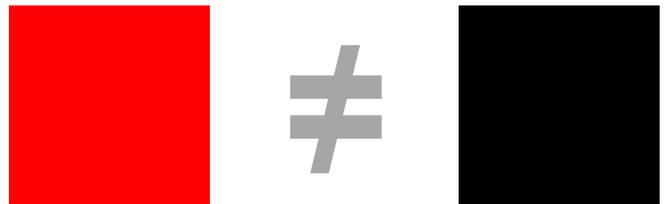


# The 'As Opposed To' test



Deepak Chopra apparently once said that “mathematics expresses values that reflect the cosmos, including orderliness, balance, harmony, logic, and abstract beauty.”

About five years ago, I came to almost the opposite conclusion about marketing, which more often than not expresses values that reflect the commonplace, including obviousness, short-sightedness, cliché and utter banality.

Like a lot of brand consultants, I spend much of my time looking through company websites and annual reports. I’m not going to pretend I read them top to bottom, but I pay a decent amount of attention to the sections where organisations list the values they use to guide how they work. And over time, I have found it increasingly hard to shake a sense of déjà vu. So, five years ago, I studied the 93 FTSE100 companies that publish their corporate values to see if any patterns emerged. What I found was a depressing degree of sameness. 63 out of the 93 companies include at least one of the following five in their list:

### **Integrity (31 companies)**

I find it worrying that so many businesses feel the need to include this as a guiding principle for how to work. What’s the alternative?

### **Respect (22 companies)**

Another value that seems to have been chosen with the aim of being unobjectionable. The problem is that unobjectionable values don’t help people in businesses make better decisions – unless they are mad, bad or dangerous enough to think that behaving disrespectfully and without integrity might otherwise be acceptable.

### **Customer-centricity (22 companies)**

I really struggle with this for so many reasons. Here’s the short version: there isn’t a publicly listed company in the world that will prioritise customers over shareholders if it comes to the crunch.

### **Innovation (17 companies)**

I suppose if you believe that a company must ‘innovate or die’ then this seems preferable to death. But are there many companies in the world that don’t innovate in some way or other?

### **Excellence (13 companies)**

Who wouldn’t want their business to be excellent? It’s another value that seems designed to be unambiguously positive. What useful direction can this possibly give to an employee that would help them to do their job better?

The mind-numbing banality of these values stems from the lack of any reasonable (or legal) alternative way to act. Values are supposed to provide practical guidance for making decisions, beyond simply avoiding being evil or ending up in prison. Collectively, they should help to define the style in which an organisation works: formal or informal? Realist or idealist? Blue chip or blue sky? Move-fast-and-break-things or slow-and-steady-wins-the-race?

Which brings me to the point: the ‘As Opposed To’ test.

It’s a simple way to make sure your values don’t suck and it builds on the idea that strategy requires sacrifice. All you have to do is ask yourself (as honestly as possible), what positive quality does each of your values involve sacrificing? And it has to be a POSITIVE quality. It’s probably worth saying at this point that I’m completely agnostic when it comes to how values are articulated. Some consultants like single words. Others prefer phrases or combinations of words. I really don’t mind as long as the values are clearly expressed and there are no more than three of them. Let’s take a random example from the FTSE100 list:

Simplicity.

This could be a great value, or terrible, depending on how the ‘As Opposed To’ test is applied. It’s one of BHP Billiton’s values, along with sustainability, integrity, respect, performance and accountability (snore). Their explanation of the value doesn’t inspire a tremendous amount of confidence:

*“Focusing our efforts on the things that matter most.”*

What are they saying? Who does that help? What does it reveal about the way they make decisions as a business? What does it tell us about their style of working: that they avoid focusing on the things

that don't matter? Who would? What they seem to be saying is this:

Simplicity (as opposed to stupidity)

But there are positive qualities that could compete with simplicity: BHP Billiton operates in a complex industry. Simplicity is not the only response to that complexity: the company could instead adopt a sophisticated, systems-led approach to dealing with complicated decisions. This would put a very different spin on the company's choice of simplicity as a value:

Simplicity (as opposed to sophistication)

Here, the choice of simplicity would involve preferring the simplest possible solution over anything more subtle or sophisticated. I worked for a brand consultancy that did exactly that: we believed in finding simple answers to clients' challenges, even if there were cleverer or more nuanced solutions. We were prepared to sacrifice the smarter ideas for one that we believed would be easier for client organisations to understand, embrace and execute.

The 'As Opposed To' test isn't just a simple way to avoid the banal, generic values that so many companies default to. It forces us to think more deeply about the values that organisations embrace and to explore their practical implications for the people who work in those organisations. If teamwork is one of your values, then what does this mean for people who like to work independently? If your company champions ambition, then is there a place for people who want to work a simple nine-to-five until they retire? And if your company values entrepreneurialism, what does this mean for your compliance team?

I've been banging this drum for a long time now – longer than five years. But the problem is that once an organisation develops its values, aligns its recruitment and appraisal processes to embed those values, and then publishes them for all their customers and shareholders to see – they become extremely difficult to move away from. Develop them with care. And don't forget to use the 'As Opposed To' test.