

Divisions and dependencies

 By [Mike Freedman](#)

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Isn't it strange that, as soon as people join a company, they are put into a division? Wanting to be whole, needing to be more than the sum of our individual abilities, we are sliced into things called profit centres. We fuel our tribal fears at the expense of our generosity of spirit.

Unifying principle

Brands are hailed as the unifying principle of the organisation. Yet brand-owners busily create divisions for advertising, sponsorships, promotions, social media, corporate social investment and so much more, with separate budgets, objectives, agendas and measurements.

They lose sight of the consumer, who reacts to a whole brand and its myriad of touch-points across space and time. The low awareness, lack of affinity, increasing mistrust and shrinking territory that many brands suffer in the marketplace echo confusion within.

Divisions threaten the whole they are there to support. Because, by their very nature, divisions divide.

Canaries in the mine

When Freedthinkers is called in as brand doctors, the usual diagnosis is self-inflicted wounds. When culture turns in upon itself, brand, company and bottom line suffer. Here are three early indicators of deep trouble:

- The bully boss seeks to divide and oppress, operating under twin cloaks of secrecy and spies. Loud and profane, the bully boss is an abusive parent, hiding his own insecurities and inadequacies by distilling fear and rewarding blind obedience.

We were thrown out of a presentation after telling Exco what individually they had told us. The boss slammed the table with his fist so hard that the impression of his knuckles outlasted his tenure and roared "Who the [several expletives deleted] said that about me?" In the numbing silence, we were shown the door, without a rooibos to sustain us.

- Organisations need dreamers and deliverers - the visionaries and the pragmatists. Yet this yin and yang of enduring growth is easily ripped apart by mutual suspicion and mistrust. The dreamers in their torn jeans and the deliverers in their Hugo Boss suits are naturally wary of each other. We have seen this turn into sabotage where new ideas are leaked to the opposition, and innovations made to fail, to discredit their authors.

- Acquisitions and mergers stumble or collapse because, while accountants have combined the assets with Bugatti signs in their eyes, no-one stops the us-and-them virus eating the brand values, devouring the opportunity to develop a whole greater than its parts.

Divisions we witness range include multiple personalities, greybeards vs young Turks, Afrikaans vs English, black vs white - even this side of the river and the other side, the second floor and the third floor. Too often, we validate "us" by denigrating "them". We retreat into illusory and opportunistic tribes.

You know you're not talking to consumers when...

1. ...asked about your brand essence, you produce a fat PowerPoint presentation
2. ...you sell budget snacks to hawkers from offices filled with marble and imported palms
3. ...your corporate social investment (CSI) department and your marketing department live on different floors and different planets
4. ...the ad community talk more about your ad than your users do
5. ...you develop communication for your boss' wife's book club
6. ...you talk about divisions, more than networks

Getting it together

Divisions exist - fact of life. So what's to be done? Here are three remedies - take your pick, or mix your own cocktail:

1. Be customer-centric

Choose the customers you want to reach, understand what they need and want, decide what you will offer them, and then go out and do it better than anyone else.

And know to be truly customer-centric; you must anticipate needs - look under the surface, see people's realities, dreams and coping mechanisms. Focus on those you wish to reach, then realign your organisation.

Customer-centricity is the mantra of the moment, but when you take it back from the away-day and turn your organisation inside-out, you get furious resistance, insidious rebellion and, if you stick the course, a fair chance of a result. There are no guarantees of success, while failure brings out the long knives.

Doing the research is the foothills. Analysing is Kilimanjaro. Changing the way everyone works is Everest.

2. Have a brand boss

Scott Bedbury has been the brand director for two modern legends - Nike and Starbucks. He created a brand mantra for each and then rigorously ensured all communications flowed from it. Nike relies heavily on advertising, Starbucks did well with none. A brand boss is channel-neutral when cascading brand essence into the lives of consumers.

A successful brand boss must be in the innermost circle of decision-making - knowing when to be diplomatic, when to shake the stick. And, most of all, will know when short-term marketing will harm long-term branding.

3. Develop your brand commandments

What are your brand's 'thou shalt nots...'? Do you have a clearly defined brand essence? A brand mantra that guides corporate strategy? A set of values that enables and empowers everyone in your organisation to make everyday decisions? Are these values merely for show, decorating your reception area, or are they lived and breathed by everyone, every day?

Encourage accidental adversaries

By creating divisions, we encourage accidental adversaries - people who could work well together begin to compete for funds and power, then mistrust each-other's motives and ideas. World-firsts are squashed at birth; powerful voices drowned, principled operatives investigated and honest dissent eliminated - all because leadership believe internal competition is healthier than collaboration.

If instead we recognise and welcome mutual dependencies, we discover that diversity breeds unity of purpose. We all want to belong to something; we all intuitively know that together we accomplish far more than we can do apart.

The brand is the ultimate unifying principle of organisations. Know what your brand stands for, celebrate the many parts of it, defend its essence and boundaries - and you will gain the most valuable real estate of all - consumer mindscape.

United we brand, divided we fail.

ABOUT MIKE FREEDMAN

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