

Twitter brand

The inexorable rise of social media could spell a hidden opportunity for those organisations that grasp its implications for brand.

As a brand specialist, I'm often accused of looking at everything, rather obsessively, through a brand lens. My wife and I have had many (to me fascinating) debates about brand in relation to political parties, religious sects, voluntary organisations and more. The only puzzling thing is that we're still married.

So it's no surprise that, having attended a couple of recent PM Forum events on the rise and rise of social media, my brand antennae have been vibrating with thoughts about the potential impact on.... yes you've guessed it.... brand. And for good reason, in my humble view.

Here's a scary thought that could keep a few brand managers awake at night. What will happen when the majority of the messages about your brand are finding their way to market through LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook? Even more scary thought – maybe they already are! What price brand control and consistency in that nightmare scenario?

Nightmare or opportunity?

Is it a nightmare or is it one of the best opportunities for brand in decades?

As branding has developed and especially since the birth of the internet, we have been moving from a situation in days of yore, where you could create a kind of external brand facade, with its own set of brand values, behind which companies could hide, to a situation today where there really is no hiding place.

The availability of information is now such that brand customers everywhere have a clear view into the heart of the organisations that serve them. For those of us who believe in transparency, this is a good thing. The advent of social media simply takes transparency to an entirely new level.

A couple of things struck me very forcibly from the events I attended. The first was that social media are about what individuals have to say to each other. An obvious point, but given that the audiences at both events were there to find out how their corporations could best exploit social media, there seemed to be a serious disconnect between their aims and the fundamental purpose of these channels.

Healthy social media depend on the trust and authenticity inherent in uncontrolled, individual conversations. Is there really any place at all for corporate interventions?

The second and linked point is that social media are based, at least to some extent, on the principle of giving and sharing without explicitly expecting anything in return. Forgive my scepticism, but whenever did a corporate indulge in that kind of altruism?

The impact on brand?

Neither of these points answers the original question troubling my antennae – what impact will social media have on brand?

The truth is that we don't know. But what I do believe is that it could give us a real brand opportunity.

Imagine a situation where, to exaggerate slightly, all external messaging was dependent on social media. And imagine for a moment a brand manager who was completely relaxed

about letting go and allowing everyone in the firm to say what they wanted about it (assuming that it was sufficiently interesting to tweet about of course).

What would it take for that situation to arise? What would it take for you to have the confidence to let go of brand message control and leave it to the people in your firm?

I think there are two answers to this.

Values alignment

The first is that the values of the organisation should align perfectly with the personal values of the people who work there.

In how many organisations is that the case? How many organisations even know whether it's the case or not? How many organisations have the data to assess what are their real values and what are the values of their people?

Not many I fear.

A lot of organisations have a set of espoused values, but the real values, the real culture are something else. And very often the real values of the organisation are seriously misaligned with the values of its people. In other words, people are unable to bring themselves to work.

This is a serious issue and one that requires serious attention from leadership. It also requires the tools to enable measurement, without which values simply become a "soft issue" and end up in the too hard to handle pile.

A number of such values measurement tools exist. One such, about which I've written before and so will mention only briefly here, is the Barrett Values Centre "Cultural Transformation Tools" – CTT for short. Figure 1 shows a US law firm where personal values and current organisational values are misaligned and where it is crystal clear that the workforce are looking for something different for the future.

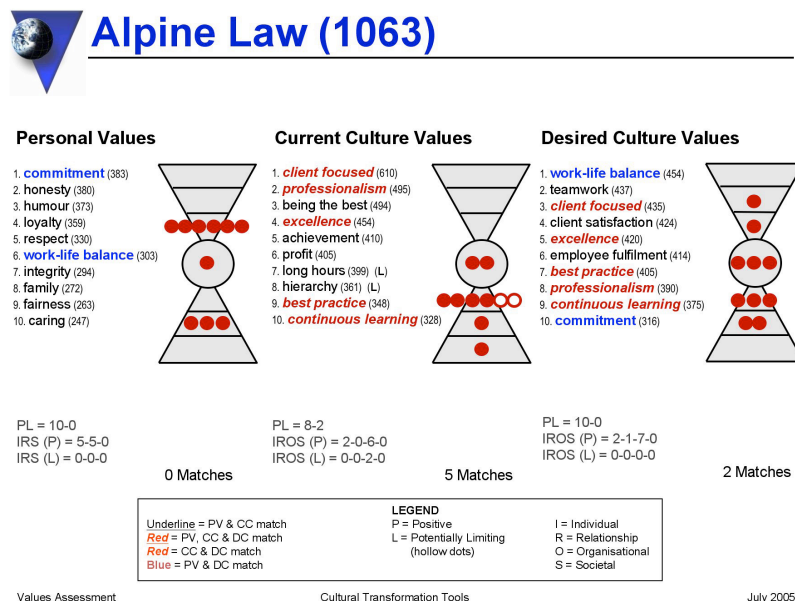


Figure 1
 To find out more, go to www.valuescentre.com or give me a call.

Higher-level values

The second is that, if an organisation is to earn the degree of trust and perceived authenticity required in a social media context, and if it is to be seen as selfless in its willingness to share content, it will need to operate with values that are significantly above those of the average corporate.

Barrett, in his book “Liberating the Corporate Soul” talks of four levels of human needs (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual) and seven levels of corporate consciousness, moving from self interest at the bottom end to interest in the common good at the top (see figure 2).

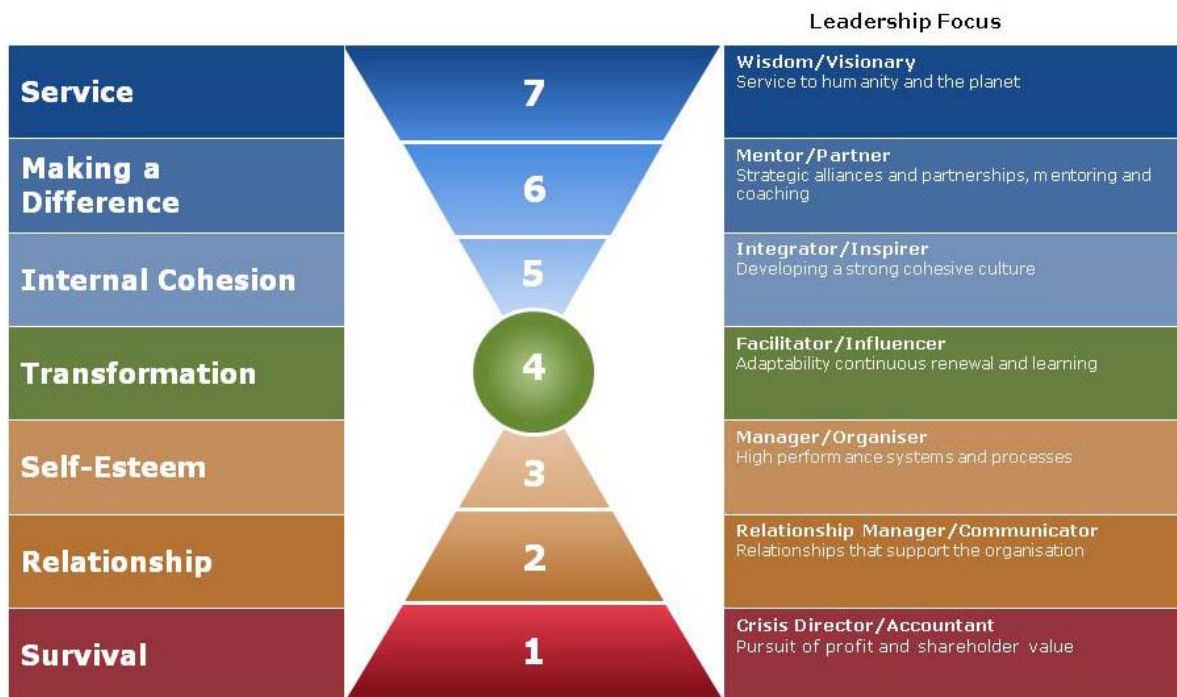


Figure 2

His thesis is that organisations evolve into the higher levels as they mature and develop, in the same way as humans move up Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Given all that has happened in the world financial crisis recently, his ideas seem especially prescient, even if there is so far little sign of a post crisis shift taking place.

From outside in to inside out

One of the most significant things about the change in behaviour caused by social media is that it moves the dial even further from “outside in” to “inside out” branding. In other words, seeing the brand as a product of the organisation’s culture and behaviour rather than as simply an output of its communications and identity.

The other exciting thing about this (especially for finance directors) is that it doesn’t have to cost as much. Clear strategy, rigorous brand thinking and outstanding internal engagement generally cost less than external marketing campaigns.

The cost, in my view, lies in the leadership courage and commitment required to face up to what the values measurement is telling them and do something lasting about it. Organisations that have done that have seen significant and enduring shifts in their culture and have reaped sizeable commercial benefits. Read the book!

Opportunity not nightmare

So for me, roll on Twitter. The more transparency, the more organisations will be encouraged to address the values issue. And that can only be good for all of us who work in business and for the future of business itself.

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