

## **“ELSIE MAIO’S SOULBRANDING<sup>SM</sup>”**

Text of feature article published in

**MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT** Magazine, Fall 2001

By Reint Gaastra. Translated from the Dutch by M. Loedewiks

### **Looking for companies ready to bare their souls**

Elsie Maio’s *Soul branding<sup>SM</sup>*.

‘We stimulate client companies’ business success by guiding them to become more self-aware, and to demonstrate their conscience’

Elsie Maio has developed a framework to integrate society’s higher values into the *corporate persona*, and then express it through the corporate brand. Former McKinsey communication specialist Maio labeled and trademarked her vision as *Soul branding<sup>SM</sup>*. She and her teams counsel Asian, English and American executives from the New York and Santa Fe offices of *Maio and Company, Inc.*

I first met marketing consultant Elsie Maio toward the end of 1998 at the International Business and Consciousness Conference, where I attended her lecture on Soul branding<sup>SM</sup>. A couple of months ago, in London, I got the opportunity to interview this remarkable woman personally on her conceptual approach. I asked her a few more questions when she visited the Netherlands recently to connect with the Dutch advisers with whom she may join forces in a European network. Among other things I asked her what was the reason for Soul branding<sup>SM</sup>.

In the first place. Maio: ‘Our Soul branding<sup>SM</sup> framework flows logically from the forces shaping global business today. Social responsibilities, environmental care and ethical- and servant-leadership are the underpinnings for any business’ success going forward. A growing group of influentials is actively striving to balance material rewards and socio-spiritual fulfillment and is interested in companies and products with the same attitude. Hence, an opportunity today for companies that would be Soul brands<sup>SM</sup>. What is an opportunity for leaders today will be a necessity for all companies tomorrow.’ Maio is very careful to define ‘what we mean by the term, and that is why we have trademarked it. We do not mean that a company expresses its essence, or soul, in its brand. That goes without saying in good branding discipline today. We are saying, however, that a Soul brand<sup>SM</sup> company’s behavior is guided by the soulful, social values, such as compassion, integrity, cooperation, accountability, transparency, holism, justice.’

According to Maio, companies will be compelled to bare their social souls, otherwise they will miss the boat and lose their customers’ trust. ‘And then they will be regulated and have to play by ‘somebody else’s rules anyway.’ Well-organized advocates of consumer issues, of the environment, and of other basic social interests are on the ascent, and they are already influencing legislation. This factor, coupled with omnipresent media coverage and the Internet, has opened multinationals to greater public scrutiny than ever before. Maio, who started her career on Wall Street, encourages voluntary corporate transparency. She says that today it amounts to enlightened self-interest for corporations. After all, such shortcomings as fraud, inferior products, top managers’ excessive pay, damaging social policies in developing markets, environmental pollution, child labor, virtually every questionable behavior is broadcast globally and immediately.

Elsie Maio and her team perform in-depth research into all corporate stakeholders’ expectations for the future. In this respect her work parallels that of futurologist Faith Popcorn, who focuses on consumers. ‘Our work suggests that: Western consumers expect high-quality products and services; They are anxious about the environment; They worry about the deepening gap between rich and poor. In our view, business leaders have a crucial role here. A growing group of consumers and the court of public opinion are looking for companies to demonstrate a sensitivity to those problems and the will to

address them. Corporations are seen to wield the power on the global stage; they are now being called to task on global issues that relate to their actual impact on society as a whole.'

Soul branding<sup>SM</sup> is an outgrowth of this demand for corporate accountability. It is 'a methodology for corporate leaders simultaneously to embrace the demands for higher values and commercial success.'

### Values-based consulting

According to Maio, who has an office on Fifth Avenue in New York, the pressure for higher corporate values manifests itself in three ways: (1) the trend toward socially sound entrepreneurship and investing; (2) the emergence of a class of organizations whose purpose is to encourage values-driven company behavior, both in a commercial sense, such as those promoting codes of corporate behavior, and from the perspective of a social agenda too, such as NGOs; and (3) the development of *values-based consulting*. *Values consulting* - the work that needs to be done to reveal or intensify such higher values in companies - is expanding, even in such historically hard-numbers environments as the big accounting/consulting firms.

'In our work, we find that companies who invest in techniques to improve employees' sense of fulfillment and self-awareness achieve important commercial results. Those employees who enjoy such a level of consciousness are both in the literal and the figurative sense more 'value(s)able'. They radiate a genuine service ethic to their customers. It is a simple mechanism: the more we know and respect ourselves, the more easily we can put ourselves in someone else's shoes. It is a matter of being aware. In short, we advise and encourage companies, by way of using market discipline, organizational change management, and corporate branding, to turn their company into one with awareness and a conscience, and to radiate it through all their brand expressions'.

Maio mastered the brand management discipline over the past twenty years. Her traditional positioning clientele have included IBM, Mellon Bank, Eastman Kodak as well as European and Asian organizations. Stepping back, she describes the evolution of socially inspired business practice: In the initial phases, the corporation strives to be (or to be seen as) *green*, during the second phases *sustainability* of resource systems is at the center of the company's business model, and in the ascending third phase, corporate decisions emanate from a sense of global *awareness, responsibility* and *ethics*, a true intention to enhance life on earth through its innovative, profitable, operation.

Maio: 'When a company commits itself to the Soul branding<sup>SM</sup> framework, it recognizes its role in a holistic system: that of the earth and of humanity. Key characteristics of these companies include humility, care, compassion, inspiration, innovation, empowerment, high-performance, respect, honesty, accountability and a holistic view.'

The corporate brand, being both the beacon and vessel for corporate culture and expression, seems a valuable tool to implement these values within the organization as well as to radiate them to the outside world. No wonder Maio focuses her ambitious work in the discipline of brand management. Maio: 'The corporate brand influences three very discerning 'customer' groups: the buyer, the investor and the employee. Properly conceived, the brand vessel can be made elastic enough to embrace the differences between internal corporate stakeholders as well as the vying priorities of disparate external groups, such as social advocates and investors. Moreover, as a beacon of corporate aspiration, the brand has the breadth to radiate the spirit of an age'.

As a matter of fact, not every organization is ready to become a fully integrated Soul brand<sup>SM</sup>, as Maio has defined it, but can grow toward it through good leadership. It is a matter of executing the intended policy through deliberate management, an integrated market vision and carefully calibrated corporate behavior. In that respect, the CEO is the company's chief brand manager. Each and every day, she or he bridges all parts of the corporation and personifies the brand, by example showing how to interpret the corporate vision, goals and ethos. And the moment leadership asserts a vision, the organization looks for ways to align with it. The declared intention initiates the creation.

Internal is external

Maio and Company in fact offers more than mere brand consultancy; the client organization needs to undergo internal changes as well to live the brand promise. Because of the integrated vision behind Soulbranding, Maio works with a network of consultants in the fields of organizational development and corporate culture.

Client projects are primarily CEO-sponsored or led, with second line responsibility taken by the Chief Strategy Officer, Chief Marketing Officer, and Human Resources leader as an internal agent of change. Maio prefers to work according to the so-called 'hub and spoke'-concept, in which two teams work together as partners on the new framework: an 'advisory' Maio-team and an 'operational' team on the part of the client. 'I am always available to the client team and CEO. The various specialists from our team keep in close touch with the specialist client teams. This is hands-on advisory work. I make sure never to be involved in more than two major projects at the same time. Otherwise I will not be able to provide the necessary attention.

Maio believes that 'the brand experience' should be felt in each part of the organization. A corporate brand is most authentic when it radiates at a cellular level in the organization. In that respect it is of the utmost importance that all disciplines within the company learn to operate from the same body of thought. The outgoing message should similarly be propagated within the organization. In fact, external marketing equals internal marketing, internal is external. "Branding is Being," says Maio.

'We cannot paint the outside world a picture that differs from the story we live every day with our employees. The products' brand managers should always bear in mind the philosophy behind the corporate brand when communicating. This also holds true for the designers and researchers of new products, both they and all employees in contact with customers should work from that fundamental attitude.' Maio confers with the CEO about the project's progress on a regular basis. 'This is essential, since this is about a radical change in thoughts and actions and about the positioning of the whole organization. The CEO should be able to monitor this entire process closely.'

Maio mentions Ben & Jerry's (although the takeover by Unilever may have tainted the company's soul), The Body Shop, and Monsanto as companies that seem to aspire toward a greater social vision. She thinks Shell, too, is on its way to becoming a Soul brand<sup>SM</sup>. Shell's outreach to various external constituent groups in society commands her respect.

For instance, a Soul brand<sup>SM</sup> company is not a company that has conjured up some values and corresponding rules of conduct simply on the basis of self-analysis; there are already enough of those. It is rather a company which has related its own operational values – such as financial leadership -- to higher, stimulating values that not only serve the employees and investors, but the interests of mankind in general. It is not only the survival of the company that counts, it is the company's contribution to the health of its operating context – the earth and those beings in it. Maio states that this requires a management *mindshift*. Maio is not unique in dealing with values and with socially sound entrepreneurship, but in making these issues relevant to CEOs operating under high pressure from Wall Street. By the way: what is it that a consultant should 'have' to be able to advise on Soul branding<sup>SM</sup>? Maio, speaking inspirationally: 'Apart from their own professional specialties, our affiliates should have a feeling for branding, but that goes without saying. Consultants should also have a sense of the dynamics of organizational change, personal development and social reform from a holistic point of view'.

### **Who is Elsie Maio?**

Elsie Maio (49) has been positioning corporations for twenty years now. Apart from the New York location, she runs a business in the quiet town of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Here she can focus on her book '*Soul Branding: Capturing the Economic Value of Social Responsibility*', which is yet to appear this year. Maio started her career in investment research on Wall Street. After having been a senior editor at '*Institutional Investor*' magazine, she moved into the world of management consultancy with McKinsey & Company. After that she worked as a senior partner for several bureaus in the fields of communication and marketing. At that time her work focused on corporate identity.

Since 1994, Maio has had her own consultancy and advises Fortune 100-companies. She also counsels non-profit organizations and sits on the Advisory Board of the Sisters of Mercy. Maio is assembling a network of European consultants interested in bringing *Soul branding*<sup>SM</sup> to their clients.  
[www.soulbranding.com](http://www.soulbranding.com) E-mail: [emaio@maioandco.com](mailto:emaio@maioandco.com)