

## Shaping the corporate personality

Reality TV: you either love it or loathe it, but one thing is for sure, there is no escaping it. However, the fickle nature of the viewing public requires that the format re-invents itself continuously. Consider BBC2's current offering '*I'm Running Sainsbury's*'. It is yet another throw of the 'reality' dice, this time in full business attire with unlikely heroes, the pressure to perform, the powerplays and the pathos. Each episode stars the lowly shelf-stacker with the great idea, fighting against heritage, bureaucracy and the Sainsbury's hierarchy to see a dream come true. In the final shot, it's either tears or cheers as the great idea gets the thumbs up or is quietly dropped.

Not everyone's cup of tea, yet this particular series offers something more, something deeper, something quite profound. It exposes the workings of the Sainsbury's corporate machine and, importantly, reflects upon the 'employee:machine' interface. And all of this wrapped up in a series of prime time TV slots for which most business leaders would give their right arms!

### **More than just marketing**

Clever marketing, indeed. However, there is more to this than marketing and branding. Whether part of a conscious strategy or not, Sainsbury's has briefly shone a light upon the personality of its organisation. Can a business have a personality? Academics continue to debate whether physiology or psychology is more dominant, how management control can be squared with creativity and dynamism, and at what point maverick tendencies become counter-productive. However, the Sainsbury's example now suggests that these questions are no longer purely theoretical. Service providers in particular are increasingly seeking to expose elements of the organisation's personality for competitive edge. The question is: How can this be achieved?

It is no secret that the UK economy is now distinctly service oriented. In fact, 75% of UK output relies directly or indirectly upon the delivery of professional and technical services. This fact represents a profound marketing and messaging challenge with which marketers have grappled for years: how to differentiate a service when all around you are making similar claims? It does not take an expert eye to see the effect of 'me too' marketing on our key business-to-business service sectors. Much of the contrived and weakly substantiated corporate messaging fails to persuade and is easily lost in the fray. As with reality TV, audiences are continuously seeking something new and different.

### **Source of unique advantage**

With the Human Resource discipline still perceived to be mired in the minutiae of payroll, performance management, health & safety and training, independent researchers regularly highlight the frustrations of HR executives as they attempt to influence how the typical service organisation goes to market. Marketers, on the other

hand, appear empowered to apply myriad resource-consuming techniques in the search for the holy grail of sustainable and defensible uniqueness. Both disciplines deal in the same raw materials: people, skills, capabilities, competences, emotions, values and beliefs, yet they appear not to speak the same language.

Look again at *'I'm Running Sainsbury's'*. Beyond mere marketing and branding, Sainsbury's has provided us with a revealing perspective on an organisation which embraces people at all levels and listens to ideas from all-comers. Yet, it is clear to the viewer that the bar is set high and sentimentality never trumps commercial reality. What does this revealing insight say to the marketplace about Sainsbury's? From the coverage, each of us infers something about the business, the people and the organisation, making us more or less likely to shop there. Whether the answer is 'more' or 'less' is a moot point. The real point is that, through the use of 'warts and all' reality TV, Sainsbury's has sought to influence how the personality of the organisation is perceived, rather than leave it to chance. It has embraced business personality as a source of unique competitive advantage.

Of course, reality TV is not to everyone's taste, and few business-to-business service providers would risk using it to influence the marketplace. However, the Sainsbury's programmes signal an enhanced role for business personality in presenting the human face of service creation and delivery. People do business with people, corporatist market messaging is increasingly being exposed as either over-spun or lacking in candour, and an increasing number of businesses are no longer happy to leave the externalisation of organisational personality to chance. Yet, lock-stepping HR and Marketing in a bid to portray the organisation's personality to the marketplace remains a bridge too far for many Chief Executives. Thus, HR remains frustrated.

### **Common language**

If only HR and Marketing could find a common theme, a common language and a common approach to dove-tailing the personality of the organisation with the expectations of the marketplace. The characteristics which comprise business personality offer, by their very nature, endless opportunities to differentiate and are impossible to entirely replicate. By defining and communicating to the marketplace the personality of a business, positive and sustainable differentiation may be uniquely attributed and the perpetrators of sloppy 'me too' marketing are exposed through lack of substantiation.

It is this desire to take strategic service sector marketing to another level which has inspired the creation of AP2, the Balanced Business Personality Monitor. AP2 is an online tool which provides a 'jumping-off' point for those who recognise the emergence of business personality as a source of sustainable differentiation, yet don't know where to start. It can be applied across the entire business, or at Division, geographic or even client account level, providing an insight into those hard and soft personality traits which represent the operating ethos of the business. With HR and the traditional market-facing disciplines jointly influencing these core characteristics before they leak, uncontrolled, into the marketplace, the market's perception of the business is more able to be shaped rather than left to chance.

Whether by design or not, 'I'm running Sainsbury's' has shown that a new era in service differentiation is upon us, and that the personality of the business has a key role to play. The winners will be those who have the tools & techniques required to help HR and Marketing speak the same language.

To find out more about business personality and to access a sample AP2 analysis, visit <http://www.connoptix.com/ap2> or [contact](#) the author.

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