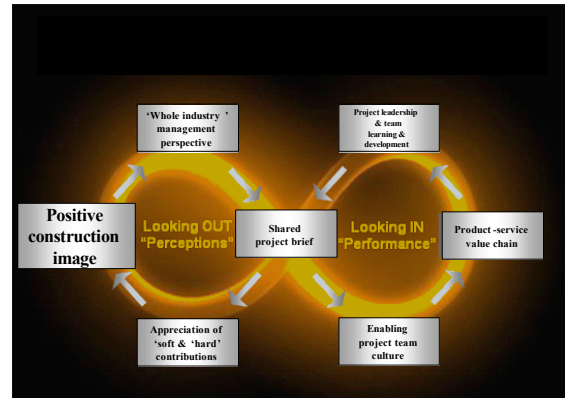


# IMAGE OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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## Abstract

The construction industry is a major contributor to the economy of a country. Despite many positive contributions, the industry suffers from a negative image. The purpose of this paper is to gain an understanding of the reasons for this negative image and to explore possible means by which these traditional perceptions can be changed, promoting a positive image of the industry.

## 6.1. Introduction

The term 'construction' is generally defined as the activity, which creates all types of new building and engineered structures, as well as the maintenance and repair of existing facilities (Wells, 1984). Construction in any country is a complex sector of the economy, which involves a broad range of stakeholders and has wide ranging linkages with other areas of activity such as manufacturing and the use of materials, energy, finance, labour and equipment (Hillebrandt, 1985). The contribution of construction industry to a country's economy may be broken down into following components (Field and Ofori, 1988):

1. production of specific and national basic needs:
2. provision of fixed capital assets and infrastructure of a country
3. direct contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), thereby stimulating further growth via its backward and forward linkages with other industrial sectors: and,
4. employment generation.

Turin (1969) highlighted the significant role of the construction industry in the national economy and its importance was further elaborated by Hillebrandt (1985). Field and Ofori (1988) stated that the construction makes a noticeable contribution to the economic output of a country; it generates employment and incomes for the people and therefore the effects of changes in the construction industry on the economy occur at all levels and in virtually all aspects of life (Chen, 1998). This implies that construction has a strong linkage with many economic activities (Bon, 1988; Bon and Pietroforte, 1990; Bon et al., 1999; Lean, 2001), and whatever happens to the industry will directly and indirectly influence other industries and ultimately, the wealth of a country. Hence, the construction industry is regarded as an essential and highly visible contributor to the process of growth (Field and Ofori, 1988). Low (1994) argued that

the construction industry has a direct bearing on the national economy and, consequently, can be used as an indicator of economic well-being for a country. In addition, Low (1994) suggested that the relationship could be found in terms of capital formation and employment creation as well. He found that in most developing countries the capital formation in construction accounts for 7-13% of the GDP while that of most industrialized countries ranges between 10-16%. Further, he proposed that construction provides 6-10% of total employment in most industrialized countries and 2-6% in less developed countries.

Despite these significant contributions to the economy of a country, the construction industry suffers from a negative image. Construction has an image synonymous with high cost, low quality, chaotic working practices and a poor health and safety record (Ball, 1988). The construction industry is seen as tedious, dirty, non-technical, non-professional, hazardous, cyclical, and associated with difficult working conditions (Reid, 1995). Gale (1994) found that image played a central part in career choice, but in order for change to occur, gender relations must be changed. This leads to a widely held perception that career opportunities within the industry are also poor (Baldry, 1997). Hence, there is an overwhelming need to improve the image of the industry if new recruits are to be attracted (Griffith, 1988). Creating a better public image may attract more professionals, workers, investors, developers, etc., to the industry. The media appear to exploit and highlight news stories that foster a negative image of the construction industry.

There is a need for a revaluing of the construction image to form a positive image – an industry which is valued by society. This paper examines the reasons for these negative perceptions and explores mechanisms that can improve the image of the construction industry.

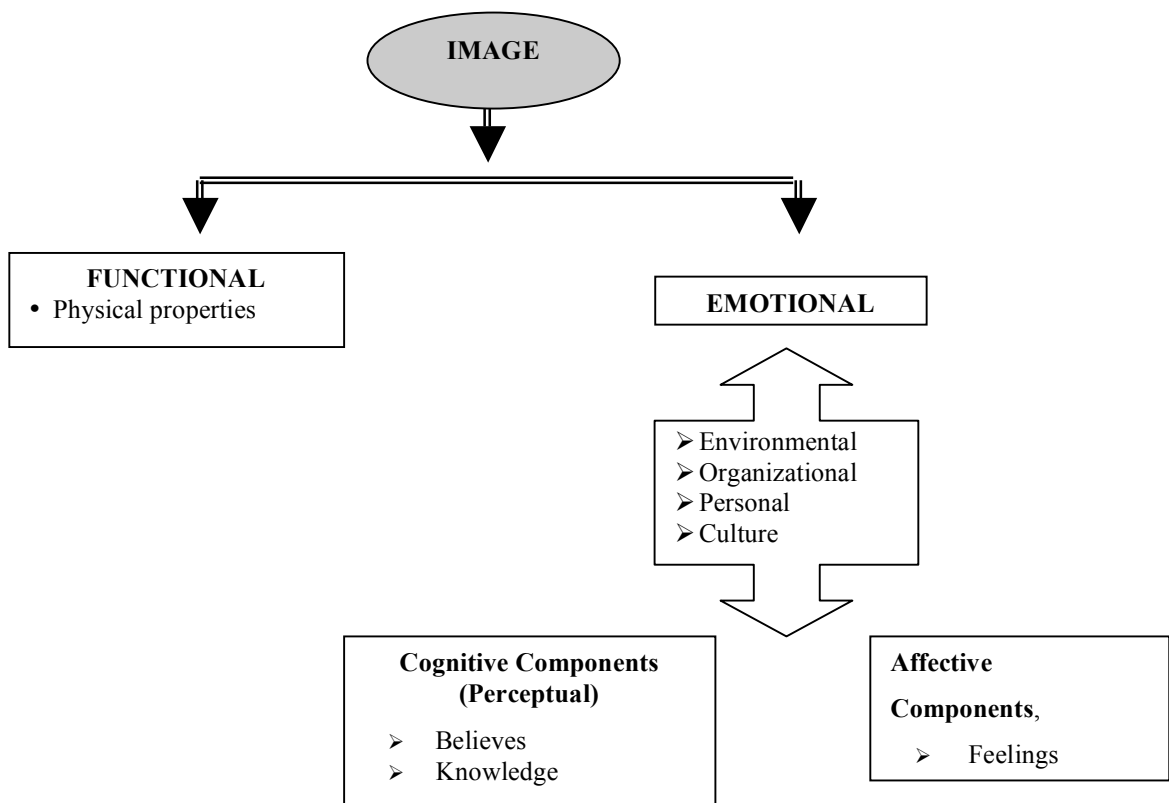
## **6.2. Understanding image**

“Image” refers to an impression created at a particular time at a particular level of abstraction (Grunig, 1993). Reynolds (1965: 69) describes an image as a “. . . mental construct developed by the people on the basis of a few selected impressions among the flood of total impressions; it comes into being through a creative process in which these selected impressions are elaborated, embellished and ordered.” The individuals construct images within them depending on their objective and cognitive capabilities. Further, due to the unanimity the experienced physical environment, norms shared by individuals and the biological and perceptual similarities, there can be many overlapping areas in “individuals” image. The “public Image” is a composite of “individuals” image. Also it is a common mental picture carried out by large number of people. As Avenarius (1993: 66) stated, the real image makers are the publics. Since the public image is a composite of “individuals” image, it can be purported as collective image.

Kennedy (1977) distinguishes two components of image: functional, related to tangible stimuli that can be easily measured; and emotional, associated with psychological conditions that become apparent in feelings and attitudes. According to Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) the image construct consisted of two components, cognitive and affective, the cognitive referred as perceptual, was concerned with beliefs and knowledge about an object while the affective was related to feelings or emotions about an object. They suggested that environments and places have perceptual and affective

images and that places additionally have an overall image that is a summation of both perceptual and affective components (see Figure 6.1.).

Thus, an image can be formed as a network of meanings stored in memory that range from holistic general impressions to very elaborate evaluations of objects. These meanings may be related to the tangible features and consist of fleeting and ephemeral perceptions that public hold. Also an image is a perception of a receiver of his or her received projection of the physical/tangible things and own reflections of interpretations of various attributes from various sources. There is no clear distinction made in terms of "the difference between the artistic concept of image as symbols and the psychological concept of image as something constructed by receivers of those messages" (Grunig 1993: 126). Therefore, image can be defined as a multidimensional concept, based upon variety of factors.



**Figure 6.1. - Different paths that image can be formed**  
Source: Baloglu and Brinberg (1997)

### 6.3. Image formation

Within different fields of business; marketing, advertising, management, and public relations; research findings have demonstrated some differing and some consistent views toward corporate image formation. For advertising and marketing, a long established line of research into consumer behaviour suggests that an organization originates image in order to foster increased sales. This consumer behaviour research has long held that multiple images are present in the consumers and that they are variable and subject to change (Dowling, 1986; Gray and Smeltzer, 1987; Cottle, 1988; Garbett, 1988; Knoll and Tankersley, 1991). Business management studies have a

slightly different view towards image formation but similar to advertising and marketing finds multiple images that can be managed and changed by various internal audiences (Lee, 1971; Kovach, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Carlivati, 1990; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Albert et al., 2000). Public relations research has identified mainly the audience as forming the image of an organization, focusing on the interaction among the various organizational, personal, and environmental factors (Alvesson, 1990; Fomburn and Shanley, 1990; Moffitt, 1994 a; Williams and Moffitt, 1997). Thus, it is arguable that recent research into understanding the process of corporate image has called attention to both the process of production of corporate image by the organization and the process of reception of corporate image in the audience member.

In the first set of theories as promulgated by business, marketing, and advertising fields, image is created and manipulated by the corporate sector. For an industry, the image can only be created by its members. In creating image, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) plays a major role by having a far reaching impact not only among the community but also among the workers of an industry (Alsop, 1999). On the contrary, as held by public relations research, the general image is the public's perception about an industry (Gallager et al., 2001). This implies that an image is a collection of impressions which changes from time to time due to external influence. Image is also influenced by the everyday interactions between members (stakeholders) of the industry and its external audiences (Moffitt, 1994 b). These two differing views were used in this study to:

1. Understand the audience perception on the construction industry, and
2. How a positive image can be created through CSR.

The next two sections of the paper discuss the results of these two studies on image formation in the construction industry, i.e., the audience perception and how the industry can promote image through CSR.

#### **6.4. Audience perception**

In order to understand the reasons for the negative image of the industry, a Delphi study was undertaken among the general public of Sri Lanka. The Delphi technique is being increasingly used in many complex areas in which a consensus is to be reached (Chan et al, 2001). The objective of a Delphi study is to obtain a reliable response to a problem or question from a group. The study consisted of three Delphi rounds having a face-to-face questionnaire survey. The following research questions were used to guide this investigation and to provide a methodological test towards the image formation process (Moffitt, 1994 a,b; Kazoleas et al., 2001):

1. What are the overall images of the Sri Lankan construction industry among the general public.
2. What factors influence the dominant image held by the public regarding the industry.

The participants in this investigation were 160 individuals who were selected using a quota sampling technique representing various ethnic groups, gender and the nine provinces of the country (Tan, 2002). The nine provinces covered were based on population centers as opposed to geometric size. Out of the 160 participants only 143 were able to participate in all three rounds, thus reducing the sample size to 143. Most

of the dropouts were from North, Eastern and North-central provinces, making the sample a bit biased towards southern provinces of the country.

Research question one posited few questions regarding respondents' perceptions of overall images regarding the industry. Overall the data indicated that the respondents had a very high negative image of the industry. The respondents had been asked to identify the source of information that had the greatest impact on their perceptions of overall image. Many respondents answered that construction work carried out in their premises or in one of their family members or friends place (mainly houses) and in the vicinity (public works) influenced their image (43.7 percent), followed by family members and friends who work in the industry (21.2 percent), media (10.4 percent), other workers (7.3 percent), and so on. These results were surprising, in that most respondents' perceptions were shaped by either personal experience, or by interpersonal relationships with others who had experience with the industry, and not by the media. Overall, these results suggest that personal experience and interpersonal networks had a greater impact on perceptions of image than media exposure.

Fourteen factors that were elicited from literature review, as contributing factors of the negative image of the industry, became the starting point of the first round of the Delphi study. At the end of the third round, following main reasons, in the order of priority, became the most pressing concerns of the general public regarding the industry.

1. Low quality of the construction product.
2. Low professionalism and skill among workers (non-availability of skilled workers).
3. Inconvenience caused to the public during construction in terms of noise and pollution.
4. Time overruns in the product delivery.
5. Lack of management inputs during construction which causes accidents and high wastage.

## **6.5. Corporate social responsibility (CSR)**

CSR is fundamentally the ethical behaviour of a company towards all its stakeholders, including its workers (Moirs, 2001; Clarkson, 1995). Many definitions for CSR are being outlined by various organizations and institutions. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) (2002: 2), defined CSR as "the continuing commitment of business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families, as well as the local community and society at large". The UK Government sees CSR as the business contribution to their sustainable development goals. "Essentially it is about how business takes account of its economic, social and environmental impacts in the way it operates; maximising the benefits and minimising the downsides" (UK Gov., 2005). Furthermore, it sees CSR as the voluntary actions that business can take, over and above compliance with minimum legal requirements, to address both its own competitive interests and the interests of wider society (UK Gov., 2005). Therefore, CSR at present is by and large about recognising and addressing the needs (that go beyond existing legal and economic concerns) of all stakeholders, whom are affected by and who affect the activities of an organization (Carroll, 1999; Lantos, 2001; Papsolomou-doukakis et al., 2005).

At present CSR is not only focused on corporate philanthropy or social consideration. It covers six broad areas which goes beyond corporate philanthropy as follows (WBCSD, 1999; WBCSD, 2000; Graves et al., 2001).

1. Workplace: The well-being and comfort of workplace is paramount in any discussion of CSR.

2. Human rights: When Human Rights are addressed in CSR, different businesses interpret it differently. It ranges from the narrowly interpreted term of denoting child or slave labour, to an umbrella term to cover almost all social and environmental issues starting with the right to breathe clean air and drink clean water.

3. Community involvement: Community relations include a focus on core business impacts and interactions as well as on more traditional philanthropy. Building trust with the community demands consistency and long term commitment from the company.

4. Environmental protection: Protecting the environment from the impact of operations is a core responsibility. Besides their legal obligations, which differ according to region and country, corporations are seen to have a broad responsibility to protect the physical environment throughout their supply chains.

5. Marketplace: Under marketplace issue, both customer and supplier relations need to be addressed.

6. Ethical business operations: Economic performance is not something excluded from global CSR agenda. Under this issue, companies are more focused on addressing needs and fulfilling their responsibilities towards shareholders and investors.

In order to understand the use of CSR in the construction industry, a case study research was undertaken among four organizations in Sri Lanka (Yin, 1994). A code-based content analysis technique was used in the study (Catterall and Maclaran, 1996). The analysis was mainly a pattern matching approach, which was carried out through cross case analysis (Cassell and Symon, 2005). The results of the study reveals that CSR as a concept is not very well known by the Sri Lankan construction organizations. However, the discussion revealed that these organizations are engaged in all the six key CSR activities. These six activities were further identified with sub-activities, which emerged during the analysis.

The “Workplace CSR” is addressed under five sub-categories by these firms. They are; allowances and benefits, obligation to provide training, workforce diversity, safety and health, and finally communication. The level of responsibility shown towards workplace CSR is considerably substantial compared to other five activities and is relatively uniform across all four cases. Furthermore, the organizations have engaged in workplace CSR with real commitment and enthusiasm.

The level of awareness given for “Human Rights” activities is very low.

Findings reveal that “Community Involvement” happens in six ways. Philanthropy; collaborative projects with community, training for community, contact and dialogue, safety systems to protect the community and employment of disabled are the six sub-activities. Among them philanthropy seems to be the most favoured and the most frequent among all four organizations.

The priority given for “Environmental Protection” is very low among the construction organizations. The level of responsibility shown is somewhat limited to the company reputation, government regulations and cost aspects.

The social responsibility towards the “Marketplace” is shown through customer dialogue, product safety, and quality concern. However, as a whole the amount of responsibility shown towards marketplace is low.

In general, “Ethical Businesses Operations” is performed by two ways. One is through “responsibility towards shareholders” and other is through “disclosure”. Due to the nature of ownership in all four case study organizations (i.e. since all shareholders are directors), this aspect was performed automatically. On the other hand, disclosure of relevant information is only carried out towards the shareholders.

Overall, apart from workplace and community involvement, other CSR activities are carried out only due to legal requirements and the customs of the construction industry. It is interesting to note that human rights and environmental protection seems to have gained very low priority among the six key activities. This is a very disturbing result as construction industry is one of labour intensive industries with very high impact on the environment.

Table 6.1. illustrates a summary of the enablers and constraints emerged through the cross cases analysis. It can be seen that there is a genuine concern to help others by the senior management of construction organizations. Interestingly, it is because of their own past that they have realized the importance of CSR. The major constraint seems to be lack of awareness and misconceptions regarding CSR.

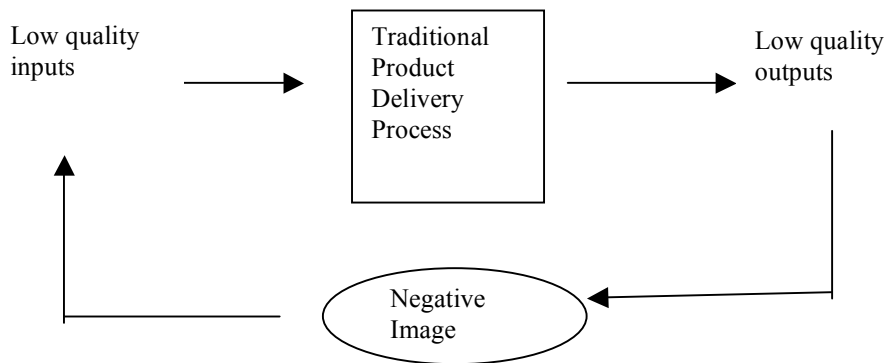
**Table 6.1. - Enablers and Constraints of SCR in Construction**

<b>Enablers</b>	<b>Constraints</b>
Genuine need to contribute to the betterment of society by owners	Lack of awareness on CSR
Top managers’ own difficult past	Identifying CSR as an obstacle for achieving targets
Positive perception /attitude of the top-management	Rejecting the need for marketing tools
Employee pride /commitment	Laws and regulations at nation level are not adequate to promote CSR
Superior financial capacity	Cost implications
Contemporary knowledge	Policies at organizational level
Smaller size of the firms	Lack of openness
Legal Requirements, professional requirement and industry customs	Negative perceptions of the lower level employees

## **6.6. Discussion**

The findings of the Delphi study suggest that quality of final product immensely contribute to the formation of a positive image of the construction industry. This study confirms that the quality of final product is the most basic and critical factor of image. Quality of final product coupled with concerns over time overruns and lack of management inputs during construction, questions the way the industry delivers its products to the customers. The negative image associated with construction workers

discourages young people from joining the industry. Some in the industry believe that negative attitude towards careers in construction have contributed to a shortage of construction workers. In addition to the shortage of workers, the shortage of female workers is even more striking. The Department of Census and Statistics reported that only 3 percent of skilled worker positions, 7 percent of supervisory positions, and 12 percent of non-skilled positions are filled by women (Dept. of Census and Statistics, 2005). Thus, the results of the study could be portrayed using a vicious cycle as given in Figure 6.2.



**Figure 6.2. - The vicious cycle of construction image**

In order to arrest this vicious cycle, one has to start from the quality of inputs, particularly the workforce. There is a need to dispel the misconception that construction work is tedious, dirty, and non-professional. Education, training and continuing professional development programs should be targeted at improving the professionalism of the industry. Recruitment of only trained skilled workers should be strictly adhered as a corporate culture of the industry. The next step is to look into the project delivery process. There is an increasing realization on the part of the clients that the traditional procurement methods that are used in product delivery to be drastically changed to have a meaningful improvement in the image of the industry. These alternative project delivery systems should eliminate quality, time and cost problems endemic in current construction projects. In addition, the need for construction companies to undertake socially responsible activities that believed to produce a better corporate image cannot be underestimated. Most importantly, CSR should involve all six areas of activities, rather than limiting it to corporate philanthropy and workplace issues.

### **6.7. Further research agenda**

One of important findings of this study is that the construction industry image, as perceived by the audience, was not primarily a function of exposure to the mass media coverage. Rather, the main influence was either personal experience or experience of a close relative or friend. The implication of this result is that the industry should focus image enhancement through better services to its clients rather than focusing on campaigns through mass media. However, to attract young workers in to the industry mass media campaigns could be very effective. Therefore, one could argue that the image formation among young and elderly could be through different means. Since



labour shortages and skill shortages are some of the pressing issues in the construction industry, further research is needed to systematically study how young people perceive the image of the construction industry, what are the main influencing factors of the image formation among them and how the misconceptions regarding the industry could be overcome. In addition, it is important to review whether mass media campaigns could be effective in attracting a quality workforce in to the industry.

As image is highly related to better output and excellence in product delivery, another area of further research is the role of national/ regional level award schemes in improving the output quality of the industry. Whether incentives/awards could improve the quality of an industry as a whole?, how these incentives/awards should be designed to achieve an enhanced image of the industry? What is the role of the government, professional bodies related to construction, and contractors' associations in promoting a positive image of the industry? Can government regulations and control enhance the image of an industry?, if yes, how they should be implemented to achieve maximum benefit? These are some further research that emanate from the results of this study.

## **6.8. Conclusion**

The image of the construction industry can be changed through the conscious effort and dedication of its members. The improvement of the image of the construction industry will depend very much on the industry's commitment to promoting quality products, time cost and safety management, and education and training programs. The study revealed that the construction industry image was not primarily a function of exposure to the mass media coverage. Rather, the results indicated that the sources of the greatest influence were close personal relationships (family and friends who had experience with the industry) or actual experience. These results suggest that the industry should focus image enhancement efforts on the way that they deliver services to their clients and employees. That is, results indicate that efforts at community relations and customer relations may also be relatively more important to industry image than a coordinated campaign targeted through mass media. Corporate Social Responsibility provides a platform that can be used to build a strong positive image of the industry.

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