

A swift kick in the credo

BY LIZ TORLÉE

How a bland, say-nothing corporate mission statement can hurt you

As I waited in the lobby of McNeil Consumer Healthcare one day -many years ago, in another life-I read the credo of its parent organization, Johnson & Johnson. It outlines the company's responsibility to its customers, employees, the community and stockholders. Two things impressed me: First, were the simple and heartfelt words; second, was the order in which they came. It states, very strongly, that doctors, nurses, patients, mothers and fathers must come first. Second comes responsibility to employees. Next are the communities in which the company works. Last, are the stockholders.

I remember thinking what a refreshing change it was to see stockholders at the end of the list. Of course, J&J knew that if the needs of the others were met first, the company would do well and, in turn, investors would profit.

This credo guided J&J's smart decisions during the Tylenol-poisoning crisis in the 1980s-a deftly-handled communications challenge that is now the stuff of case studies.

Other organizations would do well to reflect on this because the public is starting to care more about the company behind the brand. Yet, most corporate mission statements, visions, mandates and the rest are, to quote a former boss of mine, "a ritual recitation of laudable adjectives." Pap, in other words. You read words like: strive, utmost, best, surpass, teamwork, integrity, trust, raising standards and constantly innovating. In one case, the phrase: "we plan to achieve our goals," is etched into stainless steel.

A real mission, on the other hand, is something lived and breathed from the inside out, touching everything a company does.

Consider two enormously successful companies: Wal-Mart and Walt Disney. Wal-Mart's mission is "to give ordinary folk the chance to buy the same thing as rich people." These few words are profound, especially when compared to noble euphemisms like "superior value" or "putting the customer first." Walt Disney's mission is "to make people happy."

Brands once focused on communicating their functional benefits. Then, we shifted to the emotional side, giving a brand's character depth, and inspiring more intimate consumer relationships. The time has come to move to higher ground. Consumers are saying there are too many brands, too much of everything and little substantial variation. People are finding new ways of navigating through their purchasing options. One is to simply shut out the noise and clutter-selective perception often confused with brand loyalty. If a certain brand is considered good, meets needs, is available and is priced right, looking for alternatives is a waste of time. Alternatives don't even get on the radar.

But sometimes, the consumer wants to make a more considered and educated decision. In this case, the company principles come into play.

Some companies are quietly boycotted: "My husband asked me not to buy their cookies because of how they treated his brother. He said they have a bad reputation with their suppliers." Others seem to have a reservoir of goodwill, due to something specific, like their work in the community: "Panago Pizza supported libraries and literacy in our neighbourhood so, hey, when you're ordering-in pizza, it makes sense to support them back." Sometimes, the reaction is hard for people to define. When Johnson & Johnson came up in a discussion recently, one person remarked: "I just have a good feeling about the whole company. They seem to be gentle people." That J&J credo is still at work.

Millions are spent on consumer research and it may be smart to divert some of this toward understanding an increasingly discriminating factor: the company itself. Too often, a company's ideals are buried, forgotten or taken for granted. Or they are rendered into euphemistic and clumsy language.

In the 1900s, Ford said it wanted to "democratize the automobile." In the 1950s, Boeing was going to "bring the world into the jet age." Both evoke images of people with vision, hot blood in their veins and something important to do-guided by lofty, exciting principles.

A company's mission statement should be defining and discriminating-not just provide a neat tag line for the annual report. While it is smart for the marketing department to take the lead, the exploration to crystallize it should embrace the hopes and dreams of all key stakeholders. And it should *never* be "tested" in a focus group. If it is genuine, simple and honest-and lived with passion and commitment-consumers will feel it, like it, and will pay attention to brands and services that reflect it.

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