Think again, Unilever

Unilever has recently gotten into a rather bad habit. At the end of every commercial from Dove, Bertolli and Lipton, as well as all of it's other hundreds of brands, sits the Unilever logo. Brand authenticity is replaced by a distinctly corporate feel. Suddenly it's all become a bit cold, distant and meaningless.

It's a trend that has been on the rise in recent years, showing the consumer that there's a 'trustworthy and reliable creator' behind all of these brands that we find on the shelves or whose services we use.

This endorsement strategy isn't entirely flawed. For example, when Volkswagen acquired SEAT, a Spanish brand with weak connotations in terms of quality and reliability, it added *Part of Volkswagen Group* to the end of all brand communication. And in this case, it worked. Consumers felt reassured that trusty German engineers would swiftly inject some much needed quality and order into characterful but chaotic SEAT.
Volkswagen repeated this tried and tested model a few years later with the acquisition of Skoda. And thus a trend was born.

But these were cases of very weak brands that could benefit from the reassuring presence and perceived quality that the parent company could provide.
In the world of fast moving consumer goods and service providers we are now seeing the same strategy implemented to supposedly solve a very different business need. Following an overdose of mergers and acquisitions (Unilever, P&G being the tip of the iceberg) companies were suddenly comprised of a hotchpotch of brands. There was suddenly an overriding urge to bring order to the chaos. For themselves, mainly.

In the eyes of these parent companies, where corporate thinking overshadows brand strategy, the company name stand for stronger ideals. And they assume consumers feel the same way.

Beanbag sessions

A number of so-called experts, through warm and welcoming 'beanbag' sessions, have the Boards of Directors convinced that they are good for the world, their employees and that they improve the lives of consumers. I have also had to sit through a number of these sessions. I have witnessed members of the board undergoing hours of group therapy in order to ascertain whether they are more like a dolphin or a horse. Really, I'm not making this up. Or, in another ivory tower, which of the eight preconceived archetypes and colours best represents their company. Thanks to these 'tools' the companies' values seem suddenly clear: "Our company stands for reliability, involvement, innovation, customer satisfaction, quality and it's relevant. Quick, let's get to it!"

And you know the 'values' that I'm talking about. The ones that hang on the bulletin boards and adorn urinal walls. Framed, of course. Sometimes they even make their way onto company websites. At the very least, it's an embarrassing display of introspection. But mostly they are worthless words; generic hygiene factors that neither stimulate the mind nor encourage motivation or ambition. They certainly don't generate any real vision. Employees become immune through repeated exposure and they offer nothing tangible to consumers.

Take Dutch health insurance conglomerate Achmea. After years of mergers and acquisitions they needed to make their collection of 20 or so brands more efficient and profitable in order to float on the stock exchange.

Directors of the company's brands had to spend days 'in training' in order to become Achmea managers as opposed to directors of its individual brands. To accelerate this process, managers were moved between brands. It was deemed good for team spirit. Shortly after we were inundated with ads informing us that Achmea would 'take care' of us. So does that mean that my particular health insurance brand didn't? And then came the delightfully catchy brand names that all incorporated the Achmea moniker.

All in all a useless and above all confusing exercise. Of course, consumers would have endorsed the necessary research, indicating that it felt good knowing that their chosen brand was a part of a bigger whole. But it was doubtful that they realised this would result in their well-known and trusted brand being engulfed by a soulless corporation.

In recent years, consumers have learnt the hard way that becoming part of a bigger whole, especially when it comes to banks, insurance companies, phone companies, and other utilities, comes at a cost to customer service, reliability and availability. And no consumer has ever said yes to any of that.

Monotony

It is now evident, especially with international 'fast movers' that corporate values have taken over the boardroom. I hear terms such as 'connecting' and 'corporate reliability' that stem from discussions about 'corporate responsibility'. The latter is, of course, to be commended and encouraged. It's great that Unilever has switched to sustainable palm oil. As is its commitment over the past few years to reduce the salt and sugar content in many of its products. Unilever is paving the way in this instance.

And quite rightly they draw attention to this through their corporate website, the financial press, through politics and in the labour market and it is included in the new years message to staff.

But this communication should remain internal and shareholder-based. Stop adding the Unilever logo to the end of every individual brand commercial. Please. It does them no favours to strip them of their authenticity and present them as a piece of a corporate marketing pie. Corporate is a cold, distant and bland place to find yourself.

However, it's undeniably popular as a destination. The Procter & Gamble logo, unknown to the majority of consumers, has also made its way onto the end-shot of every commercial, unceremoniously plonked there like a corporate after thought.

What amazes me is the ease with which marketers, two levels lower than those corporate guys, march under this corporate umbrella, how easily they let the corporate sauce spread out over their precious brands. Did they not just spend decades with their brand and advertising agencies developing their brands unique personalities and giving them a distinctive place in consumer minds?

One with its over-the-top humour (Lynx), another with loving maternal overtures (Blue Band), and another with its wonderful representation of elderly people who are still (sexually) active in the olive groves of Tuscany (Bertolli). Create authenticity, build bonds with the consumer and share their experiences. Show individual quirks and character.

Yet now it seems that these 'personalities' weren't genuine after all! These brands are just another part of big corporate entities, displaying their boring corporate logos right at the point when the individual brand name should be capitalising on the previous 30 seconds worth of valuable communication.

Spread sheet marketer

This brings me to the second source of amazement: have the (hundreds of) millions spent by these brands yielded no results? Are their brands still so weak, or have they become weaker again, that they require the same endorsement that SEAT and Skoda required?

I haven't done the scientific research, but I can see and have experienced how these big marketing companies are forfeiting entrepreneurship and creativity in favour of size.

Is it the market creating pressure to squeeze yet more value out of fewer brands? Is there pressure to find synergy between brands where no synergy can exist? Are the current generations of marketers indeed just spread sheet marketers who look inwards to the relative comfort of the head office rather than absorbing external inspiration or following the uncertainty of their own brand's plan?

Is there such a desire for 'corporate values' because there's a belief that Lynx or Bertolli can't possibly have their own values? If they think that, then they must also accept that they themselves consider their products as nothing more than commodities. Even Ben & Jerry's can die if it's coated in the chocolate sauce of Unilever.

Yet I see amongst consumers, especially in the Western world, a shift in completely the opposite direction. People don't want 'big, bigger, biggest'. In the face of uncertainty in this ever more complex world people are actually seeking smaller, more real and more human dimensions.

Companies have become so large that thinking in a macro sense has engulfed the marketing discipline. All the while, people are looking for a scale that they can understand. *Marketing needs to switch from macro to multi-micro.* And at the end of the last century, it was well on its way before falling off the wagon, fooled by the fallacy of these holding company endorsements.

Sure, it's all good for moral over at HQ but it overshadows and demeans the power of the individual 'offspring' brands.

Yet there is light at the end of the tunnel as this all presents a golden opportunity for (family) businesses that have always remained themselves and that, despite having a global presence, have managed their scale. It also presents opportunities for cooperatives or new 'local' brands, from Ella's Kitchen to Dorset Cereals. Bonne Maman comes to mind as a brand that remains its premium-priced self in over a hundred countries. Happily, its family holding company (French-based Andros) very consciously remains delightfully and wonderfully out of sight.

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