

## THOUGHTS: WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU...

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Prepared by: Terry Tyrell, Worldwide Chairman

Biomedical scientists, so say last month's press, are the next step closer to cracking the common cold and finding a cure. The shape-shifter of the century more adaptable than Madonna, the dreaded lurgy that accounts for more sick days only second to hangovers may one day be finally foiled. Trumped by a tissue. Snuffed out with a sniff. Cleaned up by a Kleenex.

But don't hold your breath. The small print admits that "*results may vary outside of a test tube*", markedly different to a human nose. At the risk of calling Madge a virus – though comparably contagious and partial to viral campaigns – both contortionists have demonstrated an uncanny ability to endure through a capacity for reinvention and mutation, infecting their audiences the world over.

Decades to get here, it'll undoubtedly take decades more until an over-the-counter remedy is on hand. For the cold, that is. I suspect Madge might be around a while longer.

And so, the only reliable means of defence remains not to swaddle yourself in swabs and bandages and stake out an antiseptic sanctuary somewhere, but to put yourself in the frontline of the flu firing squad and take what comes. Just like the kid at playschool whose popularity peaks when he has chicken pox, it's only through exposure to the world out there that you're able to build up your natural defences.

What's that got to do with the price of eggs, you're wondering? Or, more pointedly, your share price.

Everything.

Short of an over-the-counter remedy, your immunity is your best line of defence. And, for organisations today, it's your Brand's Immunity System.

In today's market place, lurking with marauding maladies in various guises – competitors, clients, even your customers, and more – your staff, your systems, your service – your brand's immunity, the ability to withstand a battering from a battalion of bugs, is your ultimate survival tool kit.

No quick fix, immune systems are built over time.

New pressures face us every day and organisations like organisms effectively stand naked without protection. Ever better at exposing falsehoods and untruths, every consumer is an activist; ever sceptical, the media's probing is aggressive; ever baying for your blood, competitors are always on the look-out for your vulnerabilities, a gap in the armour of your value proposition, a chink in the chainmail of your brand promise.

As "*viruses*" find new ways of infecting us and reconfiguring into new shapes and sizes, our immune system must adapt accordingly. Brand managers need to find new antidotes, new means of combat and response, new antennae for detecting future trends, new ways of thinking and new products, always staying one step ahead.

### Discord equals dis-ease

Western medicine's remedial approach is a knee-jerk reaction to ailment with on-the-spot tinctures for specific symptoms. But germs have got more savvy, a shot in the arm is a short-term solution and antibiotics leave you weaker. Alternative therapies, however, prescribing a blend of art and science, take a more holistic focus on the overall wellbeing of the patient through preventative action.

Acupuncture, for example, maintains that overall wellbeing is achieved through energy balance, believing that health is composed of equal and opposite qualities (the Yin and the Yang). When these become out of whack, illness is more often the outcome.

Inserting fine needles into channels of energy, acupuncturists believe this stimulates the body's own healing response and helps restore natural balance. So too can a "*brand therapist*", if you will, apply art with science to build their patients into strong and healthy entities capable of delivering real value, not merely surviving but flourishing.

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Static old-school brands with their heads in the sand are in danger of becoming extinct. Today, corporations can no longer hide behind their portfolio of brands: consumers are calling for the real face behind the message, the purveyor of the product. The real pocket behind each brand's price tag. Or, they'll call for your head. Contrary to what's comfortable, it means laying bare in the call for transparency and exposing yourself to the world.

But new-thinking brands have built an aura around them. With healthy brand immune systems that continuously adapt by producing antidotes to ward off deadly attacks, astute brand managers have a permanent finger on the pulse of what poses a virus and pinpointing the pressure points open for attack.

### **Assessing your brand's Vitals**

What the Central Nervous System is to the body, Brand is to a healthy organisation. Your brand is the synaptic highway that connects the company's organs, functions, behaviours and responses. Through identifying specific touch points, you can help trigger the desired outcome in one area by treating a separate but vital area in another. So, to uplift your Growth potential, for example, an ailing company with falling market share may require attention in the areas of brand differentiation and delivery on promise. Or, a focus on solid brand architecture and effective communication may precipitate a revitalised Direction for your business, while maintaining pole position through heightened employee engagement underpins Protection.

Linking together all the activities of the organisation – R&D, product development, sales, marketing, HR and more, brand is the connective energy, the life force, the golden thread that ensures consistency of delivery and distributes wellbeing– through products, services or the organisation as a whole. But brands today need to be founded on more than promise – it's about the ability to execute. And superior execution is about connectivity.

But, in my experience, many organisations are still not designed to deliver consistency – they're set up in silos with the left hand oblivious to what the right hand is doing. Sometimes the widest gap in alignment is the divide between the external and the internal, creating the biggest disconnect – and hurdle – to Superior Execution. The number one priority in last year's Grant Thornton survey of US business leaders, Superior Execution ranked in the Top Three spot of 60% of CEOs.

Usain Bolt didn't smash the world record for the 100m dash on long legs alone. Apart from a handy leg up in the form of a fortunate gene pool, he delivered 9,69 seconds of Olympic speed through a holistic combination of factors: his coaches, dieticians, physios, biokineticists, shrinks, shoes, supplements.

Bolt is but the face of a myriad contributors. He is a brand that delivered on solid preparation, incisive strategy, superior design and exceptional execution. And enlightened and healthy organisations have recognised the need to break down barriers and clear blockages to energy flows if true synergies are to be achieved.

### **The Age of the Super Bug**

But, self-applied protective shields are not enough and we don't propose a single apply-all antidote. MRSA is The Cold's answer to your antiseptic and antibiotics. Traditionally, companies have relied on the remedies of Marketing and PR to see them through the down times, combating the parasites of bad press, poor perception, misaligned communications. But, when the basic hygiene factors and corporate disciplines are neglected and overlooked, your natural immune system is vulnerable. So, when superbugs contort, strengthen and discover new ways to outsmart your man-made defences, the smallest cut or bite can be fatal. Like the lightning speed at which bad news can travel in our inter-connected, 24/7 multimedia society, infections spread like wild fire and often too quickly for the antibiotics of recovery plans and crisis communications to take effect.

If the foundation for good health is correct diet, exercise and balance, the cornerstones for brand wellbeing are a compelling and true brand positioning, a durable global brand architecture, distinctive and appropriate visual language

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and tone of voice and, most importantly, engaged employees who deliver a brand experience that sets them apart from their competitors. And no quick fixes like Botox or cosmetic surgery will paper over the cracks. Okay from a distance, it doesn't match the experience when you get close.

### **GDP**

So, if superior execution is about healthy components coming together and working in harmony, wellbeing is about the capacity of the brand's immune system to ward off deadly viruses that conspire towards your demise. Companies today need to operate in a state of continual adaptation and the brand pressure points need a longer-term, holistic treatment that promotes and maintains wellbeing. Our job then should not be to heal ailing brands or give tonics to the tired, but provide guidance and preventative therapy.

Your brand diagnostician needs to understand your real challenges as a brand, the issues you face and where you are in the development of your business. They need to assess all the pressure points, from your brand strategy to your vision, your reputation, your aspirations and all the turns and trends at that are likely to present challenges in the future. It could be about a key product losing a distinctive market position. It could be about an identity or retail experience losing relevance and credibility. It could be about disaffected employees in certain parts of the organisation.

They must identify how to boost your immune system by adapting the brand to cope with ongoing invasions from the antigens of mistrustful media, probing consumer interest, competitor attack and staff inflammation.

So, what does this mean in real terms? It means measuring both quantitatively and qualitatively the wellbeing of brands, using a diagnostic filter like GDP™ that pinpoints the pressure points in the brand body and triggers Growth, Direction and Protection. It means ensuring the strategies of both your Business and your Brand are aligned. And Brand, as the CNS, in turn infiltrates and influences all the operational and functional drivers of your business, giving you the durability, robustness and continuum of a Super Brand that can outwit and outlast any colds, coughs, pop stars and other super bugs.