

Article for the Model magazine
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(Part 1 of 4)

Vision – Image or Ideal

The introduction of distinction Vision into human communication thinking is a result of Dr. Norbert Wiener's book describing systems entitled *Cybernetics*. Whether a system is an automaton, individual or an organization, it can be thought of as directed toward a specific state, outcome, goal or vision. It is teleological concept, that is, to be drawn toward its ends. What is less known is the crucial historical juncture at which Dr. Wiener can up with these ideas. It was a time the American historian Daniel Boorstin, author of *The Creators* and *The Discoverers*, calls "The Graphic Revolution". He wrote that this was a revolution of perception that created new distinctions between ideals and images. Whether a vision is an ideal or an image and the important difference that makes this the subject of this essay.

Daniel Boorstin, in his prescient 1962 book, *The Image*, pointed out that more and more of modern experience is not of actual events, but rather staged "pseudo-events". With prophetic accuracy, he predicted that the

measure of being "informed" would come to mean one's knowledge of current pseudo-events rather than historical facts or current events. He goes further to state, "What the pseudo-event is in the world of fact, the image is in the world of value. The image is a pseudo-ideal. As we shall see, it is synthetic, believable, passive, vivid, simplified and ambiguous."

"An image is synthetic. It is planned: created especially to serve a purpose, to make a certain kind of impression." ... "an image is a visible public 'personality' as distinguished from an inward private 'character'. It is reputation as distinct from character."

"Since the image is already supposed to be congruent with reality, the producer of the image (namely, the corporation) is expected to fit into the image – rather than to strive toward it. The consumer of the image (namely, the viewer of the corporate image: a potential client or customer) is also supposed somehow to fit into it. All these relations are essentially passive. The real effort in relation to an image



is not by the corporation as a whole, but by the experts and executives who have made the image and who are its chief custodians. The 'projection' of an image is itself a way of touting reputed virtues. Both subject and object then will want to fit into the picture. Both will assume that a portrait so persuasive and so popular must be made from life. Once the image is there, it commonly becomes the more important reality, of which the corporation's conduct seems mere evidence; not vice versa. In the beginning the image is a likeness of the corporation; finally the corporation becomes a likeness of the image. The image (unlike actual conduct) can be perfect. It can be a precise pattern which will satisfy everybody."

The Image, Daniel Boorstin

David Gaster suggested in his essay on Vision *A Framework for Visionary Leadership in The New Traditions in Business* that a company's vision (in the minds of its owners / officers) would be richly represented, changing, and evolving.

Vision grows in the feedback-feedforward relationship between what might be (the world in mind) and the present potential (the sensitive perception of the environment), and it thrives on difference. Indeed, vision seems ever elusive like the rainbow – wherever one moves, it is just beyond reach. Yet like the North Star, it is a powerfully reliable guide.
A Framework for Visionary Leadership, David Gaster

He leaves it to our imaginations whether that richly represented vision is highly realist or symbolic. For example, if liberty were suggested as an important aspect of a business vision, how do you now think of it? How do you represent it in your mind's eye? Do you see yourself free of obligations on the first tee of your favorite golf course? Or do you envision that statue in the New York harbor? The golf outing, even if it has never happened, has a versimultude with existing conditions, it appears as if it were real. The statue of Liberty, the symbolic representation, even though it is taken from a real object, derives its importance from being representative of the idea. It is evocative for its collected associations. Another example may serve to make this even clearer. Let's say your company's vision includes being a "Learning Organization". How do you represent that? Do you envision employees in a classroom or at a computer terminal, or Peter Senge's book cover (or Peter himself)? The more "realistic" the vision is, the more it matches Daniel Boorstin's definition of an image; something we fit ourselves into. The more "symbolic" the vision, the more it matches Boorstin's distinction of being an ideal; something never achieved, but sought after. Test this with several corporate visions. One that occurs to me as I am composing this article is the vision of Apple's co-founder Steve Jobs, "To change the way people work and live." Notice that no clear, specific image is stated. It is left to the individual's imagination. Contrast this with the typical company mission statement, the "To be

the # 1 _____ in the world." Here the suggested representation is of officers / employees in a group shot as conquering heroes. Again from Boorstin, "An image is the kind of ideal which becomes real only when it becomes public. A corporation which decides to rebuild its image has decided less on a change of heart than on a change of face."

So is an image ever a vision? Probably, but not necessarily usefully. An image is created by an advertising or marketing group in answer to a "perceived market need". A vision, as I understand it, issues from a human heart (or a sharing of human hearts) about something that is deeply felt by them. A vision is an attempt to articulate an ideal so that others might be guided by – but never reach – that star as well.

By applying contrastive analysis to Boorstin's definitions of an image and a vision, we might begin to close in on some "well-formedness conditions" for a vision that will encourage commitment to character ideals rather than image consciousness. Like a description of graphic art itself, Boorstin stated an image "...is synthetic, believable, passive, vivid, simplified and ambiguous." The opposite of that would be: actual, not believable, active, blended, complex and clear. The later is a description more closely resembling how we experience life.

First, vision must be made from the actual concerns of the company's "owners" in the widest possible meaning of both of those terms. This is confirmed by all the failed efforts at contriving a vision / mission statement. The "We Recycle" campaign of White Castle Hamburgers – when in actual fact they did not and could not is a classic example. Others include: "We're a green company" because they put out clear (as in see through) products. Ruling out planned (read: synthetic) image making might appear to put vision-making consultants out of a job. A more careful reading leads to redefining the vision consultant's role from an overpriced copywriter to a genuine facilitator of expressions of heart-felt concerns of the company's owners.

Second, a vision needs to be beyond belief (or believability). Examples of this quality of vision include Apple (a vision of personal computing products changing the world), Anita Roderick's BodyShop (a vision of cosmetics making the world more ecological), and Bennington's (a vision of suburban clothing positively changing race relations). To put it another way, if the possibility is already possible for a company, then it is image consulting, not vision making. Vision making takes the concerns of a company and places them strategically in a larger historical and / or social context. It also appears that the company and the vision need to be in different domains. A computer company increasing business productivity is not an example. A computer company changing how people relate to each other – like



MySpace.com – is an example. A seminar company changing education is not an example. A seminar company ending world hunger is.

Third, a vision needs to be active. Not just in the sense of being a movie, but also not ending up with an image of a completed, final and finished result. Like an ideal that is sought after and never completely attained, a vision is most compelling when it is essentially unfinishable.

The vision is not an attainable end state, but rather a continuing process. There is no complete description – the patterns of our minds unfold beyond our ability to describe them – but I imagine a continuously evolving hologram. A Framework for Visionary Leadership, David Gaster

Boorstin wrote in *The Image* about how people now seek to conform to an expected image and are therefore essentially passive in the creation of their own experience. The antidote is actively striving to achieve a quality of aliveness that will be lifted to a higher level whenever one closes in on it. The history of civil liberties in the United States of America provides an example of this. In the 20th century, women first achieved recognition as people with changes in legal status and the right to vote. Then the various minorities achieved this, followed by people with disabilities during Bush, Sr. Children were enfranchised with the full rights of a person during the Clinton years. The continuous quality improvement movement (kaizen in Japanese) is a business example of this. Another example is computer technology's drive for the ultimate machine – which will never be reached.



Fourth, a vision needs to be made compelling by its rich texturing of people, place and resources rather than a vivid and simplified image. An image is easier to sell in a 15 second spot, but it won't encourage employees to go the extra distance. David Gordon, noted author and NLP trainer, pointed out that no one gets compelled to participate until he or she is acknowledged as a participant. When people see how they can participate, how much they can decide, how much of a difference they can make, they do. This includes customers, like the ones that bring back their own bottles to the BodyShops for refills because they experience themselves as participating in making the world more ecological.

The reader may have detected that this distinction and desirable preference for a richly textured vision would appear to be in opposition to an idealized iconic image, such as liberty. It is rather that the truly iconic representation organizes and gives meaning to all the real and particular acts of individuals within that vision. The Christian cross with the suffering Jesus on it is iconic of the Catholic church and holds within it the acts of real individuals in prayer, charity, forgiveness and the rest. The "golden arches" and Ronald McDonald are iconic in the strict definition of the term, but they point to fast

“A vision needs to take a stand. The homogenized corporate mission statements that litter lobbies across the country were written to not offend, and therefore do not inspire. To inspire is to stand for something. To stand for something is to not to stand for something else. You have to be willing to give up something in order to get something.”

food rather than give meaning to life or a domain of life like spirit. It is important to note that it is not Ronald's cartoon quality that does this. Rather, it is cartoons that lend themselves to being vivid and simplified. Citibank's ads featuring photos of good-looking and well-groomed professionals is simply another way of portraying a vivid and simplified image. To amplify this point, in literature, this is the distinction between pathos and bathos. Pathos portrays the true tragedies of life; the upheaval of families by revolutions that were undertaken to free them, the destruction of traditions by tyrants who swear to defend them, the loss of wisdom by willful acts of ignorance. Bathos, on the other hand, tugs at our heartstrings and loosens our tears by appealing to the most vivid and simplified scenes of loss. It's the poor lost puppy, the movie's hero and famous actor in a tough, heart-warming situation without any chance of escape, except that the opening credits are still rolling, it's the lovers separated (until the already expected sequel). That is to say, most films made. This is not to say one is right and one is wrong. At issue here is the difference between real human connections and life concerns and their pseudo-events. Corporations, through their advertising agencies, often attempt to offer an engaging story of one of their employees somewhere between bathos and pathos to support their human claims. A more positive and less vivid example is Ralph Nader and his year in year out struggle to make capitalism and democracy work together (even if it means running for the presidency).

And fifth and finally, a vision needs to take a stand. The homogenized corporate mission statements that litter lobbies across the country were written to not offend, and therefore do not inspire. To inspire is to stand for something. To stand for something is to not to stand for something else. You have to be willing to give up something in order to get something. Barney's department store is now the hippest chain in the world and therefore they have lost the ordinary buyer. You don't go there for the ordinary. The Apple Macintosh and iPod users are practically religious in their devotion, as are Saturn car owners. And while both of these companies and their products have reshaped entire industries, some people will not buy them because they are not mainstream enough or unique enough or something else. By defining yourself and / or your product, you create a niche. Sony's portable products are



a marketing textbook example of this. It's preferable to be in favor of something or someone rather than against. Abolishing slavery is an example of against. Gaining the vote for women is an example in favor. You can be against high prices or in favor of low ones. In the long run, directing people toward what you want them to pay attention to works better. Witness the success of the GAP with simple, well-made, 'no designer label on the outside' clothing.

With Boorstin as our guide, the distinctions between image and ideal become as clear as the distinction between reputation and private character. If vision, mission, ideals and private character are indeed so closely related, it has tremendous implications for development of successful businesses, the conduct of those businesses, and the teaching of business as well. What MBA courses currently encourage deep heart-felt examination? How much longer can they afford not to? Where do businessmen and women go to learn to develop and articulate their character? If business schools do not offer this, they may soon seek it elsewhere. Business – the source of much of our daily bread whether we are employee, manager, customer or consultant – has hidden within it a path of personal development – perhaps even a spiritual path – as strong as any other. It's all a matter of what we strive for.

Charles Faulkner has been involved in human communication and change for over 20 years including indepth study in Humanistic psychology, Ericksonian techniques and cognitive-linguistic approaches including Neuro-Linguistic Programming. A prolific innovator, he is the author or co-author of ten titles including *NLP: The New Technology of Achievement* and is featured in several investment books for his work modelling financial decision-makers including *The New Market Wizards*. Charles is also the developer of a metaphoric model of identity and change based on his studies in Cognitive Linguistics and the author of programs including *Metaphors of Identity*. In addition to his teaching, he consults to individuals and firms on their financial strategies and human systems dynamics.

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