

The authenticity deficit

Is authenticity the ‘holy grail’ of branding and, if so, how do service organisations achieve it? Geoff Dodds has some ideas.

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Does anyone else worry about the authenticity of professional services brands? Maybe I should get a life, but I’ve been worrying about it for years.

For a start, they all sound the same, but they can’t be can they? Or can they...?

They say the same things. They do the same things. They appear to have the same values. They seek the same paragons of virtue in their recruitment ads.

And yet there is little sense of what they are really like to work with or for. No real feeling for the culture and character of the business. Which is most likely the only real source of differentiation for most.

What to do? How do others deal with this issue? Here are a few thoughts.

Learning from charities

In the past, there appears to have been a general belief that charities could learn from the business world. Having worked a lot with charities in recent months, it seems to me that the reverse is often the case, especially when it comes to authentic branding.

People working in charities are often (rightly) suspicious of branding. They don’t want to be ‘branded’ in the conventional sense of the word. They are ruthless in their rejection of any signs of brand/marketing spin. The language has to be pure. The brand definition crystal clear.

Above all, they want their brand to be



With an authentic voice, we have authority. We can author our own story.

a true and authentic expression of who they really are and what they are striving to achieve.

And therein lies a lesson for all brands – the over-riding importance of authenticity – allied to clarity of organisational purpose.

And learning from rugby

This lesson was reinforced for me by James Kerr’s book, *Legacy*, which I read, following the All Blacks’ success in the 2015 rugby world cup. The book deals with what took the team from their lowest point in 2004 to world dominance in 2011 and beyond.

What is really interesting is that Kerr argues persuasively that their success has been almost entirely attributable to the culture they have created.

Their mantra is: “Better people make better All Blacks”.

In other words, they believe that by

enabling their people, players, leaders and others, to develop the tools, skills and character that will help them in the world beyond the rugby field, they will acquire the tools, skills and character needed to succeed on the field.

A central pillar of the special culture they have created is authenticity.

So what is authenticity?

The All Blacks define authenticity as “the alignment of head, mouth, heart and feet”. In other words, thinking, saying, feeling and doing the same thing consistently.

They further define it as being the result of two other attributes – Honesty and Integrity:

Honesty involves the creation of an open and trusting environment within which people feel free and unthreatened in giving each other straight feedback.

Integrity comes from the Latin ‘integritas’, which means ‘being whole and undivided’.

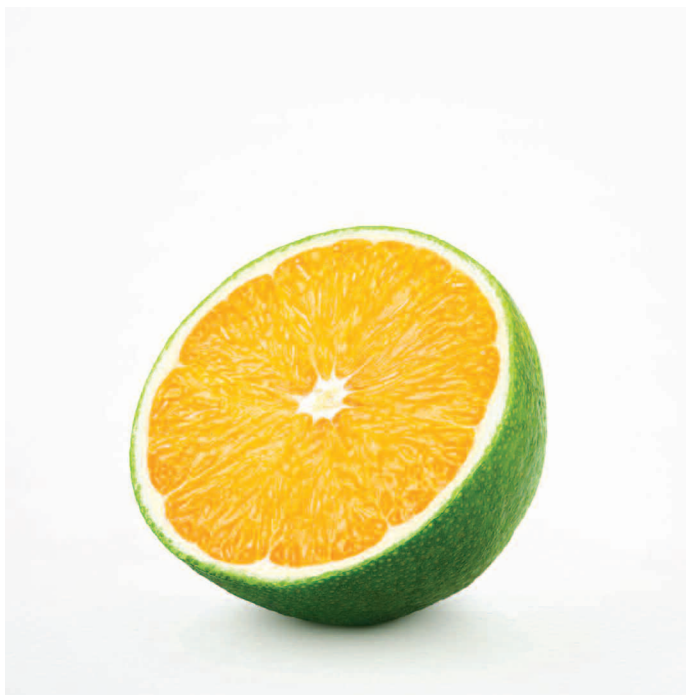
The All Blacks describe it like this: “Integrity means that our thoughts and deeds are ‘as one’, a chiropractic alignment in which our core values, purpose, beliefs and behaviours all flow in the same direction”.

Powerful stuff!

Authentic brands

Authenticity is the basis for the development of a strong brand – personal or organisational.

Authenticity implies alignment



friendly. The service was awful. But it was true to its cause and didn't pretend to be something that it wasn't. Not everyone's cup of tea, but it was a brand leader in its sector.

At PwC Consulting, we spent years in awe of McKinsey and much time and effort in trying to be like them. Until one day we realised that we were entirely different animals. If McKinsey were the people who envisioned and designed the new car, we

were the guys who got under the bonnet, got our hands dirty and made it work. Both roles equally valuable, but entirely distinct.

From that moment onwards, we began to build a more authentic and more effective consulting brand.

Making it happen

Of course, authenticity can be a tough call for many individuals, let alone organisations. And in complex service organisations, where people are naturally resistant to being 'aligned', it can be an even tougher call.

So how do you begin to build an authentic service brand? I would focus on four things.

1 Culture: It all starts with an honest and objective assessment of the organisation, without a marketing mindset. Put aside the spin and the straplines. What's the organisation really like? What is its culture? Its character. Its personality. What are its strengths and failings? What values are really played out day to day? What really matters round here? What are the beliefs that drive the behaviours? What do we think of ourselves? What do others think of us?

Describe all that in plain language and you have the beginnings of a platform to build an authentic brand from the inside out.

2 Purpose: According to Simon Sinek, "people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it".

Start with your WHY? What's your point of view on the world, on your industry, on your clients? Why do you exist beyond making money? What do you contribute to the world that others don't or can't?

If you have clarity on why you do what you do, it makes it much easier to decide on how you should go about doing it and much more likely that people who believe in the purpose will put their all into making it happen.

3 Alignment: I love the All Blacks' idea of 'chiropractic alignment'.

First and foremost, the brand needs to align perfectly with the business strategy, if it is to deliver the strategy in the market place.

Then, within the brand itself, each part needs to line up with the others. There are many brand models. The trick is not in the model or the labels but in the precision and rigour that goes into the definition.

As with any 'brief', the quality of thinking at this stage determines the effectiveness of the outcomes.

4 Leadership: Perhaps this point should really come first. If you don't have the leaders of the firm involved from the start and totally committed to the brand, you're wasting your time. It is the leaders who set the tone, who define the culture. It is in the daily decisions they make and actions they take that the brand comes to life.

It is the role of leadership continually to question and challenge their actions and those of others against the agreed 'brief'. That way lies authenticity.

Summary

So authenticity almost certainly is the most important brand characteristic. Not because it results in a much loved brand, but because it results in a more effective and sustainable one. Indeed it is the very basis of branding.

And, on that note, I leave you with another quote from the All Blacks: "With an authentic voice, we have authority. We can author our own story"

Wouldn't most professional firms like to be able to say that?

between who we think we are, what we say about ourselves, how we feel about ourselves, how we behave and how others perceive us. Head, mouth, heart and feet.

In fact, when you think about the purpose of branding, it is probably the most important attribute of a strong brand.

Contrary to popular belief, integrity and authenticity are not about morality. They are about workability.

In the words of the All Blacks: "Others can count on us to deliver and most importantly, we can count on ourselves".

Isn't that exactly what a brand is about?

Not everyone's cup of tea

But if authenticity isn't about morality, neither is it about being liked. Jeremy Corbyn, the new leader of the UK Labour Party, is probably one of the most authentic politicians of our generation (there isn't much competition). People respect his authenticity, but many don't like what he stands for or what he offers. He has a strong, authentic personal brand that makes it easier for people to choose him, or not.

A strong brand isn't about making everyone love you. It's about making customer choice easier – you know what you're getting and what you're not getting – and guaranteeing that you get what you expected. One person's favourite brand might be someone else's brand poison.

I worked at Dixons for some years. Dixons was an authentic brand. It was all about getting great deals on consumer electronics, nothing more. It wasn't



Geoff Dodds is a brand consultant and coach, specialising in helping service organisations compete more effectively. Contact: Geoff@geoff-dodds.com or visit www.geoffdodds.com