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# The Next Wave: Soul Branding

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# The Next Wave: *Soul Branding*<sup>1</sup>

**S**OCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, environmental sensitivity, ethical leadership—as Elsie Maio charts the evolution of corporations, these are the kinds of inspirational values that add power to contemporary brands. As consumers seek to be the “best they can be,” they are attracted to businesses that do the same. This gives meaning to and helps integrate the many activities of modern global organizations. It also poses special challenges to CEOs and designers who can collaborate to fashion both the vision and the reality of this “soul branding.”

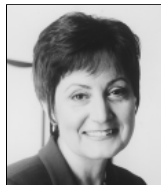
*by Elsie Maio*

*Identity:* Individuality, personality, singularity, selfhood, character, distinctiveness.

Source: America Online 4.0 Thesaurus

**Compelling evidence** suggests that over the coming years, corporate brand identity will provide a platform for solving a set of critical, functional corporate issues, seize the imaginations of corporate advisors, and set corporate agenda in the executive suite. Why? Three factors rise above the rest.

- The corporate brand influences the three most critical corporate audiences: the marketplace customer, the stock market customer, and the employee “customer.”
- The corporate brand projects a beacon wide enough to address unprecedented internal diversity.
- The corporate brand has the texture and depth to speak in a compelling



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fashion in the spirit and language of these times.

The first two factors—the corporate brand’s audience overlap and internal breadth of influence—have been brought to a point by the whirling dynamics that redefine the global business environment. Nanocycles of technology, wholesale erosion of barriers to entry, commoditization made obvious by transparent currencies, global access to capital, consumerization of investment markets, and the increasing entrepreneurization of the workforce, are some of the forces that challenge the old industrial order. These have been well documented in the past few years across mass media and have been experienced by many of us.

The third factor, on the other hand,

<sup>1</sup> “Soul brand” and “soul branding” are service marks of Maio and Company, 1998. All rights reserved.

has only begun to emerge. It is the focus of our discussion here and, increasingly, of our professional consulting practice at Maio and Company.

### The Case for Soul Branding

Our research suggests that the Western consumer has begun to expect more than high-quality products and services from corporations. We are, for instance, increasingly concerned about the environment. We worry about the expanding gulf between the “haves” and the “have-nots” around the world. And, along with experts like George Soros, we are increasingly sensitive to the huge gap between what the global economic system needs and what governments can provide.<sup>2</sup> If political leadership and acumen can't set things right, then perhaps another unifying power structure will step up to the mark. In any event, the public is looking for corporations to demonstrate higher values.

When we consulted the *Harvard Business Review* and similar mainstream, conservative sources, we found this appetite for higher values manifested in three ways: a trend toward socially responsible investing, the appearance of what we might call “values-based consulting” for major corporations, and the growth of conferences and consortia dedicated to promoting values-driven corporate behavior.

- *Socially responsible investing* in the United States surged impressively from '95 to '97. In fact, the assets in screened portfolios—that is, portfolios that exclude, for instance, tobacco and weapons companies or firms that are criticized for their labor practices—rose 227 percent in two years, from \$162 billion to \$529 billion. That's impressive, considering that during the same period the overall market grew only 84 percent, and the S&P grew by only 69 percent.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, *Nelson's Directory of Investment Managers* says that more than 9 percent of investment assets under professional management in the US are invested in socially responsible institutions.
- *Values consulting*—the work of strengthening or building higher values into corporations is on the rise. We recently learned that a prominent management consultancy has dedicated significant worldwide resources to exploring how techniques to “free the spirit” of employees enhance customer retention.

In the May issue of *The Journal of Management Consulting*, the European strategy consultant Jay Berry wrote:

“Have values really changed? Or is it just getting more fashionable to mouth off about more humanistic, spiritualistic values? You couldn't be having rising social consciousness all around us, evident in comportment, rebellion, gender conflict, social outrage and

audits at the White House, if we were not in the middle of emerging ethical awareness. Even just a few years ago it was still in the ho-hum category. It's not any longer.”<sup>4</sup>

- *Global leaders* have heard the call. They are forming international consortia to promote higher values and are sending their managers to conferences on such topics as “Business and Consciousness” and “Spirituality and Business.” In some cases, the corporations even underwrite these events. An example of the former is the Caux Round Table, a consortium of luminary organizations founded in 1986 in Caux, Switzerland. Last year, in a position paper,<sup>5</sup> the Round Table asserted that business stands at the crossroads of the various fundamental changes taking place in the world. Business, it continued, has a crucial role in helping to identify and promote solutions to issues that impede the development of a more prosperous, sustainable, and equitable society. It exists to promote principled business leadership as reflected in the CRT's *Principles for Business*, the most widely circulated standard of corporate conduct in the world. It seeks to continue widening the circles of senior business leaders around the globe who share its vision.

The Caux Round Table was founded by Dr. Frederick Philips, the former chairman of Philips Electronics, and by Olivier Giscard d'Estaing, the vice chair of INSEAD, the European Institute of Business Administration. Members include Ryuzaburo Kaku, Chairman Emeritus, Canon; Winston R. Wallin, Chair Emeritus, Medtronic; Ronald Baukol, Executive Vice President, 3M; Jean Fayet, Chair, Siemens Automotive S. A.; Norio Matsumura, President, Nissan Europe; Joseph J. Melone, Chair, Executive Committee, Equitable Companies Incorporated.

Soul branding is another aspect of such trends. It is an attempt to address society's appetite for higher values. It is not revolutionary but, instead, seems evolutionary. It stems from the kind of appeal to emotions that has long been the hallmark of con-

2. Soros, George, “The Capitalist Threat,” *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1997, pp. 45-58; Soros, George, “Toward a Global Open Society,” *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1998, pp. 28-32.

3. Social Investment Forum, “1997 Report on Responsible Investing Trends in the United States,” pp. 1-2.

4. Berry, Jay, “Mr. Consultant/Businessman...I Can't Place the Face,” *Journal of Management Consulting*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (May 1998), pp. 55-57.

5. Caux Round Table, “The Critical Role of the Corporation in a Global Society: A Position Paper of the Caux Round Table,” October 1997.

sumer marketing, and it takes emotional appeal to the next level—a level perhaps demanded by the evolution of society.

To get a sense of that evolution, look back to 1957, when Vance Packard wrote *The Hidden Persuaders*. Packard described the motivational research that advertising agencies used in the 1940s to understand the emotional needs that products should satisfy in order to attract customers. They knew, as you know, that emotion-based appeals can help insulate a brand from the vagaries of the market and even add value by simplifying choice. Such emotional appeals are universal; they speak to everyone, regardless of language or station.

Interestingly, the emotional needs identified in the late 1950s were the drive to conformity, the yearning for security, and the need for oral stimulation. This was the postwar period; people were craving peace and recovering from food shortages. And the state of the marketing art at the time was to sell consumer goods based on emotional appeals to these needs. Now let's look at what has evolved since then.

Figure 1 shows a positioning continuum our firm has used as a working model for a number of years. It moves from a focus based solely on product performance to a focus on the "inner meaning" of the brand itself, if you will—from generic to performance-based positioning through an "emotional" and then an "inspirational" stance. With each step up the continuum, the brand gains power by deepening the connection to its audience's psyche.

Of course, there are historical and economic reasons why certain types of companies and industries position themselves at different points along this continuum. For instance, utilities—and other regulated businesses for which competitive conditions

have been fairly muffled—tend to settle for inexpensive, generic branding. Next on the continuum are industries that make products traditionally chosen on the basis of features and functions. Technology products, for instance, fit this category of "considered purchases." Continuing upward, we enter the traditionally emotional category of personal care products, cosmetics, and fashion clothing. The final step up the continuum—the inspirational level—has traditionally belonged to religions and charities. These last are the "big picture" types of positionings that we now think of as "soul branding."

In fact, a recent sampling of print ads—one surrogate for ascertaining intended positionings—suggests a mass migration up the positioning continuum, driven by structural economic trends such as deregulation, consolidation, and product commoditization. For example, utilities and energy companies are now moving *up* the continuum in an acknowledgment that deregulation has left their businesses vulnerable to commodity status. A host of uncharacteristic marketing campaigns are trying to differentiate these companies by brand personality attributes.

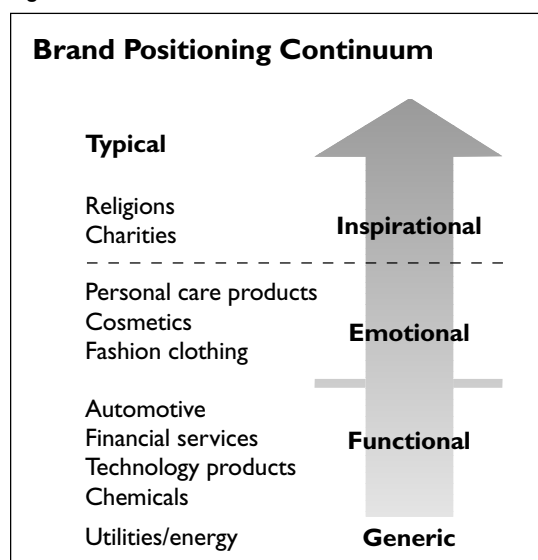
Businesses that traditionally used functional, features-oriented positioning are similarly moving up a positioning level to make a more emotional appeal. Even industries like chemicals and technology are using ads that contain high-touch human images, particularly of children. In the past, such "warm and fuzzies" would have been considered not serious enough for "considered purchase" categories.

Financial services firms, especially banks, had historically been undifferentiated in marketing and branding, but this is also changing. For example, American Express is now combining its traditional product orientation, which is based on fear of loss ("Don't [dare to] leave home without it"), with an attempt to position the brand around an inspirational notion—the freedom to "do more."

Personal care products, cosmetics, and fashion clothing have probably taken the emotional level as far as it can go, but now other types of companies are joining them at the extremes. Airline ads, for example, are full of images and words that connote and affirm life. Richard Branson's Virgin brand was the subject of a recent article in *The Conference Board's Across the Board* magazine, which marveled at Branson's power to drape Virgin in a cloak of emotional appeal and trust—so much so that the article cites a poll by the BBC in which young people rated Branson as a figure they would trust to revise the Ten Commandments.<sup>6</sup> I'd like to see

6. Vogl, A.J., "Virgin Territory," *Across the Board*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Feb. 1996), p. 1. Incidentally, Jay Berry aptly refers to this master of the art as Richard BRANDson.

Figure 1



Brands that work hardest transcend functional attributes.

what those commandments would be!

At the top of our continuum is the increasingly popular inspirational level. Images of spiritual aspiration abound—hands reaching up to the sky, clouds, spires, references to the ethereal, the eternal. An ad for the relaunched Volkswagen Beetle quips, “If you were really good in a past life, you come back as something better.” This reincarnation theme, a soul reference, is becoming more visible. Some of these are tongue in cheek, of course, like one of our favorites about vodka, but we’ll have more to say on that later.

While a number of companies are delving deeper into the higher values and global consciousness of their constituents, a few have gone even further into the territory of the soul brands. These companies—like Monsanto and the Body Shop—seem to be going beyond mere advertising to taking a more active role in living a soul positioning (figure 2).

Take Monsanto. Their tag line is “Food, health, hope.” Their ads feature images of the earth. But internally—for example, in employee training videos—they also take a bold, universal caretaker perspective, positioning themselves with employees as open, collaborating, participatory. Their internal magazines serve as a forum for exceptionally free-form discussion. They also aggressively use online sites to communicate, two-way, with their employees. Monsanto appears to be trying to build a consciousness of higher values, ethics, and openness throughout the company.

Just about now, a healthy dose of skepticism will seep into the reader’s consciousness. Why should these ads be seen as anything more than “the latest marketing spin” or an attempt to fend off the environmentalists with a superficial “greenwashing” of the corporate image? These are the right questions, in our view. And lofty “promises” must be substantiated in a meaningful way. Companies that aspire to align their identity with the higher values of their constituents are reaching for a higher ground that demands more of them than just profits.

Most of us are familiar with Anita Roddick’s Body Shop. Roddick founded the company in 1976 in the UK as a line of natural cosmetics and treatments. While other cosmetics traded on ego and narcissistic emotional drives, the Body Shop took the high ground and invoked notions of integrity and animal (and later human) rights. Last time we counted, the Body Shop had more than 1,500 stores in almost 50 countries. Recently, Roddick’s firm joined Amnesty International in sponsoring a program that publicized individuals imprisoned for political reasons. And if you go into a Body Shop, as we have, the enthusiastic shopkeeper might give you the opportunity to ink your thumb and leave your uniquely personal imprint on a petition to free the

particular prisoner whose poster image prominently graces the retail environment. That visual imprint transcends language, transcends political and cultural borders, and is wordlessly and universally human.

Royal Dutch/Shell appears to be attempting to move in a socially responsible direction. For example, their Web site invites visitors to participate in a heart-to-heart exchange on issues of a higher order. In that site, Royal Dutch Shell talks about society’s rising expectations of business and says to its visitors:

“...tell us what you think of our performance [financial, social, and environment] and in this way participate with us in the global debate about the role and responsibilities of business.”

For companies at the interface of business and the environment, this is dangerous ground; these promises are hard to keep. Any hint of “greenwashing” casts a pall of disingenuousness that is hard to shake off. Natural-resource companies must pass significant behavioral milestones before they can be shifted from “the other side of the fence.”

What, then, qualifies a company as a credible soul brand? The answer is that soul brands are not only communicating, but are really trying to *live* by, a set of higher ideals, including a sense of social responsibility. They express strong, uplifting emotions; they embrace the notion of being a global citizen; they advocate and cherish human values through their actions.

Interestingly, these qualities correlate with another model that has been around for a while, which we know as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Abraham Maslow was a psychologist who founded the humanistic psychology movement in the 1950s. One of his key concepts is that there’s a continuum of human needs, and the lower ones must be satisfied before the higher ones can even be addressed. At

Figure 2



the lowest level are physiological needs—the basics of food, clothing, and shelter. When humans have those, they can begin to worry about the next higher order of needs—safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and finally, *self-actualization*—which is the satisfaction of becoming the best you can be.

Here's a thought: Maybe we as a society are going through this kind of evolution. If the majority of people were craving security and conformity (and three square meals a day) in the 1940s, maybe a critical mass is trying to "be the best we can be" in the human family today.

### The Implications for Corporations— and the CEO

So what is the implication of all this for branding, and for those of us who help create brands? The evidence is piling up in favor of corporate soul branding. It's a step toward addressing global economic and social issues that, if not resolved, could overwhelm the positive trajectory of all our lives—individual, corporate, and societal. It's also the result of deep psychological and emotional needs that have been evolving for decades.

And perhaps equally important, it may be central to the success of the corporations themselves. As companies grow through acquisition, they become an agglomeration of product brands. What then does the corporation stand for? This is key perhaps more for the employees of the corporation than for its customers, and for the CEO most of all. When members of divisions work on strategy, what are the values that keep them on track? When the corporation focuses on attracting and retaining talent, around which values does it build its team? When products are aimed at different markets and have different personalities, it is the corporate soul that must provide the integration. Certainly, a compelling corporate brand is just as important in the corporate

space as it is in the marketplace.<sup>7</sup> And a soul brand is simply a corporate brand with a deep, values-based appeal that is willing to be held accountable.

Marketers and other creatives alone cannot make this work. Cross-functional teams must work with top managers, including the CEO, to construct a promise the organization will *deliver*. The CEO is central for two reasons. First, a soul brand must engage the CEO's vision and passion. As a case in point, corporate filmmaker Vern Oakley describes the importance of CEO engagement:

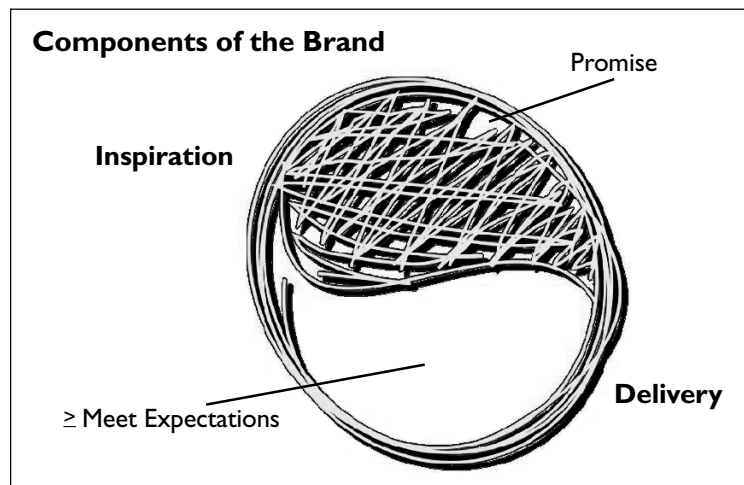
"A Fortune 100 company had decided to split into three separate companies. The equipment, manufacturing and research division had yet to be named. The audience was the entire employee population. [Among the employees] there was a passion, a confidence and excitement about starting anew, about being cut free so they were unencumbered to compete. Now for the second part of the equation: What was the CEO's vision? I did some research on him. The employees liked him. He was locating the new headquarters in the research division, a sign of a new way of doing business. But what most impressed me was that he had decided to come out of retirement to take on this challenge. In talking with him he mentioned it as the opportunity of a lifetime, not just for the company but for him."<sup>8</sup>

The soul brand begins with a passionate vision of the company. That can translate into a brand promise that separates the brand from the pack and suggests a benefit that transcends the simple utility of a product-need satisfied. We think that leading this visioning process is a critical role for the CEO as we head into the millennium, and some CEOs are beginning to see it that way, too.

Henry B. Schacht, Lucent Technologies' chairman and CEO, has singled out the essential contributions of individual leaders to "the life of the market... Their lives are monuments to the great things that the public-spirited management can achieve [in the combination of] business enterprise and the unleashing of the moral imagination in the marketplace...."<sup>9</sup>

The second reason CEO leadership is needed is because a brand is part promise—and part delivery on that promise (figure 3). The company must not only communicate its vision to its customers; it must live it, every day, as an organization. Promise and delivery must house the same message, or the

Figure 3



Brand halo is part inspiration... and part delivery.

7. Thanks to my friend and colleague, Joel Portugal, for this phrasing.

8. Vern Oakley is president of Tribe Pictures, which promotes soul branding to its Fortune 100 clients.

9. Henry B. Schacht, introduction to "Remarkable Business Lives" in David Bollier's *Aiming Higher* (New York: Amacom, 1996), pp. 295-297.

brand is empty and nobody is fooled.<sup>10</sup> Although marketing and creative professionals can make an inspiring promise, and do all the time, they do not have the clout to make it come true.

And so, brand is holistic, organic. It needs nurturing. It is shaped by all the points of contact that a constituent experiences (figure 4). It cannot substitute for poor performance, and it cannot cover contradictions between a promise and a behavior, no matter how well developed its creative expression.

Marketing miracle Nike is a case in point. Nike has made and continues to make a big inspirational promise, so they've got the first part right. In fact, on their Web site, the promise continues to ring loud and clear: "We speak the language of aspiration, inspiration and perspiration. Straight from the soul of sports."

In fact, they established a strong brand promise that reached all the way to laborers in less-developed parts of the world—and therein lay the problem. The perceived exploitation of labor in this high-margin business didn't coincide with the promise. It created a disequilibrium. It alarmed the market. *Newsday* reported, for example, on a civil suit filed in California:

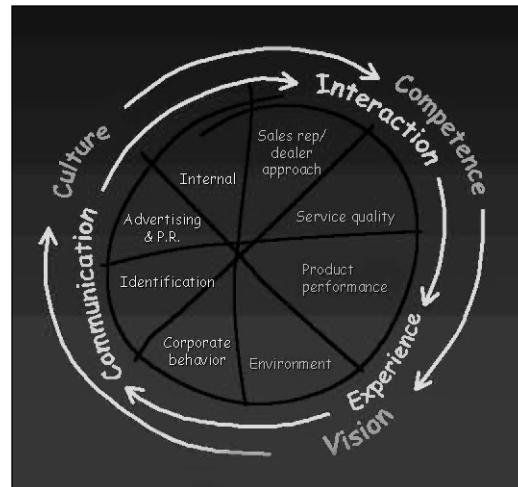
...despite an aggressive campaign to promote its image as a "model of corporate responsibility," Nike is ignoring violations in factories in Vietnam, Indonesia and China.<sup>11</sup>

Later, CNN Online reported that "renegade filmmaker" Michael Moore had released a film lashing out at Nike's labor practices. When the market sees disequilibrium, it punishes swiftly and deeply.

Disequilibrium can be corrected, though, as we saw in the famous Johnson & Johnson Tylenol scare. A big part of J&J's brand promise was *purity*, and that promise was contradicted by the delivery of tainted product. J&J's response, which was so powerful for them, was based on the corporate brand promise. They said, in effect, "The parent's promise is what's operating here. And we stand for ethical behavior and integrity. So we are immediately calling in all of that product in the name of the safety of our customers." What they managed to do was over-deliver on the promise (a model of *service recovery* versus Nike's *overpromise on delivery*).

Walking that wobbly line of credibility—that meshing of promise and delivery—is a dance of continual course correction. It takes a CEO to hold the reins and guide the far-flung horsepower that delivers on the promise of a soul brand—the employees, the visual identity team, the advertising, the internal communications, distributors, the type of service that accompanies the product, the way the product works, its ergonomics, and the environment in which it is used and bought. All those levers skew the impression and expectations of the brand.

Figure 4



The brand is shaped by all the points of contact (inner circles), which reflect the corporate reality (outer circle).

### A Dual Challenge for Creatives

Design, of course, can play a part in many arenas—not just the "visual," and not just "identification." Indeed, it can completely change the experience offered by a company to its employees and to its external constituents—thus transforming the brand. Two challenges must be addressed: first, the functional silos that keep "business" problem solvers at arm's length from "creative" problem solvers; and second, the challenge of expanding the notion of design to include the holistic experience of a brand.

Two cases<sup>12</sup> will illustrate the benefits of overcoming this first point. One is a Belgian movie theater company that found itself trapped between the rising popularity of videocassettes and the high cost of running cinemas. They put together integrated teams and came up with a new model, designing a whole new experience of theater-going that actually reversed the trend of shrinking attendance at film theaters in that country. The design teams created aisles wide enough to allow viewers to remain seated even if other viewers needed to pass them to get to a seat; they added viewing screens that were huge and encompassing; and they placed the theaters in the suburbs, where parking would be plentiful and easy (this went against all the conventional wisdom about high-traffic areas being

10. This core principle applies to all branding contexts: corporate, product—even nation-states. *Fast Company* ascribes similar sentiments to Geoff Mulgan, said to be repositioning the "United Kingdom" brand. Feb.-March 1999, pp. 173-176.

11. Reuters, "Sweatshop Suit Latest in Nike Attacks," *Newsday*, April 21, 1998, p. A46.

12. W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, "Value Innovation: The Strategic Logic of High Growth," *Harvard Business Review*, January/February 1997, pp. 103-107.

more suited to the whims of impulse-moviegoers). The giant theater they created reportedly has one of the lowest cost structures in the industry, and the enterprise, which is called Kinopolis, came to dominate the market.

The other case is a French budget hotel chain called Accor that was competing on price and convenience. Accor's teams brainstormed about what budget travelers really want—which boils down to a good night's sleep in a clean room—and they designed rooms that focused on delivering those basics at a low cost. Accor's hotel rooms were designed as modular units that could be fabricated

in a factory, thereby keeping costs down and quality control up. They were very well insulated for sound, and they were just big enough to hold a good bed and some shelves for clothing and other personal effects. The hotel chain is called Formula 1, and last year its market share in France was greater than the sum of the five next larger players. In both cases, design was central to creating out-of-

the-box creative solutions to business problems.

When designers turn their attention to the corporate brand, we can expect the same kind of creativity. Their nonlinear approach to problem solving can add much to both strategy development and the communication of strategy—that is, the brand promise and its delivery in all its richness.

Which leads to the second challenge: designing the brand experience as it is received on a human level—holistically, cumulatively, inspirationally. Bernd Schmitt and Alex Simonson pose this concept provocatively in their book *Marketing Aesthetics*. They talk about *synesthesia*, “the stimulation of one sense by another sense... [which] creates an integration of primary elements such as colors, shapes, scents, and materials into ‘systems of attributes’ that express a corporate or brand aesthetic style.”<sup>13</sup> Synesthesia suggests the graphic designer/musician/perfumer/tactile specialist all working together in a well-orchestrated symphony of identity management. We would provoke this Gestalt notion even further and propose that the offering itself, its performance, benefits, pricing, accumulated image, distribution context, service system, and so on, all materially contribute to the impact of such designed synesthesia. What a powerful combination this multi-sensory design model would make playing a duet with business strategists and product developers.

**The key for design and other creatives is to work for inspiration, consistency, and credibility, wherever the brand promise falls on the continuum of positioning**

## Conclusion

In many cases, the corporation will not be ready for a full-fledged soul brand. It might, depending on its audience, prefer to wink at the idea of higher values (such as a vodka ad that evokes the hereafter)—or it might be content with an image that falls somewhat lower on the framework we looked at earlier. The key for design and other creatives is to work for inspiration, consistency, and credibility, wherever the brand promise falls on the continuum of positioning. In this way, the creative spirit leads reality, adding value the CEO and other managers can well appreciate.

To do that, we see designers at the best organizations working more closely with top management than ever before. It is clear that, if a corporation is to walk its talk, creatives and managers must walk hand in hand. ♦

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13. Schmitt, Bernd and Alex Simonson, *Marketing Aesthetics* (New York: Free Press, 1997), pp. 105-106.

Special acknowledgements to Susan Benthall, Stephanie Marlin-Curiel, and Christine Sposato for their diligent research, organization, and inspiration in developing this concept.

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