

# Capturing the economic value of values

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**F**ive years ago, at DMI's 10th International Brand/Corporate Identity Conference, it felt like a huge risk to predict that a tsunami of corporate accountability would change the standards for business behavior. Since then, wrenching social and economic drivers appear to be doing just that. In the process they are washing away layers of outdated business norms. While the storm has wreaked havoc with much of the professional services sector, (accountancies not the least of them), those services that align with the flow of prudent, genuinely responsible business management are defining a new wave of growth.

The trend shows itself in choices constituents make across the economy. For example, the fastest growing financial instruments are those that demonstrate transparency, accountability, responsibility, and respect for stakeholders—the screened investment funds. A booming market for so called “healthy, sustainable lifestyles” is raising the bar in mainstream food and leisure sectors. The best and brightest graduates prefer employers that integrate social values into business practices. And finally, the value system of Paul Ray's “Cultural Creatives” is coloring mainstream marketing messages. Promotions from the financial sector (Citibank) to automobiles (Toyota), are leaning heavily on the halo effect of environmental and social sensitivity. “It's cool to say you care” could be the new marketing mantra. We can only hope it's also becoming essential to prove it.

What the EU has dubbed “civil society” is demanding business transparency and tangible adherence to social values. And this is where the empowered stakeholder is shaking the branding business to its core. Audiences are turning away from advertising and other marketing

pipelines that have forced numbed consumers for so long. In some circles the term “branding” itself is tainted with the hue of over-commercialization and abusive self-interest. The true test for corporate management now is in living up to, or “being,” what clever, entertaining, brand messaging used to simply promise.

Accordingly, an evolved approach to brand management plays a central role in helping the CEO to capture the economic value of the evolving norms. Historically brand managers were content to sample audiences periodically, remotely, if you will. Now they are asked to embrace them as stakeholders: interactively, collaboratively, almost continually. The payoffs for business range from risk management at the low end, to the more direct economic value of deeper customer relationships, greater trust, and the advantages of market-driven innovation.

How does it work? To begin with, a formally inclusive approach to managing brand can itself help build an authentically values-driven culture. Here, the primary role of the brand is to establish the standards for behavior: not in rules and regulations, but in the spirit that drives ethical, balanced decision-making throughout the organization.

Second, the corporate brand is a multi-stakeholder asset now. Managed as such, it can be enriched by these activist partners. If not, their relentless scrutiny will shape it *de facto*. Accordingly, CEO stewards of this “shared” asset tend to do seven things to keep it healthy—with the support of a renewed professional services sector, or without it:

1. Take a real stand for matching the talk with the walk
2. Take the long, strategic view
3. Listen deeply
4. Build social value(s)

5. Dance with more stakeholders, more of the time
6. Facilitate rich, chaotic, solutions rather than “asking the expert”
7. Know, and heal, the corporate value system.

## The role of design

One of the stunning, early lessons I learned at McKinsey & Company was the power of design in business consulting. The firm's visual communications guru, Gene Zelazky, still wields a felt tip like Michaelangelo, freeing from petrified decks of data the kernel of compelling truth that moves clients to see and to act with understanding. Gene's gift, not unlike Edward Tufte's, is to convey in immediate human terms a gestalt that integrates the left and right brain messages.

Since focusing on SoulBranding<sup>SM</sup> over the past five years, we've discovered other designers, architects, materials engineers, who are incorporating the balanced social/business agenda into their design intent. They are using design to fulfill the promise of the “cool to care” positioning. We believe this is one of the significant growth opportunities for the field.

Now, the world seems to be on a threshold, culturally, politically and economically. One professional opportunity immediately in front of us is to help humanize business so that the humans it serves can trust, respect and contribute more fully to the mutual benefit of their relationship. In collaboration with other change disciplines, design has a big role to play in discovering, communicating, and delivering on that intent. ■

Elsie Maio guides CEOs to capture the business value of their corporate values. Maio and Company's proprietary SoulBranding<sup>SM</sup> ([www.soulbranding.com](http://www.soulbranding.com)) method is featured in the new book *A Branded World*, by Michael Levine, John Wiley & Sons, 2003 .

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