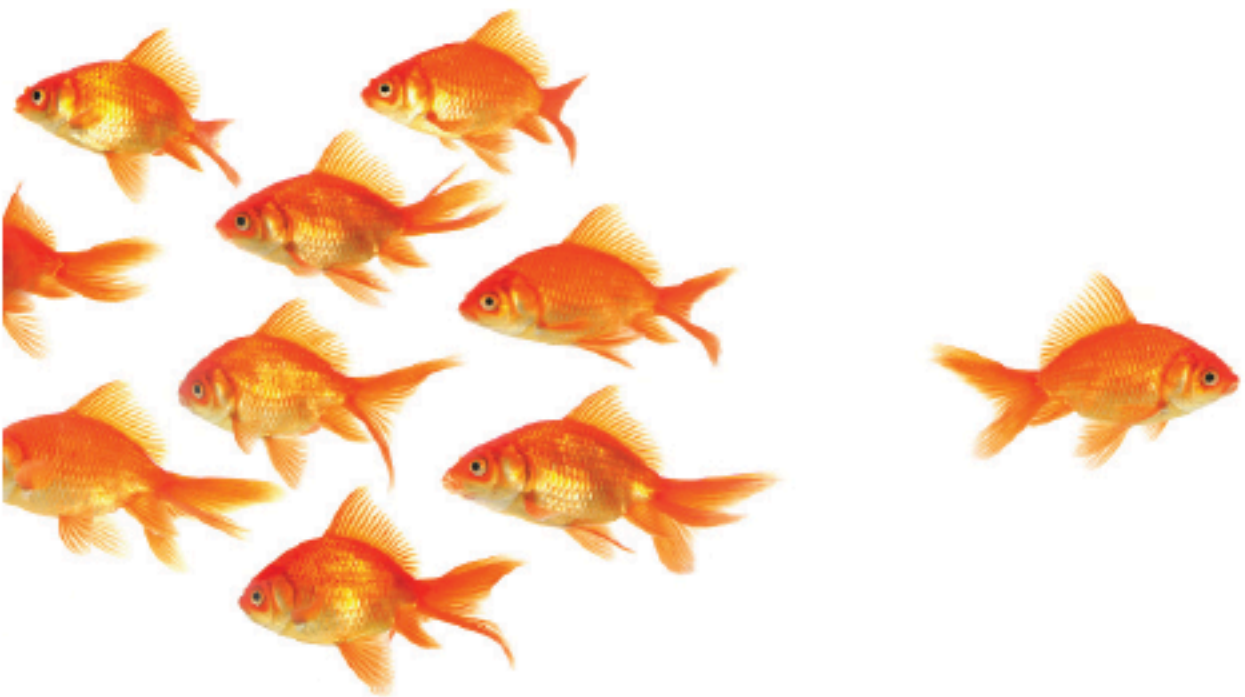


REVISED EDITION

# АЯТИОС

BUILD A BETTER NONPROFIT

# BRAND



ROBERT FERGUSON

# Branding on the Beach

*Muse*, July 2003

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## What's ahead:

- **Quick to embrace fads, we become susceptible to trends that don't suit our brands.**
- **Unless you grasp the essence of your organization's identity, you may be misled by what you read, or poorly served by the consultants you hire.**
- **Brand stewardship can't be delegated.**
- **Be your own guru: value critical thinking and self-reliance.**

**B**usiness books should have warning labels on the cover. Since they don't, allow me: for those of you heading to the beach or cottage with a business book "guaranteed" to revitalize how you think about your organization's future, read cautiously.

Can your carefully selected business book help you predict the future? Perhaps. But we're usually a little too quick to embrace the latest truths, buzz words, and new approaches that regularly burst on the scene. Readers are easily lured into the snares of management and marketing gurus without giving their arguments due consideration.

If it doesn't fit your organization's needs, even the best idea can wind up hurting rather than helping. Many new, supposedly revolutionary ideas are presented in deceptively simple terms. Complex formulae get boiled down to simple action points that only seem easy to implement. More insidious are those trends that become hard to resist as disciples apply cult-like pressure to conform (remember *Re-engineering? The "Paradigm Shift"?*).

The key to avoiding years of regret and corporate penance is critical thinking. Who are you? Without self-awareness, organizations become susceptible to trends that don't suit their brand. Reading is an important exercise in deciding how to advance an organization, but you must be your own guru and create your own path.

Of course, this requires getting a firm handle on what you stand for. To guide you in that search, one book to pack might be *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary*

*Companies* by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras (HarperBusiness, 1994). It may be the best business book I've read; it's certainly the best one that deals with brand-related issues.

I liked the book even before the authors insisted that organizations must recognize high ideas are not a luxury, but are fundamental to guiding and inspiring people. But their most important recommendation revolves around the notion of authenticity. Borrowing core values from elsewhere, while tempting, is a trap. Nor should you be asking "what beliefs would please stakeholders?" Organizations need to capture what is believed from within; the values of other companies are not germane to you.

**"Core ideology does not come from mimicking the values of other companies - even highly visionary companies; it does not come from following the dictates of outsiders; it does not come from reading management books; and it does not come from a sterile intellectual exercise of 'calculating' what values would be most pragmatic, most popular, or most profitable."**

– Collins and Porras

Building a brand is an arduous process - not for the faint of heart and not for do-it-yourselfers. But unless you can grasp the essence of your organization's identity, you may be misled by what you read, or poorly served by the consultants you hire.

This latter point is a core message of Marc Braunstein's and Edward Levine's book, *Deep Branding on the Internet: Applying Heat and Pressure Online to Ensure a Lasting Brand* (Prima Venture, 2000). Written before the hi-tech bubble burst, the book blamed the demise of many Internet companies on ill-conceived management practices, one of which was giving tactical agents too much responsibility for maintaining the organization's brand depth.

To Braunstein and Levine, being self-sufficient is the key element of success: branding is not what your ad agency does for you, it is "what you must do for your ad agency or other tactical supplier so they can be effective. Brand stewardship cannot be delegated."

Robert Sutton also argues for intellectual self-sufficiency and warns about outside advice. In *Weird Ideas that Work: 11 1/2 Practices for Promoting, Managing, and Sustaining Innovation* (The Free Press, 2001), he reveals that a key step in figuring things out for ourselves comes from ignoring polls. Research is great, but decision-making based on polling is a problem: when you ask people what they want they will be drawn to the familiar and repelled by the unfamiliar. What customers want is based on their perception of immediate need, not what they might need in the future. A similar perspective once came from David Ogilvy, the eminence grise of the advertising world, who warned against using research "as a drunk uses a lamp post. For support, not illumination."

**Organizations must recognize high ideas are not a luxury,  
but are fundamental to guiding and inspiring people.**

You can't look to outside sources of influence for help deciding what to do next; those decisions must come from within. To come to terms with your problems from the inside, you need to find different combinations of ideas and talent. Sutton advises hiring slow learners who don't follow the corporate code, who avoid, ignore, or reject the "heat of the herd". His ideal innovative person, or company, is more like a pack rat that collects "ideas, people, and things they don't seem to have any immediate use for, but they can't bring themselves to forget or discard". Pack-rat employers select staff on the basis of their additional skills that might help the firm in as-yet-unknown ways. Because creative work is so inherently unpredictable, we often misjudge what knowledge will be useful and what will be useless.

In May 2001, Harold Bloom told *Harvard Business Review* readers that "business people are fooling themselves if they believe that the self can change easily. If something can touch you, if it can reach you, it's because in some sense, it was already your own. Reading well, I think, is seizing upon something that is already your own property." Clearly, recognizing your "property" when you see it is the trick.

# Building Brands by Telling Stories

*Knowledge Marketing Watch, 22 May 2003*

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## What's ahead:

- **Can you generate creative ideas from the inside?**
- **Storytelling is not a marginal activity.**
- **Organizations can't have all their assets working if storytelling isn't at the centre of organizational strategy.**
- **Organizations need writers, not more project managers.**

In the past few years, advocates of corporate storytelling have been inching this very effective marketing tactic onto the management menu. Right now it's a special order; soon it may be on the soup-of-the-day rotation. It should be an everyday item. John Simmons' new book *The Invisible Grail: In Search of the True Language of Brands* (Texere, 2003) will ensure the concept progresses toward its rightful place.

Simmons suggests most organizations don't have all their assets working because they see words "as dummy text," not as a creative resource; they consistently deny time and space to words out of the belief they're plain and unexciting. If an organization doesn't want to be seen as being like everyone else, he wonders, why do they neglect the potential of language to creatively demonstrate its unique personality?

Storytelling and creative business writing are not marginal activities – although they're treated that way and they should be at the center of organizational strategy.

Organizations must bring their capability for expressing identity in verbal terms in-line with more traditional practices of expressing identity visually. After all, it is words that truly engage a person's imagination and helps them understand what the brand stands for. Theatre in ancient Greece, for example, was a civic event where plays fostered community. The retelling of familiar stories created central myths that defined what it meant to be an Athenian and gave this society a sense of shared purpose.

Ensuring values are truly understood on the inside of an organization is the essential precursor to ensuring consistent external communication.

Stories succeed in part because it is the most obvious way for people to frame their thinking. In their book *In Good Company: How Social Capital Makes Organizations Work* (HBS Press, 2001), authors Don Cohen and Laurence Prusak tell readers about 3M's preference for narrative strategic plans over bullet points. Why? Because a narrative approach that grabs people emotionally is not only inspiring, it is, simply, the best way to explain abstract concepts and galvanize support. In other words, stories are uniquely capable of carrying the day.

In the 19th century, at least one senior official of the British Post Office recognized that using engaging language would more effectively advance his departmental work. This man, Anthony Trollope (more familiar today as a novelist than as a bureaucrat), intentionally crafted reports, according to Simmons, that were "pleasant to read." This is a tradition carried on today by foreign service officers; George Kennan's famous "X" memo comes to mind. By relating timely stories about events abroad (Kennan's warning about communism led to the American doctrine of containment), the recipient nation learns what is going on around the world, assesses the mood, and duly adjusts its policies. Storytelling, rather than PowerPoint presentations, might be equally effective.

Simmons draws a distinction between early brands that succeeded by selling, and newer brands that succeed by seducing. The former get "in your face," while the latter lures you in. But even Starbucks - one of the best of the new brands - has not, according to Simmons, realized the potential of its story. True, its CEO Howard Schulz has told his own story through a bestselling book but Simmons is more interested in the stories that remain: the link Starbucks has with the people and countries that grow its product may potentially be more valuable. An adventurous narrative could transform this story into exciting human stories illustrating deep-seated truths about the brand. And the story approach is perfectly in synch with the Starbucks identity as a local community forum for telling stories.

**By asking consultants or tactical agents to do their thinking, organizations create a culture of dependency and an atmosphere that supports the status quo not innovative thinking.**

Fundamental change is necessary if companies and brands are to develop their own distinctive stories. First of all, there has to be a change of mindset. The return on telling stories is never immediately obvious. It requires a leap of faith, but Simmons assures organizations there are gains from improving writing abilities. Differentiation is only the most obvious. Less obvious, but perhaps more important, is the rise in capacity for thinking.

Second, who is going to tell the stories? Some brands may do this instinctively without appointing anyone specific as corporate 'storyteller.' Simmons tells us most organizations feel more comfortable hiring "a new conference organizer" than they

do a creative writer. Ask who will find and write the brand's stories and it's likely the question is answered with a blank look. Too bad, because what they need are creative writers, not project managers. Too often, when they need a writer, they buy one instead of developing the writing capacity from within. The goal should be to produce teams capable of generating creative ideas everyday from the inside.

Here lies the real problem. Instead of being self sufficient, organizations lean too heavily on outsiders. By asking consultants or tactical agents to do their thinking, organizations create a culture of dependency and an atmosphere that supports the status quo not innovative thinking.

To complement Simmon's own book, take his advice and carefully absorb Gordon MacKenzie's work on creative thinking, *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace* (Viking, 2000). I remember it as one of the most entertaining business books I've ever read (it's also, without a doubt, the most unique looking, which adds to the enjoyment). Simmons clearly agrees with MacKenzie's concern about organizations that pressure individuals to adopt their view of "normal" and, endorses MacKenzie's warning that "if you are hypnotized by an organization's culture, you become separated from your personal magic and cannot tap it to help achieve the goals of the organization."

If one of your goals this summer is to do some meaningful summertime reading, consider these two as a worthwhile match set.