Chapter 1 Getting over the stigma (B2B v B2C)

From Creative B2B Branding (No, Really)

Building a Creative Brand in a Business World

Scot McKee

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1 Getting over the stigma (B2B v B2C)

- The historical importance of consumer brands
- The shifting importance of 'brand' in B2B
- The need for change in B2B creative communications

Selling snow to the Eskimos

In a world where marketing professionals of every hue and colour are expected to sell, amongst other things, snow to the Eskimos, we find ourselves… challenged. It is truly a daily struggle to summon the creative potential within ourselves and build brands. For a start, there isn't much snow left to sell to the Eskimos. Our planet is creaking under the weight of our consumerism and those of us with children begin to wonder whether the disease is terminal or curable.

But even if the snow was plentiful and powdery and lightly dusted on the treetops of the world's thriving and pine-fresh scented forests, we would still struggle to sell it to the Eskimos, because they've rebranded. They're not 'Eskimos' any more. According to the Alaska Native Language Center (http://www.uaf.edu/anlc/), 'Eskimo' is commonly used to refer to the Inuit and Yupik people of the world. Okay, so Eskimo doesn't just mean 'Inuit' anymore. No. I thought the Eskimos had rebranded to Inuit because that was their original native Indian name. No. Regrettably and unfortunately, I was misinformed. Having deconstructed everything I had been taught as a child in an attempt to be politically correct and remember to say 'Inuit' when I meant 'Eskimo', I'd completely overlooked the possibility of 'Yupik'. Bugger.

The PR department has actually decided that Eskimo refers to both Inuit and Yupik. I don't even know what a Yupik is. I'm happy to be educated and more than willing to listen, but I'm sorry, I've never

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heard of them. And I would certainly never put them in the 'Eskimo' camp. Yupik? Really? Honestly, truly, part of the Eskimo family? Damn.

And therein lies the problem. The more we scrape around in the Alaskan tundra – if such a place exists, because now I'm more than a little confused about where I am, who I'm talking to and indeed whether they might be North American Indian. I thought Indians scalped the white man and gave Custer run for his money. I never knew they were in Alaska, and had rebranded from Eskimo to Inuit. And Yupik. I give up. Brands are confusing. The information contained within them can so easily become confused. The example given of Eskimos simply becoming known as Inuits is actually far from simple. Wrapped up in the seemingly simple change of name is an encyclopaedia of politics that includes whether (or not) one term is more derogatory to the race than another, whether nuances of language vary from the natives of Canada versus Alaska versus Greenland versus Siberia versus the rest of the world. The perceptions of the word vary and every layer of information presents the opportunity to further confuse audience perceptions of the true meaning behind the message.

As consumers, we are happy to deal with the information presented to us and process it in the best way that we can. We much prefer, however, for the information to be presented in more manageable bite-sized pieces. Simplicity is paramount in the mind of the consumer. Don't get me wrong now, complexity can be good. A PhD, I'm almost certain, requires complexity. Global warming and the consequential effects are complex. Brands, by contrast, are not. Complex brand architecture? No. I don't think so. If you don't mind, I'd really prefer to keep my brands simple. No offence (to the Eskimos, Inuits or the Yupiks).

So how come in business the respective 'tribes' of corporate culture persist in complicating their brand communications to the point where no one really understands them? They're almost impossible to comprehend from the inside so God only knows what the perceptions of the brand are from the outside. And whilst we all strive to understand the brands we work hard to develop, our opinions are inconsequential compared to the ones that really matter – those of our audience.

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Our audience has been happy to form opinions of the brands that have been presented to them for many generations and those brands have, typically, been consumer brands. Our interest, in this book, is the creative communication of business to business brands – one business communicating a business message to another business. But the context for those communications is shaped by the history of the consumer brands that we are all so familiar with and if we are to improve our business communications, we first have to have a base understanding of what consumers expect – not necessarily because they're right, but because that's what they're familiar with.

The birth of business brands

At the 'birth' of advertising, a business would invest directly and exclusively in the end-user audience. Unsurprisingly, this is where the directly measurable increase in sales volume could be measured and an advertised brand of product would increase in popularity, which in turn would drive wider distribution and further sales, creating the enviable hero products (or brands) that we all dream of. Or is it just me who dreams of hero products? Anyway, the focus was the product and the product was focused on the consumer. The business itself remained in the background to the point of invisibility. For the most part, that model hasn't changed much in the last hundred years or so. As consumers, we're all still happy to buy the product brands we love (for often obscure and irrational reasons) and we probably don't care too much that they, for example, might be manufactured by a small business operating from the Guangdong province in the far corner of China. The business ethics of employing young children, paying them almost nothing and categorically failing to provide them with an adequate career path or attractive pension scheme with ancillary benefits holds little if any interest at the point of sale. The product looks good, it comes complete with the 'badge' we attach value to and it is affordable. So we buy it.

We shut out all other considerations and focus on what interests us the most – our own self-gratification. As consumers we like that gratification to come fast and easy. Simple choices, easily and quickly made. Fortunately then, a hundred years or so ago the choices were few and far between and therefore were easily made. If you stop for a second and consider how many brand names you can

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think of that are one hundred years old or older, three things will probably happen. The first is that most of the brands you think of won't actually be a hundred years old. That's a long time in brand culture. Most brands don't go the distance. They lose popularity, they are acquired by larger competitive or predatory brands, they are lost to the obscurity of a competitive marketplace or they just die. Alternatively, you may struggle to think of any hundred-year-old brands at all. Attention spans are short in the world of brand communication. By the time we reach our mid-forties, we can barely recall what we went upstairs for – so how can we possibly hope to recall century-old brands with any real alacrity? Finally, when you do manage to think of your stalwart centurion, it'll be a consumer brand that you remember and not a business brand. Ironically, many more businesses have survived the hundred years than consumer brands of merit – you just don't know them because businesses didn't care about branding a hundred years ago. Or even yesterday.

The brands that spring, less than readily, to the forefront of your mind will therefore most likely be the big consumer brands. Coca Cola is a popular one. Established in 1886, the Coca Cola Company started life in a drugstore as a pharmacy syrup (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coca-Cola). According to popular Cokelore, when entertainment-starved pioneers of the Wild West started swigging Coke by the bottle, the manufacture of the product accelerated somewhat. As did the pioneers' heart rates when the five ounces of coca leaves per gallon of syrup kicked in and they found themselves off their faces on a drug-induced cocaine high. Whatever the reality, cocaine was ultimately removed from the secret recipe for Coke, but not before the brand was well and truly established. Add to that a hundred years of marketing, advertising, manufacturing and distribution (and the odd segue way into the bizarre realms of 'Cherry' Coke…) and a global, ubiquitous brand is the result. At the height of Cokelore, it has been suggested that it was easier to find a bottle of Coke in some of the remoter parts of Africa than it was to find a glass of clean drinking water.

So certain consumer brands have managed to survive and indeed prosper over the last century, doubtless through a combination of market dynamics, good luck and a lot of hard work. And while the consumer brands busied themselves for a century or so relentlessly telling us how good they were and why we should (continue to) buy

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their specific product or service, what exactly did the business to business brands do? Actually, very little. Business brands, in contrast to their more populist consumer counterparts, managed to inscribe 'Established 1901' at the top of their very austere and official looking letterhead and… well, there is no and. That was it. Either no one had the foresight to consider how building a perception of their business brand in the mind of their business audience may improve their business opportunities, or they didn't care. Business was business. Advertising, marketing and other questionable thespian tendencies were for pansies.

The reality is that the business and consumer worlds were, and still are, very different. Broadly speaking, a successful consumer product relies on economies of scale, wide distribution, universal popularity and the ability to distinguish itself and compete against a host of 'me too' alternatives. The businesses of a hundred years ago were very different. They were smaller for a start. Globalization was still to be invented in America as a concept, before being misspelt thereafter. Distribution was hard and for the most part unnecessary. Sufficient business could be found within local or regional territories and it could be secured, for the most part, with a few phone calls and a handshake. Businesses were in many respects specialists. They were widget focused. The business owner was enjoying the fruits of the Industrial Revolution and the advances in manufacturing techniques to produce the widget that he (because it was predominantly 'he' who ran the business) believed he could sell. And sell it he did. The focus of his energies was the product – its size, shape, colour, price, material, functionality – almost anything in fact other than the one thing that might have secured his future and longevity for the next hundred years – its brand. Owners of businesses were rarely marketers, they were operators.

The alternative to those product companies were service companies. Here we fare rather better in the longevity stakes, although not much better in the memorable brand department. Service companies included the professions that formed the very foundations of business and included the likes of law firms and accountancy practices. Their credibility and ability to attract new trade relied, certainly in part, on a demonstrable track record over a sustained period of time – hence the inclusion of 'Established' on their letterhead or above the office door or engraved onto the brass plaque at the entrance

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to the premises. A 'successful' track record was less important than the staying power itself. Being there and having been there for a reasonable period was sufficient to demonstrate a degree of competency and capability. So it is here that we see the emergence of 'reputation' as an asset for the professional businesses of the day – Father & Son Limited, …a family business, or LLP – Limited Liability Partnerships – popular with solicitors and accountants because they allowed and actively promoted succession management. The reputation of the company was passed down from one generation to the successive generation without hindrance or interruption to the ongoing business practice.

The result is a collective 'fleece' of established and durable professional services companies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers. The company that was eventually to become PwC was established almost 160 years ago, but not as the brand we know today, so it's disqualified. PwC started life as two separate companies – in 1849, Samuel Lowell Price set up his accountancy practice in London followed in 1854 by William Cooper later to become Cooper Brothers. It's not until 1998, after several subsequent reincarnations that we achieve PricewaterhouseCoopers in all its unacceptably incorrect grammatical glory. Like so many of the other longstanding commercial entities, the business may have been continuous, but the original brand hasn't. Other types of established business institutions also fail to qualify. The BBC was only founded in 1922, making its inaugural broadcast in the same year, with partners that included the ill-fated brand Marconi (which was eventually bought by the Swedish brand, Ericsson in 2005) and General Electric (GE). The utility companies have been privatized or nationalized or brutalized. Either way, the brands have changed.

The Royal Mail, established in 1660 might just qualify. But is it a brand in its own right or does the Royal warrant disqualify it on the grounds of piggy backing on royal ancestry? It's questionable – not least because even the Royal Mail isn't without its own debatable brand heritage. Although founded in 1660, it owned a separate brand, the Post Office Limited, which is the counter-serving public face of the Royal Mail. The Post Office was a state-owned brand in 1969 and ultimately re-branded to Consignia plc in November 2001. Now, if you've ever looked for a global brand that utterly failed to capture the public imagination, or even the imagination of its own

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staff, Consignia is it. The service didn't change, the people didn't change, a stamp was still a stamp. Pretty much the only thing that changed was the brand identity which was immediately and almost universally pilloried by anyone and everyone. Oops. Consignia and the millions spent on its brand, marketing and communications were quickly erased when Royal Mail Holdings plc reasserted its brand authority using the Royal warrant as its enduring rock. Phew.

Even the more memorable big business brands of today would fall at the first hurdle. Our post-industrial society has created a plethora of business brands in the technology category, but none of them have been in existence much more than fifty years. That same post-industrial society has flourished at the expense of older more established business brands that might have claimed a shot at the title. IBM, for example, can claim lineage back as far as 1896. But as Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Aspray noted in *Computer, a History of the Information Machine* – in 1896, IBM was actually, 'The Tabulating Machine Company' and not 'IBM' at all. In 1911 it was incorporated as the Computing Tabulating Recording Corporation. It wasn't until 1917 that a South American subsidiary was named International Business Machines (IBM) and later still in 1924 when the whole company changed its name to IBM.

It's hard then to spontaneously recall a business brand that has survived the last hundred years unscathed. If you were asked to list your top ten, it's probably reasonable to say you would be struggling after, oooh, one? Or less?

This perhaps offers us some insight into the business to business brands of today. If we consider what's changed, what evolutionary leaps forward we've made in the last hundred years or more, the answer is… almost none. Very little has seemingly changed. We don't build business brands to last a hundred years. Arguably, we have never built brands of any description to last. We build brands to make a fast buck on the back of the volume of products or services sold. On a very good day, we build brands to sell them on or have them acquired for profit. Sometimes we build brands to have them deliberately destroyed. Business brands, far more than consumer brands, change hands on a regular basis. But where a consumer product brand might be acquired to form part of a portfolio of complementary product brands, business brands are acquired to eliminate competition. Much like The Borg, the fictional Cyborg race

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which seeks perfection through domination in Star Trek, acquisitive companies absorb and assimilate competitive brands. The successful independent brand is stripped naked, re-clothed in the away team's colours and stamped on the forehead with the badge of the victorious acquisitor. Resistance, in the words of The Borg, 'is futile'. Everyone pretends it's all for the good of mankind, but we all know mankind is well beyond salvation.

What we don't seem to do terribly well in the business to business space is build brands to last. The century-old business brand is as utopian and mythical an ideal as the unicorn. We still flog products, we still (if we're completely devoid of imagination) have 'established' on our letterhead and we still drink Coke. But we haven't moved forward much. We might use computers a bit – they're new – and we'll tell each other that we've got a 'vision' or a 'mission' or a 'value' or two. What we haven't really done, however, is to understand, embrace and evolve the building of brands for business.

The importance of reputation

We certainly have some work to do then. Work that will have to shift perceptions of what a brand is, why it's important for a business to have one and how to go about building one to last a hundred years. That would be a worthy endeavour wouldn't you think? Building something to last. I enjoy seeing Victorian brickwork where the builder has taken the time and trouble to lay bricks into the front elevation detailing the year he built the building. Not only does it deliver the functional, by dating the 'product', it demonstrates the skill of the professionals who built it and specifically the bricklayer's craft in the usually ornate or intricate brickwork involved. But most importantly, it says, 'I built this. I built it in this year and I built it to be here a hundred years from now.' The builder didn't need to date the house in the brickwork. The house would still stand without the date inscribed into it. He chose to do it. It was optional. But in adding the date, he was making a statement for others to see and he was leaving a legacy for others. Not only that, but by no small coincidence, the house was differentiated from any other house on the street. More significantly, it was different from the houses with no date where other (competitive) builders couldn't be bothered to spend

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the time on intricate brickwork. Ultimately, the skilled builder was establishing his reputation. Of all the houses I see as I walk or drive along streets, the ones with the dates are the ones that I look at in more detail. Every business can learn something from those builders.

Businesses have struggled to appreciate the need for or place value in their brands for the last century, but at least the word 'reputation' provides a bridgehead to understanding the brand's increasing importance in terms that business leaders might comprehend. Much like the builder's reputation, the business reputation is important. Actually, it's a little more than important. Calling reputation important to a business is like calling vermouth important to a dry martini. It's critical. Without a good reputation, businesses simply can't function. Ask any businessperson who has ever had to stand up in front of shareholders or investors to justify their actions or ask for investment, what the most important attribute they have in their business is and the response will be (or should be) 'reputation'. Conversely, ask those same businesspeople what the single biggest risk facing their business might be and the answer is still the same – the loss of or damage to the company's reputation.

Gerald Ratner famously trashed a 44-year-old, successful family business – the Ratner's chain of jewellery stores – in the course of a single after-dinner speech. Gerald had taken over the company from his father, Leslie Ratner, in 1984 and, to his credit, had achieved a share price of 383p – a tenfold increase on that achieved by his father. Ratner effectively took jewellery 'down-market' for the first time. It was an extremely successful strategy. Ratner's jewellery was very cheap and not of the highest quality. At its peak under Gerald's stewardship, the company had over a thousand retail stores in the UK and USA.

Gerald resigned in 1992 after the continued 'negative press' associated to his now infamous speech at the Institute of Directors on the 23 April 1991. In the comment that attracted front page news coverage, Ratner said, 'We also do cut-glass sherry decanters complete with six glasses on a silver tray your butler can serve you drinks on, all for £4.95. People say, "How can you sell this for such a low price?" I say, "Because it's total crap".'

If that wasn't enough, Ratner's candour continued as he explained to the audience that his business model was built on giving the customers what they wanted – quantity, not quality. He used the

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example of a pair of Ratner's silver earrings that cost £0.99, explaining that they, 'have very little to do with quality, costing less than a Marks and Spencer prawn sandwich and most probably not lasting as long.'

There was mixed reaction to Ratner's comments – some in support of his position, but many were critical. In the months that followed and in a worsening economic climate, the retail giant suffered. Gerald issued an apology but the damage was done and despite promotional in-store discounting, the peak seasonal sales period in the run up to Christmas that year was very disappointing. The company reported a loss of £72m and never recovered. That single after-dinner speech is widely credited to having wiped a total of £500m off the value of the Ratner Group. Reputations take a lifetime to build and can be wiped out in a few minutes.

In the MORI report, 'The changing views of big business,' it was found that senior board directors of Britain's largest companies believe that, 'Reputation has taken over from traditional hard measures, like financial performance, by which companies are judged.' Interesting. Yet these captains of industry appear to have learned little about harnessing the positive aspects of their reputations and channelling them creatively through their brand communications.

The Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) published research at the end of 2005 regarding board-level representation of the marketing function within the FTSE 100 companies. It's staggeringly and breathtakingly bad. Not the research. The results.

If you wanted to be generous, you could read from the CIM research that 11% of the FTSE 100 companies have a marketing professional on the board. I'm disinclined towards generosity however, because one of those titles, for example, is, 'Chief Executive – Refining and Marketing.' Hardly marketing at all then. Chief Executive responsibilities first, then Refining (because that's got to be important) and then, on a Friday afternoon when the week's emails are tidied up and there's a fifteen-minute window before the limo arrives to whisk me off to the private jet, I'll squeeze in a bit of marketing. The research results deteriorate from there. In fairly plain, simple, easy to understand terms – like, say, 'How many exclusive marketing titles are there on the executive boards of the FTSE 100 companies?' the answer is… wait for it… two. There are just two of the UK's top 100 companies that value marketing sufficiently to appoint a

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board representative with the exclusive role of doing exactly that – marketing. For the record, those companies are Vodafone and SABMiller.

It's at times like this that I'm glad I never secured a job from a FTSE 100 company. I'd probably have been fired for taking marketing too seriously. But whatever my subjective opinion, there's still a significant, objective, disjoint here. The people that are refusing to acknowledge the role of their brand within their boardrooms are the same ones that maintain, 'reputation has taken over from traditional hard measures like financial performance'. There is clearly work to be done if the artistic language of the brand is to compete effectively with the numeracy of accountants in the boardroom. Language is often a greater barrier to understanding than we give it credit for. We assume that language will clarify when often, because it is open to interpretation and misunderstanding, it confuses. Working in creative communications, across geographic borders and with regional disparities, we rely heavily on images or concepts to replace language. By doing so, we attempt to simplify and clarify by using representative images rather than confusing words. If we are to understand the role of the business brand and its influence on corporate reputation then, we should first agree the terminology. 'Reputation'. 'Brand'. 'Marketing'. These are all words that have multiple definitions and clearly cover a multitude of sins.

Definition of a brand

I Googled 'brand reputation' which returned 170 million hits. That's a fair few variations on a theme. We should allow scope for individual interpretation of the words, but 170 million? Really? So if we are to continue investigating and talking about brands, the very least we could do is agree some common ground on which we can build our foundations. A brand, in the context of creative business branding, is built around perceptions – a perception (or collection of perceptions) in the mind(s) of an audience(s). Reputation is about perceptions too. And so is marketing. So whether real or imaginary, what we're talking about is what other people think about you (the corporate and personal 'you'), how they respond and what you can do, as a corporate entity, to influence those thoughts and actions. I

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particularly like the definition of reputation as, 'what other people say about you when you've left the room' (credited to Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon).

So whilst the importance of reputation is clear, the controls over it are hugely variable. Reputation is easily recognized as the domain of the press office – and has been for years. The public relations department is the one that issues the statements in support or defence of the topics of the day. It deals with the analysts, the journalists, the shareholders, the prospective investors and indeed Joe Public. It spins and it weaves and it produces a fabric, sometimes even of 'truth'. That's fine, but it doesn't reflect the importance of the brand holistically, nor the lip service paid to that importance by the board of directors.

Time for a reality check then.

In 1997, after a two-and-a-half year trial (the longest-ever English trial), Mr Justice Bell, a High Court Judge, delivered his verdict in the case between Helen Steel and David Morris and the fast food retailer, McDonald's. The case was widely known as the 'McLibel' trial. The case revolved around a leaflet entitled 'What's wrong with McDonald's?' written by a gardener and former postman (Steel and Morris) the contents of which McDonald's considered to be libellous and sued the couple as a result.

Whilst, ultimately, the Judge found that McDonald's 'exploit children' with advertising, produced 'misleading' advertising and were 'culpably responsible' for cruelty to animals, the couple failed to prove all their claims, some of which were therefore found to be libellous and they were ordered to pay £60,000 damages. They appealed and took the British Government to the European Court where, on the 15 February 2005, the court found in favour of the couple and declared that the McLibel case was in breach of the right to a fair trial and the right to freedom of expression.

Now, if I'm honest, I don't really care about how fat McDonald's burgers might make you. Eat too many burgers – you'll get fat. Okay, got it. What I care about is how a company the size of McDonalds that, according to www.mcspotlight.org/, spends 'over $2 billion a year broadcasting their glossy image to the world', wasn't able to see the folly of pursuing this case and the damage that would be inflicted on the McDonald's brand and reputation. Had McDonald's treated its

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brand with a little more care, it could have avoided the ensuing pain.

As a result of the McLibel case, anti-McDonald's campaigns escalated worldwide. The McSpotlight website launched by Helen Steel and David Morris was accessed 184,675,000 times by the summer of 2003. The Sunday Times reported that Ed Rensi, President of the McDonalds Corporation, had been removed as Chief Executive following falling US market share, promotional flops and franchisee discontent. McDonald's UK announced their largest ever drop in profits (71%) in 2003. Profits dropped from a high of £104.3 million in 2001, to £83.8 million in 2002, and sharply to £23.6 million in 2003.

Reports of the cost to McDonald's of the trial alone vary – but double-figure millions is conservative, let alone the time taken that could have been more profitably spent flipping patties. And the end result? Well, the last time my stomach was McRumbling and I ventured into McDonald's, the place was wall-to-wall 'health' food advertising. Images were of carrots and salads and fruit juices. There was nutritional information on all products – salt and sugar levels. And Ronald was proclaiming that kids should have regular daily exercise. I still ordered a Mac 'n' fries, but I'm a consenting adult and that's my choice. McDonald's may or may not acknowledge that 'McLibel' had any impact on its brand reputation, but I'd hazard a guess that it had. It certainly influenced my perceptions. McDonald's, and every other company, would be well advised to put their brands at the forefront of their organizations – in the boardroom. We'd live in a healthier, carrot-crunching world if they did. To achieve the goal of brand-led communications where reputation is king however, we're going to need more than two executive marketers in the FTSE 100 companies.

Every now and again, business brands recognize that in increasingly competitive marketing environments where products and services are ubiquitous and differentiation is difficult, brand and reputation may be the only things that set them apart from competitors. Faced with the realization that there's almost always a competitor(s) down the road that can offer pretty much the same product or service, business brands have only their brand and reputation to rely on. So they're keen to make sure that the brand holds value and that the value is communicated effectively.

Effective communication stretches well beyond a good release from the press office. The brand strategy and its subsequent

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implementation through communications channels can be a formative time for many business brands – not least because the success of that venture relies on the unequivocal support of the plan at the very highest levels of the organization. To secure internal support, the brand must be seen to percolate from the top of the organization down. From the heady vantage point of the boardroom, the brand, the corporate reputation, the advertising campaigns, the website, the brochures and the collateral have to stop being disengaged tactical entities. They must all become part of a single focus – creative brand communications on which the company's reputation is based. Reputation is thereby enhanced, directed and integrated through every channel of the enterprise. It impacts every audience – internal and external. And reputation management is creative. While we know creativity doesn't, as a rule, sit comfortably with the bean counters, the management of corporate reputation is not a job for the finance department. The responsibility for shareholder value, which is directly affected by brand reputation, lies with the board of directors.

'Creativity' is not, however, the best tool to bridge the chasm between marketing and the executive boardroom. Ask a financial director for his/her interpretation of 'creative' and they'll roll their eyes, snort, huff and insist on multiple cheque signatories. Ask a marketer for their description of an accountant and you'll receive broadly the same reaction. There's the rub – creativity is the essential ingredient required to guide and enhance the reputation of brands the world over, but the protagonists are poles apart. Which leads to exclusion. And with only two executive marketers currently in the FTSE 100, it's clear who is being excluded.

When the balance is redressed, however, the opportunities to build the reputations of the future appear. CIM research notes that marketing is represented at board level in over three-quarters of the UK's smaller companies. That's 75% representation versus 2% in the FTSE 100. So it would appear that there is potential for the young Turks scaling the corporate ladder to make a real difference to how their brands are perceived and how their reputations might be secured.

As marketing professionals, our interest in the brand is creative. We want to inspire and motivate and differentiate and challenge thinking and, and, and… but creativity for creativity's sake holds

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little value. Instead, we should recognize that the battles are fought under business rules. The boardroom discussions are of shareholder or stakeholder value. Return on investment always trumps creativity. Measurement and response always outweighs design aesthetics and creative copy. There is nonetheless a need for change. No one likes change. We like routine. Everyone likes routine. But the routine approach to brand communications will only ever deliver routine returns. For extraordinary performance, you need an extraordinary brand. And to build one of those you'll need to look beyond products and processes and into the world of imagination – not yours, but that of your audience. That's the crossroads in business where you decide whether to creatively enhance your brand reputation by doing things differently… or sue the pants off a gardener and postman for distributing a handful of leaflets outside one of your burger joints.

Those decisions are critical. The modern business brand can succeed or fail on reputation alone. Think of the importance of personal recommendation – how much importance we all attach to the recommendations and referrals of others. Business brands have relied on the principle of the network since the very beginning – one company recommending the services of others. Linkedin is a good example of the referral and recommendations network brought into the 21st century. Thanks to Linkedin, we all now have the opportunity to connect with over 50 million business people. Within reason, those people trust their networks to provide the expertise, views, opinions and insights that were once only achievable through formal or informal meetings. That's a significant change in business culture. Gone are the days where we would only ask our very best friend, in very hushed tones, which deodorant we should use to… you know… stop the whiff and embarrassing staining. Today you can ask anyone – live and direct and online. You'll receive several (possibly hundreds of) recommendations from the network, all of which will be freely and independently offered up and actionable without obligation or requiring any commercial engagement whatsoever. The same is true of business. We maintain our reputations online and engage with a wide network of business professionals prepared to help and assist and offer opinion in the belief that sharing is all for the greater good. And for the most part, it is. The importance of reputation has therefore never been more acutely felt in business. Contrary to the belief that brands are less important in an online world, the brand – the corporate (and personal) reputation has never been more

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essential to corporate success. But if we replace the word 'reputation' with 'brand', perhaps we can remove one of the barriers of language and reach a closer common understanding.

If we are to build a brand to last a hundred years, we should agree the definition. A brand is how we are perceived. Those perceptions can change, be influenced, hold value, establish and encourage loyalty, or be damaged irrevocably. So when seeking to build a business brand, we should be careful with those little suckers. Like any kind of vehicle, brands need maintenance to keep running smoothly. But unlike an engine, we need to look beyond the mechanical, the functional, the 'product'. If brands are what an audience 'thinks' and perceives about a business, then it is the perceptions that we have to shape and maintain if we are to succeed in the long term – which is a very different task to simply changing or updating a product.

Recognizing that the brand will likely change, especially over a hundred-year period, we should seek the best way to maintain, enhance and build upon its core strengths – rather than wiping out that hard-won brand equity at every turn and having to start all over again. To achieve longevity we have to build something to last. Like the builder who took care to build (and 'brand') his Victorian house, we need strong foundations. Our brand is the foundation upon which everything else will stand. We may subsequently change the position of the windows and doors. We may add extensions, we may redecorate, but, for the most part, our foundations will stand. Our brand will determine where the walls are built.

Business versus consumer brands

As we start to lay the foundations of our brand, we should recognize that for our business brand to go the distance, the differences between business and consumer brands are as important as the similarities. Our Victorian house is different to an office building. So we're building a different structure. Yes, it will have walls, doors and windows, but the purpose of a house is fundamentally different to that of an office. While the foundations may be broadly

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similar, the walls will be built for purpose – specifically to suit our business needs.

'We're all consumers', is a common refrain in business marketing. Up to a point, that's true. Treating business people as simply 'people' is a positive step. The idea that we park our personalities in the car park before entering the office is clearly ridiculous – we don't. We retain our personalities in business – the thinker, the bean counter, the joker, the boss… so it can only be a good idea to use emotive, personality-led communications when talking to a business audience. Think of it as the human touch. The message we are trying to communicate becomes more engaging that way. If we're really lucky, it may mean that we can start to communicate beyond the stereotypical 'businessman in suit shaking hands' image of business marketing once and for all. But aspiring to attach a personality to our business brand is very different from, 'We're all the same and what we need to do is to treat businesses and the business people as if they were consumers.' No. Absolutely not. Wrong. That would be a mistake. So we need to clear up some of the more obvious differences between business and consumer marketing before we start to build our creative business brand.

Anyone seeking to reach a business audience first needs to recognize the difference in the decision-making process. Take any decision to purchase model to compare and contrast the processes of business and consumer buying behaviour. For the purposes of this example, we'll use one of the most popular and widely recognized decision to purchase models, 'Aida' (Strong, 1925). A. I. D. A. – Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action. That's the process we all follow when we buy something. It's lunchtime, you're hungry, your stomach's rumbling. You pass a sandwich shop, look at the menu or sandwiches behind the counter and order a chicken salad sandwich. You hand over some loose change and within a few minutes, you've satisfied your hunger, made a mess of your shirt and can move on to the next pressing issue of the day. You've also just followed the Aida model to the letter. Awareness, your stomach's rumbling. Interest, there's a sandwich shop. Desire, I fancy chicken salad. Action, here's my money – feed me. It's all over and done in a few minutes. From the initial identification of the need through to the final delivery. Done. Easy. We all broadly follow the same decision-making process as consumers any number of times every day. We don't even think about it, we just do it. We act as consumers, making individual choices that

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are easily transacted because they have minimal impact on anyone else, including ourselves. When we make decisions in business, however, the dynamics change.

In business, to make a decision, we first have to follow whatever corporate governance and procedures have been laid down, even for the simplest of tasks. Committees have to be formed and consulted. Managers have to be appraised of our impending decision up and down the chain of command. We have to think about the impact of our collective decision on other parts of the business, even if they don't think about us when they make their decisions. We have to check it's okay with HR, PR, Finance or Legal to make sure we're not in breach of any of their respective legislative protocols. We might have to ask the lawyers if we're allowed to make the decision and, if we do that, we'll have to wait six weeks to receive an answer, so we'll need to think about contingency plans because the lawyers always say 'No', screw up the whole process and it means we have to start again and make other decisions. Time to form another committee. This time, we may even get as far as securing a budget which will mean pleading with the finance department, preparing a business case to prove that we're making a good decision that will reap corporate rewards because, let's not forget that this isn't our money that we're trying to spend even if it is our budget. We still need permission and we still need to be seen to be acting in the very best interests of the business.

Chicken salad sandwich? My ass! Frankly, making a decision in business is a small miracle that business men and women the world over perform every day. The behaviour patterns in business are significantly different from those of consumers. Irrespective of whether the business is large or small, or the cost of the action is expensive or cheap, we still struggle to make efficient and effective business decisions. Clearly the decision to buy paper cups for the water dispenser in reception is fairly straightforward (although you'd be surprised…) but prepare for battle if the converged IT and telecoms system requires upgrading, or the business embarks on an enterprise-wide systems solution upgrade. Engagement between businesses is therefore very different from a consumer transaction.

As a business, you can't advertise like a chocolate bar or washing powder and expect a sales uplift next day. You have to follow the decision-making chain and brace yourself for the long haul.

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That affects your whole communications strategy. 'Big Sale Ends Saturday' isn't going to work when the buying cycle may take a year or longer to complete. My personal record is seven and a half years. And I've had any number of apologies in between, 'We haven't made a decision yet. Sorry it's taking so long…,' and that's just after a few months. I smile and reassure the prospective client that I'm happy to wait. Seven and a half years is a long time in business. The prospective client in question (who worked in an agricultural cooperative…) loved our work, wanted to experience the transformation, wanted to build a creative brand. Unfortunately for him (and me) the company he was working for had no corporate appetite for change, no budget and little understanding of what was actually required. He changed career and moved companies three times before calling me again. When he eventually did, he said, 'I'm in the right place now and we want your help.' That was it. Purchase Order. New client. Bingo.

That second time around, the process was much quicker, much easier and turned into a lasting client relationship. But it still depended wholly on the Aida decision-making model and it still, ultimately, took seven and a half years to complete. Without a full appreciation of how businesses make those decisions, I would never have been able to nurture the prospect into a revenue-generating client relationship at all.

At a very minimum, board meetings happen every month. Decisions of consequence therefore happen every month – but only a few decisions are actually made at those board meetings. Most of them are 'pending'. 'We need a better price, more information, to talk to someone else, to consider the wider implications… etc.' So most business decisions are postponed at least for another month, often longer. Consumer marketing campaigns may be delivered in a 'burst' over a few days. All business marketing campaigns need to be considered in terms of months and often years. At the very least, we should diary a phone call every six to eight weeks to coincide with the board meetings to ascertain what, if any, progress has been made. What we can't expect, is to launch a campaign and leave the process to take care of itself.

Small businesses are a little more nimble and fleet of foot. Unfortunately while they may make quicker decisions, they also all behave differently. It's almost impossible to generalize small

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businesses into large groups and target them with generic messages, as you might with consumers. By their very nature, businesses are niche offerings. To offer some scale to the niche aspect of small business, the US Census Bureau has published figures showing that of the 25.5 million businesses in America, around 24 million have less than ten employees and the vast majority (19.5 million) are 'Non Employer Firms' – in other words, one man bands (http://www.census.gov/epcd/www/smallbus.html). Even within the same vertical market, Smith & Sons will behave and respond very differently to Jones Inc. That's because they're both small enough to behave, pretty much, however they like. Contrary to popular opinion, neither business is a faceless corporate bureaucracy that can be easily generalized in its decision-making process. Whilst the day-to-day behaviours are hugely variable, these are still small, independent, private businesses where actions are scrutinized and decision makers are held accountable. Business is not a chocolate bar that they buy instantly and easily. Actually, where their business is concerned, you better have a damn good reason for them to buy anything. Go ahead, punk, make their day.

Niche marketing tactics are therefore prevalent in business communications. Mass marketing, consumer-style approaches simply don't work – the audience doesn't feel that the message relates specifically to them. Millions of men (and women) use razorblades every day. If you're Gillette and you want to tell every man on the planet that your razorblade is the best, a line that goes something like, 'The Best a Man Can Get', will probably do the job. That won't work in the business market however. Audience size for a particular product or service is usually only a few thousand companies – not hundreds of thousands or millions of people. Those few people within the businesses expect something specific. They all view their business circumstances as 'unique' (and often they are) and they respond to messages that recognize their individual needs. It's not unusual at all for business marketing campaigns to address audiences of a few hundred or even just a handful of key decision makers. The irony of course, is that those same business people who insist upon tailored communications are happy, outside the office, to use the same washing up detergent as millions of other consumers. That's the challenge – to recognize when a business is a business and when the people within it are consumers. They are not the same thing.

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They are certainly not the same thing in the eyes of the law. Corporate governance is an issue that, as consumers, we rarely have to trouble ourselves with. In business, we can barely breathe without considering the implications of health and safety, due diligence, legislative conformity, legitimate claims, standards accreditation, investor mandates… it's hard to make a decision. As consumers, we just make choices and act on them. The consequences of those consumer actions only really get tough if you find yourself on the wrong side of a police officer (or traffic fascist…). In business, you have to make career choices every day. Some decisions are bigger that others, but many of them can potentially leave you without a job, without income or liable to prosecution. Nick Leeson, a trader at Barings Investment Bank overstepped the mark somewhat when he decided to gamble with corporate funds. As well as wiping out the 233-year-old bank by incurring liabilities of $1.3 billion (more than the entire capital and reserves of the bank), he was sentenced to a six-and-a-half-year term in a Singapore prison for his trouble. So whilst we hope that a business audience will respond emotively to business communications, much as a consumer might, there are 1.3 billion other good reasons to remember the variety of decision-making processes that might affect that business decision. A good reputation and a strong brand can offer confidence to the decision maker in their hour (or years) of need. From a business customer perspective, if the brand reputation can be relied upon, it's one less thing to worry about and it's one more tick it the box for good corporate governance that will bring the ultimate goal of the customer a step closer, whatever that goal may be.

Overcoming the stigma of business brands

The stigma of the business brand is therefore predominantly one of its own making. If you plant a potato, you'll grow a potato. There's no doubt that businesses have planted enough brand potatoes to keep the whole community in French fries for the last hundred years or so. Whether through apathy, ignorance or blatant stupidity will remain a topic for debate, but it's clear that the failures of proper brand husbandry can be catastrophic – literally bringing

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down the organizational structures that were intended to, and should, deliver ongoing returns.

It's still difficult for business brands to excel. They can perform well on their balance sheets. They can hold temporary meaning and value for both internal and external stakeholders. They can even do cool stuff – make products or provide services that we benefit from and enjoy and are happy to pay for. But do we actually care? Or more specifically, do we care enough to continue paying for the same business brand and ensuring its continued success in the long term? The glory for even the best of those business brands is transient. Our relationship with them is transactional. We pay our money and we buy stuff, we use it and we throw it away. Will our business buy another thing from that business brand? Well, maybe, but it's by no means guaranteed.

Business brands for the most part offer no compelling reason for the business customer to come back for more. They can bribe us to come back with promotions or price discounting. They might even entice us back by providing excellent customer care or after-sales service or account management. They can even contractually bind us to come back for a given (limited) period. But do they make us really want to come back? To come running, at full speed, with our arms open in wide embrace and a big hairy grin on our faces because we truly enjoy the brand experience to the exclusion of all others? No. They don't. They should, but they don't. Very few business brands have sufficient brand equity to affect our behaviour in that positive, euphoric, evangelistic, almost inexplicable way. That's why many brands ultimately fail. To achieve that kind of relationship with a brand, you have to love it. Really love it. Love is the magic ingredient that makes us all behave irrationally and selflessly and keep coming back for more. Look at marriage as a brand. Would we really do the things we do for our husbands, wives and children and continue to come back for more were it not for love? Some may. Some don't. But most do. Let's remind ourselves why:

> If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor

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> and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing…
> …And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
>
> I Corinthians 13

Very few brands (business or consumer) achieve that exalted loving status. That doesn't mean that we should stop trying however. Apple comes close.

I had a conversation with a friend recently about Apple's iPhone. I had seen one in action and I was keen to add to the growing collection of man-technology-accessories that clutter my desk, my drawers and most of the available surface and cupboard space at home. I certainly didn't need another mobile phone. But I wanted an iPhone. It was worse than that. I simply had to have one. I was explaining this seemingly irrational need to Jon and hoping that it didn't sound irrational to him because it didn't feel irrational to me, after my third beer. Jon listened patiently with a slightly quizzical look on his face. As the passion and excitement and effervescence in my voice grew, he started shifting uncomfortably in his chair (as did many of the people in the pub) until he realized what I was talking about and had his epiphany moment. He held up a hand telling me to stop as he rummaged around in his pocket with the other hand and he pulled out his new mobile phone. 'What you need', he said, 'is one of these'. I looked at the offering served up on the table and was a little more than horrified to see another brand of 'ordinary' mobile phone. 'Why on God's good earth would I want one of those?' I asked him with barely concealed contempt. 'Because it does all the stuff you've been talking about', he replied, 'look…' and he proceeded to demonstrate the full functionality of the handset. It had a touch-screen with animated icons and swipey, clicky things. It had spinny turn aroundy double-click things. It had applications that did things I might even use – address book, notes, audio, hands free, email, text. It even made phone calls. 'There', he said with a smug, self-satisfied look on his face. 'Told you. That's what you need.'

I let the comment settle for a moment and then said to him in a quietly moderated tone, 'No it isn't.' He looked puzzled again and asked with incredulity, 'Why not?'

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'Why not? Why not? Because it doesn't make me want to lick it! Because I don't want to hug it and kiss it and call it George and take the bleedin' thing to bed with me at night! Because it's not an iPhone!' At that point we had to leave the pub, rather quickly actually, but I think I made my point. We love brands (or not) because of the irrational. Because of the emotive responses they create within us and not because of their price, or functionality or availability. It's not so long ago that Apple would have been considered to be a 'consumer' brand. Our more recent (carefully managed) perceptions of the Mac and the iPhone, however, means that the Apple brand appeals to the corporate consumer. iPhones and Macs appeal to consumers… and consumers within corporates. That doesn't make much sense to the majority of business brands – business people trying to make logical, practical, justifiable, profitable business decisions. It makes a lot of sense to Apple though. And to me. And to almost all of us who work in business branding because we recognize and value the attributes. The majority, however, remain incapable of converting that appreciation and understanding into daily practice. That 'appreciation' is perhaps more widely recognized as 'creativity'.

For a business brand to succeed for 100 years, against all the odds, it needs to learn to be creative. Picasso, Rembrandt, Monet, Leonardo da Vinci – all considered mavericks during their lifetimes – but all demonstrating the supreme value and longevity of truly inspired creativity. To build a creative brand in a business world, the business needs to learn how to think differently, act differently, be creative.

It's not all bad news though. Some progress has been made. I'm delighted to report that in an inspired moment of creative genius, the industry collectively and collaboratively recognized that 'Business to Business' was perhaps not as snappy as it could be. A new generic term for business marketing was born and its name was, 'B2B'.

Well, it's a start.

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Read 'em and weep

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