



This year's branding
must-haves?



Within a number of recent brand definition projects for both small and large asset management firms we began to see a trend in how many internal stakeholders were responding to our questionnaire during the insight phase.

During the one2one qualitative interviews with the top table from within the firms, it became apparent that the negative events of recent years were playing heavily on how they presented the values of the organisation. Their goal, it seemed, became two fold: define what are their positive values in line with known peer positioning, but also 'own' the antithesis of any recent negative opinion on financial services.

Many senior stakeholders, to identify the values of the group, were defaulting to their key competitors - "something along these lines as they've come out of all this mess with a good reputation" - or the opposite as it became clear. Their goal: to achieve a presence of industry wide known positives with a counter to 'bad-press' negatives.

This prompted us to consider if the definition of brand values by asset managers have been redefined by the recent crises to counter negative opinion from investor and public.

We undertook desk research across the web sites of the top 50 global asset managers in 2014 as defined by Investment and Pensions Europe (based on AUM). This gave some interesting insight with a possible shift in the top five brand values.



Many asset managers would have previously cited **'Performance'** as key, plus the need to be seen as challenging convention and so **'Innovation'** or **'Creativity'** were in many asset managers' top three. **'Global'** was another favourite along with **'Client solutions orientated'**.

Performance and **Innovation** have been knocked off the top spot, whilst **Client First** remains a strong favourite. What is very telling is the dominance of **Teamwork** and **Integrity**. Is this a wider example of our own experience of an attempt to use the brand to counter the concerns from investor and public alike of financial services losing its moral compass, and the highly publicised ungoverned maverick acting outside of the team?

To also promote the long-term remuneration now favouring teamwork rather than the bonus system promoting an individual's own short-term performance.

Is the apparent shift to softer human values the industry's response to demonstrate the increased governance of their own actions.

Not all asset managers cite these same value terms but offer thematic variations: **Teamwork** is stated as **'One Firm'**, **'Collaboration'**, **'Multicultural'** and **'Diversity'** of thinking and approach. Similarly **'Integrity'** is often expressed as **'Honest'**, **'Open and Fair'**, **'Accountability'**, and **'Ethical'**.

Looking at the research outcome, the question arises will these often-repeated values now become the new must-have brand value list of 2015 for asset managers.

To be one of many who use these values without really thinking harder around what this means for their clients and corporate reputation.

Do the brand values present how you (and you alone) do what you do or do they fit in with a larger (safe territory) group?

The outcome of our research indicates a possible new paradigm from the old brand values model. Our concern is that through apparent cloning of these values this new brand frontier could possibly become a repeat of the old "me-too" brandscape.

These values are all legitimate for any asset manager to state, although through repeated and common use will erode their meaning relevant to each firm. It will be how each firm demonstrates their own approach to teamwork, how they look to demonstrate integrity within one firm and not reflect how the firm next door do it – the "if it's good enough for them ..." syndrome. To differentiate rather than to mimic.

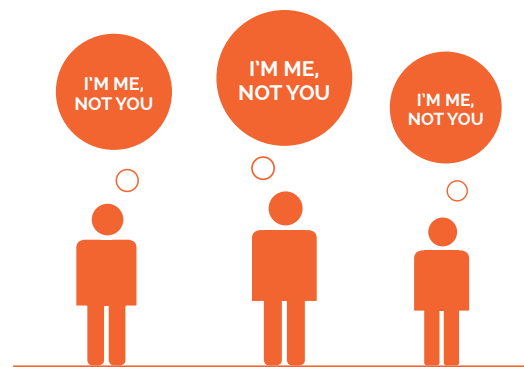


Another interesting, but concerning, discovery from our research is that for many of the asset managers the articulation of their brand attributes is considered only relevant within the careers section of their web site. Is it because their brand is not thought of as relevant to demonstrate what a professional prospect could expect of the firm, and to identify a synergy between investor and manager?

That their brand values are only relevant to a student as demonstration of the culture within the firm. This devaluation of the brand values appeared on more web sites that we would have expected.

It's still early in 2015 but we expect a growing trend towards a more balanced approach to brand values, probably tipping the balance in favour of the softer human capabilities over the harder commercial outcomes.

We doubt the market will continue with "I'll have one like theirs" as the need to be individual is definitely a key focus in strategically building a brand.



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