

by Alfred Kahn,
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A CASE OF MISTAKEN

EVERY ORGANIZATION HAS ONE.

TOO BAD SO FEW UNDERSTAND WHAT

IT REALLY IS. AND WHY IT MAY BE THE

MOST IMPORTANT ASSET YOU HAVE.



IDENTITY

Too many companies, institutions and otherwise savvy executives have the wrong idea (or ideas) about what corporate Identity means, and about how to communicate it. Many people have come to think of it as nothing more than a new logo and letterhead. Some see it as part of the “branding” process — a kind of mar-com version of a stylish suit of clothes that your organization

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wears to show customers who you are. An outfit that is easily changed every time a new product is launched or publication printed or CEO hired. Change the company’s clothes, new hair, get a tan, maybe a little organizational Botox, and presto, you’ve changed your Identity.

But have you, really? And why, exactly, do you want to?

As the Founder and President of a national design and marketing communications firm, I can assure you that with the liberal application of creativity and money, a leopard can, in fact, change its spots. But I’ve never believed for a moment that the spots defined the cat — rather it is the grace and muscle and teeth and claws. In the case of this particular corporate animal metaphor, spots are not Identity — strength and swiftness and stealth are.

As long as organizations are made up of people, those organizations will have complex, sometimes conflicted, but forever ingrained personalities and core identities, just like people. It’s as though the corporate world were one giant high-school reunion, where no matter how far each person has come, no matter how different they look, you still immediately recognize the person they were back in junior year.

And if companies are simply expanded people, it follows that whether the organization’s product is software or solar, health care or higher education,

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robots or retail, the organization itself is a living, growing being having a one-on-one conversation with its customers. The market, as it has often been said, is not an audience. Firms like mine, charged with the task of capturing and communicating corporate Identity, must understand that, as must their clients.

In his book “Identity Is Destiny,” business transformation consultant Laurence Ackerman writes: “In the Identity credo, ‘I’ becomes as much the pronoun of the organization as that of the individual (I, Alcoa; I, Maytag).” He goes on to posit eight laws of Identity that apply as much to an entity formed of 100,000 people as they do to a single person:

I am alive; I am unique; I have much to give; to truly live, I must express myself fully; to do so, I need others; to establish real relationships I must first be recognized for who I am; I will receive in accordance with what I give.

No organization can achieve its potential, Ackerman points out, without first embracing its true Identity. I would expand that no organization can achieve its potential without first effectively communicating its true Identity.

Two decades ago, when I was designing covers for magazines including *Time* and *Newsweek*, it became clear to me that the most effective images,

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those that communicated the most and most quickly, were the ones which produced an emotional response. And here I don’t necessarily mean “emotional” as in tears or puppies or maudlin mechanisms. I mean visceral, touching, direct — real. So when I founded Brainworks, I focused on what we dubbed Emotional Response Communications, which depend on arresting images and messages in a human, rather than corporate, voice.

After 20 years, it seems that we were ahead of the curve. Today, we don’t have to work quite as hard to convince organizations that capturing what is central to their Identity, and finding a resonant, emotion-producing way to portray that, might, in fact, be a good idea. That’s not to say that many

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companies and institutions don’t still see Identity — and marketing, for that matter — as something superficial, something that can be worn for a while then changed on a whim. Or, in the case of industries like technology or bioscience or computing, they don’t see how emotion — direct and powerful connection, in other words — relates to their products or missions.

I argue that if what really defines corporate Identity is the convergence of the very human characteristics, talents, desires and drive of the people who are the corporation, then that Identity is by definition the soul of your company and your reason for being. Your greatest, longest-lasting, most trusted asset is not your products or your R & D or even your reputation. Your greatest asset is who you really are.

And that is a human thing, which must be communicated in a human way. I wish I could find a better, less tie-dyed-and-time-worn way to say it, but truth is truth, and when it works it works: Keep it real, people.

