

**BRW Article – Rewriting the Rules of Marketing**

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It's fair to assume that most consumers across the Western world feel that corporations and governments have failed in their prolific mismanagement of the global economy.

In response to the economic crisis, it is our belief that the greatest shift in consumer thinking is the seismic loss of corporate credibility, resulting in a profound 'brand disconnect', delivering unprecedented levels of cynicism, skepticism and lack of trust.

What this means for marketers is that even for the most 'trusted' companies, brand loyalty can no longer be guaranteed, as purchasing decisions across the board have come under review.

Consumers are now questioning their existing brand relationships and asking who do "I want to put my faith in?"

As brand image advisors, we see the reputation of a brand and how it is perceived through marketing as being critical to the ongoing health of an organisation. Responsibility for getting the message right has moved back into the hands of CEOs and we are finding more are taking greater interest in the way their business strategy is conveyed.

From telcos to banks, airlines, retailers and manufacturers, smart CEO's who recognise this shift in consumer thinking are now strategically talking about 'customer closeness', as a way of combating the uncertainty and fear driving most consumer behaviour and keeping the lines of communication open.

In our opinion, CEO's who can steer through the economic crisis in a "responsible" and "authentic" way, while demonstrating leadership and a willingness to respond to changing consumer mindstates will benefit most.

Those who are getting the message right include Holden's managing director, Mark Reuss, who commented recently: "It would be crazy of us with the way the industry is going to not be reinventing the company from the core." (*The Australian* 28.02.09).

Echoing this frank admission is recently appointed KMart CEO, Guy Russo, who told the *AFR*: "I want to be able to fix this thing, it won't be sexy but it will be clean and easy to use." (*AFR* 21.04.09)

Also carefully managing the re-evaluation of their customer relationships is David Jones CEO, Mark McInnes, who told *The Age*: "People who are trading down can trade down within our portfolio," (*The Age* 18.05.09), demonstrating an understanding of his customer's changing needs.

Another example of a business walking its brandtalk is FoodWorks. Their Brand Council, made up of company representatives and key advisors, drives how the brand is expressed to internal and external audiences, to ensure collective buy-in by staff and key stakeholders. This enables the corporate brand message, delivered through customer brand touch points, to have greater impact with more authenticity and efficiency.

Successful CEOs understand the critical need to protect their brand reputation and that this needs to come from the top. And, whilst the brand to take the biggest hit might be the system itself, (ie; capitalism), marketers' new hero could just be the straight talking and conscientious CEO.