

Is your firm dysfunctional? Take an online test to find out

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By Randall Rothenberg

Are marketing departments dysfunctional?

For years, marketing executives have complained about the difficulty in bridging the gap between strategy and execution. Does the problem lie with suppliers-agencies, production houses, and others who serve their own interests, rather than clients'-or does it lie somewhere inside us? Now, evidence is surfacing that the breakdown may indeed be inside marketing groups, attributable to specific factors-and potentially subject to repair.

Conflict alert: The research was done by my colleagues at Booz Allen Hamilton, and put forward initially in the management journal I edit, strategy+business. But the findings have proved so intriguing that my Ad Age editors were willing to allow a self-serving gloss here.

In the article, titled, "The Four Bases of Organizational DNA," consultants Gary Neilson, Bruce Pasternack and Decio Mendes proposed that a company's ability to translate strategy into action is woven deep in the firm's fabric, and derived from four primary building blocks-structure, decision rights, motivators, and information-that recombine in myriad ways to form a unique personality for each organization. Subsequently, the authors turned their analysis into a diagnostic test on orgdna.com.

Within three weeks, more than 4,000 had diagnosed their own companies' DNA. About one-quarter identified themselves as working in marketing-the largest functional segment represented in the survey.

By significant margins, marketing staff and managers in large companies (\$1 billion-plus in revenues) view their companies as less "healthy" than do personnel in other divisions.

The authors found most companies falling into one of seven organizational "species," based on prevalent combinations of the four bases. Of these, three were considered healthy: well-aligned, flexible firms, a species they termed "Resilient"; "Just-in-Time" organizations, which, while not necessarily proactive, are able to turn on a dime when necessary; and "Military" organizations, generally smaller companies, which succeed through the leadership's force of will. But marketing, Booz Allen's "OrgDNA Profiler" found, had a lower incidence of "Just-in-Time" profiles than other segments; among the largest companies-\$10 billion-plus in revenues-it had a lower incidence of "Resilient" profiles than other segments.

Marketers didn't merely perceive their firms as less sound; they also found a higher degree of unhealthy behaviors. For example, marketing management and staff were more likely to identify their companies as "Passive-Aggressive." Passive-Aggressive firms are "so congenial" that they seem "conflict free." But looks are deceiving: These are the organizations where "everyone agrees but nothing changes."

Unlike the DNA of living creatures, the DNA of organizations can be changed outside the laboratory. So there's certainly hope for marketing. But there is a larger question looming over these findings, which is less about marketing than about the firm itself: Given that marketing often is a more front-line division than other overhead functions, are its staff and managers more aware than others of the problems a company faces and the mistakes it makes?

If so, marketing may not be dysfunctional. It may simply be more passionate about results, and frustrated by the firm's overall ability to align itself for action. Take the test and decide for yourself.

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