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What is Your Firm's Corporate Hidden Identity

Your Web site is sending clues to job candidates.

By Michael Lovas

You know those times when you hear someone use inappropriate language? You know when you read a vendor's brochure and get a sense that something isn't right? You know those times you visit a company Web site, or read a brochure and realize you've found a winner?

The words that transmit those messages to you are known as "corporate criteria words." They indicate the values and focus of a company. Simply, everything the company does or says or publishes paints a seemingly invisible picture of itself. All of those cues add up to a hidden corporate identity.

What is the hidden identity being transmitted by your company? What do your criteria words say about you? Are you a victim of inappropriate language?

You can determine the answers to those questions simply making a list of the important words you find. Let's concentrate on the hidden identities at corporate Web sites.

Determine if the opening page of your site is inviting to all visitors.

If it isn't, determine who it does invite. What's the most important focus. Is it sales? That would indicate a firm that replaces innovation with production and pressures workers to meet quotas and follow set procedures. If you were a potential customer, would you want to do business with a company like that?

Corporations can be divided into two camps. One values people, the other values things. People values would be indicated by the words: Communication, interpersonal, learning, achievement, fun, challenging, people-oriented, nurturing, caring, team, together, collaborate. Things would be indicated by the words: Technology, science, processes, production, cutting edge, engineering, analysis, systems. Companies using those words might treat their people like things.

The significance of this elementary culling point is enormous. Imagine you're a young genius looking for a corporation to call home. If you're a people-oriented person, you won't be happy working in a thing-oriented company. On the other hand, if you're a thing-oriented person, you won't feel comfortable in a warm and fuzzy culture where everyone talks about feelings.

Now, let's say you're a people-focused company looking to attract people who have excellent interpersonal skills. The criteria words you use to describe your organization will have to align with the criteria words of the people you want to attract.

One firm that is a victim of inappropriate language is Dell (<http://www.dell.com>). Their Web site drops the ball on both ends of the linguistic spectrum. The language on the main page and other major pages reads like vacuous, generic advertising and says nothing of substance about the company or its people.

Is HR human?

Most companies claim to be looking for the perfect worker. Then, when you see what they value, you can determine what "perfect" means. On some sites, on the Job Opening pages, there are listings for Public Relations Managers, but no mention of people skills in the job description. The same goes for "Human Resources" listings.

From your experience, you know that if a company fails to mention people in its public relations, it either has a focus on something other than people, or it's a victim of inappropriate language.

Mobil's motives.

For example, Mobil has a link to a page titled "Working at Mobil." The copy says, "Mobil is a valued global partner due to our technical skills, our financial strength, our experience managing major projects, and our dedication to environmental leadership and good corporate citizenship."

Writers are trained to place such a list in order of importance. You'll see that Mobil lists technology first and something called "corporate citizenship" last. There's no mention of people but there is lots of mention of "our." From a people perspective, all you have to do is count the number times you find "you" and "our" or "we." That's a contest you don't want "our" and "we" to win.

At the other end of the language spectrum is PeopleSoft (<http://www.peoplesoft.com>). It contains language that so comfortable and alluring that you want to roll around in it. They even have a page titled "Fun." I collected criteria words from three categories:

1. People: continued growth, people (four times), value-added employees
2. Integrity: Openness and honesty
3. Job posting: think, proactive, communicate, relationships

Look for what's missing

Many companies have a page giving executive profiles. Make a list of the criteria words in the biographies. You might find some hint there, but chances are, a public affairs writer drafted the bios from a fact sheet. What's missing will likely give you a better indication of the company's values.

For example, at the Mobil Oil site, the CEO and COO have similar biographies. The criteria words are: Serve, join, director, named, elected, appointed, member, responsible for and graduate. It seems they value position and esteem. There is no mention of civic service, other people, teamwork, passion or how anyone ever benefited from their being appointed.

Exxon's hidden identity is actually worse than Mobil's. They never mention any people. I didn't find the word "people" mentioned even once on their Web site.

Create the right criteria words

If you're a company in a competitive industry and you're looking for the best people, you naturally want to do everything you can to attract them, instead of repel them. By selectively inserting the right "criteria words," you can achieve an alignment with the exact people you want to attract. Here's how you do it:

1. Decide which of your corporate values you want in your new hires to align with.
2. Determine the precise criteria words that communicate those values to the people you want to attract.
3. Insert the criteria words in all your written communications.
4. Conduct some Values Training throughout your firm to educate your employees on exactly what your company values.
5. Give a list of criteria words to any and all people who would have the opportunity to answer a telephone.
6. Train your copywriters and other communicators to understand fully who you are and what you value.

Imagine if the corporate "line" is that it values education, innovation and provides a challenging, exciting, fun environment. Then, when a young genius calls, the HR representative treats the young genius like someone applying for an entry-level clerical job. A breakdown in any of the hidden identity links will show the company as dishonest.

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