



**THE IMAGE OF HI-HOSTELS
AMONGST MEMBERSHIP
ORGANISATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

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In a current image society people are constantly exposed to different types of messages. People base their information on perceptions and images as much as on actual facts. Image is formed by unconscious and conscious matters and can be formed in a single encounter. Organisations can never fully determine what kind of image is formed of them and therefore it is essential for any organisation to be up-to-date with its current image.

This bachelor's thesis was commissioned by Hostelling International Finland. The aim of this thesis was to examine the current image of HI-hostels amongst the membership organisations of Hostelling International Finland and offer suggestions for possible improvements.

The theoretical framework consists of image and reputation formation and image building process. Also strategic and marketing communications are described. A qualitative research method was used to gain better insight of the current image. Semi-structured interview method was chosen to collect data and the data were analysed based on the themes of the interviews. Due to confidentiality reasons the analysis of the interview outcomes and suggestions for future development are not published and they can be found in the appendices.

The analysis indicated that HI-hostels are not well known amongst the membership organisations. HI-hostels were considered as a choice of accommodation mainly for youth and students, indicating that the external communications could be improved to raise a better awareness and to improve the current knowledge. Further research could be done on consumer behaviour to gain in-depth insight of the factors influencing consumer decision making process and how to persuade consumers to consider HI-hostels as an accommodation alternative.

Key words: image, interviews, hostel, marketing communications

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1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this bachelor's thesis was to examine and analyse the current image of HI-hostels amongst the membership organisations of Hostelling International Finland. In addition, possible reasons influencing the current image and services provided at HI-hostels were analysed. This bachelor's thesis was commissioned by Hostelling International Finland and the topic was chosen due to a relevant need, since the image greatly influences on customer behaviour.

Hostelling International Finland is a non-profit umbrella association for around 40 Finnish HI-hostels and the purpose of HI Finland is to market, promote and develop HI-hostel network in Finland, assure quality standards set by global Hostelling International and ensure visibility of Hostelling International brand. (Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

The latest research of the current image of HI-hostels was conducted in autumn 2011 amongst randomly selected people. A research focusing on images amongst membership organisations had not been conducted before; therefore this research provided valuable information for HI Finland and Finnish HI-hostels.

To gain a better understanding of the research topic, the theoretical framework is based on image and reputation formation and how an image can be built. In addition, strategic and marketing communications are briefly explained. The data analysed were gained by interviewing representatives of membership organisations.

The purpose of this survey was to provide relevant data that can be used to improve the current image. The current image provides possible guidelines for operations and defines the course for HI Finland and Finnish HI-hostels. By achieving a good image amongst membership organisations, HI-hostels are able to succeed in the competitive service sector where a good image may be the main matter influencing on the purchase decision.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical framework in this thesis provides the vantage point from which the research topic was examined. In the next chapters the topics of research and reasoning, aims, objectives, main concepts, relevant theoretical framework, data and methods are explained. Concepts are explained in more detail to avoid common 'concept confusion'. Theoretical framework is based on these definitions.

2.1 Image society

In a current society people are constantly provided with different types of information which has initially led to so called 'information overload'. People base their information on perceptions and images as much as on facts due to lack of time and effort. The images are often lagging behind reality yet decisions must be made according to current images. A good image has become an asset in all fields of operations from schools to massive international companies, making it to be an important part of any kind of strategic operations. (Juholin 2009, 184; Karvonen 1999, 17; Åberg 1999, 67.)

2.2 Perceptions

A perception is formed when two parties encounter for a period long enough for the information to pass on, whether this information is sent unintentionally or intentionally. (Karvonen 1999, 52.)

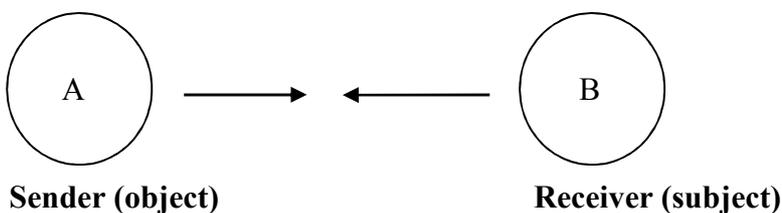


FIGURE 1. Simple figure of perception formation (Karvonen 1999, 52)

A perception is a schema of memory traces and associations between these connections. Schema helps to categorize information and allows taking shortcuts to form perceptions. An example given by Karvonen (1999, 54) is when we see an elderly, 'granny' type of a lady roaming on the street; we naturally assume this person probably enjoys knitting in a rocking chair instead of driving Jaguar and drinking in a bar. Schemas help people to

process the vast amount of information that people are exposed to on a daily basis (Karvonen 1999, 53-54.)

Since there are no wrong or right perceptions, these do not have to correlate with reality. Perceptions are based on previous experiences, conclusions and interpretations, therefore making it difficult to estimate what kind of perceptions an individual might have. Even memories from a long time ago can affect if an individual connects these two things intentionally or unintentionally. (Karvonen 1999, 53; Vuokko 2003, 190.)

Marketing communications often struggle with creating connection long enough for perceptions – a constant exposure to different types of information has led to that a noticeable amount of information is dismissed if information does not serve a current need. In this low-involment mode communications might not have the desired effect, yet certain elements of the message might be passed on. Instead of the receiver recalling the exact details, basic concepts and perceptual memories (shapes et cetera) might be memorized. If done well, this is enough to create a memory trace, and can be brought up in later encounters into conscious awareness. (Kotler & Keller 2007, 89; Vitale 2006, 64.)

2.3 Importance of good image

What is the point of good services if no one knows about them? (Juholin 2009, 191).

Image is one of the most important assets for any organisation. Image is a sum of all perceptions a stakeholder has about an organisation. It influences in all stakeholder relations, since it affects in every single contact an organisation has or might have (Vuokko 2003, 106):

- how people speak about an organisation
- how interested they are (or if they are interested)
- is the existence of an organisation found justified
- is an organisation found interesting for possible cooperation
- is an organisation worth recommending
- how attractive an organisation is found as an employer
- are employees proud of their organisation

A good image is a clear asset against competition; it attracts potential partners and builds trust. Good stakeholder relations boost respect towards the organisation and also works as a reference for possible future partners. As any other organisation, a non-profit organisation has to appear reliable amongst rival organisations since competitiveness means that the organisation is taken seriously by rivals. Vuokko also states (2004, 196) that nowadays a sign of a good image is when the rivals are more interested in doing cooperation than compete against the organisation. (Mäkinen, Kahri & Kahri 2010, 31-33; Vuokko 2004, 196.)

A good image reduces expenses. Better deals with partners are more easily negotiated whereas a negative image complicates or even prevents cooperation. Organisations are keener on cooperating with respected organisations and might be even willing to settle for less when negotiating possible terms. This also reduces marketing costs and this way scarce resources can be used otherwise. Marketing is often seen as a complex matter since it is often associated with a commercial profit instead of realising it can be used for relaying the mission of a non-profit organisation. A good image therefore also makes communications easier, since less resources are required to be successful. (Mäkinen, Kahri & Kahri 2010, 32-33; Vuokko 2003, 106.)

A good image protects in difficult situations. Without a doubt, organisations face difficulties during their existence. A good image helps to manage difficulties and if crisis management is done in-line with the current image, an organisation is able to handle the crisis better than a competitor with a less flattering image. An image also has a filtering effect: a positive image delays a possible negative image formation as opposed to an organisation with a negative image. (Mäkinen, Kahri & Kahri 2010, 31; Vuokko 2003, 107.)

On the whole, a good image is everything; if services provided by the organisation are secondary in the minds of the stakeholders, the organisation most likely ceases to exist. When there is a possibility for selection, there is always competition. (Karvonen 1999, 23; Bowie & Buttle 2004, 102.)

2.4 Image formation

An image is built over time and each intentional and unintentional encounter with an organisation leads to some kind of an image; even avoidance of any communication forms an image. Also it is not only the information that a stakeholder receives, but also *how* information is interpreted. All stakeholders have their own reasons and experiences to interpret information as they do. (Juholin 2009, 190.)

A facet theory of communications developed by Åberg (1999, 156) defines that the message receiving process has different stages. Before an image can be even formed, a message has to go through these four stages:

1. comprehensive interpretation
2. simplification
3. activation of stimuli
4. attachment

According to this theory, the most ideal type of communications would activate as many stimuli as possible, as an example a message acknowledging all senses. These kind of stimuli can be easily found in a well-designed theme restaurant; an Italian restaurant does not only serve Italian cuisine, it also has invested in decoration and creating an Italian atmosphere. Small details in a restaurant, certain smells and even an accent can bring up memories related to Italy. (Åberg 1999, 156-158.)

Since these kinds of stimuli possibilities are rare for organisations, more common yet effective measures are repetition, empathy and surprise factors. Each separate message is interpreted differently by the same person, therefore the effectiveness of a message can be improved when repeated since different stimuli are activated every time. Although it must be kept in mind that *too much* repetition can turn a good message into an annoying one in the end. If possible, communications should take into consideration the kind of stimuli the receiver might already have; here a proper understanding of target markets is essential. A message sent also should not be too easy, since it has more effective results if pondered a bit. (Åberg 1999, 160; Vuokko 2003, 71.)

The most influential matters in image formation are personal experiences, even when they have occurred a long time ago. The current image might be out-of-date and even new encounters do not alter it, therefore making the first formed image the most influential. Changes in communications often struggle with the matter since these images are challenging to alter. People are naturally rather sceptical towards change and renewal takes time. People are keener on remembering negative experiences, but a once gained positive image is not either easily exposed to change. (Juholin 2009, 320-322; Åberg 1999, 66-67.)

Other very influential matters are common perceptions and word-of-mouth. These rely on experiences of other, 'ordinary' people. People are more interested in experiences of someone they know and these experiences are often considered as a more reliable source of information than information sent by the organisation itself. The importance of word-of-mouth and common perceptions have been emphasized in a current society due to constant exposure to information. As discussed earlier, people filter great amount of information on a daily basis and therefore information received from someone as considered as trustworthy usually passes a very selective filtering process. Word-of-mouth is not only happening on face-to-face communications but even more on social media where people can publish their reviews and experiences with their own name. (De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van Den Bergh 2007, 248; McKinsey & Company. A new way to measure word-of-mouth marketing 2010.)

The image passed on by the media is also influential, since information is not only passed directly but also by word-of-mouth. Media create connections to stakeholders and occasionally messages do not even pass the organisation itself. Media also pass on information that might not be favourable for the organisation and filter information as media find convenient, making it anything else but a passive intermediary. (Karvonen 1999, 78.)

Special characteristics of a service sector organisation is that it is embodied; whole image of an organisation can be formed by the actions of a single customer servant. *Personification* occurs when an organisation is strongly connected to a certain person. Personification is very common in small organisations; a good example is the grocery shopkeeper at Jounin Kauppa in Äkäslompola. By being very active on social media and linking the face of the shopkeeper in marketing communications, the store has strongly embodied to

him and this has helped making this store nationally famous. (Puustinen & Rouhiainen 2007, 60.)

2.4.1 Levels of image

The image is not only formed by what information is received, but also levels of image influence on image formation. Image exists on several levels; for example a network organisation always has an overall image and a local image. (Grönroos 2001, 293.) Image can be formed by a local image, an overall image or by a combination of these. Hostelling International Finland and HI-hostels are a good example: the image of Hostelling International Finland can be seen as an overall image where local images are formed by separate HI-hostels. Especially a local image is strongly influenced by overall image. (Grönroos 2001, 293.)

Levels of image also include what type of an organisation is at issue. Non-profit status influences on image formation due to different expectations by stakeholders. The importance of transparency is even more vital for non-profit organisations, since information is easily accessible by anyone and if operations do not match with what is written by third parties, a non-profit organisation is in danger of losing one of the most essential advantages – trust. Without a trust an organisation cannot sustain valuable stakeholder relations. (Tuominen 2013, 63-64; Vuokko 2004, 201.)

2.4.2 Interpreting information

Attitudes define how information is interpreted. Attitudes explain how information is perceived based on previous experiences and knowledge. Often attitudes are confused with behaviour; attitude is what is in the mind whereas behaviour is the actions taken. (Webb 2002, 154-155.)

Attitudes are formed by cognitive, affective and behavioural components. Cognitive components are formed by knowledge, beliefs and assessments; such as information received from an organisation. Affective components tell feelings associated and behavioural ones tell readiness to take possible actions. An individual might have dreamed of a hiking

holiday in Lapland (affective) but thinks holiday being too expensive. Then the individual receives new information (cognitive) and learns about an affordable option leading to a booking of a holiday (behavioural). Attitudes also can be altered by learning: an individual might adopt a new way of thinking, leading to altered behaviour. When a certain knowledge is learned, an individual often starts repetition process leading to a new habit. People are on keen habitual behaviour where well tried manners are found as a safe option since it does not require much thinking. In the example given above, this could mean that since the person has learned about the more affordable option, one might turn to a service provider again creating a repetition process. (De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van Den Bergh 2007, 78; Webb 2002, 158-159.)

If a message goes along with the knowledge the individual already has, the message is more likely received positively whereas a message conflicting with attitudes and knowledge is received negatively. It is important that messages are adapted; if an organisation wants to revise attitudes amongst stakeholders, the approach should differ depending on the stakeholders. All stakeholders have different attitudes and varied images towards the organisation and therefore using the same method to all is rarely successful. (Puustinen & Rouhiainen 2007, 156.)

Despite of positive attitude, behaviour might not correlate with the attitude. Instead of merely focusing on attitude measurement, additional focus should be put also on behavioural matters. Individuals might have a very positive attitude, for example towards HI-hostels yet they do not favour actually using the HI-hostels themselves. Often for an organisation behavioural matters provide more valuable information than just measurement of attitudes. Combining data gained about attitudes and behaviour, information gained can be used either to predict or influence future behaviour. (Webb 2002, 161.)

Due to the special characteristics of a non-profit organisation there is a need to justify its existence. This also has an effect on attitudes; without justification a non-profit organisation is seen purposeless and not a cause worth supporting. The mission of a non-profit organisation should be emphasized in communications to influence attitudes. The more positive attitude stakeholders have towards the non-profit organisation the more likely it is able to execute its mission. (Vuokko 2004, 193.)

2.5 Reputation

I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation – Joan Jett

Even though a popular song inclines not to care about bad reputation, for an organisation such a move would be fatal. Reputation is an intangible asset for an organisation and its importance can never be underestimated. (Vuokko 2004, 192.)

Reputation is based on embedded ideas, whether false or true. Although compared to reputation, image is seen more false. Reputation is not directly connected to perceptions and is created by the images of several stakeholders. (Juholin 2009, 187; Vuokko 2003, 103.)

Reputation is closely connected to time; it does not exist without a past, present or future. It is a mere impossibility for an organisation to exist without reputation and even a brand new organisation borrows its reputation from similar organisation. This can be a great asset or a burden, depending on the field of operation. (Aula & Heinonen 2011, 14.)

Reputation is greatly influenced by cultural issues. When discussing about an international organisation, its reputation varies depending on the location. Hostelling International can be used as an example; reputations of national Hostelling International associations differ greatly. Each single association is an individual unit presenting worldwide Hostelling International yet there are several country related matters than can be interpreted differently due to cultural reasons. National associations can be more recognised, respected or utilisation rates of HI-hostels can be higher, even though the brand of Hostelling International is the same worldwide. (Aula & Heinonen 2011, 15.)

Importance of a good reputation

Consistent actions and communications are the best tools to gain favourable reputation. An organisation that communicates too much and acts too little is likely to lose its reliability amongst stakeholders. An organisation that acts well but communicates little might have to justify its existence. Small amount of actions and little communications are only advisable if an organisation is revising itself. Balance in actions and communications

means that not only the organisation functions well; its excellency is also known by stakeholders. (Juholin 2009, 191-192.)

Reputation is above everything creating expectations; what stakeholders can assume to get from the organisation. Appreciation towards the organisation involves stakeholders' positive concepts, creating trust and genuine interest. Also attractive outlooks of an organisation are able to maintain its appreciated positions, yet it has to be kept in mind that an organisation also must fulfil these expectations. (Aula & Heinonen 2011, 15.)

Networking is also about reputation; if an organisation enjoys a reliable and respected reputation, partners find cooperation worthwhile. A good reputation is a stronger competitive advantage than a good image. A good reputation also works as a reference for an employer. A good image works as a reference for more closely connected stakeholders whereas a good reputation improves awareness also amongst the potential stakeholders. (Aula & Heinonen 2011, 15-16.)

A good reputation is considered equal to success; without success an organisation can rarely have a good reputation. Successful organisations are also likely to do occasional mistakes; a good reputation protects and even might prevent from a total descent. Good reputation is also related to forgiveness; stakeholders are willing to forgive more easily. (Aula & Heinonen 2011, 21-23.)

Reputation is not built solely on facts, but more importantly on stories. Storytelling is an effective way to build reputation since emotional part is always relevant. Reputation therefore does not occur in one-way communication; it requires relationship between stakeholders and the organisation. Reputation can be shaped in any encounters with the organisation. These encounters can be from first-hand encounters to second-hand encounters. Essential part of storytelling it is all about quality of words and actions. (Tuominen 2013, 68-69.)

2.6 Image building process

As earlier discussed, the image is always individual and therefore it is never the same. However, there are actions that can be taken to influence image formation from the strategic management point of view.

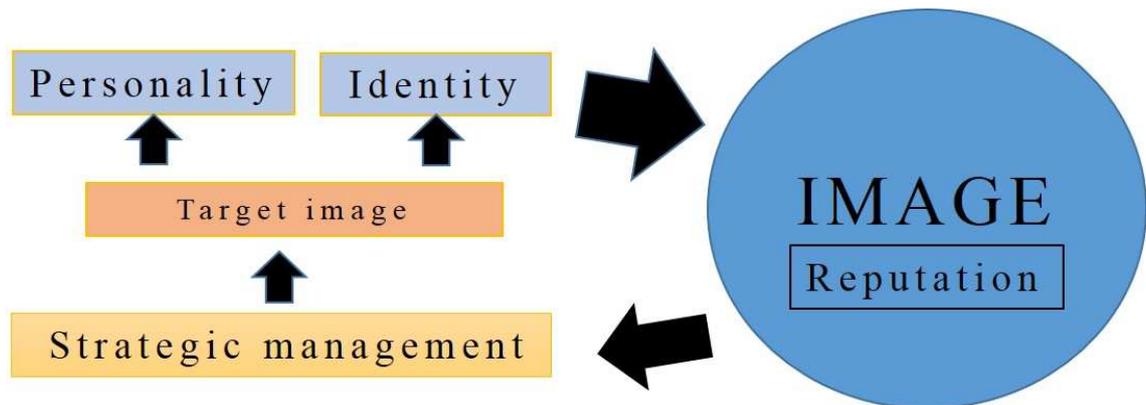


FIGURE 2. Relationship between relevant terminologies, modified (Vuokko 2003, 104)

2.6.1 Target image

Target image is a strategic tool and needs to build on vision, mission, goals, identity and values. Unlike image, a target image is owned by the leaders of an organisation; since an organisation cannot decide its current image, it can ensure that target markets have the main elements of the target image. (Mäkinen, Kahri & Kahri 2010, 36; Vuokko 2003, 112.)

Target image must be realisable or otherwise it cannot be successful. The target image must be closely connected to the organisation and the target image should be possible to execute in daily operations. Not only the external communications of an organisation need to excel, but also internal communications must involve the target image. Target image defines what is aimed to achieve and why; therefore it also must be internalised by the people of the organisation, since the target image is always promoted intentionally and unintentionally. (Vuokko 2003, 115.)

Levels of image in a network organisation can be used to set a target image. In areas where overall image has failed, strengths of a local image can be used to influence on better overall image. (Grönroos 2001, 293.)

2.6.2 Personality

Personality is a sum of all special characteristics of an organisation. These attributes resemble personality traits such as progressiveness, loyalty et cetera. Personality traits mainly have these five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness, although these have varied depending nationally. (Kotler & Keller 2007, 87; De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van Den Bergh 2007, 55-56.)

Personality of an organisation can resemble consumers' personality or organisation's personality can be something how consumers want to see themselves. Personality can be used also as a statement, for example products of Apple. For people staying at HI-hostels, the use of personality could be related to the social nature of hostels. Not only HI-hostels function as a place to stay but also social characteristics of HI-hostels provide additional meaning. (Kotler & Keller 2007, 87; Vitale 2002, 52; De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van Den Bergh 2007, 55-56.)

2.6.3 Identity

Identity is everything that an organisation is and how it reflects its personality. These include all unconscious and conscious actions taken regarding the organisation, such as colours, employees, ways of communications et cetera. Personality of an organisation can be used as a method of self-expression, so it does matter how organisation's identity is executed. (Vitale 2002, 52; Vuokko 2004, 191-192.)

Identity summarises the vision, mission, personality, essence and position of the organisation (Hall, S. 2013. *The Marketer's Guide to Developing a Strong Brand Identity*). Identity can be a great asset if an organisation manages to link a certain descriptive word to its image (Kotler 1999, 83). It can be assumed for example that the majority of the people find Omena Hotels affordable. If the image is strong and people are above all seeking for an affordable accommodation, the first thing that pops up in their mind might be Omena Hotels, even though it might not actually be the cheapest option.

Word-of-mouth is also an effective way to achieve a strong identity. Spontaneous networks are effective; for example increasing popularity of blogging as a method of communication is noticeable. Blogs are considered as powerful tools for influencing images; especially blogs held by third parties enjoy trust since they are considered as objective sources of information. Nowadays the vast majority of bloggers do cooperate with organisations that provide services suitable to the content of their blogs. (De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van Den Bergh 2007, 248.)

Identity also defines the place of the organisation in the market. An organisation often fails if it aims to please everyone. Especially non-profit organisations have scarce resources, so a strong identity can ensure the best usage of resources. Choosing 'a happy medium' is rarely a smart option and it is likely that an organisation only loses to its competitors by being nothing special. (Kotler 1999, 80-81.) A good example of a strong identity is Varusteleka; they have distinguished methods of communications and are not aiming to please everyone. Some might see the choices made rather questionable yet it enjoys a good reputation amongst a great amount of people.

2.6.4 Identity building process

It is important to be up-to-date about the expectations, motives, attitudes, needs and lifestyle of the stakeholders in order for the organisation to be able to emphasize its actions where required. Identity building process helps to clarify possible failures and provides possible suggestions for improvement. An identity building process should not always be approached as a project work but rather it should be seen as a continuous part of all operations. (Bergström & Leppänen 2011, 378.)

An image building process can be summarised to these steps (Vuokko 2003, 114):

1. current state analysis
2. defining a target image
3. improving internal communications
4. improving external communications
5. follow-up of results, analysis and requisite further measures

Current state analysis aims to clarify what is the current image, how it is seen compared to competitors and how the current image is related to the important values of stakeholders and to their expectations. While evaluating the current image, focus should be put on these three matters (Kotler 1999, 92-94):

- associations only connected to the examined organisation
- nature of associations
- intensity of image

By making a division between positive and negative associations, an organisation is able to understand what is done well and what not. Especially if a certain negative matter arises repeatedly, it is a sign of a real problem. During the evaluation process an organisation should define what associations can only be connected to the organisation. If there are no special characteristics associated to the organisation, there is nothing special about the organisation either. Understanding how intensively certain elements of an image are felt also tells what is done well and what not. An organisation might have a certain emphasis that people are not aware of; if this matter does not arise during the research, an organisation has failed in its communications. (Vuokko 2003, 206; Karvonen 1999, 118-119; Kotler 1999, 92-94.)

Defining a target image is the next step. Comparing the target image to the current image clarifies what needs to be improved and possible solutions can be found. It also illuminates what has been done right and what more is expected from the organisation. (Vuokko 2003, 206; Karvonen 1999, 118-119.)

Improving internal communications is the first step of the 'visible' part of the identity building process. As earlier mentioned, naturally the target image has to go hand-in-hand with the actual operations. If employees do not have the necessary resources to fulfil the target image, an organisation should not expect good results either. (Vuokko 2003, 206; Karvonen 1999, 118-119.)

When internal communications are in order, focus should be put on external communications. Yet it should be kept in mind that though external communications are crucial, it cannot fix poor operations. Before hastening into changing external communications, an organisation must ensure that all operations function and that the services provided meet the expected standards. External communications should not be only focused on messages

sent directly from organisation to stakeholders; also third parties such as media relations should be included in the identity building process. (Vuokko 2003, 207; Karvonen 1999, 118-119.)

The last step is evaluation of the results. Evaluation phase is similar to the current state analysis; it tells what was successful and what not. Evaluation process should focus on following matters: innovation, profitability, proficiency of management, social responsibility, attractiveness as an employer and quality of services and products (Lotti 2001, 76-77; Vuokko 2003, 207-208; Karvonen 1999, 118-119.)

2.7 Strategic and marketing communications

Strategic communications

Strategic communications provide an execution plan for the organisation's future and provides guidance for communications on a daily basis. Strategic communications is connected to the identity and therefore cannot be inconsistent with strategic management; strategic communications provides the thread in all communications. (Juholin 2009, 68-69.)

Vierula (2014, 99) emphasises that integration of all communications should be a part of strategic communications. Integration helps to maximize the efficiency of communications, since not only communications need to be consistent; it also has to be well-timed, simplified, influential and valid to the target markets. (Vierula 2014, 99-101.)

Marketing communications

Marketing communications involve all elements of communications that aim to achieve interaction between stakeholders and to improve productivity. Good marketing communications are creative, consistent, informative, compact and distinguishable. (Puustinen & Rouhiainen 2007, 225; Vuokko 2003, 17.)

Marketing communication tools involve selling, advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, PR, sponsorship, exhibitions, packaging, point-of-sale and merchandising, word-of-mouth, e-marketing, social media and identity (Smith & Taylor 2006, 8).

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is an approach to ensure the best usage of resources and tools by consistent communications and messages. IMC clarifies the needs of the stakeholders and provides strategies for an efficient usage of communications channels by understanding *how* and *when* stakeholders are best reached. It combines the communications mix to the marketing mix, emphasis depending on the field of operations. It requires time and effort; therefore IMC should be well planned and executed since it also provides multiple benefits. (Smith & Taylor 2006, 9-11; Vierula 2014, 73.)

IMC also allows the best possible impact since it turns marketing communications more interactive. The basic idea of less being more, for example, means that there is no need to be present in all media but instead it is better to handle smaller amount of marketing communication channels well; this enables more personalised and customer-oriented approach. Consistency is the key matter here as well; since any messages sent can spread instantly, IMC ensures that all messages are coherent and consistent. (De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van Den Bergh 2007, 9-10; Vierula 2014, 47-49.)

Regardless of the field of operations, successful IMC should always consider the following matters (Vierula 2014, 73-74):

- *Accurate message*: By understanding target markets well, a right message can be sent. If a message is found interesting and valuable amongst the target markets, it improves efficiency of a message. It cannot be assumed that all target markets value the same matters.
- *Accurate timing*: With good planning, the right target market receives the message at a right time. People filter information that is not currently relevant; there is no point of advertising a winter holiday destination in the beginning of summer. The result would be that when the message actually would be relevant it is already forgotten.
- *Accurate placing*: In multi-channel communications there are various possibilities for places to send a message. Communications should always be considered separately depending on communications channels.

- *Accurate target market:* Communications must be adapted depending on target markets; for example same messages should not be sent both to partners and to the media.
- *Accurate impact:* By defining a desired impact, an organisation can get the message through easier. The message should vary depending on the purpose; altering attitudes requires different approaches than maintaining an image.

If marketing communications have been discovered to be unsuccessful, there might be several reasons for this. Often matters related to lack of awareness might be due to the reason that the renewal of the organisation is going through or perhaps due to rare and short encounters with the stakeholders. Also unintegrated marketing communications lead to diluted messages causing confusion amongst the stakeholders. Most importantly an organisation must examine what has failed and why marketing communications have not worked and develop possible solutions. (Grönroos 2001, 296.)

3 THE CASE ORGANISATION

3.1 Hostelling International Finland

Hostelling International Finland (in Finnish Suomen Hostellijärjestö ry) is a non-profit umbrella association for about 40 Finnish HI-hostels. Hostelling International Finland (HI) was founded in the year 1935 by a group of national youth, sport and travel organisations and nowadays has 42 membership organisations. (Hostelliviesti: 75-vuotta hostellitoimintaa Suomessa 2010; Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

HI Finland markets and promotes Finnish HI-hostel network to national and foreign markets, develops HI-hostel network for example by acquiring new possible HI-hostels, coordinates quality assurance activities and ensures visibility of the global Hostelling International brand. (Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

HI Finland states their values being: communality, openness, inexpensiveness and responsibility. These values include customers but also HI-hostels and their managers, all parties of the network are being valued. (Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

3.2 HI-hostels in Finland

Finnish HI-hostels vary from purpose-built accommodations to student housing and other several types of accommodations; HI-hostels can be located in the center of Helsinki to an island in Lake Saimaa. Even though Hostelling International is a non-profit association, the ones managing HI-hostels can be from individual entrepreneurs to municipalities et cetera. HI Finland operates Helsinki's Stadion Hostel and owns the company behind the Eurohostel brand and the premises of Finnhostel Lappeenranta. (Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

First Finnish HI-hostels were built to serve youth and hikers and hostels had rather strict rules while staying in them. Guests were not allowed to stay in the hostel during the day

and were instructed to clean themselves before going to bed. (Hostelliviesti: 75-vuotta hostellitoimintaa Suomessa 2010.)

HI-hostels have renewed during the course of years from 'traditional hiking huts' and nowadays Finnish HI-hostel network offers hostels from design hostels to countryside hostels. Each HI-hostel has to follow internationally set standards, assuring that the quality of the network stays around the world. Nowadays Finnish HI-hostels are according to Hostelling International Finland inexpensive, unique hostel experiences and communal. (Hostelliviesti: 75-vuotta hostellitoimintaa Suomessa 2010; Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

HI Quality (HI-Q) is an international quality certificate developed for HI-hostels and national associations acknowledging the special characteristics of the hostel sector. HI-hostels with HI-Q certificates ensure that high standards are followed each stage of operations. HI-hostels with HI-Q certificate are allowed to use the distinctive HI-Q logo. HI-Q certificate can be granted for national HI associations as well. (Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

3.3 Hostelling International

Hostelling International (HI) is a non-profit membership organisation located in Welwyn Garden City, England. HI was founded in the year 1932 to coordinate youth hostel associations around the world and nowadays its international network includes around 4000 hostels in 90 countries. (Hostelling International: About Hostelling International 2015.)

Currently HI has around four million membership card owners worldwide, making it one of the largest youth membership organisations. (Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

HI aims to provide affordable and safe hostel experiences around the world. The mission of HI goes as follows:

To promote the education of all young people of all nations, but especially young people of limited means, by encouraging in them a greater knowledge, love and care of the countryside and an appreciation of the cultural values of towns and cities in all parts of the world, and as ancillary thereto to provide hostels or other

accommodation in which there shall be no distinction of race, nationality, colour, religion, sex, class, or political opinions and thereby to develop a better understanding of their fellow men, both at home and abroad. (Hostelling International: What we believe 2015)

3.4 Membership organisations of Hostelling International Finland

HI Finland has 42 membership organisations, including youth, student, sporting, pension, and travel organisations and trade unions. (Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

Membership organisations have an important role in the operations of HI Finland. HI Finland is governed by a council and each membership organisation appoints a representative to serve for two years. The council appoints a board of directors who are responsible for the running of HI Finland, and the heads of the board form the executive committee which is assisted by special committees and advisers when necessary. (Hostelling International Finland: Hostelling International Finland 2015.)

The importance of membership organisations also reflects on HI Finland's mission:

Ylläpidämme jäsenjärjestöjen puolesta Suomessa hostellien verkostoa, joka tarjoaa erityisesti jäsenille viihtyisää, yhteisöllistä ja edullista majoitusta. Lisäksi järjestö vastaa kansainvälisestä yhteistyöstä HI-hostellien verkoston kanssa jäsenetujen tarjoamiseksi myös ulkomailla sekä kansainvälisten asiakkaiden saamiseksi verkoston hostelleihin Suomessa. (Hostelling International Finland: Suomen Hostellijärjestö. 2015)

(We upkeep on behalf of our membership organisations a network of hostels in Finland offering especially for members comfortable, communal and inexpensive accommodation. Additionally HI Finland is in charge of international cooperation with HI-hostel network to provide benefits also abroad and to attract international customers to HI-hostels in Finland.)

All membership organisations have to pay a membership fee, which is dependent on the amount of members. If an organisation wants to apply for membership, these three conditions must be fulfilled:

- an organisation has to be a national organisation
- an organisation's operations need to be connected to traveling
- an organisation has to be willing to inform its members of HI-hostels and member benefits on agreed methods. (Hostelling International Finland: Suomen Hostellijärjestö ja jäsenjärjestöt 2015. 2015.)

Members of membership organisations are eligible to a minimum 10 percent discount at Finnish HI-hostels and entitled to buy the international HI card at discounted price. With HI card, members are eligible to the minimum 10 percent discount during their stay at HI-hostels outside of Finland. (Hostelling International Finland: Suomen Hostellijärjestö ja jäsenjärjestöt 2015. 2015.)

4 RESEARCH PROCESS AND METHODS

4.1 Research question

The topic of the thesis was suggested as continuum for the internship of the author at Hostelling International Finland and based on the relevant issues at HI Finland. The research question was as following: What is the current image of HI-hostels amongst the membership organisations of Hostelling International Finland? Supporting sub-questions were: How is the current image formed and how aware membership organisations are about the services provided at HI-hostels?

4.2 Data collection method

The data collection technique chosen was qualitative and semi-structured interviews were conducted. A qualitative research method is preferred when there is a need to understand a topic with no simple answers; a better understanding of the topic can be gained (Solatie 1997, 11-13). 27 membership organisations were contacted with a request for an interview possibility. Contacted membership organisations were selected based on variety and accessibility reasons to ensure the validity of the data collected. One representative declined to participate since the representative had the opinion that the current state of awareness is not sufficient enough to participate. Questions were formed based on research questions and while forming the questions, the various levels of awareness of HI-hostels amongst the interviewees were taken into consideration.

Interviews were conducted during the period from 10th November till 4th December 2014 and with an exception of one, the interviews took place at the premises of membership organisations due to convenience reasons. The length of interviews varied from 19 to 48 minutes. All interviews were recorded and notes were taken to ensure no data would go lost.

Semi-structured interviews are often used when collecting qualitative data (Heinonen, Mäntyneva & Wrange 2003, 71). Semi-structured interviews can be rather flexible but require more experience from the interviewer. To gain reliable data, the interviewer and interviewees must focus on the topic. Semi-structured method was selected since it provided enough flexibility yet also helpful guidance when conducting the interviews. Most

often flaws occur due to timing, interviewer's influence, phrasing of the questions, leading the interviewee, insufficient extra questions and incorrect registering of data and interpretation. (Heinonen, Mäntyneva & Wrangé 2003, 71.)

4.3 Analysing results

Data were analysed through themes instead of an exact transcription. In this thesis there was no valid reason to do an exact transcription and therefore this method was chosen (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 141).

Results were collected under different themes and each interviewee got an identifier to keep track of the data; this phase was also the analysing phase. The researcher must identify all relevant matters and therefore already make selections that affect the analysing phase (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 142).

Images are strongly formed by individual reasons; therefore these results cannot be seen as an image of the whole membership organisation, yet it helps to understand how the received information might be passed on. These results are based on subjective views of all representatives that have gained information about HI-hostels through their work and personal experiences.

5 ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW OUTCOMES

Due to confidentiality reasons the analysis of the interview outcomes are not published and the analysis explained in appendix 1.

6 DISCUSSION

The aim of this bachelor's thesis was to examine the current image of HI-hostels amongst the membership organisations of Hostelling International Finland. The theoretical framework was established to support the topic of the research and to ensure successful implementation. According to the results, it can be said that the research has been conducted successfully, although certain mistakes occurred; the mistakes were mainly caused by lack of experience in conducting interviews and interpreting the collected data. Another concern was the smaller amount of the interviewees than expected, yet fortunately enough of interviews were conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the data.

The internship of the author at Hostelling International helped to analyse the data. When conducting interviews the author was able to recognise HI-hostels or if a hostel discussed was no longer a part of the network. Without the knowledge gained through the internship, this research would have been more difficult to conduct.

According to the results it can be assumed that the current image of HI-hostels amongst membership organisations is rather unknown. HI-hostels were mainly seen as a choice of accommodation for youth and students, making the current image of HI-hostels suitable for those target markets. Matters influencing the current image varied due to various reasons; some of the interviewees had more experiences of Finnish HI-hostels than others or some of the interviewees were more involved in the operations of Hostelling International Finland than others.

The results of the thesis also provide ideas for possible further researches; for example better insights of the consumer behaviour might prove to be useful. Since some issues occurring in results were related to behavioural matters, solutions might be gained through in-depth insight; the data gained would provide information about how to persuade consumers to consider HI-hostels as an accommodation alternative.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Analysis of the interview outcomes

Appendix 2: Interview structure

Appendix 3: Interview results