

Business Personality

Understanding the 'personality' of their organisation's 'body corporate' rather than just its individual employees is the key to achieving long-term market differentiation for service providers. Russell Thomson explains his theory that businesses have a 'personality' that can be shaped and communicated externally.

"In many cases, the organisation's personality traits diametrically oppose the corporate brand message"

IT WAS HIPPOCRATES WHO identified four personality types – Sanguine, Phlegmatic, Choleric or Melancholic - known as the '4 Humours', in one of the first attempts to ascribe changes in physical condition to changes in temperament or personality. Fast forward 2,500 years, and a host of personality and character profiling techniques are now used to profile employees and build cohesion within organisational teams.

This approach to team building through the fusion of individual personality types, has become an important component of the recruitment process for services-led, people-driven businesses. The HR profession has sought to systematise the process of recruitment and employee placement rather than rely entirely upon gut instinct or the veracity of the applicant's CV. Personality type indicators now play an important role in determining the best fit of applicant to job function within defined teams.

However, increasingly, it is the personality of the body corporate which has come under the spotlight. Services-led businesses, in the absence of differentiating attributes, are often caught in a downward spiral of price competition. Yet, it is argued, the personality of the organisation may alleviate price pressure to an extent by offering up a certain 'uniqueness' which cannot be easily replicated.

This begs the question: Is the profile of an organisation simply the sum of each individual employee's innate characteristics, or does the organisation itself have a distinct 'personality'? More to the point, can an organisation's personality be measured, shaped and deployed constructively in the marketplace?

It was this heady subject which I touched upon in the June edition of *PFM's FM Report 247 25th June 2009 (Shaping the corporate personality in the service sector)*. For the organisation in question, swathes of anecdotal evidence suggested that the viewing public welcomed an insight into its personality, in order to see beyond the Corporate 'blurb'. As consumers, we positively embraced a snapshot of the organisation's true character, because it offered us another perspective on its products and services.

Since then, the level of interest in organisational personality assessment has risen, suggesting a latent thirst for more information, particularly in regard to the role of business personality as a component of a long-term differentiation strategy.

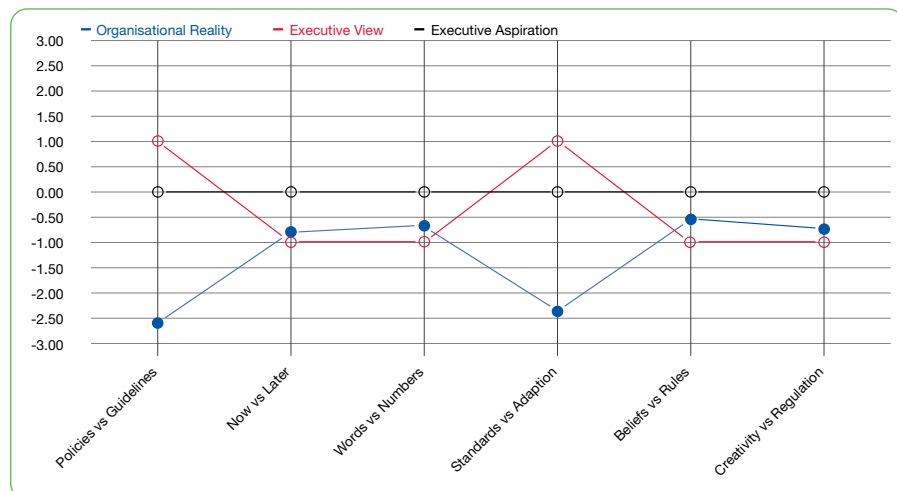
For the Business-to-Business services sector, and with particular reference to an overtly people-oriented sector such as FM and Support Services, being able to 'shape' the personality of an organisation offers a range of internal and external advantages. Amongst these are:

- Creating genuine sustainable differentiation
- Exposing the weaknesses of 'me too' competition
- Focusing HR and Marketing on a mission critical purpose
- Structuring a plan for skills enhancement and talent development
- Developing competence-based services
- Professionalising in the eyes of the marketplace
- Creating a culture of employee involvement
- Developing a 'market-orientation' culture.

However, in the absence of a structured approach to shaping organisational personality and leveraging such traits in the marketplace, many service-oriented businesses reach the point in their evolution where they struggle to articulate genuine sustainable differentiation. Over time, market messaging develops an overtly corporate veneer, 'me too' competitors snap at the heels, and faced with a host of service providers making similar claims, prospective purchasers default to price comparison as the only area of quantifiable differentiation.

Yet, with a little effort and some understanding of how to assess, shape and communicate externally the personality of the business, a service provider can create an environment in which well-substantiated attributes of the organisation are so unique as to be beyond replication. By placing business personality at the heart of the market strategy, the service provider has a far better chance of shaping the organisation to meet the expectations of specific markets and offering customers a genuine

AP2 – three views of the Control dichotomy



difference.

However, leveraging business personality has, until now, been a rare occurrence. This is due primarily to a lack of interaction between those responsible for engendering organisational culture, developing skills, defining competences and managing talent, and those responsible for marketing and selling those assets as components of a unique 'capability portfolio'.

There is also little doubt that, for those executives who accept that the personality of the organisation has a role to play in service differentiation, the lack of a credible structure within which to perform a business-wide assessment has held back any attempt to drive the approach forward. The temptation is therefore to rely upon the executive 'gut feel', delivered by way of a simple reference to 'Our People' on the company website.

For the others (there is a significant rump of managers who may still be relying upon Product, Price, Promotion and Place for marketing inspiration) a frustrating game of 'oneupmanship' beckons as each new service brought to market is quickly rendered impotent by the counter-messaging techniques of 'me too' competitors.

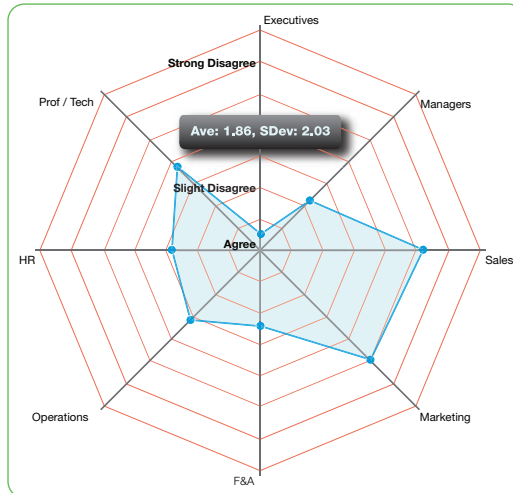
Structuring the approach

Yet, there is now a credible alternative. AP2 – the Balanced Business Personality monitor - offers a structured approach to assessing, shaping and communicating the personality of the business to the marketplace. The tool focuses on identifying the key personality traits of the organisation which, as inherent characteristics or temperament indicators of the body corporate, are unavoidably displayed when employees communicate with customers and the general marketplace. Today, for the vast majority of organisations, these characteristics are random and unshaped. In many cases, the organisation's personality traits diametrically oppose the corporate brand message, confusing the marketplace and tempting prospective customers to re-consider their purchasing criteria or delay decision-making.

However, with access to a defined analytical structure and committed to re-visiting the organisation's differentiation strategy, it becomes possible to align the brand message and the personality of the organisation with the strategic goals of the business. This approach can derive long-term benefits throughout the organisation as well as within the marketplace.

There are two parts to the AP2 process. Firstly, the key characteristics of the organisation which combine to create its personality, are surveyed, assessed and reported upon. The surveying process assesses the personality of the organisation from the perspective of four areas of indecision or 'dichotomy' common to all organisations. These are:

- **Control vs Initiative dichotomy:** The balancing of command & control orientation (see diagram left) with the freedom of employees to take the initiative and act in the best interests of the business.
- **Synergy vs Autonomy dichotomy:** The degree to which employees work together and share, as opposed to working in isolation.



AP2 – Analysis stratified by job function

- **Internal vs External dichotomy:** Assessing the natural tendency of employees to orient towards the marketplace or view success as a function of process and procedure.

- **Drive vs Culture dichotomy:** The degree to which the organisation is managed by top-down managerial drive as opposed to as a community or culture.

The analysis is most effectively performed online, providing participants with the opportunity to respond confidentially to a range of scenarios designed to expose levels of imbalance inherent within the organisation.

Secondly, the process of shaping traits commences, and planning for the long-term evolution of the organisation and its market messaging becomes the focus.

The shaping process applies aspects of classic Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) theory to interpret the results from the surveying process. It assesses how the various dichotomy imbalances uncovered during the survey have the potential to become embedded as business personality traits and impact upon how the business is perceived in the marketplace. Moreover, the analysis reports on the likely impact of dichotomy imbalances on how effectively the organisation's core entrepreneurial functions are performed. Importantly, it indicates how key role-holder groups within the organisation are perceived to be performing their core functions.

It is important to stress that there is no ideal outcome or perfectly balanced personality template towards which all organisations should strive. In fact, such a Utopia would defeat one of the core purposes of the analysis – to enable the business to differentiate and create 'defendable uniqueness' in the marketplace. However, for the purposes of comparison and action planning, the process focuses on the organisation's personality traits from three perspectives:

- **Organisational Reality** – how participating employees describe the organisation's personality.
- **Executive View** – how the Executive describes the organisation's personality.
- **Executive Aspiration** – how the Executive wishes the organisation to be perceived in the future.

"Traditional marketing techniques are failing to do justice to the talent of people and the efficiency of business processes"

To find out more about business personality and to access a sample AP2 analysis, visit www.connoptix.com/ap2 or contact the author.

These comparators enable tangible decisions to be made which will shape the organisation's personality over time. They also enable positive personality traits to be accentuated in the marketplace as opportunity-attracting differentiators.

AP2 can be applied at Corporate, Division, Business Unit and Major Account level. It quantifies the output of the analysis, making interpretation easier, and enables changes over time to be monitored and reported upon. It focuses on those intangible characteristics of an organisation which comprise its personality profile, and stratifies the output (see diagram on page 27), allowing results by job function to be analysed. And it enables specific traits to be focused upon, then action taken to shape and accentuated them in the marketplace as unique attributes.

A valuable by-product of an AP2 analysis is the role it plays in involving employees, managers and executives jointly in the process of defining how the organisation is portrayed in the marketplace. As well as providing employees with a confidential route through which opinions can be offered, it engenders a pan-organisational focus on the organisation's personality, highlighting imbalances, shaping characteristics and ultimately involving the entire organisation in beating the competition.

There is little doubt that, in the world of people-based service provision, service differentiation

presents unique challenges. Traditional product marketing techniques, promoting endless iterations of features and benefits, are increasingly failing to do justice to the talent of people and the efficiency of business processes which constitute the essence of service delivery. Similarly, service providers which resort to 'me too' marketing are drawn into a futile war of words with like-minded competitors, and succeed only in confusing the marketplace.

The answer to the question of differentiation lies within. By the very nature of their services, processes, talent, competences, heritage and culture, organisations are unique and infinitely variable. Human Resource professionals, as the de facto guardians of organisational development, recognise this, yet may not be best placed to drive forward a long-term differentiation strategy.

On the other hand, the communicative role of Marketing is clear and well-established. However, by operating at arms length from those disciplines which have experience of skills creation, competence development, talent management and culture, it is little wonder that the essence of an organisation's unique personality often fails to come through. HR and Marketing have the potential to unlock a new era in service differentiation, and business personality provides the key.

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