 1986), suggests that physical markers are most often used to manage perceptions of an organization's long-term and enduring identities and reputations (Olins, 1995). Proponents of the "visual school" of corporate identity, for example, suggest that the visible and tangible decor, design, and structures of an organization may be viewed as manifestations of the organization's identity (Balmer, 1995). Perhaps because physical markers, such as buildings and furnishings, are relatively permanent and highly visible, they are viewed as a natural means of symbolizing and managing perceptions of the enduring and central character of an organization (Elsbach, 2003b). Along those lines, Ornstein (1986, 1992) found that the design of public reception areas in corporate office buildings conveyed organizational identity categorizations of authoritarianism (signaled by displays of flags, pictures of organizational leaders, and chairs facing each other) or non-authoritarianism/ comfort (signaled by displays of artwork, live plants, and couches and chairs at 45 degree angles). Similarly, Arnold et al. (1996) found that patriotic displays in retail stores (e.g. Wal Mart) were effectively used to communicate and build the organization's long-standing reputation for community involvement and concern to customers. Finally, Ridoutt et al. (2002) found that organizations that displayed wood in their interior design were most preferred by observers, and were most likely to be described by the identity categorizations: innovative, energetic, and comfortable (vs. rigid, unpleasant, and impersonal, which were assigned to organizations without wood in their interiors).

In addition, physical markers can be used effectively to manage temporary organizational images in anticipation of future controversies (e.g. the use of "green" imagery by an automaker in anticipation of public concern over their launch of a new, gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicle). In such cases, physical markers work well for preemptive perception management because they are continually visible to customers, employees, or the public, and may send a consistent signal well-before the anticipated controversy occurs. Elsbach et al. (1998), for example, found that hospitals strategically changed the structure of their invoices (e.g. making sure common items like aspirin were priced close to drugstore prices) to present an image of organizational legitimacy, which they hoped would deter patients from challenging their charges.

ORGANIZATIONAL SPOKESPERSONS

A third component of organizational perception management is the organizational spokesperson. Organizational spokespersons convey or explain symbolic actions (verbal accounts, symbolic behaviors, display of physical markers) to organizational audiences. *Spokespersons include anyone who is perceived by audience members as representing the organization*. They do not have to be members of the organization or hold formal or official titles or roles that designate them to speak on its behalf.

Speaking on behalf of a large and diverse organization presents unique challenges for organizational perception managers. Most notably, they must often manage multiple organizational perceptions, to multiple audiences. This situation is difficult not just because there are many distinct perceptions to track, but also because these perceptions are, at times, incongruent. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) found, for example, that a school may find it challenging to maintain its reputation for top quality teaching while also trying to maintain an identity as a preeminent research institute. The role of the spokesperson in such situations becomes crucial to success.

Empirical organizational research reveals that the most common types of organizational spokespersons are: (1) organizational leaders, public relations professionals; and (2) employees.

Leaders and Official Spokespersons

For several reasons, visible organizational leaders or official public relations professionals are the most common types of spokespersons who carry out organizational perception management. First, they are typically the ones who offer initial accounts following both positive and negative events (Pearson & Clair, 1998). For example, in annual reports, the letter to shareholders explaining past performance is always signed by the company leader (Staw et al., 1983). Researchers have found that audiences react most positively if leaders take responsibility, in these letters, for both successes and failures (Salancik & Meindl, 1984). Audiences expect leaders to take both credit and blame for the performance of their organizations (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987).

Second, several studies show that organizational leaders are most likely to engage in symbolic behaviors on behalf of the organization, such as presenting restitution to harmed parties following an industrial accidents (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Conlon and Murray (1996) found that responses to letters of complaints about poor product quality typically came from an official organizational spokesperson in charge of customer satisfaction and product quality. When the harm done is more serious (e.g. physical harm or death caused by an organization), the company president or CEO is likely to respond. For example, Ford Motor Company CEO, Jacques Nasser announced Ford's program to replace faulty Firestone tires on its Ford Explorers, following publicity about numerous deaths that resulted from Explorer accidents (*60 Minutes*, October 8th, 2000).

Finally, organizational leaders are often involved in the choice or design of company buildings and work spaces – an organization's most prominent physical markers. The sprawling, campus-like environment of the Microsoft Headquarters in Redmond, Washington is often attributed to the mindset of the company's founder, Bill Gates (Meyer, 1994). Similarly, John Chambers, CEO of Cisco Systems portrays his company's collaborative spirit in his choice to put top managers in cubicles alongside fellow workers (Donlon, 2000).

Employees

For events on a smaller and less controversial scale, symbolic actions, intended to manage day-to-day perceptions or to provide anticipatory perception management, are often conducted by rank and file employees. These employees routinely interact with the customers and/or the public, and thus, are often in a position to provide symbolic information about an organization. In one example, Elsbach et al. (1998), showed how customer service staff in hospital billing departments used symbolic behaviors in their interactions with customers (e.g. threatening to send a patient's bill to an outside collection agency, warnings that an audited bill can lead to additional charges). These behaviors were intended to portray the hospital as an intimidating and threatening organization that would not easily given in to patients' requests to reduce the amount of their bills.

In certain situations, however, the employees as a group are symbolically defined as the spokesperson in organizational perception management. Most commonly, this occurs when the organization is dominated by an employee union or unions that speak on behalf of the rank and file. In this manner, Cowden and Sellnow (2002) described how the employees of Northwest Airlines were represented as the "organization" in a contentious battle with the National Airline Pilots Association. In a series of full-page newspaper advertisements, rank and file Northwest Airlines employees spoke as a group committed to meeting the needs of customers, but hand-cuffed by a small band of rogue pilots.

ORGANIZATIONAL AUDIENCES

The fourth component of organizational perception management is organizational audiences. *Organizational audiences include all the parties who are targets of organizational perception management.* These audiences may be made up of persons external to the organization, such as members of other organizations (e.g. regulatory agencies, competing organizations, suppliers), public interest groups (e.g. consumers, environmental activists, voters), and the general public. Alternatively, audiences may be made up of persons internal to the organization, such as employees, stockholders, volunteers, dues-paying members, and students.

External Audiences

The general public is the most common external audience studied by researchers of organizational perception management. It is often the largest group affected by organizational events that threaten short-term organizational images, and includes consumers or potential consumers who hear about faulty products or services, citizens of communities harmed by environmental pollution from a corporate plant, and citizens in communities affected by corporate layoffs (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Because these groups include so many people, and may be associated with influential political parties, their complaints receive substantial attention from the public media (Lamertz & Baum, 1998). In addition, because of the diversity of members within a group, multiple and complex perception management messages are required to adequately address all of the audiences' concerns following a negative organizational event (Sutton & Callahan, 1987).

In the absence of an immediate or impending crisis, members of special interest groups (including customers, competitors, and activists) may be the only external audiences still scrutinizing the actions of an organization. These audiences pay special attention to routine symbolic behaviors and the permanent display of physical markers that are indicative of the enduring reputations of an organization (vs. temporary or short-term images). For example, Fombrun and Shanley (1990) found that, in rating corporations reputations in the *Fortune* magazine survey of most admired companies, corporate executives, were strongly influenced by an organization's routine behaviors, including their advertising intensity, their contribution to charity, and their choice of risky strategies.

Internal Audiences

Organizational perception management aimed at internal audiences has received much less attention than that aimed at external audiences. Recent research has begun, however, to examine how managing the perceptions of internal audiences may require additional or distinct tactics (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Specifically, organizational identities are important to internal audiences, and identity management becomes necessary when internal audiences perceive that organization's status or distinctiveness is threatened, or that its identity is internally conflicted. For example, Elsbach (2001a) found that long-time staffers working for the California State Legislature connected with the "policy making" identity of that organization, while newer and short-term staffers often identified with the "political campaigning" identity of that organization. Maintaining these two identities was a difficult act for many members, who often used physical markers to denote their decision to affiliate themselves with one of these identities rather than work to reconcile the two.

SUMMARY: A FRAMEWORK OF ORGANIZATIONAL PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

I have defined organizational perception management as symbolic actions by organizational spokespersons to influence audiences' perceptions of the organization. Further, I have used empirical studies of organizational perception management to explicate the specific types of: (1) organizational perceptions; (2) symbolic actions; (3) organizational spokespersons; and (4) organizational audiences that are involved in managing organizational perceptions. These findings contribute to our understanding of organizational perception management by demonstrating several factors that make organizational perception management a distinct field of study from individual perception management.

First, the research presented here defines the primary forms of perceptions of organizations that may be managed through perception management (i.e.

images, reputations, and identities). While individuals may manage the same kinds of perceptions of themselves, it appears that particular perceptions are more relevant to organizations. For example, an organization's preoccupation with images of legitimacy may result from our society's more stringent regulation and requirement for standardization of organizational practices than of individual practices. Because organizations are increasingly confronted with both formal and informal certification requirements(from meeting accounting standards to fulfilling social norms about donations to charity), it seems natural that managing perceptions of legitimacy should be a priority for organizational perception managers. Similarly, organizations' emphasis on the status (vs. distinctiveness) components of identity and reputation may result, at least in part, because organizations are increasingly ranked in public surveys. By contrast, individuals are not as commonly subjected to such public rankings, and thus, they may focus more on the distinctiveness dimensions of their identity.

Second, the empirical findings reviewed in this paper suggest that an organization's symbolic actions include many of the same categories of tactics used by individual perception managers, including verbal accounts, verbal categorizations and comparisons, symbolic behaviors, and the display of physical markers. Yet these findings also reveal how such tactics are uniquely deployed within the domain of organizational perception management. In particular, organizational tactics appear to build on institutional and legitimate benchmarks for their content. Organizational accounts, for example, commonly refer to industry norms or trends to validate their excuses, justifications, or denials. Elsbach (1994) found that cattle industry spokespersons used denials of food safety violations that they backed-up with references to their use of industry norms and guidelines. Similarly, in accounts of corporate performance included in annual reports, Bettman and Weitz (1983) found that excuses for poor performance were bolstered by references to industry trends, such as higher prices for materials or a slowdown in the industry. By contrast, individual-level accounts of failures at work are more likely to refer to broad social norms, rather than industry norms, to back up their excuses or justifications (i.e. I was late for work because I had to care for a sick child) (Riordan et al., 1989). Because the actions of organizations (vs. individuals) are more likely to be evaluated in the context of industry norms (vs. social norms), it is more appropriate and effective for organizational accounts to refer to such norms.

In addition to differences associated with verbal accounts, organizational actions and physical markers appear to be operationalized differently by organizations vs. individuals. Organizations can devise, publicize, and enact corporate *strategies* that incorporate a number of activities designed to signal a single perception. For example, a corporate strategy of "environmental awareness" can be enacted through a recycling program that involves actions by marketing, manufacturing, and research and development groups, as well as the display of physical markers such as the construction of energy-efficient buildings and plants (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). In this manner, organizations can enact a single reputation through multiple, simultaneous activities and displays of physical markers that reach diverse audiences. It would be difficult for an individual to manage his or her identities or reputations on so many fronts through so many simultaneous actions. Instead, individuals are likely to focus on one type of perception management at a time, and perhaps vary their focus over time. For example, Chen and Meindl (1991) described how the image of People's Express Airline founder, Donald Burr, evolved over time through a series of different perception management tactics, including press releases, symbolic behaviors, and verbal accounts.

Third, the research reviewed in this paper documents how organizational perception management may be carried out by a variety of organizational spokespersons – many of whom have no link to the specific organizational event or controversy that prompted the perception management. That is, unlike the individual perception manager who is primarily responsible for his or her own images, identities, and reputations, organizational perception managers are responsible for the images, identities, and reputations of a collective. Further, more than one spokesperson may manage the perceptions of this collective. Speaking or acting on behalf of an organization (versus only on behalf of an individual) presents additional dilemmas, such as dealing with the often inevitable inconsistencies between various images, identities, and reputations that define an organization, as well as inconsistencies in the expectations held by various internal and external organizational audiences. On the upside, researchers have found that maintaining more than one spokesperson means that organizations may project different (even conflicting) images to specific audiences to meet the particular needs of those audiences (Sutton & Callahan, 1987; Zbaracki, 1998).

Finally, this paper identifies both internal and external audiences of organizational perception management, and demonstrates how these are distinct from the audiences that individuals may face. In the same way that organizational spokespersons are a diverse group, audiences of organizational perception vary in their size and characteristics. Demands for identity management from employees, an internal audience, may focus on maintaining a distinct culture (e.g. of "smallness" or "collegiality"). Yet, multiple internal audiences may disagree about what identity is appropriate for the organization, leading to hybrid organizational identities that are difficult to maintain (Elsbach, 2001a). These identity conflicts would not manifest themselves in the same way for individuals as for organizations.

In other cases, there may be conflicts between the demands of an organization's internal and external audiences. Organizational consumers may demand cost cutting behaviors as symbols of their commitment to lowering prices, while employees may chafe against such actions. While such internal/external conflicts may occur for individuals (i.e. individuals may hold internal beliefs that conflict with what their friends would like them to be), such conflicts are not typically thrust into the public eye unless the individual chooses to make the conflict public.

Finally, organizations may face disagreements between the demands from various external audiences. External audiences that routinely interact with the organization (e.g. consumers) may pay most attention to routine symbolic behaviors and communications from leaders, while external audiences that only casually observe the organization may pay most attention to crisis communications or communications in anticipation of controversial events.

Taken together, these findings suggest that organizational (vs. individual) perception management involves a consideration of unique strategic issues. In particular, the above discussion suggests that organizational perception management involves matching spokesperson actions to audiences' interpretations of salient perception forms (i.e. images, reputations, or identities), as well as to organizational norms and strategies. As shown in Fig. 2, the key to successful organizational perception management starts with recognizing how different types of triggering events focus audiences' attention on: (1) specific forms of organizational perceptions; and (2) specific strategic issues (i.e. coping with audience conflicts, coordinating multiple spokespersons). Interestingly, this framework suggests that the major mistakes that spokespersons can make in carrying out organizational perception management are *not*, for example, the use of the wrong types of accounts or symbolic behaviors to manage a threatened organizational image. Rather, the major mistakes such spokespersons can make are to incorrectly identify the *form* of organizational perception that needs managing (e.g. using identity management responses, when reputation management is called for), and the *strategic issues* that need consideration (e.g. disregarding how perception management tactics fit with the organization's overall performance strategy).

In sum, there is ample evidence that organizational perception management involves a set of components that are distinct from those used in individual perception management. There is also evidence that putting these components together to effectively manage perceptions of an organization is not a simple or easy task. Still, there are many cases that illustrate how such organizational perception management may be effectively carried out. As a case in point, let us return to the trials of the National Rifle Association, originally discussed at the beginning of this paper.

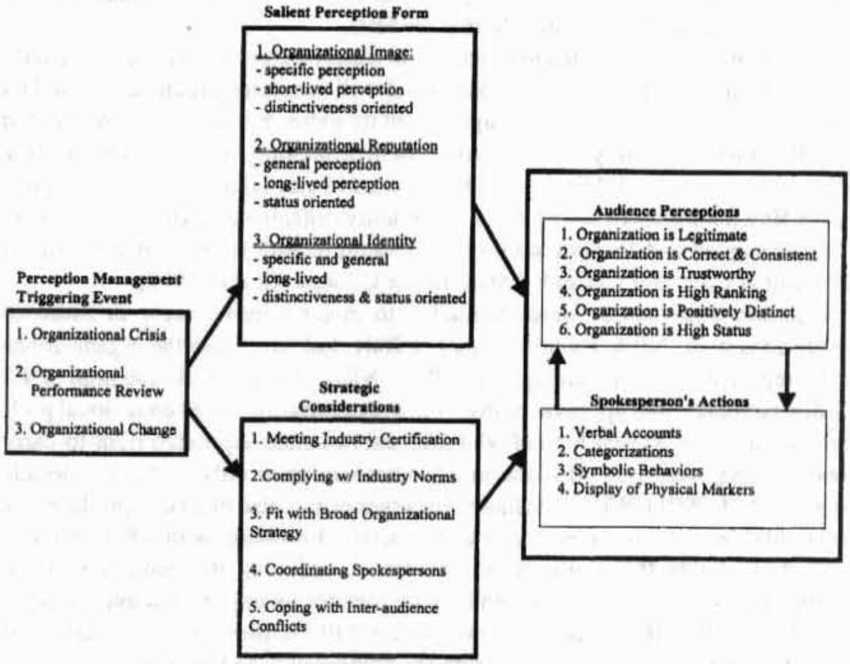

Fig. 2. The Process of Organizational Perception Management.

The NRA: Follow-Up

In the months and years following Handgun Control Inc.'s prediction of the NRA's demise, the NRA and its leadership undertook a series of campaigns to manage these perceptions. First, it attempted to improve its current *images of legitimacy and morality* with external and internal audiences by electing a new leader. In the Spring of 1997 the NRA elected screen icon, Charleton Heston to be vice-president. Members elected him as president of the organization one year later. Heston was seen a legitimate, mainstream gun owner, and a morally and ethically sound spokesperson for the organization (most American's remember him in his film roles as Moses and Ben Hur) (Getlin, 1998, p. A1).

Second, the NRA re-affirmed its central, distinctive, and enduring *identity* as a mainstream organization by producing a series of magazine and newspaper advertisements that described the NRA's role in mainstream life. These advertisements featured famous, and widely respected members of the NRA (e.g. Heston, former NFL quarterback and Congressman, Steve Largent, and television star Tom Selleck) who claimed, "I am the NRA" in full-page advertisements

(Janofsky, 1998). Their statements equated the NRA with their personalities (e.g. mainstream, upstanding, legitimate role models).

Finally, the NRA attempted to influence its widely-perceived *reputation* by publicizing its links to other well-established and well-respected organizations and by engaging in symbolic actions that highlighted its status. For instance, it publicized its affiliation with the Boy Scouts of America in promoting shooting safety, and the NRA cartoon mascot, Eddie the Eagle, was used in gun safety programs designed by the Boy Scouts and used by other community organizations (Moscoso, 2000). It also designed and taught a college curriculum on gun safety that was offered for credit at Colorado's Trinidad State Junior College (Curtin, 1999).

Together, these tactics were credited with major improvements in audience perceptions of the NRA. By the summer of 2001, LaPierre (now the organizations CEO) reported that membership of the "New NRA" was at an all time high of 4.3 million members, that approval ratings for the organization based on national polls were running at a 20 year high of 60–65%, and that state-supported right-to-carry firearms laws were now in place in 32 states (up from only 6 states a decade earlier) (Staff, 2001). While it is likely that other events also helped to produce this turnaround (e.g. the replacement of a Democratic President, with a Republican), it seems probable that LaPierre was correct in crediting the makeover of the organization's images, identities, and reputations for its improved pubic support.

In the end, the NRA appears to have successfully implemented organizational perception management by considering the components and strategic issues outlined in this paper. This case illustrates how an understanding of the unique nature of organizational perception management can help even the most controversial organizations to repair and maintain positive and desired perceptions among its valued audiences.

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