

THE COMPANY STYLE

Diagnoses of the present financial and economic crisis show a wide variety but one idea comes back time and again: standardisation and “sheep-like” strategies share some of the responsibility for the collapse of the markets. The system crashed because numerous banks in many countries rushed to grant unsafe loans. In the new world now taking shape having an own style will become a strategic goal for companies and a good means of finding their niche in open and uncertain ecosystems.

A well-defined style reinforces a company’s position since, according to Voltaire, style renders the commonest things unique. A company with a style is in a better position to seduce the contemporary consumer in pursuit of emotions and “authenticity”. Style is a kind of genetic heritage transmitted by the creator to his creation. For the composer Arnold Schönberg style, as the innate quality of a work, derives from the artist’s distinctive natural features. Similarly, the men and women in a company transmit their style to the products they design and the overall result becomes the company’s style.

Mastering a style is hard, but so is keeping it. The banks have committed an abuse of the prudence in wealth management that is their true style. Will company strategies take from this crisis “Thou shalt not imitate” as the commandment to observe in benchmarking exercises? And subsequently apply the corollary familiar to all creators: “Thou shalt invent unceasingly”. A style lasts only if it remains true to itself and yet open to outside influences. What having a winning style means is finding one’s own style and keeping to it.

In music, Beethoven is a good illustration of the concept of a “winning style”. While his early works are reminiscent of Mozart, his contemporary, his difficult and dissonant later creations are closer to the twentieth century. And yet a unique style – powerful, full of extreme contrasts and repetitions – permeates his music.

At another level, Apple is also an outstanding case, the company never having changed its style despite the serious crises it has undergone, thanks to the exceptional leadership of Steve Jobs, the “Apple messiah”, as the journalist David Barroux (“Les Echos”) has termed him. Apple has maintained a unique style marked by its studied aesthetic quality and the importance of the touch and feel rapport with its products.

It is clear that the great creators observe principles that could well inspire companies today and help them to come away from the crisis stronger than they were initially. Here are four:

1. Keep listening to the public and the markets, but never make your innovation policy or strategic choices dependent on them if they do not chime with the company’s essential identity.
2. Persevere over time, maintaining the same direction of a genuinely positive and unified vision for the company.
3. Pursue beauty, uncompromisingly and for the long term. For the company this means reconciling an aesthetic ideal with the constraints of the market in a systemic approach that embraces all the company’s sectors and functions.
4. Accept the fact that uncertainty is not a negative variable, that beyond a certain threshold it cannot be curtailed and that it is in fact the guarantee and the driving force of any creative company that intends to last.

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