Some notes on a brand-based approach to the analysis of public sector organizations

Purpose and Overview

The purpose of this article is to examine brand analysis as a useful platform upon which to address an interesting range of organizational performance or transformation challenges, especially with respect to public sector organizations with "whole of the Department" mandates. As part of this approach, it is useful to think of four distinct but related concepts:

- **Brand value** relates to how an organization with a "whole of the Department" mandate is viewed *outside* the organization by the rest of the Department. This approach is useful in understanding why organizations with "whole of the Department" mandates sometimes do no turn the corner from "compliance obligation" to "strategic must-have";

- **Brand identity** is a way of describing how the managers and officers *inside* an organization with a "whole of the Department" mandate actually understand their roles and mandate. This is useful in situations where an organization senses that it has lost its way and needs some assistance in repositioning itself vis-à-vis the rest of the Department;

- **Brand management** focuses attention on questions relating to the degree of convergence between the *external* brand value of an organization and its *internal* brand identity, again, useful in situations where organizations with whole of the Department mandates need to address questions of organizational mobilization and/or re-positioning; and,

- **Brand portfolio** is a concept that is useful in dealing with larger organizations, to help clarify the perceived division of labour between, for example, directorates in the same branch. This last approach is particularly useful in re-organization scenarios.

Evolution of this brand analysis approach

All units with "whole of the Department" mandates face the challenges of pursuing *horizontal* objectives in what are predominantly vertically integrated organizations. In addition, however, units with "whole of the Department" mandates face additional unique challenges. On the one hand, they have mandates that are deemed *officially important* – e.g. audit and evaluation, integrated risk management or strategic outcome planning, etc. On the other hand, these *officially important* mandates sometimes do not carry much weight – or, rather, not as much weight as they should – with the rest of the organization.

In some cases, the fundamental nature of the specific "whole of the Department" mandate is effectively discounted by the rest of the Department – think of the challenges that integrated risk management teams face when confronted with program managers that consistently underestimate the presence of risk, to begin with, and then over-estimate their capacity for risk mitigation, should it appear. In other cases, the role of such units is too narrowly perceived – think of Communications Branches that are perceived as "service units", essentially press-release machines, rather than as sources of strategic advice about the most effective ways of telling a Department's story to the rest of the world. Consider, in the same vein, strategic policy units that are perceived mainly as "deck drafting" units largely reserved for the use of the Deputy or the

Minister. In still other cases, mandates of such units are the victims of what might be termed "program denialism" – think of Legal Service units that are somehow seen as the "owners" of litigation actually caused by program misadventure.

All too often, units with "whole of the Department" mandates face one or both of the following situations. Sometimes, units with *officially important* mandates enjoy "corner of the desk" status, when they are supposed to be "strategic must-haves". In other situations, these kinds of units, with functions that cut horizontally across the Department, are often seen as nothing more than "compliance obligations", that is, ones that that *have* to be used by programs, e.g. "ticking off yet another box on the Memorandum for Cabinet (MC) checklist", as opposed to be organizations that programs *want* to use, i.e. because of their unique expertise and "whole of the Department" vantage points.

Over time, I came to view the challenges and opportunities faced by units with "whole of the Department" mandates as questions of *brand development and management*. The idea of using brand analysis as a lens on organizational performance emerged out of initial work I did on "value proposition". Asking the members of an organization – at either the senior management or working levels – what their organization "brings to the table" in terms of "unique value added" contributions proved remarkably effective in cutting through the often murky questions of vision, strategy and mandate and "grounding" the discussion on practices or products that were difference makers. The Strategic Review process provided more than adequate external justification for taking this "value proposition" approach to organizational mobilization and performance questions. After all, what Strategic Review really did was to challenge Departments to demonstrate how they could actually *increase their value propositions* after shedding the bottom-performing five (5) per cent of their programs.

On what was a parallel track, I started to examine the recent management literature with respect to brand analysis. As I worked my way through this material, I started to realize that, essentially, an organization's brand in the Government of Canada is how that organization's value proposition is perceived by those both outside and inside the organization. As a result, I began to see brand analysis as a more focused version of the value proposition approach to organizational challenges. There is an old saying to the effect that "the fox knows many little things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing".[1] In that respect, a brand-based analysis of an organization's performance is much more "hedgehog" than "fox", because the very nature of a brand-based analysis encourages a focus on identifying or "knowing" the "one big thing" that characterizes the unique fundamental nature of an organization. Over time, this led to the development of the framework presented at the start of this article, where *brand value* describes an organization's *perceived* place or standing in the rest of the Department, *brand identity* describes how members of an organization *internally* perceive their own unit, *brand management* addresses situations where the external brand value and the internal brand identity of an organization do not converge,

[1] According to Wikipedia, this saying is originally attributed to the ancient Greek poet Archilochus. It is the title of a very interesting essay by Isaiah Berlin, who uses this saying to compare and contrast the intellectual styles of famous philosophers. For me, this saying has proved useful as an interesting way of thinking about different management responsibilities. For example, "the fox knows many things" suggests, to me at least, the concept of a Chief Operating Officer, or COO, i.e., someone capable of multitasking, and managing many priorities at the same time, in the role as the organization's "wagon master", driving the implementation of the organization's annual action plan. By contrast, "the hedgehog knows one big thing" suggests to me something more in the role of the Chief Executive Office, or CEO, i.e., someone who is taking a longer and more fundamental view of where the organization is, and, more importantly, where it needs to go.

and *brand portfolio* deals with larger organizations, where each sub-unit or Directorate has its own brand value and brand identity.

Brand Value Approach

An organization's brand value is a product of that organization's best and worst services and products *as perceived by the rest of the Department*. Accordingly, the core question posed by the brand value approach is simple: does the organization in question, i.e. the one with an *officially important* "whole of the Department" mandate, produce at least one product or service that has "wow factor" or "difference maker" written all over it, such that the rest of the Department recognizes both the value and the source of this "difference making" product or service?

As already noted above, the mere fact of having an *officially important* "whole of the Department" mandate is no guarantee that the organization will be viewed by the rest of the Department as a "go to" organization. If an organization with a "whole of the Department" mandate is going to "turn the corner" from "compliance obligation" to "strategic must-have", then it is going to have to distinguish itself in terms of both its cognitive capacity and its action capacity.

Cognitive capacity involves two unique but related considerations. Having a "whole of the Department" mandate gives an organization a unique vantage point from which to observe the workings of the entire Department. What is important is that the unique vantage point provided by a "whole of the Department" mandate be translated into a source of unique insights about the Department, insights generally not otherwise available.

In turn, this enhanced cognitive capacity should translate into "client capacity", i.e. the ability of an organization with a "whole of the Department" mandate to know what its client needs before the client does, whether the client is the Deputy, the senior management team of the Department, or senior program managers. And if this kind of organization is really "on its game", then it should aspire to knowing what the client *really* needs, as opposed to what the client *thinks* it needs. [Heightened client capacity is not an unreasonable demand to be placed on organizations with the unique vantage points provided by their "whole of the Department" mandates. At an everyday level, consultants are successful to the extent that they can detect and understand the sub-texts being communicated by their clients, and thus get past surface concerns and identify more fundamental issues facing organizations. At a much more elevated level, think of the uncanny capacity of Apple Computers to continuously design devices that prompt "I didn't know I needed this until I saw it" kinds of reactions.]

Having superior cognitive and client capacities is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for making the jump from "compliance obligation" to "strategic must-have". What is required is that this capacity for generating unique insights about the *operations* and the *needs* of the Department be translated into clearly definable services or products that are *difference makers*. This is action capacity, i.e. the ability to generate services and products that are unique, that have a "wow" factor, and thus which demonstrate the organization's "unique value proposition" to the rest of the Department.

This is not to argue that every unit with a "whole of the Department" mandate has to be outstanding at everything it does or produces, but it does strongly suggest that every such organization has to do one or two things very, very well to demonstrate its real – as opposed to officially mandated – value to the rest of the organization. The risk of not generating unique insights about the operations and the needs of the Department and of not translating these cognitive insights into products with wow factors is two-fold. First, the organization does not fully implement its "whole of the Department" mandate and remains a compliance obligation, i.e. nothing more than a "box to be ticked". Second, and more fundamentally important, the real risk in this kind of scenario is something I term "commodification".

With respect to the first risk, some considerations are presented in Table 1. Essentially, what is being suggested below is that organizations with "whole of the Department" mandates need to do more than simply "go through the motions" of implementing their mandates. To generate some significant and visible "brand value" vis-à-vis the rest of the organization, they need to "push their mandate envelope" a bit and "make more of a difference". And if they do this, they will almost certainly develop products that are "difference makers", which make a mark on the rest of the Department, and thereby build "brand value".

Table 1: Brand Value Options for Organizations with "Whole of the Department" Mandates

Organization	Remains "compliance objective"	Pushes the mandate envelope & becomes "strategic must-have"
Integrated Risk Management	Does annual program-by-program roll-up of risks; makes one annual presentation to senior management	Effectively integrates risk-relevant information from a wide range of sources & presents senior management with compelling overviews of operational and strategic risks
Legal Services	Provides solid advice on current and emerging cases	Goes well beyond case management to provide advice on litigation trends, the factors driving litigation and legal risk management & prevention
Audit & Evaluation	Grinds out products that meet professional standards	Generates insightful, compelling reports that place emphasis on management action plans and problem solving
Corporate Management	Dutifully pulls together Reports on Plans and Priorities (RPPs) & Departmental Performance Reports (DPRs) to meet Treasury Board standards	Invests time & energy in improving the content and presentation of these documents, recognizing that RPPs and DPRs are very significant, high profile "for the record" statements of Departmental intent and performance
Strategic Policy	Grinds out decks and other materials for senior management	Develops a visible capacity for integrating issues across the entire Department, for identifying future trends & their implications for the Department, etc.
Federal-Provincial Relations	Effectively manages fed-prov meetings or issues as they arise	Develops effective working relationships with other jurisdictions, i.e. builds significant "social capital" that actively supports Departmental objectives
Communications	Basically viewed as a service unit or "press release" machine	Uses public environment analysis & forward planning to provide strategic advice to senior management about the most effective ways of telling the Department's story to the rest of the world

With respect to the second risk, what I term “commodification”, if an organization with an *officially important* “whole of the Department” mandate does not generate unique insights and difference-making products, it runs the risk of being viewed as simply another “one of those coordinating units”, i.e. the ones having horizontal mandates that largely do nothing more than get in the way of vertically integrated program operations. Being seen as “just another unit” makes an organization indistinguishable from other units and thus something close to a commodity, and when nothing distinguishes one commodity from another, then the only real issue is not one of performance, but rather one of affordability. The last place any organization wants to find itself is “part of a crowd”, because “crowds” become much less affordable in Strategic and Operational Review situations. In contrast, organizations that have demonstrated unique, value-added propositions are far more likely to be supported and protected in these kinds of reviews, because they are seen by senior management and by program managers alike as unique sources of value to the performance of the Department as a whole.

Brand Identity Approach

The core question at the centre of this approach is simple: what is the unique activity which gives the organization its identity, as perceived *internally* by its own workforce? Like any other organization, a unit with an *officially important* “whole of the Department” mandate faces choices in terms of how its mandate is implemented – which dimensions of the organization’s *mandate space* are filled, and which are left relatively under-developed or empty? Sometimes, organizations find it necessary to rediscover “what makes them tick” or what makes them unique. In this regard, the brand identity approach poses some potentially useful questions.

Performance-based approach to organizational identity

- Does your organization occupy a unique substantive “space” in the Department? If so, does your organization “own” this space by virtue of performance? Or, in the alternative,

- Is there a unique service or product being produced by your unit that would otherwise not see the light of day?

Style-based approach to organizational identity

- What is the driving force that defines your organization? Or, in the alternative,

- Is there a unique combination of “what” your organization does and “how” your organization works that, taken together, defines your organization’s unique identity?

Employing this brand-based approach to organizational identity can generate useful and non-obvious insights. For example, on “performance”, one strategic policy unit realized that, among its other duties, what it had been doing for some time had been to tell the story of the Department’s future back to the present – something being done by no other unit in the entire Department. On style, this same group concluded that it had been developing a reputation as a “can do” organization that always is seen as leaving any situation better as a result of its involvement. Thus, while the members of this strategic policy group recognized that much of their work would involve “feeding the Cabinet committee process” with decks and other presentations, they also recognized that there was a combination of substance and style that really did define their unique identity as a policy group.

Another policy unit, one with a horizontal coordinating mandate, concluded that it had "some work to do" in terms of sharpening its *performance* identity. But, at the same time, this group came to understand that, under *style*, it had developed a very considerable amount of what might be termed the organizational equivalent of "social capital" in terms of strong working relationships with the program sectors in the Department and, more importantly, with a wide range of other government departments. This group further concluded that this "social capital" could be leveraged into stronger performance and products and services that would better resonate with the needs of the rest of the Department. In short, the brand identity workshop helped this second policy group identify the key dimensions of a "re-positioning" strategy vis-à-vis other policy units in the Department and the rest of the Department as a whole.

In summary, brand identity analysis provides a very simple and direct way of helping an organization to define or rediscover its "raison d'être". It encourages a focus on "knowing the one big thing" that defines the essence of the organization.

Brand Management Approach

Ideally, an organization's externally perceived brand value and internally perceived brand identity should converge – i.e. the product with "wow" factor that defined the value of the organization to the rest of the Department should also figure prominently in the organization's own conceptualization of its identity. Similarly, the reasons why the rest of the Department views the unit in question as a "go to" organization should overlap with the internal vision of "what makes our organization tick".

Using this approach, it is likely that a strategic policy group is going to experience the organizational equivalent of cognitive dissonance if its external brand value is "being a really first-rate deck writing operation", while its internal identity leans heavily towards "telling the future's story to the present". Similarly, even if a communications shop earns an enviable external reputation in the rest of the Department in terms of its service – "really first-rate press releases and communications products" – that may not resonate with an internal identity which is focused more becoming a strategically capable organization interested in attempting to reposition the Department to deal with future communications challenges.

In this context, brand management can be viewed in terms of how to generate a higher degree of congruence between the organization's external brand value and internal brand identity. In some cases, the answer will be relatively obvious – if the organization's *external* brand value is what the rest of the Department needs, then it is clear that the organization's internal brand identity has to be brought in line with producing what the rest of the Department needs and values. This kind of externally driven brand management may come into play in situations where the Department is given new mandates or new directions by the Government.

In other situations, however, the brand management solution may not be as immediately obvious, and the question of client capacity, of knowing what the client really needs, may come into play. Consider, for example, a legal services unit facing new challenges. From an external brand value perspective, the legal services unit may already enjoy a valued position with the rest of the Department, primarily on the basis of legal advisory service excellence. Internally, however, the legal service unit's senior management team may be viewing with dismay a steadily rising tide of litigation, some or most of which could be prevented with prudent and timely changes to how programs are designed and/or delivered. In this kind of situation, the legal services unit is facing a brand management challenge – i.e. how to move both their clients *and* their officers from a “service excellence” brand positioning to a “legal risk management” orientation? The legal services unit’s leadership will have to work hard on two fronts: first, to make a compelling case to the Department’s senior management team that the Department’s real need is to put in place an integrated approach to legal risk management and litigation prevention; and, second, to re-orient senior and junior lawyers alike from case management to legal risk prevention and management, i.e. from focusing on specific cases to concentrating on the entire inventory of cases and the factors driving the growth of this inventory.

More generally, the concept of brand management can serve as a window on broader change management situations. What about the all too familiar scenario where a major change management initiative – say, involving a communications branch – stalls out half way through the transformation process? In brand management terms, this might suggest that the commitment of the branch’s senior management team to a new brand value positioning for the organization is not shared by, or congruent with, the internal brand identity motivating working level officers. Thus, while the senior management team is committing itself to the concept of a more forward looking, strategically oriented communications shop, working level officers are still committed to a much less strategic, much more “in the present” identity, where “better press releases sooner” remains the organizing mantra.

Brand Portfolio Analysis

The final dimension of this brand-based approach to organizational analysis involves the concept of brand portfolio. Two considerations are central to this approach:

- In a larger organization with a “whole of the Department” mandate, what is the unique brand value of each sub-unit or Directorate?

- How to ensure that each brand identity “counts”?

In the context of the earlier Strategic Review process in the Government of Canada, and given the new Strategic and Operational Review process now getting underway, this second question becomes significant. Situations where some sub-units or Directorates exist primarily as “back of the house” support units for other, more front-line Directorates are becoming more tenuous and less affordable in the context of Government-wide fiscal restraint initiatives. If a sub-unit’s brand value does not translate directly to the needs of the Department as a whole, then it is more likely to become a candidate for downsizing and/or consolidation into a Directorate that does clearly provide valued services to the rest of the Department.

More generally, brand portfolio analysis – and the idea that every Directorate’s or sub-unit’s brand “has to count” – lends itself to any scenario involving either downsizing or re-organizing, or both. In these kinds of situations, “getting there from here”, i.e. working through the confusion of major change to arrive at a new organizational configuration, is often a daunting challenge. It may prove more useful to adopt a brand portfolio approach to help clarify the “end game” and then go through a process of “reverse engineering” to get back to the current situation. The key question would thus become: in the new organizational configuration, what will be the brand value positioning of each new sub-unit or Directorate? That is, what will each of the new units, post downsizing or re-organization, “be known for” by the rest of the Department?

This approach has several potential advantages. First, it can be used to generate some clear “destination points” in the process of downsizing or re-organizing – i.e. this is the configuration of brands that we want to arrive at, by the end of the change management process. Second, it provides guidance in terms of the subsequent development of internal brand identities for each sub-unit – i.e. if Directorate X is going to be known for producing this kind of "wow" factor product or service, then the development of the internal brand identity of that Directorate will have to proceed along certain lines in terms of personnel, activities, approaches and leadership.

Third, and perhaps particularly important in any downsizing scenario, having a clear sense of the desired brand value or brand positioning of each sub-unit or Directorate, i.e. what each unit with be "known for", will, of necessity, also define what each sub-unit or Directorate *will no longer do* in terms of providing services or products. Downsizing implies that, for reasons of declining resources and/or shifting priorities, an organization with a whole of the Department mandate will no longer provide certain services or products to the rest of the Department. All too often, this "hard new reality" is "lost" on the rest of the Department, with the demand for services somehow never quite adjusting to the new resourcing realities. Consider, in this respect, the unenviable position of any communications shop that will experience sharp resource contractions but will more than likely still be held accountable by the rest of the Department for a volume of services no longer supportable. Thus, having clear brand positioning for every new unit generated by a re-organization helps create boundaries about what is reasonable and not reasonable to expect from re-organization.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the examples provided above, this brand-based approach to organizational analysis is deeply embedded in the experiences obtained working with a wide variety of organizations with "whole of the Department" mandates. In effect, brand-based analysis allows for a sharpening of issues to help such organizations make the jump from *officially important* "compliance obligations" to "strategic must-haves". More generally, however, it is reasonable to suggest that this brand-based analysis applies to a broader range of public sector organizations:

- **Brand value** encourages organizations to produce services or products that "make a difference", and thereby avoid the potential pitfalls of commodification;

- **Brand identity** cuts through the mists of mission statements and strategic plans to focus attention on what it is, in terms of substance and style, that makes the organization unique;

- **Brand management** raises useful questions about the degree of congruence between an organization's brand value, as perceived by the rest of the Department, and its internal brand identity, and, in addition, provides a window on change management situations, where senior management and working level officers may not share the same new brand identity for their organization; and, finally,

- **Brand portfolio** generates simple and useful questions for any large-scale downsizing or restructuring scenario, namely, what will be the unique brand identity of each new sub-unit created by the reorganization, and how to ensure that every such brand "really counts".

To return to the old saying about the fox and the hedgehog, brand-based analysis suggests that, in some organizational renewal or transformation situations, "knowing one big thing" about the organization's unique value proposition may be a lot more useful than "knowing many little things" about mandate, mission statement, strategic objectives, resource base, etc.