

A Reputation Analysis of the Most Visible Companies in the Scandinavian Countries

Tony Apéria

Stockholm University School of Business, Sweden

Peggy Simcic Brønn

Norwegian School of Management, Norway

Majken Schultz

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

ABSTRACT

To date (mid-2004), the Reputation Quotient (RQ) study has been carried out in 24 individual countries. In early Spring 2004, however, the first attempt was made to apply the RQ in a regional context. During May-June 2004, RQ Scandinavia results were simultaneously released in the three Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Although Denmark has carried out the RQ three times, this was the first time Norway and Sweden have used the instrument. The Scandinavian countries are often seen and treated by businesses as one and the same. The inhabitants and the culture are often seen as homogeneous and this is supported by the fact that residents from all three countries can normally converse in and read each other's native language. This paper discusses the similarities and differences that the Scandinavian RQ research found in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. The analysis is based on the findings of the 15 most visible companies in Sweden and Denmark and the 16 most visible companies in Norway. The analysis shows many similarities, but also some surprising differences. One of the most obvious similarities is that, parallel to other RQ studies, emotional appeal is also the most important driver of corporate reputation for Scandinavians. Further, the majority of visible

companies in the three Scandinavian countries have a local heritage. Finally, the general public agrees on the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in all countries and considers 'treatment of employees' and 'treatment of the environment' as the most important dimensions of CSR. This analysis also revealed many differences. One of the most obvious concerned the level of trust in each country. The aggregated RQ average of all the Danish companies was 74.2, the Norwegian average was 64.9 and the Swedish average was 60.7. The aggregated average of the Top 5 in each country, however, showed that the Norwegian results were the lowest on all six reputational dimensions. The authors also found differences between the countries in relation to how much the companies should communicate about their CSR activities. Danes are more reluctant than Swedes and Norwegians on the subject of companies communicating their good deeds.

INTRODUCTION

In early spring 2004, the Reputation Institute (RI) began collecting data for the first regional Reputation Quotient (RQ) study. This is the first time that Sweden and Norway have been measured using the RQ among the general public, while Denmark was measured for the third time. The

Table 1: Data Sampling (Phase Two, 2004)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Sweden</i>
<i>Fieldwork period:</i>	February 25–March 21	February 23–March 29	February 20– March 7
<i>Method:</i>	Telephone	Telephone	Internet
<i>Total sample size:</i>	3,242 respondents 8,879	2,997 respondents	2,640 respondents

RI global project has so far studied corporate reputations in Europe and the USA, using the same methodology: the Harris-Fombrun RQ.

In accordance with all other RQ country studies, the Scandinavian RQ study was carried out in two phases. In the first nomination phase, a representative sample of respondents from the general public was interviewed regarding their perceptions about firms with the 'best' and 'worst' reputations in their home country. All the nominations were open-ended and, from the results, the researchers constructed a list of the most visible companies in each country.

In the second rating phase, respondents were asked to give a detailed rating of two of the visible companies with which they were 'very familiar' or 'somewhat familiar'. The rating phase was done on the internet in Sweden and on the telephone in Denmark and Norway. In the rating phase, in the spring of 2004, a total of 8,879 people from the Scandinavian general public rated the 46 most visible companies. In total, 55 questions were measured in this phase, including the six reputational dimensions and the 20 RQ attributes. The dimensions used were emotional appeal, products & services, workplace environment, financial performance, vision & leadership and social responsibility (Fombrun *et al.*, 2000). The companies were each rated on 20 attributes in the six main dimensions mentioned above.

Respondents were also asked general

questions about corporate reputation, corporate communication (the Expressiveness Quotient) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). On average, each company was rated by 250 respondents who had indicated familiarity with the company. All data were weighted to be representative of the Scandinavian adult population. Weighting variables were demographic variables (ie age, sex, education and household income). An RQ index was calculated based on the respondents' ratings of each company on the 20 attributes for each company to determine the rankings. The highest possible score was 100 and the lowest score approximately 15. Each RQ rating has an estimated sampling error of ± 1.5 . In comparing any two RQ scores, a difference of 1.96 would be considered significantly different at the 90 per cent confidence level. Data in the rating phase were collected by MMI Univero in Norway, by Vilstrup in Denmark and by Temo in Sweden.

THE SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES

The Scandinavian countries have a number of similar characteristics. All countries have small populations: Norway ~4 million, Denmark ~5 million and Sweden, with ~9 million inhabitants, has the largest population in the region. Many of the companies in the region have lately experienced significant changes in their business environment as a result of national deregulation and international restructuring, particularly the telecommunications industry,

some public transport, the postal sector and, in Norway, the oil sector. Both Denmark and Norway are dominated by small and medium-sized companies (Schultz *et al.*, 2002), while the Swedish companies are larger and more international. In a population-based comparison with the EU and the world, Sweden has the largest companies in the EU and comes out as number three in the world after Switzerland and Hong Kong.

According to *Business Week's* 'Global 1000' (2004) survey, Sweden has 15 companies on the top 1,000 list of the most valued companies in the world, Norway five and Denmark four. That Scandinavia as a region is important is confirmed by its treatment in international marketing texts and courses and that marketing research

often clusters the countries in studies of the Scandinavian market. A quick internet search resulted in more than 10,000 hits on Scandinavian stereotypes and more than 170,000 on marketing and Scandinavia.

Overall Scandinavia RQ Analysis

Denmark

Denmark's largest company, A.P. Møller-Mærsk, operating primarily in shipping and gas, moved from No. 3 in 2002, to No. 2 in 2003 and finally to the No. 1 reputation rank with the highest score ever in Denmark. The other top tier companies are Danfoss, Grundfos, Bang & Olufsen and Novo Nordisk. This represents a significant move forward for both Danfoss and Grundfos compared with 2002. It is

Figure 1: Danish RQ results 2004

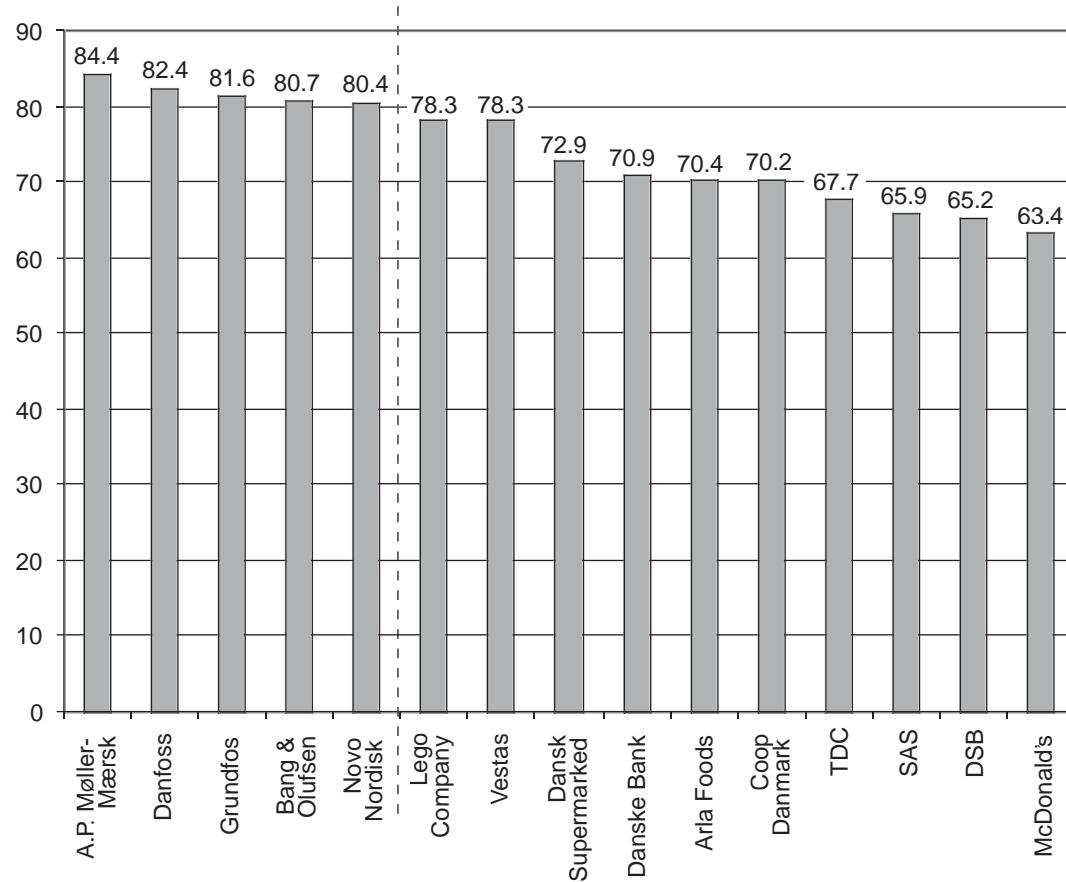


Table 2: Danish Winners on the Reputational Dimensions and Overall Averages

Denmark	Emotional appeal	Products & services	Workplace environment	Social responsibility	Financial performance	Vision & leadership
Average of Top 5:	82.14	83.64	82.72	80.3	81.84	84.12
Number 1:	A.P. Møller	B&O	Danfoss	Danfoss	A.P. Møller	A.P. Møller
Score:	83.1	85.3	84.6	82.5	88.4	89.1

particularly notable that Danfoss is also ranked as No. 1 in relation to both social responsibility and workplace environment. With the exception of Bang & Olufsen, the top tier companies in Denmark are business-to-business manufacturing, shipping or pharmaceutical operations.

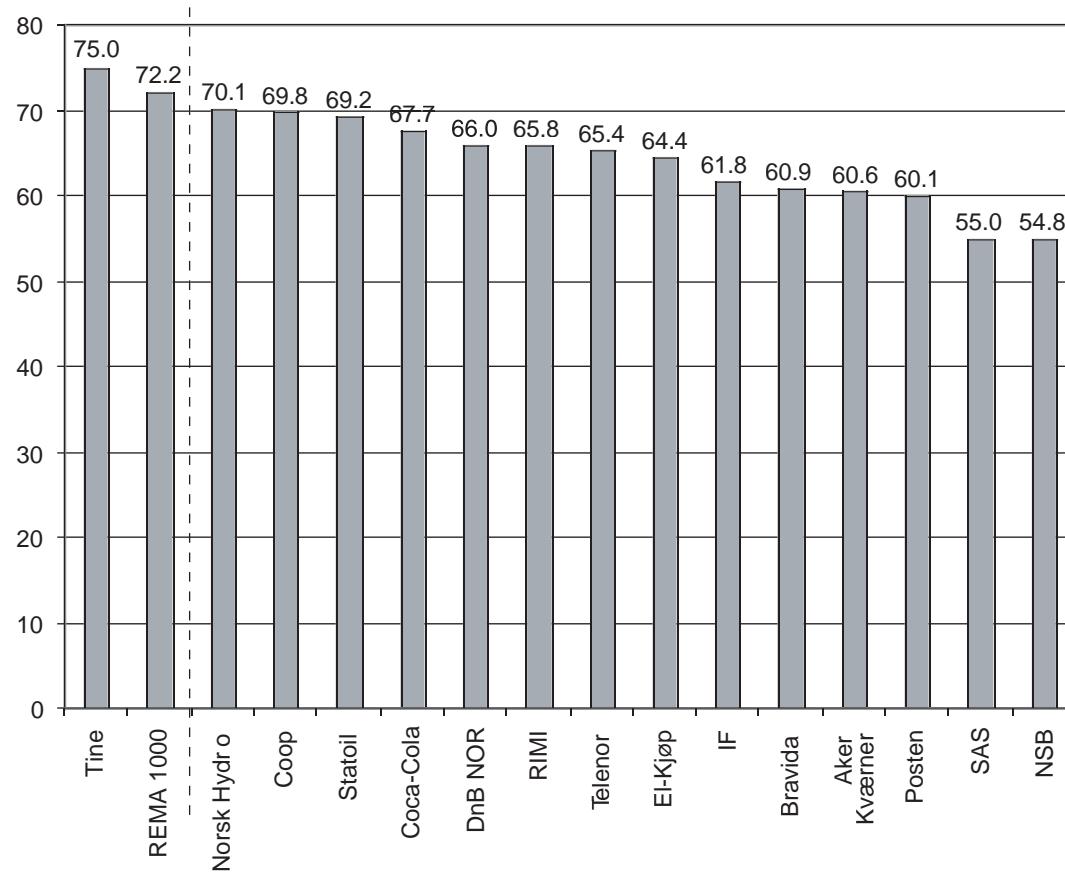
The reputation of the winner of the previous two years, toy manufacturer LEGO, has fallen back to a No. 6 position. Although the company had a rather small decline in its absolute RQ score (2.3) it suffered from the general increase in the reputation level among almost all other companies in the ranking. Thus, a majority of companies have moved up the reputation ladder with A.P. Møller-Mærsk receiving a very high reputation standing compared with previous years and compared with the best RQ level in other countries (eg US winner Johnson & Johnson 2003 has an RQ of 79.5).

The Scandinavian benchmark highlights the most remarkable overall impression: *The level of corporate reputation has increased in Denmark*. The average RQ of the 15 most visible companies has increased from 69.3 in 2002 to 74.2 in 2004, which implies that the general public is expressing a higher level of trust and admiration for Danish companies than previous years — particularly compared with their Scandinavian neighbors. All five top tier companies have an absolute RQ beyond 80.0, which is remarkable compared with all other countries using the RQ scale. The same relatively high level of reputation is found

at the other end of the scale, where the lowest RQ in Denmark is 63.4, compared with Skandia in Sweden having an RQ of 34.0 — the same level as WorldCom in the USA. In a year when echoes of severe corporate scandals have generated a decline in corporate reputation in many countries, Denmark has so far not had any significant corporate scandals and this may be a main reason behind the increase in the general reputation level.

Norway

The reputation winner in Norway is Tine, with a score of 75.0. Tine, a cooperative dairy company that has a near monopoly in this sector, is one of the most well-known brands in Norway and regularly ranks positively among Norwegian consumers in other rankings carried out in the country. Tine scored highest on four of the six reputational dimensions (see Table 3). The exceptions were financial performance and vision & leadership, where they ranked third, behind the second ranked company Rema 1000. What is most surprising is that Norwegians ranked a foreign firm, The Coca-Cola Company, highest on these two dimensions. The soft drinks firm received the highest dimension scores of any other firm, including Tine. Furthermore, The Coca-Cola Company is the sole non-Norwegian firm among the country's 16 most visible firms. Norwegians' admiration of a US firm for its vision and leadership is seemingly an interesting paradox that should provide food for thought for managers,

Figure 2: Norwegian RQ results 2004**Table 3: Norwegian Winners on the Reputational Dimensions and Overall Averages**

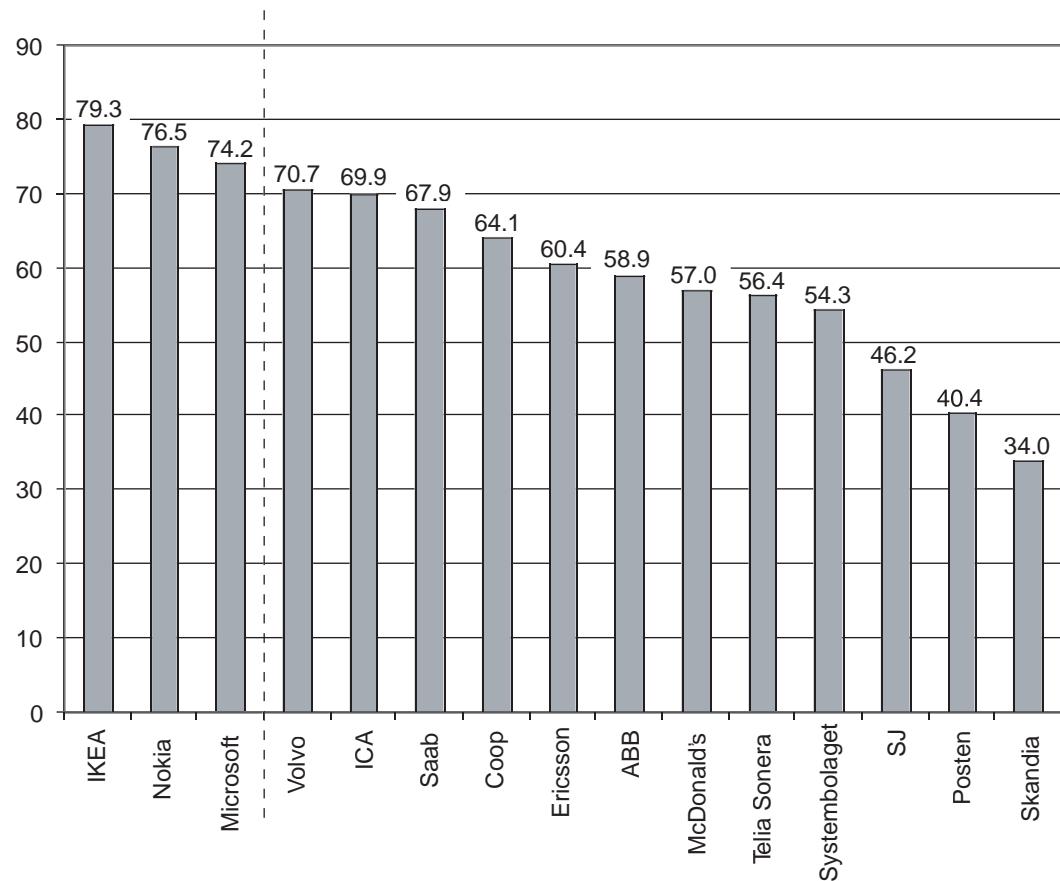
Norway	Emotional appeal	Products & services	Workplace environment	Social responsibility	Financial performance	Vision & leadership
Average of Top 5:	70.2	72.8	71.34	67.12	75.5	74.72
Number 1: Score:	Tine 75.1	Tine 79.5	Tine 73.9	Tine 71.3	Coca-Cola 81.0	Coca-Cola 79.7

given recent press coverage on the negative influence of American culture on Norwegian diets (Brønn, 2004).

Norwegians also stand out with respect to trusting companies, ie in general, they rank companies low on trust. Tine, the top ranked firm overall, was also the top ranked when it comes to trust. But only 40 per cent said they would trust the firm in

the event of a product/service problem, followed by 27 per cent for the second ranked firm.

Since this is the first year in which the RQ survey has been carried out in Norway, it is not possible to establish a pattern of behavior for these firms. It is seen that the highest ranking Norwegian firm had a score of 75.0, with the second

Figure 3: Swedish RQ results 2004

ranked having a score of 72.2. This is much lower than the highest ranked Danish firm, which had a score of 84.4, but Norway is not too far from Sweden, whose highest ranked firm had a score of 79.3.

At the lower end of the scale, Danish firms score higher than Norway, with a low of 63.4, which is a mid-range score for

Norway. The lowest ranked Norwegian firm had a score of 54.8 and Sweden's lowest ranked firm received a score of 34.0. The lowest ranking Norwegian firm has been in the media regularly for poor service, while the lowest ranking Swedish firm's management has been involved in a number of scandals in the last year.

Table 4: Swedish Winners on the Reputational Dimensions and Overall Averages

Sweden	Emotional appeal	Products & services	Workplace environment	Social responsibility	Financial performance	Vision & leadership
Average of Top 5:	75.06	76.48	73.0	67.78	75.72	77.78
Number 1:	IKEA	Nokia	IKEA	IKEA	IKEA	IKEA
Score:	80.1	80.1	75.9	71.8	83.5	83.5

Norway and Sweden's scores are in fact comparable with the top ranking RQ firms in the USA, for 2003. It should be noted, however, that the USA has seen a drop in overall scores, probably due to an increasing distrust of businesses as a result of scandals in that country.

Sweden

The internationally well-known furniture retailer IKEA achieved the highest score in Sweden. IKEA was a clear winner in five of the six dimensions. On the products & services dimension, IKEA fell to second place behind the Finnish mobile telecommunications company, Nokia.

The majority of the 15 most visible companies in Sweden market their products/services towards consumers. All companies, with the exception of Microsoft and McDonald's from the USA and Nokia from Finland, have a local heritage. Sweden was the only country where two international companies, Nokia and Microsoft, were rated in the top tier. This could mean that the Swedish general public is more open to international companies than their neighboring countries. The car manufacturers Volvo and Saab both received relatively high ratings (fourth and sixth, respectively). Even though they are now part of Ford and General Motors they have a strong reputation that is partly based on their Swedish origins. The question arises, however, given the seeming openness of Swedes to international firms, whether the national association of Volvo and Saab will become less important.

In comparison with its neighbors, the averages of Sweden's 15 most visible companies were much lower than in Norway and Denmark. There are at least three possible reasons for this low result. The first reason, and an important one, is the management scandal with Skandia that started in the autumn of 2003, resulting in this company's extremely low RQ of 34.0. The

second reason concerns ABB and Ericsson. Both of these companies have been in poor financial condition and they barely survived their crises. ABB also received a lot of bad press due to another scandal with the former management. A third reason is that the old state-owned monopolies, Telia Sonera, Systembolaget, SJ and Posten, have had a difficult time building a strong reputation among the general public. The alcohol retailer Systembolaget was involved in a corporate scandal due to bribery at the retail outlet level. All of this has had a negative impact on companies in Sweden. The aggregated average of the Top 5, however, showed that the Swedish results were better than the Norwegian results in all six reputational dimensions. The Danish results were the best in Scandinavia on all dimensions.

Comparison of Countries

As noted above, the ratings of the top tier companies in Sweden and Norway are much lower than their counterparts in Denmark. The Swedish top tier companies: IKEA, Nokia and Microsoft have RQs in the range between 79.3–74.2. The two Norwegian top tier companies, Tine and Rema 1000, have RQs of 75.0 and 72.2, respectively. The Danish top tier consists of five companies that have RQs above 80.0, which is quite impressive. The Danish top tier companies are all in the range between 84.4–80.4. In Denmark there are 11 companies with an RQ over 70.0.

One clear pattern found for the three countries was the nomination of food retailers (ICA in Sweden, Coop in Sweden, Denmark and Norway, Dansk Supermarked and the Norwegian Rema 1000), but also other forms of retailing with direct consumer relations such as fast food (McDonald's both in Sweden and in Denmark), furniture (IKEA), financial services (Danske Bank and Den Norske Bank), alcohol retailing (Systembolaget) and post-

services (in both Sweden and Norway). One characteristic for Norway was the nomination of their large national oil companies, ie the Norwegian petrol retailers Hydro and Statoil.

A comparison of the nominated companies in the three countries shows that the majority are firms with a national heritage, although current ownership may be much more international. Similar results have been found in other European countries measured with the RQ. Only five nominated companies from a total of 46 have clear international ownership; four of them are US firms. In Sweden there are three international companies, Microsoft and McDonald's from the USA and Nokia from Finland. In Denmark there is only McDonald's and in Norway only The Coca-Cola Company. Microsoft's high rating in Sweden was surprising since the company had an ambiguous reputation in the Swedish nomination phase where it received an almost equal number of nominations for 'best' and 'worst' reputation. A similar finding for companies with ambiguous reputations was also discovered in a US nomination study (Gardberg and Fombrun, 2002).

A clear pattern found was that state-owned or former state-owned companies tend to have low RQs in all three countries. In Sweden, the state-owned companies of Telia Sonera (telecom), Systembolaget (alcohol retailing), SJ (railway) and Posten (mail) had very low RQs in the range between 56.4–40.4. Among the 15 nominees, the four current or former state-owned companies were found at position 11–14. Only Skandia had a worse reputation in Sweden. The RQs of the four Norwegian state-owned or former state-owned companies were: Telenor (telecom) 65.4, Posten (mail) 60.1, SAS (airline) 55.0 and NSB (railway) 54.8; ranking them at 9, 14, 15 and 16, respectively. The RQs of the three Danish state-owned or

former state-owned companies were: TDC (telecom) 67.7, SAS (state-owned by all three countries) 65.9 and DSB (railway) 65.2, ranking them at 12–14, respectively.

It appears that in Scandinavia there is a real reputation challenge for current or former state-owned firms, which is more than supported by their poor performance on the RQ. Part of the reason for this in Norway and Sweden at least is the monopolistic behavior of many of these firms. This is a recurring theme in the media for Telenor and Telia Sonera. Tine, the RQ leader in Norway, while never a state-owned organization, has also received negative press coverage for its monopolistic-like behavior. Posten in Norway is investing large sums in corporate branding activities in an attempt to change its image to one that is more consumer friendly. Posten and SJ in Sweden also score very low on customer service. Many people in Sweden have also lost a lot of money in Telia Sonera, since they invested in stock when it became a publicly owned company.

Obviously, there is now a trend toward a more deregulated market in Scandinavia, where many of the countries have been characterized as social democracies and where the state (particularly in Norway and Sweden) has been a primary owner of a number of very large businesses, which are now increasingly exposed to a more competitive business environment.

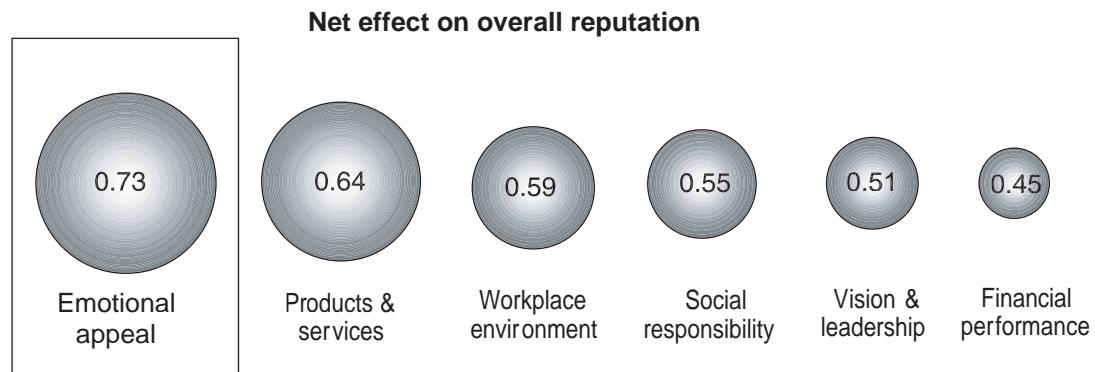
THE REPUTATION DIMENSIONS

The Importance of Emotional Appeal

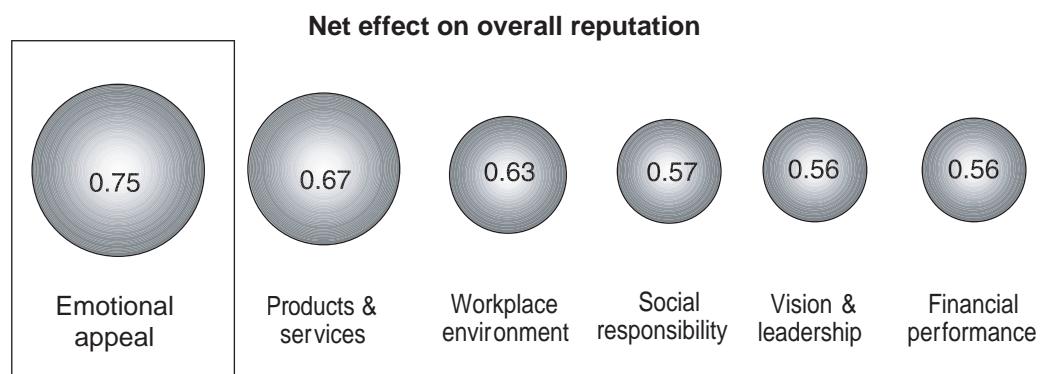
It is clear from Figure 4 that emotional appeal has the strongest impact on the overall reputation of a company in all three countries. This is also the dimension on which the general public feels it knows most about companies. While Danes and Norwegians find emotional appeal nearly

Figure 4: Drivers of reputation in the Scandinavian countries (a) Denmark, (b) Norway and (c) Sweden

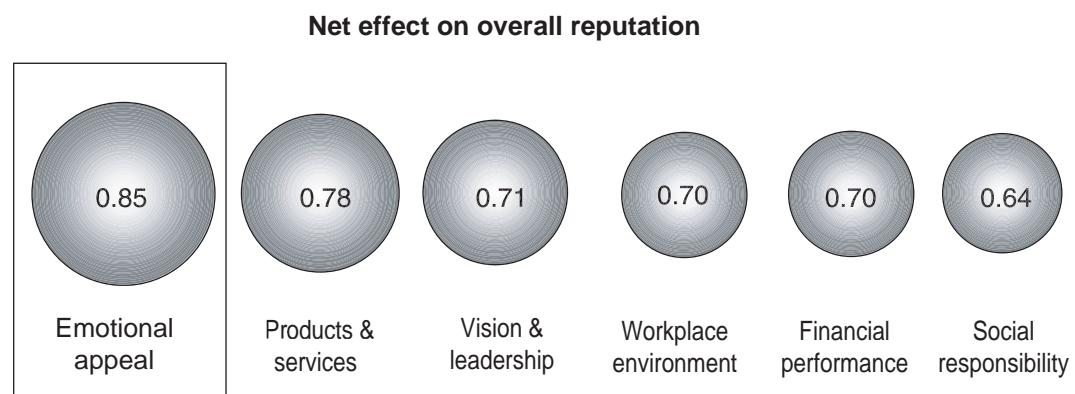
(a) The Drivers of Reputation for the Annual RQ 2004 Denmark



(b) The Drivers of Reputation for the Annual RQ 2004 Norway



(c) The Drivers of Reputation for the Annual RQ 2004 Sweden



equally important, the Swedes find it even more important. This is also true of the second most important driver of reputation, products & services, which all three countries agreed upon, but which the Swedes also found to be more important.

It is evident from the importance attached to emotional appeal as a driver of reputation that Scandinavians want to have a relationship with the firms they do business with. Besides being the primary driver of reputation, this variable received the lowest uncertainty scores, which means that people are sure about this. Scandinavians want to feel good about a company and to trust, admire and respect it. They also want to trust, like and admire a firm for their products and services, workplace environment and social responsibility. These variables have a high indirect impact on reputation through their effect on the emotional appeal dimension.

When it comes to the remainder of the drivers of reputation, Sweden diverges

from its sister countries. While there is nearly no difference in the importance of the six dimensions in a comparison between Denmark and Norway, Swedes rank them in a different order. While both Norwegians and Danes find workplace environment to be the third most important, Swedes rank it fourth. For Swedes, vision & leadership is the third most important while the two other countries rank it fifth, followed lastly by financial performance, which Swedes rank fifth. Arguably, there is little difference between the weightings on a few of these dimensions, but at least one is noteworthy, that of CSR.

Different Perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility

Sweden ranked CSR as the sixth most important dimension of reputation compared with the Norwegians and Danes, who ranked it number 4 (see Figure 4). At 0.64, however, the Swedes still found it

Figure 5: CSR activities considered important by the Scandinavian general public

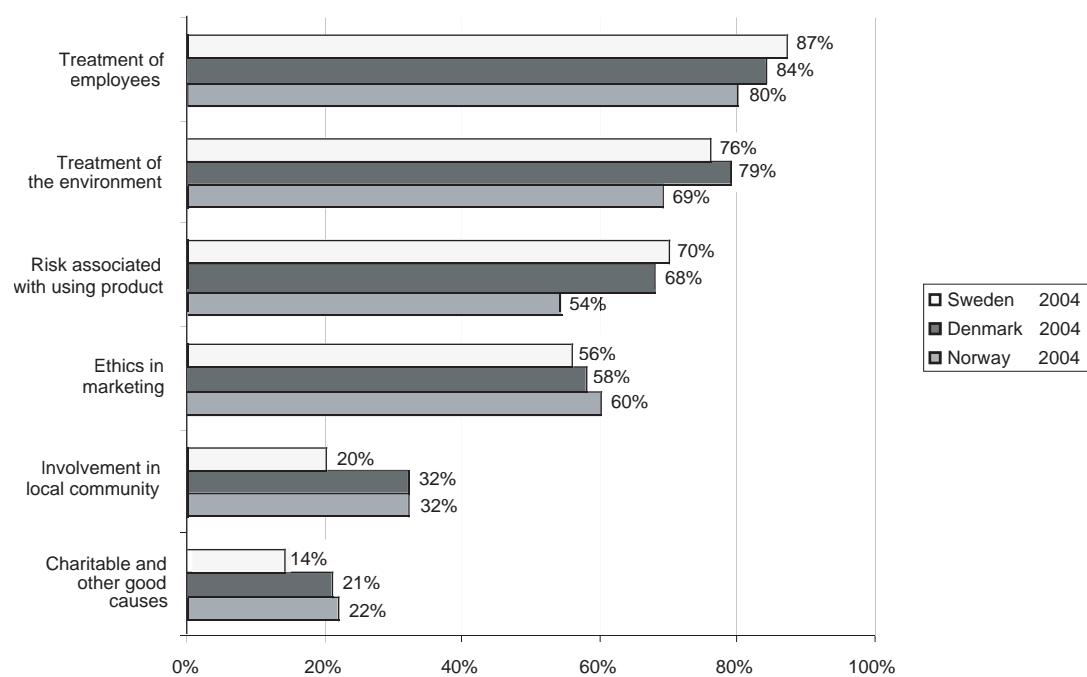


Table 5: Correlation Between Reputation and the Five Dimensions of Corporate Communications in the Scandinavian Countries

Danish results	Score	Norwegian results	Score	Swedish results	Score
1. Sincere	0.74	1. Sincere	0.74	1. Sincere	0.82
2. Consistent	0.59	2. Consistent	0.68	2. Transparent	0.74
3. Transparent	0.55	3. Transparent	0.63	3. Consistent	0.73
4. Distinct	0.51	4. Visible	0.59	4. Visible	0.69
5. Visible	0.43	5. Distinct	0.54	5. Distinct	0.50

more important than the Norwegians or Danes (0.57 and 0.55, respectively). A further analysis of this dimension indicates that the concept of CSR in Scandinavia at least is something that needs deeper investigation.

In all three Scandinavian countries, over 90 per cent of the public indicated that companies should take social responsibility. Fewer Swedes than Norwegians and Danes, however, believe that companies should have a broad social responsibility, ie that they have a responsibility to shareholders, employees and customers plus a broad social responsibility. Some 20 per cent of the Swedish general public want their companies to have a broad social responsibility, versus 31 per cent of the Norwegian and almost half (48 per cent) of the Danish population, who want their companies to have a broad social responsibility. All Scandinavian countries, however, believe that companies have a responsibility primarily to shareholders, employees and customers. But, again, Sweden differentiates itself from the others. Three-quarters of the Swedish general public supported this in comparison with 60 per cent of Norwegians and 48 per cent of Danes.

As noted above CSR was an important dimension in all countries for reputation, with some differences between countries. As regards corporate citizenship, however, Swedes, Norwegians and Danes all agree that treatment of employees is most impor-

tant to CSR and the most essential aspect to a company's engagement in CSR activities. Other aspects of importance, on which there was little difference between the countries were: treatment of the environment, risk associated with using a product, ethics in marketing (more important to Norwegians), involvement in the local community and charitable and other good causes (see Figure 5 for more information).

Regarding the issue of what aspect of CSR is most essential to corporate citizenship (the respondent had to choose one of the activities shown in Figure 5), the countries were in relatively close agreement on the most important: treatment of employees. In Denmark and Norway, the second most essential was treatment of the environment. In Sweden, this activity was third (23 per cent) after risk associated with using a product (24 per cent). There appear to be large differences in opinion on the other aspects, however. Norwegians clearly find ethics in marketing to be more important and essential than both Danes and Swedes (only 2 per cent of Swedes found it essential versus 15 per cent of Norwegians). Similarly, only 12 per cent of Norwegians found risk associated with using a product essential for corporate citizenship versus 24 per cent of Swedes. Norwegians (8 per cent) also found involvement in the local community more essential than Swedes (3 per cent).

Another important finding had to do

with the question of whether or not companies should publicize their good deeds. The results showed that the number of people who believed that corporations should *not* publicize their good deeds was noticeably higher in Denmark than in Sweden and Norway. Only 5 per cent of Swedes and 10 per cent of Norwegians do not want their companies to publicize their good deeds. In Denmark, however, 21 per cent of the population do not want their company to go public with their CSR activities. Furthermore, 50 per cent of the general public in Sweden and Norway believe it is acceptable to publicize CSR activities through advertising and public relations versus 33 per cent in Denmark. A word of caution is necessary, however, as the numbers are relatively high in all three countries of people who believe CSR activities should only be publicized minimally through such media as press releases, annual reports and websites.

CSR is the dimension about which the general public in all countries finds it the most difficult to answer questions. People do not know whether or not companies support good causes. In Sweden and Denmark, the average of 'not sure' responses for this question was 33 per cent and in Norway 31 per cent.

Communicating Reputation

The familiarity of almost all companies measured was very high in Scandinavia. The research demonstrates that high visibility and familiarity are necessary for a strong reputation — but visibility alone is not enough. It is what a firm is known for that decides whether the general public perceives it positively or negatively.

There was a high correlation between five elements of corporate communication as defined by Fombrun and van Riel (2004) and a firm's overall reputation. The better a company expresses itself on the five corporate communication dimensions,

the more likely it will help the company to build a strong reputation. The five elements are: sincerity/authenticity, transparency, consistency, visibility and distinctiveness. The dimensions are referred to as the Roots of Fame and the Expressiveness Quotient (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004; Schultz *et al.*, 2000). The most important communication dimension was 'sincerity', where a high correlation can be seen between the perception of the communication and the overall reputation. Swedes found 'transparency' more important than Norwegians and Danes. One explanation for this result is that the management scandal with the insurance company Skandia never seemed to come to an end in the media because the company never showed sufficient transparency. This scandal has made Swedes more aware of the importance of this dimension and they are now seeking it from Swedish companies. Norwegian and Danish firms would be well advised to take a proactive stance on this element.

Having concluded that Scandinavians value a relationship with their organizations, it makes sense that sincerity scores highest of the corporate communication elements. As trite as it sounds, 'walking the talk' pays off.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The concept of a regional reputation survey is exciting for a number of reasons. For one thing, it adds a new dimension to the RQ. A recent issue of *Newsweek* concludes that the Nordic countries set an example for the world (July 2004). Do Scandinavians in fact view the world in a different (and better) way? The authors took three seemingly similar countries and were able to conclude that their populations differ on how they view firms in some key areas. But they also concluded that, irrespectively, Scandinavians hold the same things important as other countries

when it comes to the behavior they expect of their organizations.

The Scandinavian research therefore adds to the discussion of regional insight into the concept of corporate branding, reputation and corporate communication. Some would find it encouraging to move away from a seemingly dominant American paradigm. In fact, Scandinavia, including Finland, is partially credited with a version of customer relationship management that focuses on forming and maintaining ongoing relationships (Gronroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1999; and Schultz, 2000). This focus is evident in the RQ results here.

Most importantly, however, is the realization that Scandinavian countries cannot be stereotyped. While the histories of the three countries are intertwined and their languages similar, their populations' perceptions of organizations are sufficiently different that common marketing or communication strategies are not wise. It would be wise for the countries themselves to note country-of-origin issues when marketing their own products/brands, as they need a deeper understanding of their own individual identities.

While Danish companies appear to be improving on building trust with their constituencies, the Norwegians and Swedes have some way to go. The research here shows that the process must start internally. The most important dimension for respondents' images of a firm was emotional appeal and, while products & services was the most important driver of this dimension, workplace environment and CSR were also seen as central. Furthermore, the general public considered treatment of employees to be the most important activity of CSR. This was supplemented with the fact that the most significant communication dimension was sincerity. Firms have to 'walk the talk'. This supports the con-

clusion that reputation building starts from within the company. When stakeholders get what they expect from a company time and time again, the promise is kept and the corporate reputation is strengthened.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors acknowledge the kind permission of the Reputation Institute and the Reputation Institute Nordic to utilize and cite some of the materials in this paper.

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