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Yesterday's brand promise doesn't hold much promise for tomorrow.

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BY CHERYL HELLER

Consumers are taking control of communication, turning the table on corporations, says Cheryl Heller, the award-winning principle of Heller Communication Design in New York. In this context, losing control means that messages can't be managed, and things that companies prefer not to talk about can't be hidden as easily as they once were, she says, so the only course of action is to make sure that everything you say is true. But, making what you say true is much more difficult, and requires the coordinated efforts of many more people than traditional branding used to require.

Cheryl Y. Kiser, director of marketing for the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship recently explored how these new dynamics are changing the purview and process of branding.

CYK: As a leading expert in this field for over 30 years what's different today about the conversations you're having with corporations?

CH: Until fairly recently, when companies wanted to improve their reputation, they would do some research to measure consumer awareness and attitudes toward their brand, homogenize the results into a slick executive summary, then "sharpen" their messages, create a new ad campaign (also a great time to fire the current agency), spruce up their logo, and in really serious cases, change their name. It was all about putting a new face on – one that better reflected the company's ambitions and the way it wanted to be perceived. And the logic was built on the identification of some superiority in product, service, dependability, or price/value; the classic handful of competitive advantages we all know so well. But these are not sustainable advantages anymore.

CYK: So, are the drivers of this process in the past those driving it today?

CH: The maestros of the old brand transformations were the company's marketing and communication chiefs, and the external brand consultants. Millions and millions of dollars changed hands as people were lectured on the more action-oriented curve of a serif, or a more emotional shade of blue. Countless hours were spent by aspiring agencies of record, capturing the image that would most perfectly reflect the way the CEO wanted his company to be seen. Have you seen the TV special, *Madmen*? Believe it or not, until recently we have been living with the vestigial behavior from that time – when agencies, and their counterparts in corporations, (the marketing department) were the ones that singlehandedly created and controlled a company's fortunes. Clearly this is a tattered notion.

CYK: So what does matter today?

CH: What is most remarkable about branding today is that so many companies have accepted the fact that it is no longer enough to change their messaging – that it is the company itself that has to change. This is enormous news, and it's the impetus for the keen and widespread interest we're seeing in corporate citizenship. We're finding evidence of it everywhere, from hundred-year-old manufacturing companies who are changing the core processes through which they make things, to start ups who are sourcing and developing ideas in a very different way now so that their ethics, and the environment, are embedded in their brand from the start. We're even working with a professional trade organization that wants to offer advice to its members on sustainability as part of its own differentiation.

CYK: Does this change the way you work with companies? How does it impact the process?

CH: In the traditional model of marketing, you determine your target audience in the aggregate: urban males, 25-38 years old, for example. You buy as many impressions as your budget will allow, and “hit” as much of your target audience as possible. In the past, you could be fairly certain that if you bought enough impressions, you would move the needle and get trial, or better yet, increase market share. If you had a good product, and were consistent with communication, the system worked pretty well. What the new transparency has done is to add a company’s behavior into the mix of what gets communicated – not just whether the product is as good as promised, but what the company does and what it stands for. In addition, because anybody can talk to anybody through social networks, people don’t behave in the aggregate any more. Males 25-38 years old, and everybody else for that matter, have vastly increased sources of information at their disposal besides their peers. Little by little, what the company stands for is becoming as much if not more important than what the company says. In a worldwide survey, 56% of respondents said a company’s social responsibility is important in forming their opinion of that company, but only 34% found business basics to be important.¹ And 82% of citizens worldwide believe that companies should do more than give money to solve social problems.² These are numbers that CEO’s take very seriously.

CYK: If communication is no longer under the control of corporations, how can they really take stock of what is being communicated?

CH: First and foremost, they have to recognize that the curtain has been lifted, and consumers have a view that goes all the way backstage. There is a diagram I use in presentations and workshops that was published in the *New York Times*. It charts the paths of emails within Enron, and the breathtaking thing is that, without ever opening an email, researchers were able to identify which people within the company were covering up their behavior, and precisely when they began. It was all based on who they were copying (or not copying),

and the length of the messages. Evidently people are less loquacious when they’re lying.

Once a company accepts that secrets are no longer unassailable, the next step is to try to understand what opinions consumers are forming based on all this new and additional information.

The best way to do that is to talk to customers, and do it in a much more interactive way. Companies have to be open to dialog, and make information available on line. People will gladly tell them what they think if they’re asked.

Also, they have to begin to measure their behavior, or unspoken communication, just as carefully as they consider the messages they put out in advertising, internal communications and their sustainability report. We help them audit behavior along with more typical communications, to determine what conflicts and gaps exist.

CYK: Are you changing the way your clients think, or has working with clients today changed yours?

CH: Of course the answer is both, but I have always found that if you pay attention, and don’t bring a set of preconceived answers to the table, every new client will cause you to learn and grow. What actually made me start thinking about this is the number of times recently that I have been hired to help fix a branding problem, and found that the problem had little to do with the accepted definition of a brand. In other words, it was not that things weren’t being communicated effectively, but that the company didn’t have the appropriate true and relevant things to say. One of my clients, with many subsidiaries in different countries, told us that their customers were confused about their organization and their offering. Once we talked to their customers, we assured them that the customers weren’t confused at all – in fact they had a perfect understanding of the confusion that actually existed. It’s not hard to imagine, before the internet and the ubiquitous corporate website (where a lack of organization is made painfully manifest to the world), before on-line tracking of

orders, before email, that these customers could have remained fairly distant from the inner workings of their supplier. But this is a good example of the seismic shift that's taken place. You simply cannot change people's impressions anymore without changing reality.

CYK: For those of us in the corporate citizenship world this is great news, but I imagine it is a huge transition and new set of skills needed for those inside companies creating and managing brands today.

CH: For sure. Companies listen, in a way that's far more real and ready than they have ever listened before. The conversation moves to whether or not the brand promise includes corporate citizenship, and then, the best way to transform the corporation in order to make it true. Also, the fact that it takes a much broader and deeper form of collaboration to make a brand promise true has enormous ramifications for the way people within a company work together, simply because more people are responsible for it. The communication department relies on colleagues in manufacturing not to compromise the statements it makes. The CRO relies on the marketing department not to overstate results or commitments, casting doubt upon the real things that have been accomplished. Transparency makes all departments more vulnerable, and therefore more dependent on each other to maintain standards and adhere to the all important "no surprises" ethos.

CYK: Specifically, who is at the table today that was not there 5 years ago?

CH: The centers of power are starting to shift – from silos of autonomy (you stick to marketing, I'll take care of sales) to cross-disciplinary teams that collaborate not only to grow the business, but also to make sure that the company's behavior is completely aligned with its promise and its communications. Obviously, we're seeing Chief Responsibility Officers and Chief Integration Officers as part of the team now, but I would go further and say that there are people who should be in the room who are not. Even though collaboration

is more essential than ever for the reasons we've been talking about, the people from manufacturing, sourcing, logistics, HR, etc., still aren't a core part of the process, and they should be. We like to ask the CEO to assemble the appropriate "Brand Champions" who will own the process and make sure that each critical group and function is represented.

CYK: You have enormous opportunities to influence companies around the integration of their CSR/CC to insure authenticity within the brand. When you see a company making the mistakes of the past how do you advise them?

CH: It's pretty easy, actually. We simply ask them to think about the alternative. Let's say they don't change, or keep going on the path they're on, what will happen, and where will they be in five years? Yesterday's brand promise came from the marketing department. It had to do with how the company's products or services performed, how customers were treated, and what kind of experience a purchaser could expect to get for their money. Today's brand promise must include what the company stands for; what role it will play in society, what causes it supports, and what damage it will not do to the environment. To make this kind of brand promise true takes an entire company, working together and believing in the same things. (You know, it takes a village, right?) We think that's true of our own company as well, by the way. Sometimes it shocks prospective clients when we tell them that we have a mission too. Traditionally, branding firms are supposed to be happy and grateful to get any successful company as a client. But we have a rule that our clients must be willing to discuss how corporate citizenship can become an integral part of their brand.

CYK: What's the most important thing you've learned so far?

CH: I think it's an understanding of systems thinking – the relationship between events and cause and effect. The notion that everything is connected, and that we can only understand it and impact it if we see the whole. The laws of the natural world have

so much to teach us about business. We create so many artificial boundaries that don't exist, and that in fact get in the way of collaboration and progress. In my own life, I've had separate careers in design, advertising and branding. I began as an art director and became a writer. I didn't realize it at the time, but my evolution through these transformations was all driven by my hatred of silos. I couldn't bear the notion that there was a line around how I was supposed to approach a problem or which part of a problem I was supposed to try to solve. It never did work, and it never will. It serves a certain kind of status quo that relies on titles and an org chart or specialties within consultant groups, but it's not real. Once you see that, there's no turning back. Brands are more important than ever. So is trust, it just takes a different kind of communication – and a different kind of company – to earn it. ■

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We offer brand strategies, brand workshops and on-site consulting, naming, corporate identity programs, packaging, sustainability reports, employee programs and communications, custom publishing, advertising, design, web development, and events.

1. *The Conference Board of Canada, Revered or Reviled: How Corporate Social Responsibility Can Affect Your Reputation, Choquette and Turnbull, 2000*
2. *Corporate Social Responsibility Monitor, 2003*