

The Living Brand Manual

At a British Airways counter recently, I noticed an elegantly attired man trying to squeeze his over-large hand luggage into one of those luggage size-indicator frames. The man gave up trying to make the bag fit, and abandoned his reading of the lengthy note of legal caution above the frame. He directed his anger at the check-in staff whose manner was as frosty and ill humoured as that of the signage. No natural repartee; no human connection. This has been replaced by the corporate standard.

Corporate standards are killing brands. So are the brand manuals that specify those standards and the logo-obsessive behaviour that they prompt. Legal jargon is packed into every email and into the smallest website. Just for the fun of it – try printing any legal section on any site and your printer will soon run out of paper. The legal jargon in every communication has rarely helped anyone survive the machinations by which the jargon promises to protect the company at the cost of the client. This artificial sense of protection amounts to seeking a divorce before you're married. It's like saying to the consumer 'I don't know you yet but, hell, (Clare- I prefer not to swear in my articles) I don't trust you anyhow.' And from that point on, a brand's unconsummated relationship with its potential customer is on the steady slope to oblivion. Rules don't generally respond to the vagaries of the human condition. And that's disastrous for brands which, if they're treated well, are human themselves.

Compare the check-in experience at British Airways with a parallel one I witnessed at the Virgin Blue counter. I'm sure this younger passenger had a shorter temper than the reserved British Airways traveller. Yet he managed to simply smile when he realized his bag was too large for the cabin. Unlike the British Airways' luggage frame and attendant legalese, the Virgin Blue luggage signage snappily advised, "You can bring an ego of any size on board – but only a bag this size." The humorous, human touch dissipated any potential for anger. Check out Virgin Blue's sister company: Virgin Atlantic which greets you on their site with the headline: "Hello Gorgeous!" A phrase setting the tone of voice for the Virgin brand in air, on ground and online.

Similarly, Puccino's, a café concept born in London, makes an art of converting every detail into an amusing brand experience. Where Starbucks have taken the corporate brand manual tack, like British Airways, by simply and superficially adhering the logo to countless millions of cups, Puccino's has put individual messages on each of its cups. Messages like "Take my top off" refer to the cups' plastic lids. The sugar packets are embellished with: "Serving suggestion: – pour in cup and shut up". Compare that with your last impression of Starbucks. It's a boring, impersonal brand these days. Its rapport with the customer has been seemingly constrained by a corporate style manual.

But how do you achieve brand personality? And how do you allow the brand to grow without killing it with conventions? British Airways and Starbucks are just like the rest of the top brands: their branding has gone onto autopilot. They've lost their individual, responsive touch. Why? Because the brands were converted by their own brand manuals - documents created by committees full of rules that leave nothing to opportunity.

The best brand manuals are people, not books. A dynamic, humorous, human brand is dynamic, humorous and human because of one single person who's running the brand, owning the brand, and setting the vision for the brand.

Instead of spending thousands of dollars on brand manuals that prescribe action, spend the money on a living brand manual. A person, whose role is to live and breath the brand. He or she should be the brand's evangelist, growing with the brand, and ensuring that it never gets into any situations, which drain it of its spirit. The living brand manual should be prepared to change rules, shift guidelines and adjust the vision. Some might reckon this is a scary scenario. What if that individual leaves? for example. Well, people do move on. But the brand-manual-contrived British Airways scenario is scarier. For such companies, the



brand has turned to stone – immutable, self-justifying and impervious to its relationship with customers.

The living brand manual - a brand custodian - is someone who holds the brand baton. The role needs to be accompanied by an exit strategy so that, when he leaves, there are tactics in place to ensure that the baton is passed on smoothly to the next custodian. The handover needn't be artificially smooth, but it needs to be achieved without the baton being dropped. The point is that a real human being is in charge of a consequently humanised brand. Identified and training the right person takes time. But once you've secured the position, your brand will achieve its own healthy life.

So give up trying to resuscitate that dry, lifeless brand manual and begin searching for a living, breathing, human version instead.

Further Information

For more information about Martin Lindstrom, [click here](#).

To start receiving Martin Lindstrom's complimentary online BRAND magazine, [click here](#).