

On: Purpose.

Or why professional firms should focus on what they do do do, not what they don't don't don't

Don't believe the truth.

Purpose is everywhere. It's the new black. It's the new Friday. It's the only way to guarantee skyrocketing, sustainable, profitable growth that reduces your competition to tears.

And we know who to blame. The Millennials (whatever it is, blame Millennials). Those so-called snowflakes who want everything hand-crafted by an artisan in the style of a suffering but dignified seventeenth century French peasant.

But is it true?

And isn't it a bit confusing? We already have mission statements, vision statements & positioning statements. We have brand essences, brand propositions & brand values.

Doesn't adding purpose on top just over-complicate things?

Gimme some truth.

The idea of brand purpose isn't new.

The December 2005 Harvard Business Review article, *Marketing Malpractice: The Cause & the Cure*, talks extensively about purpose-brands; products & services with a clear message about the job they do & what people should choose them for.

Take Federal Express. A business with such a clear message about the job they do & why people should choose them - rapid, reliable, time-definite delivery - they became a verb. To fedex.

Today, however, purpose has become something different.

A key advocate is Jim Stengel, with his book **Grow - How Ideals Power Growth & Profit at the World's Greatest Companies**.

He claims businesses need to uncover the "*higher order benefit you bring to the world*" & have an ideal in one of five areas of fundamental human values - eliciting joy, enabling connection, inspiring exploration, evoking pride & impacting society.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your point of view), **Richard Shotton** has conclusively dismissed the claims Stengel makes about how higher purpose delivers superior financial performance (although I'd still recommend the book for its other insights & stories).

So how can this new sense of purpose apply to professional firms? And should we apply it?

Policy of truth.

Look at the statements below from Google, Starbucks & Coca-Cola, each of whom call them a mission. Coca-Cola actually have a Roadmap - it starts with their mission, which declares their purpose. They then have a vision, which serves as a framework for the Roadmap. Wow.



Organise the world's
information to make it
universally accessible &
useful



Inspire & nurture the
human spirit - one
person, one cup & one
neighbourhood at a time



Refresh the world in
mind, body & spirit &
inspire moments of
optimism & happiness

Let's deal with them first. Remember that 70% of Coca-Cola's revenues come from what they themselves describe as a *"sparkling soft drink with vegetable extracts"*.

I love a full fat Coca-Cola, don't get me wrong. But refreshing? It's full of caffeine. It's dehydrating. Moments of optimism? The only thing all that sugar's going to inspire is tooth decay & diabetes.

Onto Starbucks. The human spirit stuff's a bit wishy washy but you can see the link between their mission & what you experience when you go into a store.

First, they're on every corner. Second, they have more, comfier chairs than the competition. The idea is that you spend time in a Starbucks. This was core to the initial business proposition of providing a place for people to meet between the office & home.

Also, there's very little food. In a Starbucks it's all about the coffee. They're clearly positioning themselves apart from Pret A Manger, Costa Coffee & Caffè Nero etc.

And finally Google. Utterly brilliant, if you can forget for a moment how terrifying their statement is (they want to make EVERY PIECE OF INFORMATION about you available to ANYONE & EVERYONE in a form that's useful for WHATEVER THEY WANT TO DO WITH IT).

We can't say we weren't warned. This is a crystal clear statement of Google's purpose. You can see how it gives them scope to move away from being a search engine to other forms of information sharing. It really is brilliant.

There are equally good examples in professional services.

BLM talk about *"making it quicker & easier to reduce risk, resolve disputes & manage claims"*. EY talk about *"building a better working world"*.

Grant Thornton talk about *“helping dynamic organisations unlock potential for growth”* & *“building a vibrant economy”*. Radiant Law talk about *“transforming the way commercial contracts are supported in large organisations”*.

Each of these is a great statement of purpose. And one of the reasons they work is the clear link to each firm's core business activities. Because of that they're relevant, credible & powerful.

The truth shall make you free.

I believe in purpose as articulated by the likes of BLM, EY, Google, Grant Thornton & Radiant Law.

It adds strength & substance to strategy. It helps you make decisions more quickly & easily. It helps you organise your internal resources. It tells people why they should choose you. It gives a framework for your marketing. It's more interesting than talking about how many offices you have.

However, a Jim Stengel type purpose is tricky for most professional firms. So much of what they do is simply incompatible.

They help rich businesses become richer. They help put people out of jobs. They help large corporations pay less tax - tax that would otherwise go towards building schools & hospitals. Most firms are still predominantly the bastion of the white middle class male (I did say most).

Treating people well. Encouraging diversity. Looking after the environment. Supporting your local communities. These things should be ordinary, not extraordinary. But against the backdrop above it would be hypocritical for professional firms to start proclaiming the higher order benefit they bring.

And yet.

Accountants, actuaries, architects, barristers, law firms & others do so much good.

They help people move on from tragedy. They help build hospitals & vital infrastructure. They champion justice. They help schools & social enterprises spread education & care.

They help people plan for later life & safeguard their futures. They help create new businesses that in turn create new jobs. They help innovators invent useful new products that benefit society.

The problem isn't that professional firms don't have a purpose. It's that they're generally rubbish at articulating & communicating what it is.

Speaking at a recent roundtable discussion Elizabeth Fagan, Managing Director of Boots, said some of the most insightful & sensible things about purpose I've heard in a long time. One was that ***“purpose doesn't always have to be a lofty 'doing good' purpose”***.

And this should be the message for professional services firms. Focus on the great stuff you do without worrying about the stuff you don't. And, if you want, call it your purpose.

Thirteen.Be.Distinctive.