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Goodbye To All That

Why branding and other fluff is dead... and the new rules of the road

According to a new study out of Boston College, three-quarters of businesses are reporting flat or declining sales in 2009. According to us, nine-tenths of clients and prospects are feeling paralyzed about how to move forward, and afraid to spend money on just about anything.

The inertia's understandable – up to a point. We're all still trying to grab hold of just how much things have changed, and for how long. Well, how about: *a lot*, and for a long time.

There's no waiting it out, nor going back to the way things were. Here's a quick guide to what works now, what's dead or dying, and what you can do to get unstuck.

New Rules of the Road

Branding is dead (emphasis on "ing"). I'm talking here about the pseudo-science of image advertising, color psychology, and \$1 million logos. Brands will remain important, but only as symbols pointing to the substance beneath, not as tangible assets in and of themselves. I like how James Surowiecki puts it: "Brands are like shadows; they can only go where you go." In other words, it isn't your logo that matters. It's your strategy, your product, your story – and your capacity to see it all through. With limited resources available, focus them on substance, not symbol.

Authenticity rules. Forget hype, image and spin. This is the Age of Authenticity. Consumers rule, and they've had enough corporate B.S. to last a lifetime. Same with employees... especially if they are Millennials. Marketing & Leadership are now built on the same two principles: honesty and transparency. These are the new language of persuasion.

Fewer, stronger businesses will come out on the other side. Not every business will survive the Great Recession of 2008-20???. But those that do will be better, stronger businesses. Fat margins make us sloppy, unfocused and slow to deal with problems. When times are lean, you need all the focus you can get. Let's be honest: many of us are making decisions we should have made a long time ago, whether that's dealing with under-performing employees, killing a product that's become a distraction from core business, or focusing marketing dollars where we *know* there's ROI.

Alignment is everything. There's no margin for confused teams and scattered effort. The visual here is of a crew team rowing through roughening water: Everyone's got to be pulling in the same direction – even if that means fewer people in the boat. The keys to successfully aligning your team:

- **A clear and focused story.** *Where are we going and how will we get there? What sets us apart? Why come along?* Your story must **connect** (through context and inspiration) and **direct** (by specifying behavior). Remember it: Connection and Direction.

- **Consistent leadership communication.** Increasingly, leadership is all about communication – regular, consistent and transparent. In hard times, the potential for employee distraction is huge. Keep teams focused with the steady drumbeat of a connecting, directing story.

Getting Unstuck

Many businesses are stuck because they're swimming upstream against a river of old assumptions – truths and realities that a year ago made sense, but don't anymore.

Whether you own a business or lead a team, here's a simple exercise every leader should do right now to gear up for 2010: Make a list of all the assumptions you might have made about your business one year ago this month – and then update those assumptions to fit today's new realities. *What is still true? What's changed, and how? Where is it leading?*

Here's a list of prompts to get you started:

For Businesses Owners/CEOs

- Customer mindset
- Five year growth projections
- Total size of your market, and your % share
- Keys to marketing success
- Assessment of your team (strengths & capacity)
- Strongest competitors
- Positioning strategy & key differentiators
- Best growth opportunities
- Biggest challenges

For Team Leaders

- Company growth projections
- Department growth projections
- Value added to the company by your department
- Leadership perceptions of your team's value
- Assessment of your team (strengths & capacity)
- Most important priorities
- Biggest challenges

This is your story *today*. It has new truths and a new trajectory. Your call as a leader is simple: Connect your teams to the story, to the new surrounding context, and to a picture of the future. And direct them to focus on the activities that matter most now.

Our Take On It: Commentary and opinion on the books that shape our thinking

THE BOOK: *The Starfish and The Spider – The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*



Forget what you've heard about this book. In reality, it's the ironic tale of how great leaders are required to create a leaderless organization.

Despite its subtitle and ideology put forth in the early chapters, the book actually reinforces a long-known fact: Leaders drive organizations.

Authors Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom have a simple premise: There are two kinds of organizations, Spiders and Starfish. Spiders are rigid, hierarchical and rely on top-down leadership. Cut off the head and the spider dies.

Starfish companies, on the other hand, are built on the power of peer relationships. Knowledge, responsibility and leadership permeate the organization. Cut off a starfish's leg and it grows a new one; in fact, the leg itself can grow into an entirely new starfish.

Familiar Starfish organizations include Craigslist, AA and eBay. Like all Starfish organizations, they are flat, flexible and peers connect directly and support each other without centralized insistence.

Starfish organizations do have leaders, but not in the traditional sense. These leaders understand and value decentralization, open networks and empowerment. Known as Catalysts, they initiate and inspire activity but then willingly—*insistently*—hand over control.

It's important to note the name Catalyst. Like the chemistry term it is borrowed from, a catalyst creates a reaction between other elements that wouldn't occur without it. A catalyst might not know how to solve a problem, but knows the people who can. Catalysts are known for their ability to bring out the best in other people. Chapter Five offers practical advice on how to think and act like a Catalyst.

Implications for Organizational Communication

Catalysts need to be excellent communicators. The temporary nature of their work and fluidity of their career paths demand it. They must be able to quickly articulate their vision or the main reason for bringing the group together, establish an environment where people know how and when to work with each other, launch and nurture good work, and then transfer ownership and responsibility to the circle.

Recommended for:

- Individuals looking to improve their ability to delegate
- Teams considering reorganization
- Leaders looking to elevate their role
- Managers who need to develop talent