

Please mind the gap

Tim Collins looks at the real role of CSR in building a firm's brand equity. It is far from simply the charity run or reading classes at the local school – it's more fundamental.

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At its most simple, branding is what differentiates your firm from all the others and we all know it is much, much more than just your logo. The difficulty is that many law and accountancy firms offer almost identical services for similar prices in very similar ways. In addition, many are attempting to adopt the same positioning: **professional, trusted, friendly, expert**, etc.

True impression

Branding is all about the impression you have created in your market's mind and this becomes your brand equity. Every day we make sophisticated choices based on our brand knowledge – but that knowledge is not just based on well intentioned branding and marketing efforts. Our focus is on trying to get clients to **know** us, **like** us and most critically to **trust** us. Quite simple really – but sometimes there is a dissonance. Brands can either be unintentionally undermined or at the extreme the desired brand image is the polar opposite of the reality. Before Woolworths went bust they ran a highly acclaimed TV advertising campaign, but their stores hadn't changed and customers were disappointed.

Real equity

A number of years ago I ran a research project for one of the then big six accountants into how the top 100 Yorkshire businesses perceived them all. What was most interesting was how different, for each firm, yet consistent the



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perceptions were both for clients and non-clients. The psychographs we developed highlighted the firms' perceived attributes and quite starkly their relative strengths and weaknesses. These were all top, very successful firms, with excellent people and great clients yet the market had developed sharply defined perceptions of these firms – their brand equity.

Reality check

Brand equity is built on the messages we send out, the experiences of the market and **our actual behaviour**. Let's just consider how a firm treats its staff, clients

and suppliers. How do staff feel when a firm trumpets their growth figures and their partners' drawings yet have a wage freeze? Equally, think of the firms and individuals that you admire: what is it they do and how does that shape your perception of their firm?

Integrity

Stories will filter out into the market and they can either enhance or damage your branding and your business. You build your branding internally and that creates the integrity of the story that you can then tell. So next time you are reviewing your branding or planning a marketing campaign, stop. Step back and focus on the key values and ask yourself **is this consistent with the reality?**

Alignment

There must be an alignment between what you do – the experience of your staff, your clients, your competitors and your suppliers. If you look at the firms that are struggling or indeed recall those that have gone bust – weren't they all trying to position themselves with the pack? The challenge is for authenticity, to work through the issues we face and to develop a transparent positioning that has **integrity**.

Professional service firms need to have some joined up thinking so that there is consistent engagement internally and externally. We can develop real capital and value from running our businesses ethically and responsibly from inside to out.



Can CSR drive our branding?

I asked Helen Beachell, director of Yorkshire based charity Simon On The Streets, for some perspective: “Forward-thinking businesses will find a cause to align themselves with and will then integrate that cause into all levels of the organisation, engaging staff, customers and suppliers alike. Simon On The Streets works very closely with its supporters to ensure that a relationship is built with the people within the business.”

Ricky Alfred, managing consultant at csr4u, has a broader and perhaps even more challenging perspective: “CSR has moved beyond how companies work with and support charities, to how they do business overall, considering every aspect of their operations and seeking to remove or lessen the negative impacts and behaviours that there may be. Those that get it right are seeing it positively affect their reputation and commercial performance.”

An organisation’s **culture** must be at the centre of its CSR. This is the font and source for our values but also where we walk the tightrope between for example the legitimate pursuit of profit (see Carroll’s CSR Pyramid) and the corrosive driver of greed. As many now comment on leadership we need to step back and instead of focusing on what we have to do we need to explore how and why?

Real cost

When I worked for P&G many years ago I

suggested the idea (from a mate’s dad) to run a staff salary sacrifice to raise money for an early Children in Need. Staff would simply opt to round down their monthly salary to the nearest 10p, 50p, £1, £5, £10 or £100, running it for a few months would generate tens of thousands of pounds. However, my idea was rejected as it was not team building and didn’t fit into their strategy. I watched the show when smiling P&G staff excitedly explained about their various fun projects and presented a cheque to Terry Wogan for £50,000. Is it me? It could have been £100,000! Yet I know their CSR has moved on hugely since then. Maybe we’re relearning the lessons from the Victorian industrialists and philanthropists like Salt, Rowntree and Cadbury.

Balance of power

But how does this really sit within a firm that bullies its staff and suppliers? We see some corporate charity or fundraising events and may think “that’s a bit rich” so is anyone really fooled? Are some firms simply ‘giving’ so that they can fulfil a CSR tick box requirement for their commercial requirements? There is a difference between being parted with your money and genuinely giving. There is also an issue of power and our underlying motivation. Is it an effort to compensate for poor ethical behaviour or to try and impress others?

There is a great scene in the film *The Fisher King* where Jeff Bridges’ character is with a legless veteran begging at Grand

Central station. Someone walks by and drops some money missing the cup and it falls to the floor. JB’s character complains “he didn’t even look at you” to which the beggar explains “Well he’s paying, so he doesn’t have to look.” We need to look, engage and build internal relationships as well as with our CSR partners if it is going to have any authenticity.

A brand that adds values

Your clients, staff and suppliers are smarter than you think. I believe that real communication is not about what we want to say. Rather, and more importantly, it is about what people are willing, able and likely to pick up. Beer glasses were recently given to solicitors at a charity pub quiz run by a chambers with the slogan “Solicitors couldn’t give a XXXX for anyone else – ABC Chambers”. Now you can probably see what they were intending as well as how it could be interpreted! The same is true about your branding and CSR and the greater the difference between your claims and the reality the greater the possible damage.

What are your real values? Is everyone bought into them? Do your staff feel valued, appreciated and engaged? How do your suppliers see you, do you pay them within 30 days? Do you have a real and equal relationship with the charities and projects you support? The big gestures are often just seen as that but the unexpected small acts of kindness have a disproportionate impact. Do watch Tom Peters’ short video where he describes a fantastic example of the power of kindness. It costs nothing but is a priceless commodity to harness in any organisation.

Trust

We must also look at how our world is changing and how trust has become the new green every firm is chasing. Jim didn’t fix it, the banks lost our money, the press lost the plot, and our politicians lost their way. And those professionals we thought were there to protect us only seemed to look after themselves.

The firms that understand the power and true value of developing an authentic brand will be the ones we trust.



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