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For Market Advantage

Parsing Personality:

Some Profiling Tools and Exercises

Introduction

A brand's personality can derive from many sources. In working to define a personality, we're likely to mine several. These can include the tone and manner of existing communications, facets of the company culture, attributes of key stakeholders, corporate archaeology that might extend to the way workspaces are designed and decorated, cues from society at large and the marketplace, and more.

Not that a brand's attributes need to be grounded in its past or present reality. Authenticity in the narrow sense isn't the only source of credibility. A well-crafted brand story answers to its own truth and logic. Personality attributes can also be aspirational—fictional, even. What matters is that

the personality is interesting, distinctive, broadly consistent in spirit, and usually at least a bit charismatic. To help us arrive at the insights to compose such a personality, we typically work through a set of whiteboard exercises with our clients. Many if not most of these exercises are classics—oldies but goodies that have been around in some form since the early days of brand strategy. Time permitting, we like to run several of them and then to compare and contrast the results.

(Apologies in advance for freely switching voice in what follows from "them" to "you.")

The exercises that follow appear in no particular order.

Some profiling tools and exercises

Metamorphosis Exercises

These classic thought exercises lend themselves to almost limitless variations. (If you've got some of your own, please share!) They require little to no prep—a nice bonus. Another thing we like about them is their slight obliqueness: Instead of trying to characterize "the company" or "the brand" directly, these create a little bit of conceptual distance that can help stakeholders to visualize, and open up. These exercises serve as great, light-but-valuable conversation starters.

Totem If the brand were to transform into an animal, which would it be and why? (Note: For this and the thought exercises that follow, our goal is to tease out variety and to encourage free association, not to build consensus around a singular animal or set of attributes.)

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FLAG

What would your brand flag be? What kinds of elements would go on it?

Flag   If the brand had an embassy and needed to design a flag to fly over it, what would its flag be? What kinds of elements would go on it? (Note: No elements from the current logo are allowed.)

Soundtrack   Imagine you're creating a documentary called, "Living Our Brand." What music would you choose for the soundtrack and why?

Event   Imagine you're throwing a big launch event for your most valued customers and fans. For this event, cost is no object. Where would you hold it? What food would you serve? What highlights would you feature? What do these choices say about you? About them?

Speaker   Imagine you're creating an ad campaign that involves selecting a celebrity spokesperson. Who do you choose, and why?

Avatar   Imagine that your brand magically turned into a character from film, video, literature, games, and so on. Who would that character be, and why? If you want to take this further, create scenarios that force your character to act. What actions do they take, and why?

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Living Testament Identify an individual within the organization who most fully embodies your idea of "the brand spirit." Who is this individual and what is it about them that has informed your choice?

"Hall of Mirrors" Exercises

These thought exercises give participating stakeholders a chance to compare and contrast their perceptions of the brand with other personalities that are already established:

The Competition, Individually Look at each individual competitors' personality as expressed by their current creative—images, layouts, colors, patterns, tone of voice, and so on. Ask yourself in what ways your brand expression is similar and different? Do you like how you are similar or different or do you see qualities in your brand that you'd like to change? What attributes do competitors express more strongly? Less strongly? (Note: In this exercise, do your best to remember that you're not here to comment on the overall quality of your competitors' creative execution.)

THE COMPETITION, INDIVIDUALLY

Do you see qualities in your brand that you'd like to change?

The Competition, Collectively Look at the brand personality in relation to competitors' personalities as a whole. Who's closest? Farthest apart? In what ways?

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Photo by Eric La Brecque

NUMBER ONE

Consider the personality of the company's CEO. How do they dress? Speak?

Number One Consider the personality of the company's CEO or the brand's business lead. How do they dress? Speak? Formal or informal? Lively or reserved? How do they change when they're off the clock? And so on.

Now: How does the brand's personality compare? (A few things to keep in mind: First, remember that we're looking for personality, not values.) We assume leaders will model a company's values but not necessarily its personality. The correspondence between a leader's personality and a brand's personality can be close or

remote. It doesn't matter which. What matters is simply that the leader provide a frame of reference.

Self-Portrait, Unfiltered Consider a wide range of current brand creative—visual, written and experiential. What qualities emerge from this exercise? Which of them feel foundational? Which feel dated, uncomfortable or out of place? If the brand could be given a makeover, what might be worth changing? What is the brand's best self, and how does it differ from the brand as stakeholders perceive it today?

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ARCHETYPING

Think of archetypes as something like human-centered signs of the zodiac.

Archetyping Some of the richest insights into personality can come from working with archetypes. Using them can get a bit nuanced, so spend a little time checking out various sources to see which seem clearest to you and which provide a level of detail that feels right. (At the moment, Applied Storytelling doesn't have a reference source for archetyping. We're in the process of building a tool of our own, but it's still got a ways to go before it's complete.)

Archetypes are deeply embedded forms in the human psyche that bubble up as recurrent motifs in art and literature. Much of our current thinking about them owes to clever work by the psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961). I like to think of archetypes as ready-made building blocks for storytelling.

Matteo Vistoco for Unsplash

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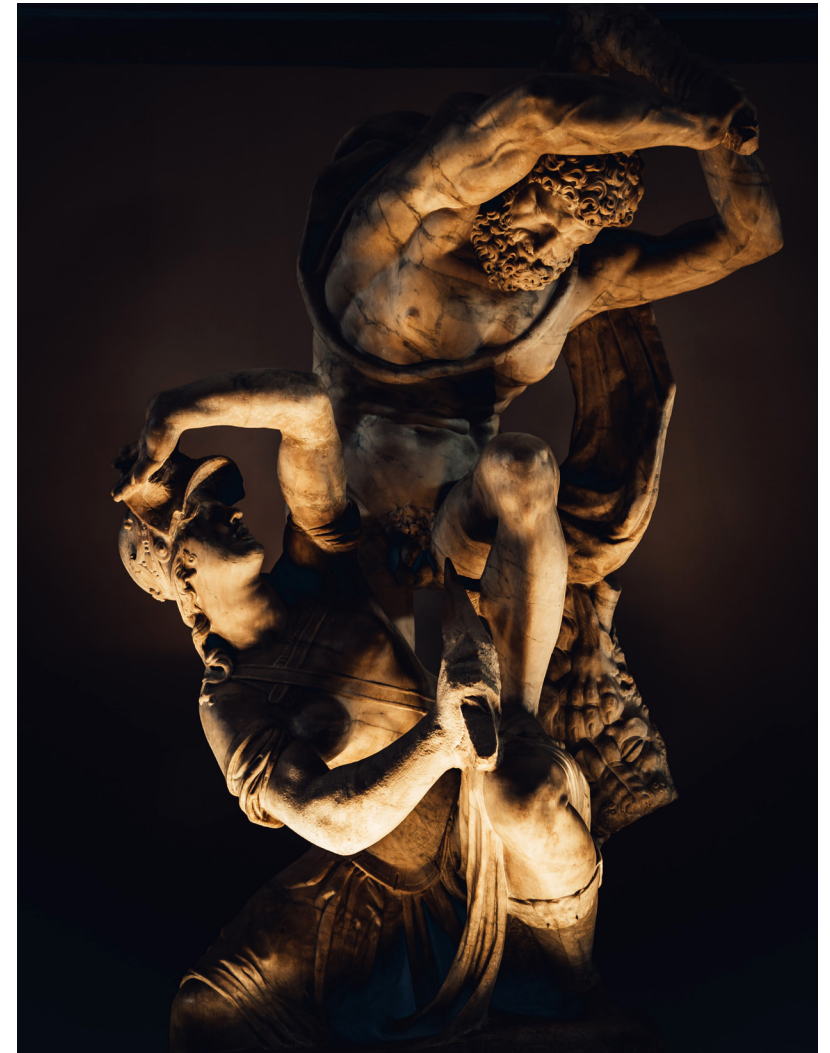
Archetypes extend to all manner of things. (For a really wonderful rathole to go down on this subject, check out tvtropes.org). But they have a lot to say about human nature in particular. Think of archetypes as something like human-centered signs of the zodiac: Many classic archetype schemes used by brand marketers identify 12 archetypal beings, with names such as The Ruler, The Magician, The Everyperson, The Lover, and so on.[1] Each is immediately recognizable and, in its pure form, readily distinguishable from the others.

Archetypes prove handy in two ways, both at the beginning of personality definition and later on. We tend to look at archetypes most frequently later on, after we've run other exercises.

With insights from those exercises in hand, we work to match emerging personality attributes with corresponding archetypes. (For what it's worth, we rarely encounter a situation in which all

ARCHETYPING

Which archetypes feel closest to your brand? And why?

of the attributes we've identified land on a single archetype. That's entirely okay by us. When that happens, we try to figure out which of, say, two or three qualities is dominant and which are secondary. We then use this insight to create our own suitable name for the hybrid archetype that emerges.)

More recently, we've had occasion to apply archetypes early in the discovery process, too. Without any previous information, we've simply introduced brand stakeholders to a "brand archetype wheel." After briefly summarizing key features of each archetype, we ask stakeholders to tell us which feel closest to their brand and why.

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Brand Personality Cards A wide array of pre-made decks of personality cards is available for purchase for brand marketers to use with their stakeholder teams.[2] Card decks typically include an assortment of descriptive adjectives, symbols, visuals or some combination of all. We've never used them, but they look intriguing. My friend and colleague Cynthia Murnane has painstakingly crafted

BRAND PERSONALITY CARDS

The deck's power comes from its variety and richness.

a deck of her own, which she has used with great success with several of our clients. Cynthia's deck is a lively, wide-ranging assortment of photographs, symbols, illustrations, patterns, words, characters in a variety of typefaces and so on. In addition to being highly diverse stylistically, the photos and illustrations present a wide range of topics. The deck itself doesn't pretend to have any underlying structure: Its power comes from its variety and richness. It plays not to the ego but to the id. Cynthia spreads her deck out on

Photo by Cynthia Murnane

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BRAND PERSONALITY CARDS

There's simply no excuse for a brand personality that's fuzzy, dull or me-too.

a conference table and encourages stakeholders to sift among the cards and pull the ones that "speak to them" in some way about their brand. After participants in the exercise have pulled a number of cards, Cynthia encourages them to elaborate on their picks. The discussion is always lively, always picks up steam as stakeholders interact with each other, and always yields a rich bed of insight from which she and the rest of us can work.

If you want to go even deeper, you might check out enneagrams,[3] another personality scheme that builds on nine distinct types. While the enneagram model isn't exactly empirical, it's nonetheless highly detailed. It strikes us that enneagrams' potential for developing brand personality remains to be plumbed.

Regardless which you choose, with the tools, approaches and models available, there's simply no excuse for a brand personality that's fuzzy, dull or me-too. Keep it lively!

1. Many different schemes exist. The number and nature of archetypes can vary widely, though you can usually discern the basic pattern of 12 at the root of them. The labels applied to archetypes can also vary.

2. For example: https://branding.cards/

3. One place to start: *The Wisdom of the Enneagram,* by Don Richard Riso and Russ Hudson.