

See Your Brand Vision

Before you can tell people what you want them to think about you, you must know clearly who you are. A quick review of most corporate sites reveals a disappointing lack of unique brand visions and distinctive corporate identities. Though some company executives devote time to thinking about and defining who they are and where they want to go, the vast majority seems to come up with impotent copy-and-paste statements, redolent with empty clichés and nebulous objectives.

Take a look at this excerpt from one company's vision statement: "We will be seen in all our markets as the quality leader among international airlines. This will be achieved by:

- Mobilizing our joint talents, know-how and skills
- Inspiring all staff to support our persistent effort to improve quality
- Placing quality first in everything we do
- Setting an annual target of measurable improvement
- Doing things right the first time
- Providing both our external and internal customers with a reliable and punctual product and careful and friendly service."

Now, tell me, which airline is this? American Airlines? British Airways? United Airlines? Well, in fact, it could be any of them, couldn't it? This was taken from KLM's vision statement but, demonstrably, most corporate vision statements read the same. They're largely cut-and-paste jobs, with the only difference being in the company name. I'm not criticizing the way people run their companies. But I am flagging such vision statements with huge question marks. What value do companies gain from such statements? What value do companies gain from probably spending thousands of hours and millions of dollars on articulating a supposed mission? Could it be that these "company visions" are nothing more than pieces of verbal livery that are nice to have and are obligatory on corporate Web sites? Or are the management teams really using these vision statements as guidelines for their work? As Gary Hamel and K.C. Prahalad stated in "Competing for the Future," "At most companies, employees focus on short-term performance, like improving profitability or process. These are important challenges, but people won't go the extra mile unless they know where they're going." A thoughtful, substantial, meaningful vision statement can communicate direction. Personally, I'd love to see a company's personality reflected in its stated vision. Why do these

statements have to be the same? I'd like to see some managerial courage reflected in a vision statement. You could think about an airline's vision like this: "It's not fair that only birds should experience the pleasure of flying." Or, "Humanity should be free of the burdens of distance because any movement limitation is a waste of time." Perhaps these sound more facetious than I intend, but I want to illustrate the value of injecting some provocativeness into the corporate vision, some quality that communicates the corporate personality through a meaningful vision statement and thus differentiates its brand from that of competitors. Vision statements should be distinctive and strong so that anyone within the company's target group can identify the associated brand. Consider this vision statement: "Man is the creator of change in this world. As such he should be above systems and structures, and not subordinate to them." Can you identify what corporation might have expressed this? You guessed right: Apple. This vision was articulated decades ago, but it holds true for Apple today and is compatible with its "Think Different" campaign.



What about this vision statement: "One can embrace either a static or a dynamic way of seeing the world." And this is followed by the brand's "company ambition," which is "to be the catalyst of change for a whole generation." Any guesses? You got it: Pepsi! A vision expresses a brand's place in its world. It articulates a brand's reason for being. For some reason most corporate "visions" are disturbingly similar. Perhaps that reflects the fact that most companies' objectives and most brands' purposes are similar. Or perhaps that reflects the fact that courage is lacking, or nonexistent, in the business world.

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