Editorial: Creating corporate brands with a sense of history

One of the fundamental principles of Socratic philosophy, 'know thyself', provides a 2,000-year-old lesson which many post-modern brand owners would do well to relearn. For in the rush to be, or appear, 'contemporary' and 'relevant', many organisations seem all too prepared to jettison elements of their brand which are uniquely their own.

Corporate branding programmes constitute a root-and-branch exploitation and alignment of corporate assets. As such, they must take everything into account, starting with the organisation's commercial and strategic objectives, the marketing and communications strategy, the culture and personality, the 'way things are done around here', the visual identity, the product and service portfolio, the distribution channels, the customers, competition and other market factors. There may be parallel organisations from other sectors from which it can learn.

There is also a timeline which must run through the analysis: the past, present and future of the organisation and the market in which it operates (Figure 1). Yet the focus is all too often on a snapshot of the present with a consideration of potential futures — the organisation's history is either overlooked or thought to lack relevance in the brave new world.

When organisations are considering a corporate branding programme, they are in a state of flux. The reason

for this is usually either a shift in corporate strategy and structure; a merger or acquisition; the desire to build value with a view to, for example, disposal, flotation or defence against predation; or the creation of a new company. Clearly, these shifts cause huge ructions, and as a result an identity crisis often ensues, much as when human beings reach crucial points in their personal lives. For companies as for people, those with a clear and robust sense of who they are, where they've come from and where they're going are most likely to manage change comfortably and to their ultimate benefit.

Yet all too often organisations fall prey to the mistake stereotypically perpetrated by menopausal males. They spruce up their external appearance to look 'hip' (as they perceive it), conveniently forgetting the reality of who they are. They stretch the bounds of credibility and look for inappropriate opportunities which match their new-found contemporaneity. They are surprised, their confidence dented, when potential receivers of their message find that the carefully crafted image is inappropriate to the person, what he holds dear and how he behaves.

It has been common knowledge for those working in the arena for many years that such a superficial approach to corporate branding is harmful. It leaves the door wide open to justifiable criticism of the branding industry for

Figure 1: Timeline of branding programmes

irresponsibility and financial wastefulness. But more importantly it can be detrimental to client organisations, to their ability to create value, to their credibility in the marketplace, with the media and the City and to their long-term vitality.

Bearing this in mind, why the desperate willingness to jettison the rich history each organisation uniquely has at its disposal? I should say that I am not solely referring to the use of new brand names for reasons such as legislation or market entry, although the results of the name development can be perplexing. What interests me in this editorial is the apparent unwillingness to define and exploit an organisation's uniqueness and the role its history plays therein.

I believe the answer to this conun-

drum can be seen in society at large, in the drive to minimalist order and in the new-age mistrust of history. Taking minimalism first, as the world economy has become increasingly global and businesses ever more streamlined, we have adapted to the need to travel light through our working lives and seek to declutter our working and living spaces in order that we remain undistracted from the multiple tasks at hand. As people and organisations, we teeter on the abyss of panic-inducing disorder: the way we deal with this is by seeking order, sometimes at all costs. We declutter organisations as we declutter our personal lives. We see this in minimalist homes and hotels; we use it in 'neat' brand architectures and sanitised global brands; we see it in oversimplistic brand strategies which

take no account of troublesome historical realities.

While the degree of flux in our lives is of a new order, its nature is anything but. It was acknowledged by artists at the turn of the 20th century during the first great explosion in the growth of urban environments; later, the Bauhaus movement was perhaps the first to respond with a minimalist approach, one which pleased the intelligentsia of the time. But it was in the 1990s that the calm of minimalism extended itself into the cultural mainstream, perhaps as a response to the excesses of the 1980s. As Nicholas Foulkes put it recently in the *Financial Times*:

‘Certainly the polychromatic acquisitiveness of the go-go 1980s had reached a terminal cultural velocity; money, red braces, large mobile telephones and the mock ancestral country house school of decorating.

Western Society could easily have been accused of institutional vulgarity — so it went on a diet . . . suddenly, no one wanted to live in a house that looked like a pastiche of the 19th century, instead we wanted to prune, trim, streamline our lives.’¹

This is not an anti-minimalist diatribe, however: the issue is fitness for purpose. As Jean Pierre Martel, the acclaimed interior designer currently renovating the Ritz in Madrid, pointed out: ‘It is fine to have something bare, sober, practical and functional, but it is not fine if you are doing that to follow fashion. It has got to reflect what you are; not what fashion dictates’.² So corporate branding must reflect what an organisation is, and companies are rarely neat and tidy things. Like the people who make them what they are, they have unique histories, beliefs and ambitions. Rather than being a weak-

ness to be papered over, this sense of provenance and identity is a potential source of competitive advantage waiting to be leveraged.

I now turn to the growing mistrust of history and its role in today’s society. A sense of history has been seen until recently as one of the pillars of a young person’s education. But this is in the process of being challenged. Our real-time society encourages us to live in a continuous present, supplemented intermittently with promises of golden futures (*vide* financial services advertising). In ‘All Tomorrows Parties’, the latest novel by the high priest of cyberpunk, William Gibson, history — even more than geography — has been consigned to the scrapheap.³ The onset of the digital society has served to shine a harsh light on a reality we all knew all along: history is a construct; it is stored data, and stored data can be manipulated. In this context, we cling to what we think we know, and what we think we know is the here and now.

But the reality of most people’s lives is far from being minimalist and ahistorical. We are all surrounded by things which bear the patina of our ownership, imbuing otherwise unfamiliar objects with meaning. The historical context in which they sit supplies meaning; they are part of the narrative of our lives. Similarly, we all exist within a web of friends and family — living, breathing signifiers of our movement through this world; a sometimes sobering reminder of who we are and where we came from. These objects and human beings, and the experiences we gather, are the things which make up our unique identity. So it is with organisations. They are established in a certain time and place,

undergo shared experiences, develop belief systems, move office, evolve, merge, acquire, establish relationships with partners, suppliers, customers and consumers. This process, while similar in kind to that experienced by other organisations, will nevertheless give rise to a unique entity. This does not mean that an organisation will wish to retain all of its historical equity when reviewing its corporate brand, but it would do well to acknowledge it and build on its best elements.

We have already seen the advent of a change of emphasis in people's lifestyles and in popular culture. As Nicholas Foulkes put it: 'The shackles of minimalism are being thrown off ... individuals are learning to ... enjoy their possessions and revel in the clutter'.⁴ Hotels and restaurants are reflecting this counter-trend. As people, we are rediscovering our histories. Branding practitioners and

academics should take note in their professional endeavours. Some brands, such as Guinness, have never forgotten the richness provided by a brand's past, but if anything it will become even more important for brands to reflect their authenticity and richness if they wish to connect with customers. This reassuring sense of origin will be a key source of contact with stakeholders in the future, establishing binding loyalties and helping to create organisations that are built to last.

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References

- (1) Foulkes, N. (2001) 'So farewell to minimalism', *Financial Times*, 24th February.
- (2) *Ibid*
- (3) Gibson, W. (2000) 'All Tomorrows Parties', Penguin London.
- (4) Foulkes, ref. 1 above.