

The Inner Game of Branding

Successful branding can take a leaf out of sports performance coaching and the wisdom of Tim Gallwey

If you haven't read Timothy Gallwey's book, "The inner game of tennis", read it right now. Doesn't matter if you're not a tennis player and have no desire to be one. Neither am I, but what he says has much wider application. The book is ages old but I've just re-read it and recalled how influential it remains.

With apologies to the author, here's a potted version.

The inner game

Gallwey's central point is that "The opponent in your head is more formidable than the one the other side of the net."

Most people, when they play tennis, or indeed pretty much any sport, will recognise that they have two "selves". Self 1 is the critic, the judge that sits on your shoulder and tells you how bad you are. That little voice that says "You really are rubbish, she's much better, just look where that ball went, you couldn't hit a ball to save your life...." and so on.

And then there's Self 2, the self that sometimes comes to the fore and lets you play like a demon. You're "in the flow". You could conquer Wimbledon. You play to your full natural ability.

If only Self 2 could be released more often.

Another way of putting this is in Gallwey's equation: Performance = Potential - Interference

Gallwey's coaching strategy is to distract Self 1, to deal with the interference – by getting the player to achieve greater focus and awareness.

He argues that the result of Self 1 is that people don't focus on the ball. So he gets people to focus on the ball, that is really focus on the ball.

He might ask his coachee to tell him which way the ball is spinning on each shot. Or exactly how many inches it was above the net. Or how fast the ball went, on a 1-10 scale. Or he might just ask the coachee to notice what they're noticing.

He goes on to talk about setting clear performance goals to provide even greater focus. And he talks about breaking these goals down into achievable parts.

The result is that Self 1 is kept at bay, the coachee's level of awareness of what is happening is raised and Self 2 begins to make increasingly frequent star appearances.

It's well known that outstanding sports players have the ability to achieve a degree of focus and awareness about which we ordinary mortals can only dream. They report that they can effectively see high-speed action in slow motion, so that they are able to discern much greater detail and respond accordingly. So what we're talking about here is really just a more ordinary version of those extraordinary capabilities.

I can testify to the power of this approach, as I've personally coached people in tennis and golf, neither of which are my games, using the Gallwey approach, and have seen them making remarkable progress as their focus and awareness increased and Self 2 was allowed to take control.

So what's all this got to do with branding?

You've probably already begun to think about how this philosophy can be applied more widely to the world of work. How much more confident and effective would we all be without that nagging voice of Self 1 telling us that we are about to make complete fools of ourselves in front of our audience? Gallwey explores this further in his follow up book, "The inner game of work". And this is what led me to think about its application to branding.

In all my years of working with brands, I have never ceased to be impressed by those organisations that appear to play the branding game with ease and poise and confidence. Linklaters. McKinsey. Goldman Sachs. PricewaterhouseCoopers. To name but a few in professional services.

Meanwhile, many of their competitors have angst –ridden discussions about how to differentiate themselves in increasingly homogeneous markets. How much to invest in their brand communications. What to do next in the brand wars.

Is it that these brand role models have a riveting core brand idea, as the brand agencies would have us believe? Or is it that they simply play the game with more Self 2 and less Self 1? That they have more focus. That they relax into it and play more "in the flow". In fact, that they play "The inner game of branding".

Just imagine an organisation where everything lines up...

- Everyone in the firm is clear about where the firm is going and their role in it
- Every daily action is aligned to the firm's goals
- There's no blame or judgement in the culture
- People are praised, reinforced and encouraged in what they do
- The place is relaxed, there's time for humour, time for each other
- The real values of the organisation are a reflection of the values of its staff
- Everyone is able to articulate what's special about the firm...

Sounds like heaven. But maybe this is the secret of great branding. Not so much about differentiation. More about focus, alignment, relaxation, confidence. More about the inner game.

Playing the inner game of branding

If that's the case, what are the implications for professional services firms in building a strong brand?

Well I won't pretend that this represents a seismic shift in management thinking, but I do think it moves the emphasis of brand thinking. For me there are five areas to consider:

1 Goals

Reaching real clarity about what are the firm's long and short-term goals and how each individual's personal goals are aligned to achieving them.

2 Values

Developing an understanding of the personal values of the people who work in the organisation, the real values of the current culture (not just the espoused values) and how the culture needs to change so that it more directly aligns with the aspirations of the people who work there.

3 Leadership

Adopting an enlightened style of leadership that uses a coaching approach to achieving individual and corporate goals and optimising people's potential. Leadership that finds daily reasons to praise. Leadership that has the humility to support rather than impose.

4 Messaging

Defining a clear messaging hierarchy that single-mindedly states what it is about this organisation that is special and why clients and others should believe it.

5 Communication

Practising open, transparent, sharing, direct, challenging, regular, intensive, two-way internal communication that builds trust in the leadership and a real community amongst staff.

So, not so much a brand programme. More a management philosophy. One that can lead to remarkable performance, without the investments sometimes associated with brand programmes.

Clarity, focus, alignment, relaxation, support, confidence. It all sounds very Gallwey. Very "inner game".

Read the book – it could change your life, your brand.... and your tennis.

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