NGOs, identities, and religion: a case of split personalities?

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Abstract

The past two decades have seen considerable worldwide growth in the size and influence of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Some 3,451 NGOs were listed as having consultative status by the United Nations in 2007. Using a more relaxed definition of ‘NGO’, some commentators have estimated the number of such organisations an order of magnitude higher (Mathews, 1997). One explanation for the expansion of the sector is that NGOs meet societal needs which corporations and governments either cannot or will not, thus circumventing problems inherent to both profit maximisation and bureaucratic structures (Seibel & Anheier, 1990). It is therefore ironic that many NGOs, established as a necessary alternative to commercial enterprises, are increasingly run on corporate lines (James, 1997). This trend is especially apparent in the corporate identities leading NGOs develop and project to their stakeholders through the deployment of strategic communication programs. This paper presents a comparative case study of the Australian arms of two well-known international NGOs, both operating in the same sector (humanitarian aid). One of the organisations in question is religiously-based, the other is secular in nature. The study found that the Religiously-based Non-Governmental Organisation (RNGO) deliberately downplays its religious identity in order to succeed in an increasingly secular Australian social environment. The implications for organisational identity and identification in the NGO sector are discussed. To some extent it appears inevitable that NGOs must cultivate a split personality to achieve their goals, creating both ethical and practical dilemmas for their public relations advisers.
Introduction

In recent years there has been an increase in the number and visibility of Non-Governmental Organisations or NGOs (Ebrahim, 2003; Heyse, 2006; Maslyukivska, 1999). The NGO sector is extraordinarily diverse and notoriously hard to define. One of the major lines of demarcation between NGOs, and the focus of this research, is the difference between RNGOs (Religiously-based NGOs) and SNGOs (Secular NGOs). Contemporary Religious Non-Governmental Organisations range from local, independently run operations, to transnational, hundred million dollar enterprises (Berger, 2003).

One of the most notable, yet paradoxical, trends in the NGO sector in recent years has been the tendency towards increased corporatisation. This widespread phenomenon can be defined as the introduction of private sector principles and practices to non-commercial entities (Andrews, 2006; Mcdonald, 2003), whether government services, higher education or a diverse range of NGOs operating in what is known as the ‘third sector’. The entire raison d’être of the third sector is that it is neither commercially-oriented like the conventional private sector nor an arm of government. Hence the apparently increasing desire of many NGOs to present themselves as pseudo-corporations is somewhat ironic and has the potential to fundamentally undermine the legitimacy of the third sector. Legitimacy is bestowed, and may be withheld, by an organisation’s stakeholders (Wood, 1991) and the decline of public trust in corporations is a well documented reality (Lewis, 2003). If stakeholders accord legitimacy to NGOs in part because they are not corporations, and subsequently NGOs start acting like corporations, the risks are apparent. An inevitable by-product of the corporatisation trend is that larger NGOs must increasingly pay attention to such considerations as corporate identity and branding, more commonly associated with the private sector. The focus of this study is how two sub-sets of the NGO sector, RNGOs and SNGOs, differ in their approach to these aspects of corporatisation.

An associated trend discussed in this paper is the pressure on NGOs to display higher levels of professionalism. As the operations of NGOs become ever more demanding, driven by the corporatisation process, the relatively unsophisticated approach of volunteers and NGO employees characteristic of earlier times no longer suffices (Irvine, 2000). Consequently there is a need for NGOs to recruit highly qualified professionals in competition with the private sector. Although such professionals would not necessarily expect an NGO to match the salary levels of commercial corporations, the potential for higher administrative costs as a proportion of revenue is apparent.

What is an NGO?

According to the strictest definition, an NGO is just that: ‘an organisation which seeks funding, hires staff, and undertakes programs but does not realise a profit’.
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(Hines & Eckman, 1993), while of course not being an arm of government. However, this definition excludes a wide range of entities generally accepted as NGOs including state churches, profit making bodies run by not-for-profits, autonomous public enterprises and numerous others (Seibel & Anheier, 1990). At the same time, it has been pointed out that using a literal definition “presents a problem in that it embraces a large number and wide range of organisations that are structurally and functionally unrelated” (Maslyukivska, 1999, p. 8). Hence a simplistic interpretation of ‘non-government’ and ‘organisation’ results in a definition simultaneously all-encompassing and too restrictive to fully describe the third sector. Table 1 provides an overview of the major types of definitions used to capture the essence of the NGO.

Table 1. Contrasting approaches to defining an ‘NGO’

| 1 | Anon-profitmaking, voluntary, service-oriented/development-oriented organisation, either for the benefit of members (a grassroots organisation) or of other members of the population (an agency). |
| 2 | An organisation of private individuals who believe in certain basic social principles and who structure their activities to bring about development to communities they are servicing. |
| 3 | A social development organisation assisting in the empowerment of people. |
| 4 | An organisation of people working independently of any external control with specific objectives and aims to fulfil tasks that are oriented to bring about desirable change in a given community or area or situation. |
| 5 | An organisation not affiliated to political parties, generally engaged in working for the aid, development and welfare of the community. |
| 6 | An organisation committed to the root causes of problems, trying to better the quality of life especially for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised in urban and rural areas. |
| 7 | An organisation established by and for the community without, or with little, intervention from the government that is not only a charitable organisation, but also works on socio-economic-cultural activities. |
| 8 | An organisation that is flexible and democratic in its organisation and attempts to serve the people without profit for itself. |

(Adapted from NGO Cafe 2007, in Maslyukivska, 1999, p. 9)

Beyond classificational issues, there have been to date four main strands of research into NGOs: why NGOs exist, why the NGO sector has expanded, why NGOs have not ultimately reached their promised potential, and the major differences between NGOs operating within different fields of expertise (Heyse,
One explanation for the development of NGOs is that they meet the needs of sectors of society that government and private industry cannot or will not, and offer a way in which to circumvent the problems inherent in both profit maximisation and bureaucratic organisational structures (Seibel & Anheier, 1990).

There is little doubt as to the expansion of the NGO sector (Clarke, 1998; Lister, 2003). Numerous possible reasons have been suggested: globalisation, a decrease in legitimacy of nation states, general political upheaval (Fisher, 1997), the emergence of a professional ‘bourgeois’ class with the ability to organise non-governmental activities on an international scale (Heyse, 2006), a governmental trend of surrendering the provision of social services (Ebrahim, 2003), and seemingly everything from disillusionment with the welfare state to the collapse of the USSR. Ultimately, the rise of NGOs seems to consist of three predominant factors: the unprecedented pace and scope of socio-economic change in the contemporary world, the failure of ‘old’ structures of nation state and private sector to fill the resulting gaps, and the apparent ability of NGOs to meet these needs effectively – if with arguably less efficiency than some other forms of organisational structure. However, in the 1980s the optimism previously surrounding NGOs began to wane. NGOs appeared unable to deliver on the heightened expectations for the third sector (Heyse, 2006; Lister, 2003). A number of scandals (Ebrahim, 2003), publicly embarrassing exposure of less than cohesive governing boards (Radbourne, 2003), and concerns over the NGO sector’s legitimacy (Lister, 2003) have all contributed to a more critical climate of opinion. In short, NGOs can no longer take public trust for granted.

As pointed out previously, one of the major distinctions within the NGO sector is the demarcation between religiously-based NGOs (RNGOs) and their secular counterparts (SNGOs). Ebaugh et al. (2003) described a set of seven characteristics by which a religious organisation per se might be recognised. These include: self-identification as being religious, religiosity of participants, religious supporters being primary resource providers, religious nature of organisational goals, reliance on religious values in decision making processes, distribution of power according to religious designation, and the majority of external interaction being with other religiously oriented groups. Berger (2003) defined RNGOs in the following terms.

Formal organisations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operate on a non-profit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realise collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level (Berger, 2003, p. 16).

Having discussed the nature of the contemporary NGO, the next section will provide a brief review of the key current trends driving the sector in the direction of increased corporatisation.
The corporatisation of the third sector

Perhaps one of the reasons for the definitional confusion surrounding the third sector relates to the evolution of the field over time. Korten (1987) identified three major phases in the ongoing development of NGOs with regards to their philosophies and approaches towards undertaking their missions. Initially NGOs focused on short-term relief efforts, then progressed to an emphasis on fixed-term projects before evolving their current mandate around long-term sustainable development. In addition, in more recent years the pursuit of advocacy programs has arisen as a significant element (Jordan & Tujil, 2000). Consider the background of Oxfam. Starting as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief in 1942, with an expressed aim of assisting Greek civilian victims of World War Two, the organisation progressed from individual assistance, such as direct food provision, to community-based development, and in modern times is arguably one of the leading advocates in the Make Poverty History Campaign, an effort to end poverty on a global scale (Oxfam, 2007).

As the focus of NGOs has evolved over time, so have the requirements on these organisations to prove their worth in a manner comparable to the performance expectations of corporations, especially in results-based terms. Lister (2003) argued that to date much of the focus on ‘legitimacy’ in the NGO sector has been a proxy for issues of accountability, performance and representativeness, with little concern for moral or other forms of legitimacy. Previously, the somewhat ambiguous notion of ‘doing good’ ‘unencumbered and untainted by the politics of government or the greed of the market’ (Fisher, 1997, p. 442) was largely sufficient to summarise an NGO’s efforts. As a result of this greater demand for near corporate accountability, the calibre of some NGO mission statements, websites, branding and communications campaigns has become comparable to those of some of the world’s most successful corporations. In fact, the very nature of NGOs has altered to more closely mirror the private sector.

It is increasingly evident that modern NGOs exhibit many of the characteristics of a corporate entity as defined by Balmer (Balmer & Greyser, 2003). Balmer (2001) argued that throughout the 1990s, the interest in ‘business identity’, or the joint elements of corporate identity, organisational identity and visual identity, equally applied to the not-for-profit sector. Other research seems to confirm the view that NGOs are increasingly developing like corporations. Ambrose and Kulik (1999) found the employees of NGOs and business corporations are in general motivated by similar intrinsic (e.g. satisfaction of personal values) and extrinsic (e.g. monetary rewards) considerations. Consequently, it is necessary to review briefly the literature on key corporate communications concepts, particularly organisational identity (also sometimes referred to as corporate personality) and corporate identity.
Organisational and corporate identity

The building blocks of corporate reputation are the related concepts of organisational and corporate identity. In essence these fields can be seen as extensions of social identity theory which, in simple terms, holds that societal categories heavily influence, if not determine, the primary views, beliefs and norms held by groups in that particular segment (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Not to be confused with personal identity, or how individuals conceive of themselves, social identity theory deals with how individuals view the social categories they are members of, seek the advancement or maintenance of their category’s position, and interact with other social strata (Brown, 2000).

With regards to what separates corporate and organisational identity, Schultz, Hatch and Larsen (2000) highlighted the distinction between the ‘identifying-of’ the organisation, and the ‘identifying-with’ the organisation by the organisation’s members. They concluded that the ‘identifying-of’ literature concerns the ‘central, distinctive and enduring aspects’ (Albert & Whetton, 1985, p. 292) of the organisation, whereas the ‘identifying-with’ stream is more appropriate for those researching internal individual/group relations. In other words, corporate identity refers to ‘identifying-of’ understandings of identity and the external propagation of this identity, whereas organisational identity refers to the ‘identifying-with’ literature and the internal development and growth of organisation identification.

A brief account of the pressures driving contemporary NGOs towards greater corporatisation has now been provided, together with some remarks on the nature of organisational and corporate identity. As stated above, corporate identity is the specific aspect of corporatisation under investigation in this study.

Research objectives and methodology

This research investigated two key questions. Firstly, to what extent do RNGOs consciously modify their corporate identities when operating in a secular society such as Australia? Secondly, how do Australian SNGOs and RNGOs differ in their approach to organisational and corporate identity?

The research was exploratory in nature as the impact of religion on NGO identity in Australia does not appear to have been investigated previously. A qualitative approach was adopted as this is appropriate to situations where the researcher wishes to examine complex social situations and there are many potential variables of interest (Creswell, 1998). The research design was essentially a comparative case study involving the Australian arms of two large international NGOs – one an RNGO the other an SNGO. The unit of analysis was the individual NGO. However within this overall unit two different strata were considered, namely full-time employees and volunteers. These ‘embedded’ units (Yin, 2003) identify one of the major internal divisions within most NGOs.
Analysis of embedded units is a way of distinguishing data from different ‘sub-groups’. Employees and volunteers were chosen because it is widely accepted in the literature that identity represents the perceptions of organisational insiders (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). The names of the two NGOs studied are not revealed in this paper. This approach enables respondents to be more candid in their comments than might otherwise have been the case. It is important to note that ‘identity’ in this study refers to the abstract concept of organisational identity, not identity in terms of the specific name of a particular organisation.

Participants were selected from within each of the overall units mentioned above and their embedded groups using two primary methods. For recruitment of the full-time staff, judgment sampling was utilised. Although the generalisability of information provided from such a method has been questioned, in order to effectively incorporate only those individuals who possess valid and relevant information to the inquiry this method is necessary (Sekaran, 2003). For recruitment of volunteers, convenience sampling was undertaken. Convenience sampling is simply sampling of those participants who are available to provide information on the subject in question. Although obviously not without its drawbacks, this method is useful in the exploratory phase to identify basic information (Sekaran, 2003). In total 20 depth interviews were conducted – 10 from each organisation comprising five full-time staff and five volunteers in each instance. Interviews with full-time staff averaged 30 minutes in length, whilst those with the volunteers typically lasted between 15 and 25 minutes.

The full-time employee interviews primarily focused on the topic of corporate reputation, identity and branding. Subjects were asked to answer to the best of their professional capability, as well as encouraged to provide opinions and personal insights as to the topics at hand. The volunteer interviews were based on two major topics: religious orientation of the volunteer, and the importance of the religious orientation and activities of the organisation they were volunteering for. In addition, they were invited to express their opinions from their experiences as to the reputation of the organisation in question. All interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed with the use of the NVivo 7.0 qualitative data analysis program.

Findings and data analysis

Religious identification

In Australia, any association with religion has been increasingly downplayed by both organisations (though this is not necessarily so in other countries where the case RNGO operates such as the US). The case SNGO has consciously attacked the issue of organisational religious identification. Reference was made to:

[T]rying to stamp those kind of vestiges on the head. – Subject SFT3
(Secular NGO Full-time respondent #3)
Negativity was frequently expressed by both full-time and volunteer respondents regarding any form of overt religious promotion within their organisations, whether corporate or by individuals. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the RNGO has been almost as effective as the SNGO – if less overt - in shifting public attention away from its Christian basis. One of the core tenets of the RNGO in question is that:

We are a Christian organisation and yet “We are Christian” is definitely focused on more so in countries who are in a Christian environment, whereas … Australia is a secular environment. So it’s, in terms of promotion to our audience I guess, and to our supporters or potential supporters, yes we do [modify our religious identification]. There’s a different emphasis on the values in Australia. – Subject RFT2 (Religious NGO Full-time respondent #2)

For the case SNGO, political and religious neutrality is seen as an integral part of its mission and organisational identity which is, by and large, accurately projected to its stakeholders through its corporate identity. The RNGO is in a completely different situation. It appears to be deliberately obfuscating its (religious) organisational identity as a matter of practical strategy, particularly with regard to fundraising.

In a competitive, ever changing, ever more fickle environment like the Australian consumer market … we’re going to have to change our methods of engaging. – Subject RFT1

Australia is essentially a secular society if you like, and so I think that affects the way that you need to communicate, with the messages that people are going to hear. – Subject RFT5

There appears to be a significantly negative perception of groups which are termed ‘religious’. Specifically, the term ‘religious’ when used in Australia seems to imply for many people that the organisation has a missionary agenda and/or requires compulsory religious observance of its members. There is a similar dislike of secular organisations which sometimes attempt to recruit people to their cause with an almost missionary-like zeal. (Some prominent environmental organisations were mentioned by respondents in this regard.)

Sometimes I think that if you support something with a religious context, they’re going to be knocking on your door constantly if you show them any sort of support… they’re on your door every two weeks. – Subject SFT4

Even when the organisation claims a non-missionary mandate for its operations, there is scepticism.

Maybe the people who work for those organisations might have a different view. And although it might not be part of the tenets of that organisation to preach the teachings of the gospel or whatever, the people involved are
more likely to do that even though it’s not part of the reason why they’re doing it. – Subject SV4 (Secular NGO Volunteer respondent #4)

Paradoxically, whilst such views were frequently expressed when discussing religiously-affiliated organisations in general, once specific examples were mentioned the response was usually far more positive. In other words, respondents were more supportive of RNGOs with which they were familiar, rather than the category RNGOs in general. In addition, negative comments frequently arose in association with the term ‘over there’ or words to that effect. There seemed to be an assumption among some respondents that RNGOs working overseas may be engaging in missionary-like activities (generally regarded with suspicion), whereas respondents knew that the local efforts of RNGOs they were familiar with usually had no such overtones.

NGOs who heavily promote themselves as a religious based NGO would see, (people) would assume that they are missionaries and that they are trying to convert people in the field, overseas, to Christianity. – Subject RFT2

Respondents seem to be incorporating their perception that RNGOs operating outside of Australia engage heavily in missionary activity into their stereotypical view of RNGOs in general. Possibly subjects perceive two types of RNGO. On the one hand:

There are NGOs in the country that are Christian, Salvos [Salvation Army] and St Vinnie’s [St Vincent de Paul Society] for example, that live off their reputation for doing the job. – Subject RFT1

In contrast there are NGOs which are seen as little more than a recruitment arm for the church in question, and coincidentally happen to have a humanitarian aid agenda as a drawcard. Respondents from both case organisations identified ‘banging the drum’ (Subject SFT3) on a particular religious or political agenda as counter-productive when trying to court public opinion. These findings are consistent with an earlier study of frontline child welfare workers which identified a considerable degree of religious alienation amongst respondents, even those working for faith-based organisations. (Jensen, 2006).

There appeared to be a widespread perception amongst respondents that belonging to or working for an RNGO requires commitment to a specific faith. For some RNGOs this is indeed true. Yet at the same time, this does not tell the whole story. A number of respondents identified the practical problems associated with putting such demand on potential employees when factoring in a skills shortage in the currently under-supplied Australian labour market. One example suggested by respondents was the relatively recent practice of Catholic schools recruiting non-Catholic staff to meet shortages. Another was that staff at a particular Catholic RNGO with which the respondent was familiar were only required to pay lip-service to that organisation’s religious philosophy.
I found that at [Catholic RNGO] most of the staff there, the senior management had to go through confessional every year but they didn’t have to be of a religious faith... In fact there were very few people, very few people of faith that I knew and they’d even go to Mass... They would go as part of their friendship but they weren't in any way religious... I was surprised going to [Catholic RNGO] to find that most of the people there were agnostics. – Subject SFT3

Although these policies could be perceived as purely pragmatic by the organisations in question, and may be reversed should there become a ready supply of suitable religiously-aligned job applicants, there is another theme which remained consistent throughout the interviews. Broader ‘values’ alignment is far more important than narrow religious affiliation. RNGOs do not necessarily require complete assimilation of employees’ spiritual identities, only that they are aligned with the values or the ethos of the organisation.

People who work [here] do have to... be aligned with [our organisation's] values, but it's not necessary to be Christian. – Subject RFT3

There are a lot of people who are also attracted to [our ethos] who don’t have a Christian framework. – Subject RFT5

Indeed, respondents from the case RNGO reported that the organisation has Muslim and Buddhist employees despite its Christian identity. The importance of employee and volunteer values (although not of course religious affiliations) aligning with those of the organisation is of equal importance to the case SNGO.

If you’re dealing with somebody you keep the same things, respect, you know, no prejudice. If you do have any issues with anything you do in your day to day job you make them known to senior management, if you have an issue abiding by any of those. – Subject SFT4

NGO corporatisation

The corporatisation of NGOs in recent times was another subject covered in the interviews. One of the major factors identified by respondents is the growth that both case organisations have experienced. As NGOs increase in size, and expand the number of specialty services offered, there is a need for bureaucratic structures and corporate-like functionality in order to make the organisation operate successfully.

Some people have a very clear idea and vision of where they want to go but someone else might have a different idea and sometimes you’ve got that going on at the same time... and that’s part of the challenge with our growth. The way you operate when you’re smaller and the way you operate when you’re larger is quite different and getting used to that. – Subject RFT1
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Soinonerespect, itisthe sheer practicality of operation within large organisations which has required NGOs to shift from a ‘volunteer’ perspective towards one of professionalism and corporatisation.

It appears one consequence of the growth of certain prominent NGOs is that smaller organisations in the same sector are being forced out of operation. As more public charitable support is concentrated in fewer NGOs, smaller groups experience a loss of income as a consequence.

Some of the smaller organisations that haven’t been able to [corporatise] have really ended up where they’re, if they haven’t been up to speed with, for example, procurement processes … typically it’s the smaller that just don’t have the infrastructure and a couple of other things that I’ve been looking at over the past couple of years in providing a service to those smaller organisations so they can keep running. By us actually tackling some of the fiduciary issues that baffle them. – Subject SFT3

Hence it appears that bigger, more efficient NGOs can put smaller third sector organisations out of operation in much the same way as big conventional businesses deal with smaller competitors.

Larger NGOs are also becoming more corporatised in part to meet public demands for greater accountability and transparency in the administration of donor funds.

If you’re trying to interface with the rest of the world you have to have the same rules as them … you have to be professional when dealing with people. We ask a lot from our partners in the way of money and in-kind support and if you’re asking for that level of support from somebody you have to be able to professionally report on what you’re doing and how you’re using the assets they’ve allocated you. – Subject SFT1

I think ultimately we can prove we’re being more effective with the money we’re being entrusted with, that we’re utilising the resources that are given to us or donated to us, and that ultimately it’s helping. – Subject RFT4

Donor publics expect NGOs to be demonstrably effective and efficient, typically by reporting in a professional manner.

[You’ve] got to have sophisticated fundraising to get up to speed with everything else … We run 30 stores, we’re contractors for the government for things that bring us a whole lot of money, we need to be sophisticated in order to stay alive and part of that is because people don’t just automatically give… – Subject SFT3

Australians are willing to give their money to organisations they trust, and they will research and question and make sure that you’re accountable. – Subject RFT4
Among the core benefits identified by respondents are greater efficiency and a clearer focus on outcomes. However, this may in some cases occur in counter-intuitive ways.

You may not think they’re cost effective but looking at them from the whole picture it really is … [For example] using temp staff. Sometimes has been out of necessity in desperate situations, but when we’ve actually looked at results versus cost of payment, obviously it’s a higher cost, but it has proven to be more cost-effective because of the dollar value they have represented in terms of fundraising support in a certain area versus someone who wasn’t. – Subject RFT2

The danger is that some stakeholders may not appreciate these kinds of efficiency gains, instead perceiving the NGOs in question as wasting hard-won donor funds on corporate extravagancies. As one respondent put it:

I have worked in some places where volunteers get very upset about lovely brand new cars and offices because they want to know their time is actually going to the service provision. – Subject SFT5

In short, corporatisation within both case organisations would appear to be a reactive process. Whereas previously supporters had expectations that an NGO would operate out of ‘someone’s garage’, public demand for increased accountability and efficiency has led inexorably towards corporatisation. However, when an NGO appears ‘too’ corporate there is a suspicion that too much money is being diverted from service provision. These conflicting stakeholder desires are an ongoing issue for both RNGOs and SNGOs.

Implications, limitations and recommendations for future research

This was an exploratory study which investigated only two Australian-based organisations – one RNGO and one SNGO. Given the breadth and diversity of the NGO sector, it is not possible to generalise the findings of this research with any great degree of confidence. Further data should be gathered from different NGOs and, ideally, in different countries where prevailing attitudes towards religion may differ. Nevertheless the data gathered from respondents did confirm some of the major trends reported in the NGO literature, in particular the tendency towards increased levels of NGO corporatisation.

Both the case NGOs are large and successful organisations which have grown considerably in recent years. Both take issues of organisational and corporate identity extremely seriously. There is, however, a clear tension in both organisations (particularly the RNGO) between the need to project a corporate identity which appeals to the Australian public and the group self-identification of the organisations’ hierarchies. For the sake of marketing and fundraising expediency, respondents reported a willingness to sacrifice the integrity of
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their organisational identities in order to achieve what might be regarded as conventional monetary goals typical of the private sector.

For the SNGO, prevailing Australian public attitudes to religion are convenient in that they align with the direction the organisation actually wishes to take. In the words of one senior manager:

It’s really funny that in some cases we see ourselves as a very Protestant brand, have in the past seen ourselves as Protestant. Now multiculturalism is overtaking us, but that may be one of the incentives for reinforcing our secular [nature]. – Subject SFT3

In other words, the alignment between the SNGO’s organisational and corporate identities is largely a result of serendipity. The implication is that the organisation would be prepared to project a less than genuine corporate identity should market needs dictate.

For the RNGO, the obfuscation is quite open. As a respondent from the case RNGO put it:

I’ve got to fall into marketer mode…and say whatever presses the buttons of the Australian people. Say you’re a Muslim organisation for argument’s sake, and you know that being Muslim might not necessarily bode well with seeking donations from the Australian public, then I’d probably downplay it. – Subject RFT1

Arguably, one of the greatest dangers to corporate reputation arises from a mismatch between organisational and corporate identity, in other words when an organisation pretends to be something it is not. NGOs already face threats to their perceived legitimacy simply as a result of the inexorable pressure towards increased corporatisation. The case RNGO’s strategy of obfuscating its true organisational identity appears to be working thus far, but the long term threat to its reputation and legitimacy are apparent. Conventional profit-oriented companies can succeed simply by giving their customers what they want within the bounds of, as Milton Friedman (1970) put it, ‘ethical and legal custom’. Their corporate communications advisers do not normally have to balance potentially incompatible organisational and corporate identities. Life for those operating in the third sector is not that simple.
References


