Performing with purpose

Irish entrepreneur and retail expert, Andrew Thornton, explains how to develop and communicate purpose in a way that wins customers' hearts.

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IN these challenging times, I believe that one of the best ways of differentiating a business from its competitors is to have a meaningful purpose, one that resonates with and inspires the people who work in your organisation, your customers, your community and your suppliers.

Reading a book about marketing a while back, I was struck by the author's view that the reason organisations existed was "for selling or effecting transactions". Sadly, that's how many companies see it, and no matter how much they dress it up, that's it: it's transactional and about money. In his excellent book, The Heart of Business, Hubert Joly (who saved Best Buy in the US from their predicted demise) traced this view back to Milton Friedman and stated that, contrary to Friedman's view, "the purpose of a company is not to make money, but rather to contribute to the common good and serve all its stakeholders". He went on to say that "corporations are not soulless entities, but human organisations with people at their centre, working together in support of that purpose".

Companies consist of groups of people, and people need meaning in their lives. One of my all-time favourite mission statements was the one created for Apple by Steve Jobs: "To make a contribution to the world by making tools for the mind that advance humankind". I'd call this a purpose statement, but let's not be pedantic! I don't know about you, but I'd certainly have been motivated by this purpose.

Purpose versus profit?

It's also worth noting that without a clear, written purpose, an informal unconscious and unspoken one emerges, which is often about increasing profits. Few businesses are bold enough to state that their purpose is about generating cash – they just act that way.

I believe that a clear purpose needs to unite all stakeholders behind something that will become the organisation's entire focus, so a culture can be created that aligns with that purpose. To work, a purpose has to be authentic and lived. I believe that customers and employees can sense when it's fake.

Patagonia are one of the most purposeful companies I know. Founded in 1973 by Yvon Chouinard, their mission is "to build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, and use business to inspire and implement solutions to address issues related to the environment and social justice". Even in 1973, Chouinard saw the need to address the climate crisis. Everything they do is lined up behind and defined by this purpose – and it's truly authentic. And as if to reinforce this, Chouinard recently gave away his entire shareholding to (in his words) "the earth", a non-profit to "protect nature and biodiversity, support thriving communities and fight the environmental crisis".

When I owned the London supermarket Thornton's Budgens, our purpose was that we were "the community supermarket that really cared about people and

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Andrew Thornton, author and former CEO and founder of Thornton's Budgens.

planet"; everything we did was framed in that context and everyone in the team believed in it. We supported this with a detailed manifesto that outlined exactly how we were going to deliver this purpose and what habits we were going to use to support us.

Developing a purpose

Here's what I have learnt over the years about developing a purpose:

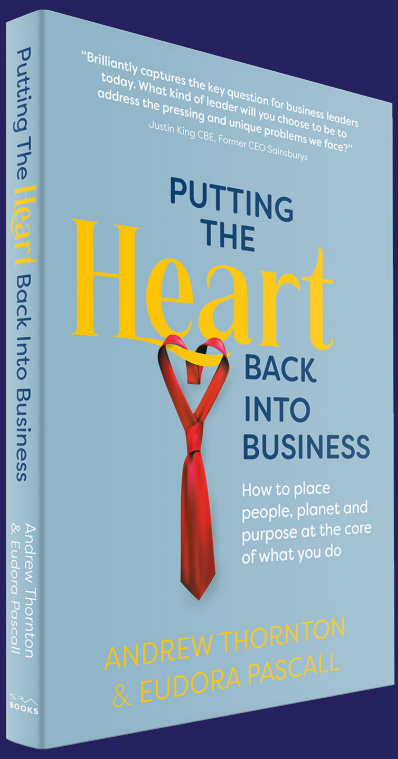
- The leadership team must be involved in the process. If the founder is still associated with the business in any way, they need to be included; and if it's a family-run business, the family needs to be included. This is not something that can be done by committee, and it needs all the key stakeholders to be engaged. Real leadership skills are required to achieve this.
- It's good to have your customer at the table, as their perspective is important. It doesn't mean you can't come up with a radically new direction, but if you're going to be doing this, it's good to know that's what you're doing! With Thornton's Budgens, we'd built a base of respect for doing the right thing and customers could see this. So, our purpose wasn't a leap into something brand new, just a clarification and tightening up of what we stood for.
- Don't outsource your purpose to consultants. It's my guess that most glossy report mission statements are prepared by non-stakeholders and signed off by the board because they think it looks good.
- Do get help with facilitation. As leaders, it can be tough to see the wood for the trees, so it helps to have an objective outsider leading the process. And it's also good to have some sort of structure – to get all the views, options and opinions on the table, and then use a creative process to evolve the wording.
- Get yourself and your team out of your heads and into your hearts, away from the day-to-day grind. Ensure that you run any purpose sessions at an offsite venue, ideally one surrounded by nature. In helping companies to find their purpose, I've used visualisations and other techniques to open people's hearts, as that's where they instinctively know the right direction to go in.
- Don't rush it; it's better to do this in a number of sessions than to try and force it into an afternoon. If you develop a meaningful purpose, it should stand you in good stead for years, decades or even centuries, so there's no need to get it knocked out next week. Be patient and be prepared to rework it until something clicks.

Building a culture in your organisation

It's also worth noting that this is just the start of the process! Once you have your purpose clear and maybe even developed a manifesto to support this, you need to build a culture around it, and that in its own right is a huge task!

Once you have a clear purpose in place and you have started to develop your culture, then communicating this to your customer becomes easy; your new purpose will be hard-wired into everything you do, including your communications. If you follow this process, your purpose will be authentic and your customers will feel it. To see what this looks and feels like, I suggest you visit a Patagonia store (there is one in Exchequer Street in Dublin) or their website (Patagonia.com).

About the author

IRISH entrepreneur Andrew Thornton was founder and CEO of award-winning independent supermarket, Thornton's Budgens, which was the UK's first supermarket with plastic free zones. They also implemented Andrew's heart-centred way of doing business, which aimed to put people and planet first, while trusting that profit would still follow. In fact, his store sales increased by 4% over the market and he created an extraordinary team spirit.

Andrew and his partner Eudora have co-authored 'Putting the Heart Back into Business: How to place people, planet and purpose at the core of what you do', which is out now, available on Amazon.