

Spirituality and business: *the next movement?*

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Spirituality and business might seem odd bedfellows at first glance, but is that because we view the latter as corrupt and materialistic? If we believe in the goodness that commerce can do, we should be able to accept and promote what might be one of its roots as the next big step in strategy.

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WHAT DO the best businesses have in common? In fact, what do the best governments have in common? An immediate response would be values. Deepak Chopra believes in it in his books—we need to have it, otherwise society disintegrates.² Businesses would, too: without some form of vision or enterprise-wide understanding, they would naturally fail. Branding is one tool that guarantees that understanding, and a good branding programme reinforces that continuously.

Values constitute a theme that we, as a human race, haven't mastered particularly well over the last few millennia. Confucius dedicated most of his life to looking at good government. The whole of the *Analects* is dedicated to it. But he refused to step into the realms of spirituality, preferring to base his philosophy on practical matters. Besides, Buddha had done marvellously in that sphere.

The basis of the philosophy was a “do unto others” approach: in short, a constant exchange of duties.

The ideas are delightfully simple, but they depend on education. Without it, people would resort to institutionalizing power, restricting others' freedoms, and in short, forget about the exchange of duties.

There are plenty of analogies with branding. Some companies may spend megabucks on rebrands. There's a lot of hoop-la and enthusiasm to begin with. Without a brand based in reality and on real values, the company begins to disintegrate. In nations, there is often a lot of hoop-la after a change of government. There, too, without real values, the government begins to look less like it has the mandate of the people. It risks getting voted out—assuming it permits elections.

Red China is a good example. Even Cuba. In fact, every communist state has started off with some fervour before something goes terribly wrong. Confucius's warnings were right.

Not that one has to look at totalitarian régimes. Many democracies, even those that claim to be free, have been doing this, covering up their mistakes by fudging economic data or blaming the problems on ongoing policy sins committed by the previous administration.

Confucius's work had a lot of merit, otherwise we wouldn't be talking about it a couple of thousand years later; Lee Kuan Yew wouldn't have followed his teachings nor would Singapore erect a statue of the philosopher in Marina City Park.

Values are, in many ways, an understatement. As companies go global, surely there is something more that ties everyone in humankind together?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, essentially, that every human being has free will and liberty. That is founded in a deeper spiritual belief, shared at a basic level by the signatories to the Declaration. In that we return to Dr Chopra, an Indian-born

2. Chopra: *Creating Affluence: the A-to-Z Steps to a Richer Life*. San Rafael, Calif.: Amber-Allen Publishing 1998, p. 57.

author who has bridged not only cultural gaps, but one between “conventional”, scientific-based western medicine and spiritual beliefs of the east. And there are people in business and in the market-place who believe in one’s right to fulfil its highest path.

New-age crock? Not if you consider how the figures of people claiming religion or spiritual practice shot up the week after 9-11. Sixty-four per cent of Americans said religion was important in their lives in a September 21–2, 2001 survey. Eleven major religions plus plenty more are tied together with something even more fundamental, especially when one considers the root of the word *religion*. It comes from the Latin *religare*, ‘to bind something together in common expression’.³

That “binding together” is at the root of everything from meeting friends, online communities, collaboration, knowledge management, trust, networking, branches of environmental science seeking to heal the planet⁴—and the best corporate alliances that haven’t been driven by serendipity and stock prices. It is at the root of many of the ventures young people have been driving, including TakingITGlobal, a global network of youth aimed at changing the world.⁵

What this paper advocates is being open (or if not open, then active) about what might be the glue that does the binding. Is not everyone’s wish to be, to borrow a phrase from the US Army, all you can be?

Check out *The New York Times*’ bestseller list or browse bookshops and spiritual texts on self-actualization and realization are far from absent.

To the buyers of such texts, why not add those who support the Dalai Lama and his team, who equally have a vision, a strategy (how Tibetan beliefs are operationalized in prayer and ritual) and a brand exposition (His Holiness’s travels and PR campaigns)? The cohesiveness of this brand means there are few critics other than Red China, which has its reasons for disliking the Dalai Lama, calling him a landowner who would gain from having control over Tibetan peasants. Compare that to the Roman Catholic Church, which has critics and crises because its vision hasn’t been as strongly communicated.

The author means no disrespect to Their Holinesses, who head their religious movements. The purpose is to show how business—and nations—can learn from and incorporate spirituality. By understanding it and respecting it, we can create a better commercial world, because we’ll be incorporating not just values, but values with true belief behind them.

The next step in commerce is to create not religions—it’s plain to see how contentious that suggestion would be—but some recognition of everyone’s desire to fulfil their highest selves by joining with the organization and its vision.

3. Mathews and Wacker: *The Deviant’s Advantage: How Fringe Ideas Create Mass Markets*. New York: Crown Business 2002, pp. 143–8.

4. See, e.g. O’Connor: ‘Planetary visions’, *Business 2.0*, December 2000, and the work of Jan Hauser, a global sustainability volunteer, at <<http://www.janhauser.com>>.

5. See Yan: ‘Corporate responsibility and the brands of tomorrow’, written for the *Journal of Brand Management* and scheduled for possible publication in 2003. TakingITGlobal’s URL is <<http://www.takingitglobal.org>>.

The competition may then be on how sincerely an organization espouses its spirituality or allows its team to fulfil each member's highest being, self or destiny. The money measures are forgotten and the cause for financial corruption disappears.

This is hardly an unattainable utopia. We might be heading that way, anyway. There are probably fewer people who believe in stock prices than spirituality, especially after 2002. There are more people who are beginning to find that how much you make has no impact on what you love to do in life. There are people who are doing their nine-to-five jobs, often very well, but indulging their passions in a hobby, sometimes with results that pay more.

Products such as Winamp were results of this shift. While eventually sold for millions, Winamp was an early sign of the real new economy, one where money was secondary to developer Justin Frankel's sense of purpose in creating a product for one's fellow man and his own fulfilment. But Frankel's Winamp is an intermediate step; his Gnutella the next advance.⁶ Linus Torvalds, the man behind Linux, who hasn't gained financially from his operating system, is probably the best example of the new economy, because he probably believed he did not need money to be content with his invention. In the utopia that Torvalds heralds, people won't be squabbling over dollars, cents and quarterly reporting, but creating things of service to humanity for a gain of a different sort.

How different? If we abandon monetary values, wouldn't the system collapse? Not really. There are some things that haven't changed a great deal, even since Confucius' day.

Is it not telling that we continue to believe in a person's honour more than a person's financial worth? Do we not value someone who champions integrity before someone who champions monetary gain? If asked whether our admiration should go to Phil Knight, founder of Nike, or Mother Teresa, is our decision not obvious? We value honour and service to humankind, but underlying this, we value those who allow others to be themselves and fulfil who they are. It's neither a bad long-term strategy, nor a bad short-term one.

Move against these basics and there's a breakdown. Harming others by lying to them is not part of anyone's highest self, yet Enron bred that culture through fluff and probably overstating its profits. Restricting people's freedoms by putting obstacles in their way is unnatural, yet communist nations did just that. Worryingly, the United States appears to be moving in the wrong direction with the war on terror as its excuse.

People may not be open to espousing spirituality right now, unless they are part of a spiritual organization—such as the Church or the Dalai Lama. But can we bring it forth into commerce? And if we did, can we prevent it from being coopted as a trend by money-making authors and ensure it's reinforced with each interation? And can we ensure that it doesn't go into fanaticism (defined here as the blind following of another's free will by

6. Lewis: *Next: the Future Just Happened*. New York: W. W. Norton 2001, pp. 112–19.

compromising one's own vision and higher power)? All that sounds like a solution for good education, which would have to be part of any spiritual policy in an organization.

Doubters might fear the change. Yet there is certainly nothing shameful about adopting a policy that openly says people are allowed to serve their fellow man within the walls of the organization. There are no real negative spinoffs from saying that people's liberties are supported by the organization. Given what we say our society's values are, then these suggestions are not really that shocking.

This policy might be practised already in the most unexpected places, but not consciously or with any real plan. Lewis, when examining Frankel, found him inside AOL Time Warner, which has allowed him to create programs that are antiestablishment. Gnutella was one of them, designed to allow computer users to share files—and pirated works. 'His corporation tolerates him because it knows that the alternative is worse. It is far better to keep the enemy close, by bribing him with stock options, than to have him out in the wild, foraging.'⁷ However, Lewis notes that Frankel is still compromised: 'He must pay lip service to the boss's demands and agree to take down his software, which makes the boss feel that he is indeed the Boss. This has no real effect other than to keep up the appearance that the chain of command holds firm'.⁸

When practised consciously, as with all branding the first step would be to look at putting it in to the vision of the organization and have it "lived" at every level. Simply embracing it and living it yourself is a great first step. It's what has made Oprah Winfrey one of the most powerful women in the media. She may be financially rewarded, because she chose to do her work within the established money and mass-media structure to spread her message, but it's a cinch Oprah would still be who she is in character even without the trappings. One could hardly say that the message in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is a fringe cult watched by a select few folks. It has even spawned a spinoff, hosted by Dr Phil McGraw, a man whose personality and desire to help others has led most people to forget his surname. He is known to everyone from guests and callers to *The Late Show with David Letterman* as simply 'Dr Phil'.

It seems like the next logical step and one which will arise anyway. When freedoms are curtailed and when financial systems fail, the human race has always naturally found a solution to balance things. As a profession, it's better to know it's happening than having it catch us by surprise.

The mid-2000s may be the time that being open toward a new spirituality in business is the next big thing. Incorporating it into a corporate culture, initially subtly, is the next big task of the branding business.

7. Ibid., at p. 116.

8. Ibid.

About the author

Jack Yan founded Jack Yan & Associates, JY&A Consulting's parent company, as a virtual firm in 1987. A graduate of Scots College (where he was *Proxime Accessit*) and Victoria University of Wellington (BCA, LLB, BCA (Hons., 1st class), MCA), Jack is regarded as an authority in the areas of branding, identity, typography and cross-media branding, speaking and writing world-wide on these topics.

At JY&A Consulting, Jack's focus is examining branding and global business, including how smaller firms can leverage their intellectual capital applying an international marketing strategy. His master's thesis proved a connection between organizational vision and business performance through best-practice methods, which are now applied to many JY&AC clients. Recent research includes an examination of the success factors for online firms in Australasia, touching on cross-media concerns.

Client firms include insurance brokerage Willis, UNICEF, Electricity Corp. of New Zealand, Colgate-Palmolive, SANE Australia, Deutsche Bank, Knight Ridder, Victoria University of Wellington, and numerous non-profit organizations. He developed the *Lucire* brand from 1997, now one of the world's leading pure-play online fashion titles.

Jack Yan has a reputation of taking all his firms to leadership positions.

He is a regular columnist for *Desktop* magazine in Australia, and formerly contributed to UK design titles, *DZ3* and *Fontzone* (1998–2000). Articles about him or his work have been published in *The New York Times*, *Elle* (US and Taiwan), *The Washington Post*, *Pioneer Press* (St Paul, Minn.), *Access*, *Design Week*, *Graphic Design USA*, *Resumé*, *Vogue*, *IdN*, *Professional Manager*, *Publish*, *MAP Magazine* (Brisbane, Qld.) and *The Sydney Morning Herald* and broadcast on Saturn Television and the TV One network in New Zealand.

Jack Yan is a member of the Alliance Française, AGDA and advocacy group TypeRight (which he co-founded) and a former member of the Society of Publication Designers and the Sales and Marketing Executives.

His interests include the application of Confucianism in the context of global harmony and business, automotive design and international cultures.

He regularly travels and currently divides his year between the United States and New Zealand.

About JY&A Consulting

JY&A Consulting (<http://jyanet.com/consulting>) is part of Jack Yan & Associates, an independent global communications company founded in 1987. Based in Wellington, Sydney, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Milano, Stockholm, London, Manchester, Essex and Tel Aviv, JY&A Consulting tailors solutions using researched business principles, based around the organization's vision and identity. The company specializes in identity, branding, marketing strategy and global strategy. Its clients have included small businesses, non-profit organizations and *Fortune* 500 companies. JY&A Consulting staff and alumni regularly contribute to the house journal, *CAP*, published in print, and online at <http://jyanet.com/cap/>.



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