

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MALAYSIAN QS PRACTICES' WEBSITES AS PART OF CORPORATE BRANDING STRATEGIES.

Christopher Preece and Mohd Saiful Nozam Mohd Suhaimi

*Department of Quantity Surveying, Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design,
International Islamic University Malaysia.
chrisprece@iiu.edu.my*

ABSTRACT

The quantity surveying sector in Malaysia has become very competitive and fast moving. Quantity surveying businesses are faced with the challenge of professional regulation of their marketing approaches together with a need to communicate clear corporate brands with a range of potential stakeholders from existing and potential clients, to investors and potential recruits. Website branding strategies are now a part of the marketing and corporate communication of any business. Recent research with QS practices in Malaysia has identified that websites are perceived as being an increasingly important part of the marketing mix. Traditional branding techniques for QS firms include brochures, newsletters, organizing seminars and presentations and corporate entertainment. The benefits of the net are that it is highly interactive and does not operate in real time. Business websites offer a very distinct and client sensitive approach. This paper will outline research that adapts established mechanisms of measuring the effectiveness of websites as branding tools in the construction sector. A preliminary review of the websites of leading QS practices in Malaysia will include identifying accessibility through search engines, the user-friendliness of design and content and interactivity.

Keywords: Websites, branding, marketing communication, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Preece, Moodley & Cox (2001), websites are more than a shop window for a construction business. If designed and managed effectively, they are an opportunity to create a powerful brand and sustainable stakeholder loyalty. The company website has to be viewed as part of a strategic cybermarketing (Bickerton *et al* 2000) plan. Much of construction, including quantity surveying, would seem to fall within the b2b e-commerce market space.

In Malaysia, the profession of Quantity Surveying is governed by professional bodies, i.e. the Board of Quantity Surveying Malaysia (BQSM) under the Quantity Surveying Act 1967 (with Amendments 2002), which administers the Quantity Surveyors professional conduct. Strict rules, associated with advertising and sales promotion (Circular No. 2/93), are imposed on members to refrain them from canvassing for business. This is because active advertising and sales promotion are often regarded as placing the professional service in an unprofessional atmosphere (Lim and Yap, 2003).

Despite these restrictions, if quantity surveying practices are to improve awareness with key target stakeholder groups, then they have to invest in developing a corporate branding strategy. This includes considering corporate branding online.

2. WHO ARE THE KEY STAKEHOLDERS OF QS BUSINESSES?

Stakeholders are defined as parties that are influenced by, and can also influence an organization (Freeman 1994). They may be categorized as primary or secondary stakeholders. Identification of the stake is of strategic importance in developing and managing better relationships with key target stakeholders. In terms of developing a corporate branding strategy, an organization needs to understand the perceptions and interests of a range of target groups.

The QS key stakeholders would seem to be as follows (Preece & Moodley 2007);

- Clients; public and private,
- Investors
- Professional institutions
- Potential recruits to the profession
- Academic institutions; schools, colleges and universities
- The general and specialized data
- Communities and the general public

According to Preece and Moodley (2007), the clients, whether Government, or private sector, are important sources of innovation and the main drivers of any change within the sector. This is demonstrated by the adoption of new methods of procurement and ways of organizing the Industry. This has taken the form of partnering, frameworks, concessions and supply chain management. They also have an impact on the range of services demanded and perceptions of value for money. This would seem to be the primary stakeholder of the QS business. Their perceptions of the meaning of the brand are critical. Quantity surveying practitioners and businesses are faced with increased competition and demands for a broader range of services. Focus must be on the value and quality perceptions of their services and the development of niche markets. They must differentiate their market offering and develop more effective branding strategies.

The professional institutions representing are concerned with the sustainability of the profession. In order to achieve this aim it has to develop an up-to-date approach to maintaining professional standards and a profile that is attractive to potential recruits. A key role is the development of relationships with Government as a regulatory stakeholder. A brand strategy for the QS profession must be lead by these professional bodies, in conjunction with the commercial sector.

The educational sector is the primary mechanism by which people are recruited into the QS profession. Colleges and universities need programmes that are attractive and viable as there is substantial infrastructure and resources. The attractiveness of quantity surveying is important in the recruitment, retention and employability. The perception of the brand and how it is presented to young people would seem to be a critical consideration.

The general public and communities are at best neutral, and at worse, hostile to the construction sector. Quantity surveyors do not enjoy the same profile as the architects, engineers and contractors. Whilst this may insulate the QS profession from hostile perceptions, it means that generally there is a lack of awareness and identity of their work. Given that the media, in all its forms ie. print, broadcast and online, are influential in creating and changing perceptions, a branding strategy needs to build better relations with editors and journalists.

Currently, a popular way of implementing marketing/corporate communications is via the internet. In this age of the internet, the usage of websites to match skills and market needs should be utilized to the fullest. Lim and Yap (2003) highlighted that Quantity Surveying firms which include completed projects in their websites will enable potential clients to match their proposed projects and needs with the firms experience.

There is limited literature concerning the use of websites in construction or the QS sector in particular. This paper first examines corporate branding and how QS practices can develop online branding through their practice websites.

3. CORPORATE BRANDING STRATEGIES OF QS PRACTICES

A review of the literature has uncovered application of branding to a range of professions; nursing (Dominiak 2004), accountancy (Parker 2005), planning (Mcclendon 2003). These studies have used corporate branding theory and practice to establish strategies for improving brand awareness and reputation.

Göl, Nafalski and McDermott (2003) looks at proactive measures for the purpose of informing, affecting and shaping community attitudes towards engineering in Australia. Measures identified were the active coordination of efforts by key stakeholders; Government, the professions and universities, in developing proactive programmes to promote greater awareness and participation in engineering related areas.

3.1 A Broadening of QS Services

Preece and Moodley (2007) assert that the services provided by the QS profession are no longer restricted to the traditional forms. New services and greater competition from within and outside the profession demand a more effective approach to marketing and brand building.

Some business-to-business marketers think that the word brand connotes a gimmicky tactic for a less serious consumer product/service (Doyle and Wong 1997). To others, brands are simply products with brand names or logos. These perspectives gloss over key differences in the degree or level of branding. Brands are commonly depicted in the literature as a multiple level pyramid, with basic physical attributes forming the base, upon which rests the tangible benefits, the emotional benefits, the brand personality characteristics, and with the soul or core of the brand at the top of the pyramid. Alternatively, Doyle and Wong (1998) states that successful brands can be viewed as a quality product/service, surrounded by several layers of product features of increasing intangibility. A *basic brand* is a quality product that has been differentiated from its competitors through marketing mix decisions. An *augmented brand* offers buyers additional tangible benefits such as support services and guarantees. A *potential brand* is perceived by buyers to have real, if intangible, values that differentiate the product in a sustainable way from competing products.

A successful brand combines an effective product, distinctive identity, and added values, as perceived by customers (Doyle & Wong 1998). Brand equity is defined as the total value added by the brand to the core product (Hague and Jackson 1994). Aaker (1991) identifies five categories of assets underlying brand equity: brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and other proprietary brand assets such as patents and channel relationships. Brands add to customer value by giving signals about the offer (Day and Wensley 1988). These signals are often interpreted in terms of risk reduction and enhanced satisfaction. According to Collard and Preece (2000) branding should encompass a company's identity, culture, service and image. It is not just about logo. They also argue that image must match reality and there must be a shared internal understanding of the firms' brand values.

The construction industry is essentially a service industry (Arditi and Davis, 1988; Friedman, 1984; Hardy and Davies, 1983), and faces the same problems often encountered by other service industries, namely intangibility of services, inseparability, perishability, and heterogeneity. Generally, in the marketing of services, there are problems additional to those relating to the traditional marketing mixes, i.e. product, price, promotion and place (Fisher, 1989; Hardy and Davies, 1983). Langford and Fellows (1993) listed some of these problems as: uncertainties regarding the clients; the need for relevant experience; limited differentiation between services; limited knowledge of marketing and branding; involvement of the consumer in production. For a service organization, such as a quantity surveying practice, market position can be undermined by the actions of front-line employees and the inconsistency in service quality experienced by the client.

4. THE USE OF WEBSITES IN THE CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

The Internet and its usage have brought about a new culture amongst businesses. The Internet is providing access to a wider audience allowing small and medium sized firms to compete as never before. However the main challenges of the Internet for QS practices when utilising their web sites as a corporate branding tool is not only to ensure its application is relevant, but also to recognise the need to market to each individual client and key stakeholder personally and on a global scale.

This will require the development and implementation of new marketing plans that embrace this new tool for branding communications. The major share of power now rests with the consumer, what some marketers refer to as the third phase of marketing - consumer domination. As change is the only constant, consumer demands of a web site will increase the more they become accustomed with this new technology. It is information that invites comparison and honesty in communications that will provide a competitive edge and commercial success for an organisation.

Branding is an integral part of any organisations corporate branding strategy and it is often key stakeholders, who are the best judges of the best businesses and subsequently their web sites.

According to Bickerton et al (2000), there are four key issues to be considered when designing a website;

1. first impressions must immediately add value and ensure positive perceptions of the brand and service quality.
2. responsiveness to on-line requests is an indication of service. It must be faster than traditional communication tools as the Internet is perceived to be an immediate medium. Customers will be reassured if a business responds quickly that if they have any problems with the service or product the business will act speedily in finding solutions.
3. technological quality of the site is essential. out-of-date links or screens that don't work sends out a very negative message.
4. understanding of the user/customer and the way they buy is imperative. Site must be simple to use and allow the customer maximum freedom. The business will have to recognise that some customers will still want to use traditional forms of communication at some point.

A corporate web site not only needs to contain the quality and depth of information key stakeholders is looking for, it also needs to be usable and to have a fully functional back office system in place.

In the design of a website, the business needs to identify how users would like to interact, what will be an effective customer relationship online, how two-way communication can be developed and maintained and what on-line experience will improve perceptions of the brand. Solutions to these issues will enable a company to understand usage of the website and the reputation of the brand and how this can be refined in the long term.

5. THE POTENTIAL FOR GREATER INTERACTIVITY WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Users want quickly assumable information and data. They want the ability to navigate easily to gain a clear understanding of the sites progression to more detailed information (Plant 2000). The key is to match the user's psychological, demographical and technological sophistication profile with the sites initial and subsequent impact. There must be a balance between information provision to the customer and information collection by the business on visitors. The aim must be to develop user-site interaction to use connections to move the customer towards the "sell". The content and design of the site must build relationships with customers that lock them in to a site by, for example, offering continual advice (Preece, Moodley & Cox 2001).

Lehrer (2003) presents a 7 point plan for assessing the effectiveness of websites as follows;

1. Initial impressions of home page
2. Navigation
3. Content
4. Design
5. Useability
6. Technology
7. Results

Preece, Moodley & Cox (2001) assessed the effectiveness of the top 50 UK construction firms. They found that one of the principal differences of the Internet compared with other forms of marketing is that it has increased the opportunity for interaction with the customer. Consequently if a web site is used effectively as a means of marketing it is capable of bringing the relationship between a business and a range of key stakeholders closer than any other traditional medium has ever been capable. This form of interaction needs to be adequately designed to not only encourage the user to pull information from a web site, but also be seen as an opportunity to encourage a user to directly interact with a contractor via their web site.

Some key questions for the QS practice website if it is to be more than just an online brochure include; does the visitor want to explore the site further? Is key information easy to find? Is the content fresh and not outdated? Is technology used to aid the visitor rather than confuse them? Do all the links work? Are there reasons why a visitor would want to keep on revisiting the website?

6. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this exploratory study were to:

- Locate the website addresses of QS practices in Malaysia, concentrating on those in the Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley region.
- Investigate the contents of a convenience sample of QS practice websites by adapting the Preece, Moodley and Cox (2001) methodology.
- Identify trends and issues in the future development of websites by QS practices.

6.1 Research Method Developed

The following gives an account of the methodology employed to undertake the exploratory research for this paper. To date no research has previously taken place within the QS sector in Malaysia to evaluate web sites as a means of corporate/marketing communication. The established methodology of Preece, Moodley & Cox (2001) was used as a basic guide to provide the main steps for the research project.

Locating the QS practice websites

The first stage of the research was to locate the website addresses of QS practices. Lists of the names of firms based in the Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley area of Malaysia were obtained from the Board of Quantity Surveyors. However, to locate the website addresses required the use of the Google search engine. The first key result of this study is that only a relatively small number of quantity surveying practices would seem to have established corporate websites. Of a total population of 97 practices only 13 had identifiable websites (approximately 13%). Of these one of the websites was under construction at the time of the review and therefore only 12 websites were included in this preliminary investigation (see Table 1 for the list of sites reviewed).

The criterion for reviewing the websites

The next stage of the research was to adapt the Preece, Moodley and Cox (2001) approach to establish a method of developing the criterion for analysing the sites. The researchers considered what key stakeholders may be looking from a QS practice's web site and the kind of information they are most interested in obtaining. Initially this involved carrying out a detailed literature review of current texts on web site design and content, key areas of corporate communications as well as identifying specific content relevant to the users of QS practice websites ie. construction clients, consultants, potential recruits etc. To help in this process a convenience sample of 8 mid-career quantity surveyors in practice in Malaysia were engaged in a pilot of the criterion, especially in deciding what would be expected in terms of the content of practice websites. Eventually five sections with one subsection were identified, as shown below;

- ACCESSIBILITY
- DESIGN & CREATIVITY
- WEBSITE CONTENT, incorporating SPECIFIC ONLINE INFORMATION
- FACILITIES FOR INTERACTION & CONTACTABILITY

It was then decided to weight each of the criteria. This reflects the importance of being able to locate the website in the first instance. Also websites should be attractive and creative in design to attract the attention of the user. As QS practice websites will be judged largely on the quality and relevance of their content to the key stakeholders, the largest weighting is afforded this aspect. The following provides details on each of the criteria and the aspects considered.

Section 1 – HOW ACCESSIBLE ARE THE QS WEBSITES? (20%)

1. Ability to locate a web site, e.g. through the use of a search engine, etc
2. Time taken for delivery of online information, e.g. moving to a new page
3. Ease of site navigation and clarity, including the use of site maps, prompts, etc
4. Availability of web site, e.g. accessible 24 hours

Section 2 – HOW CREATIVE FROM A DESIGN POINT OF VIEW ARE THE QS WEBSITES?
(25%)

1. Visibility of functions, e.g. menu's and links
2. Information layout
3. Visual impression and impact
4. Quality and sophistication of design

Section 3 – ARE THE QS WEBSITES PRESENTING APPROPRIATE CONTENT AND INFORMATION TO KEY STAKEHOLDERS? (15%)

1. Availability of information online
2. Appropriateness and relevance of information
3. Information constantly updated, i.e. what's new section, company news
4. Activities of organisation and geographical locations easily identifiable
5. Clarity of message, delivery and impact

Subsection 3 – WHAT SPECIFIC ONLINE INFORMATION IS THE QS PRACTICES PRESENTING ON THEIR SITES? (25%)

1. Past projects
2. Lists & details of clients
3. Quality Assurance and ISO recognition
4. Details of company awards won
5. Range of services being offered
6. Company reports and accounts/brochures
7. Organisational chart
8. Details of board of directors/partners
9. Links section
10. Recruitment information
11. Corporate social responsibility/business ethics

Section 4 – WHAT FACILITIES FOR INTERACTION & CONTACT WITH THE PRACTICE IS PROVIDED? (15%)

1. Opportunity for individual direct interaction, including direct email links, automated user enquiry forms
2. Opportunity (for user) to acquire new knowledge & reasons to return to web site, i.e. innovative research & development
3. Ease of use including level of aids, tools and help resources, e.g. online help function
4. Services offered via the web site, e.g. links to previous clients & live projects, frequently asked questions (FAQ) section

7. REVIEWING THE CONTENTS AND DESIGN OF THE WEBSITES

Having established this criterion method for reviewing web sites, the next stage of the research was to commence reviewing the websites. Four researchers, including the authors were engaged in independently reviewing the sites. In order to ensure that the review was carried out on an equitable basis a maximum of 25 minutes was allocated to review each web site. It was felt that within this 25 minutes it should be possible for a user to extract all the required information from a web site. Key notes were made on each web site including good and bad points, all of which would eventually be analysed to help make recommendations for improvement.

7.1 Overview of Preliminary Results

Table 1 shows the performance of the QS practice websites. The following preliminary observations may be made.

Accessibility – 6 of the 12 websites could be found easily using Google. All sites were accessible 24 hours. However, about half of the sites proved to be quite difficult to navigate around without site maps or prompts.

Design – Generally the websites were very basic in terms of design features. They demonstrated very little creativity and without establishing identifiable corporate branding for the QS practices. The top three websites from this sample (see Table 1) appeared to be better in terms of visibility of functions, layout and quality of design. The impression given is that the firms have thought about the user's requirements and interests. Two of the three top websites were designed by outside consultants.

Content/Online information – With the exception of the top two websites, most were lacking across many of the areas identified under online information. In particular a lack of detail on quality assurance or any awards won by the practices. In addition, organizational charts downloadable reports, brochures and accounts were also missing. Generally recruitment or careers sections were not provided.

Facilities for interaction and contact-ability – Most of the websites had clear points of contact including postal, email, fax, phone details. However there were no examples of interaction with clients, live projects etc. Only a few websites included FAQ sections. There was little on the websites to encourage users to return ie. current news sections or research and development/innovative approaches to services/projects.

8. CONCLUSION

In general the websites of quantity surveying practices in Malaysia are very simple and it is not clear what their purpose is, or who they are trying to communicate with. Currently websites are little more than basic company brochures online. It would seem that QS practices have not realized the potential of this medium to communicate with their key stakeholders.

The majority of websites have nothing in terms of content which would make users want to return to the site or maintain interest. In many cases, what may be considered as important information for key stakeholders is not currently included on the websites. In particular, little attention is provided potential recruits.

The website technology being used is very basic, with most practices not employing any methods to encourage interaction with users.

In short, QS practices in Malaysia generally have not realized the potential of company websites as a corporate branding tool.

A number of areas for further research have been identified. It is seen to be essential to follow up this study by surveying QS practices concerning the use of websites. Why have a large number of firms not yet invested in a company website? For those that have a website, do they have a strategy? In addition, this research has not yet tested the interactivity of the websites. How efficient are the firms in answering queries via email through their sites etc.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Overall-Ranking Performance

Website	Accessibility (20%)	Design (25%)	Content (15%)	Online Information (25%)	Facilities for Interaction (15%)	Total Score
www.pendita.com.my	20	23.8	13.8	21	11.3	89.9
www.qncjp.com.my	20	23.8	13.8	20.9	10	88.5
www.hahassociates.com	20	25	13.2	13.2	15	86.4
www.atqs.com.my	20	22.5	12.6	16.4	11.3	82.8
www.pdma.com.my	20	22.5	13.2	13.6	9.8	79.1
www.econcos.com	18	23	12	12.7	9	74.7
www.balow.com.my	19	18.5	13	8.2	6.8	65.5
www.pnfl.com.my	20	17.5	11.4	5.9	7.5	62.3
www.kristalpadu.com.my	17	16.3	11.4	9.5	8	62.2
www.arh.com.my	18	13.8	13.8	9.5	4.5	59.6
www.jubpadu.com.my	19	16.3	9.6	7.7	6	58.6
www.hnaqs.com	19	15.8	9.6	7.7	4.5	56.6