

Corporate Personality: Myth or Reality

Visit www.feketeco.com or call Sandy Fekete at 614/540.5520.

Two years of research profiling the personality of 55 organizations confirms that every organization has a personality which, once defined, can have a far-reaching impact on its longevity, productivity, and profitability. Understanding your organizational personality is essential if you want to bring your company into alignment at all levels, create a common point of reference for decision making, make promises you can deliver, and set behavioral guidelines for every member of your staff.

Organizations, like people, have natural preferences that affect how they focus, gather information, make decisions, and work. Understanding this frees the organization to be true to itself, which attracts employees and customers who share its values. You no longer find yourself obsessed with chasing the competition. Rather, all your energy can be focused on showing up more like yourself every day, which makes you irresistibly attractive to your ideal customers.

According to Arie de Geus, author of The Living Company, "all companies exhibit the behavior and certain characteristics of living entities. All companies learn. All have an identity, whether explicitly or not, that determines their coherence." Corporate culture is the clothing for personality...an organization's personality is its core.

If your organization had its own unique personality, how might that affect its culture, its hiring practices, the definition of its ideal customer, the way in which decisions are made, or how customers, employees and vendors are treated?

Shattered Myths

In profiling the personalities of 55 organizations, the collected data challenges the myth that the CEO determines the company's personality. In 84 percent of the cases, the CEO's personality preferences differ from the company's. This relieves the CEO of the burden of being the example everyone must follow, or the figurehead everyone must please.

Some believe that the people who make up the organization (the team) influence the organization's personality. On the contrary, team personality is different than the organization's personality in 86 percent of the cases that have been studied. Team members now have the freedom to behave within their own natural preferences, as long as they base their decisions on the values and preferences of the organization.

One of the most eye-opening discoveries of the organizations whose personalities have been profiled is the misalignment in perceptions between the CEO and the management team. In 77 percent of the cases, the CEO sees the organization's personality differently than his or her management team does. This makes dysfunction easy to spot and correct.

Mission that Matters

Many organizations spend months or even years crafting the ideal mission statement. The outcome is often framed and prominently displayed on the walls, printed on wallet cards, and touted in company advertising. More often than not, employees and customers cannot remember the mission statement, much less live it.

Once an organization's personality is revealed, creating a vision (core ideology), mission (core purpose) and core values is easy. Personality preferences generally reveal core values. For example, the Walt Disney Company's personality profile shows that the organization generates its ideas from within (introverted), sees the big picture (intuitive), bases its decisions on its values and their impact on people (feeling), and is extremely effective at getting things done (judging). According to research in Built to Last by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, Disney's core values include imagination, wholesomeness, and fanatic attention to detail. Its vision is to "make people happy," and its mission is entertainment. To those of us who have experienced Disney, it is clear that everyone in the organization behaves according to its core ideology 99 percent of the time.

These are more than words on the wall; to be effective, mission, vision, and values should be a "doing" model rather than a "planning" model. Once an organization's culture and values are understood, they create a framework for the thousands of decisions that are made by hundreds of people every day in the organization. As Paul Galvin, CEO of Motorola, said, "it is more important to *know who you are* than where you are going, for where you are going will change as the world around you changes. Leaders die, products become obsolete, markets change, new technologies emerge, and management fads come and go, but *core ideology endures* as a source of guidance and inspiration."

Promises You Can Keep

Understanding the organization's personality also results in marketing messages that are truthful and promises that can be delivered. Steve Wilhite, Volkswagen's senior marketing executive said, "if we don't have a *clear understanding of who we are, what we stand for, and what we offer*, then we'll never understand how to communicate that in the marketplace. It is critical to understand your position, and *to make sure your positioning is rooted in truth*." Volkswagen's values include originality and innovation, and have been deeply ingrained in the company's branding. The new Beetle is simple, original, unpretentious, friendly, and accessible. The Volkswagen brand provides a product experience that can't be found anywhere else, and appeals to people from all walks of life.

The strengths inherent in an organization's personality are demonstrated every day. The profile reveals what to say in marketing messages. You may think your market wants innovation, but unless innovative thinking is a personality characteristic, don't promise it. Instead, focus the message on what you are naturally good at, because that is what you will consistently deliver and why customers will seek you out and stay with you for the long term.

Elford Construction markets its dependability and professionalism with "We're with you every step of the way." Cheryl and Company's brand is based on its service, innovation, and reliability, and is expressed in the company's vision statement: "Comfort and satisfaction, warmly served." Heart Specialists of Ohio, a cardiology practice, positions itself with "Compassion is at the heart of our practice," after its profile revealed that concern for patients' comfort was a strength. On the other hand, Neurological Associates' profile showed that the organization was driven by getting results for its patients, thus its positioning statement: "Results through neuroscience since 1929."

Attracting the Ideal Customer

In business, as in personal relationships, people are naturally attracted to or rebuffed by each other. The personality profile of an organization is very helpful for targeting its ideal customers. Since we know what the organization values, and its innate strengths and weaknesses, we can identify the characteristics of people who will be attracted to it.

The personality profile for Fireproof, an information management and records retention company, showed that it was outwardly focused and energized by taking care of customers, thrived on comprehensive and timely delivery, and was extremely relationship oriented. Its ideal customers are those who trust reputation and value security, are conservative by nature, desire a partner who will follow through and get the job done, and want value for their money. It is interesting to note that prior to understanding the organization's personality, Fireproof's marketing materials focused on technology over service.

Putting Personality To Work

As long as all decisions are based on the values and preferences of the organization, success should be realized in any organization, measured by a strong sense of identity, consistency in behavior, clarity in messages, and alignment in decision making.

While the concept of corporate culture has been explored, the discovery of organizational personality and how to measure it is in its infancy. The work of Jung, Myers and Briggs helped pinpoint the personality preferences of individuals, and it is now being applied to organizations. Perhaps the most valued aspect of this method of profiling organizations is that it creates consensus without requiring a lot of time, energy, or research. One hundred percent of the organizations who have experienced it to date agree with the findings.

The applications for organizational personality are numerous. When two organizations are considering blending through merger or acquisition, the profile can pinpoint potential blind spots and culture clashes. Organizations facing transition due to industry changes or competitive situations can operate from a position of strength. Companies wishing to solidify customer relationships or attract new customers can position themselves to be irresistibly attractive. Defining mission, vision and values is simplified, and sending truthful marketing messages becomes second nature.