

# Distinctively different

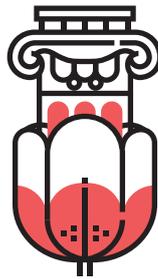
Brand distinction inspires change. **John Davis** explains how you can stand out

**Turning midlife from a time** of crisis to contribution. Creating yoga pants from pollution. A transformation from colonial backwater to global leader. And ‘winning’ at the Olympics without being an athlete. What do these achievements have in common? Brand distinction.

‘Distinction’ is the acknowledgement by stakeholders that your brand is meaningfully different. Distinction can capture the collective imagination. It is important for organizations and products alike, because it drives added value.

Developing your organization’s distinctiveness is essential to becoming a reputable brand, but no amount of marketing wizardry can convince target stakeholders that a brand is truly unique if it doesn’t authentically have all the elements in place. Only when the market recognizes true difference can a brand claim it has achieved distinction.

There are four elements in distinction: strategic heritage, strategic environment, strategic goals, and strategic positioning (see graphic on p66). Focusing on these four elements will help your organization build and maintain a distinctive position in the marketplace, and resist the inevitable shift away from specialty and towards commodity, which occurs as markets mature and competitors multiply.



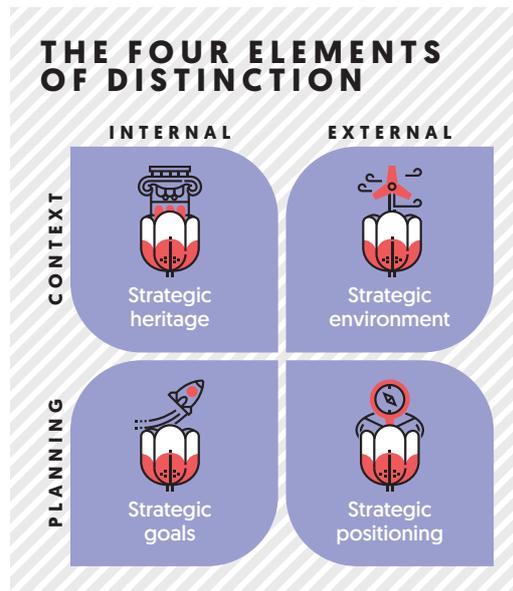
## Strategic heritage

Your organization’s strategic heritage is comprised of the unique traditions and practices that distinguish you from your competitors, influencing your approach to creating value in society. This is true for mature companies as well as start-ups: the latter’s strategic

heritage comprises the collective experiences of the founding employees. Authenticity is at the heart of strategic heritage. If your organization has historically been risk averse, then bold innovation would be inauthentic and could actually disrupt your business, dilute your brand reputation and reduce brand value.

As organizations grow, each generation of talent inherits the practices of those that came before, influencing decision-making. Most of us will recognize such inheritance through the internal dialogues that animate an organization’s social fabric. The phrase “this is how we do things around here” is a common example, guiding us as to whether current ideas are consistent with historical practices. A word of caution, though: paying respect to the past is different from mindless, rigid adherence to tradition. There will be situations when norms have to be challenged to stimulate new thinking. ▶





- ▶ For a start-up, the core need is to apply the wisdom of past experiences to your ambitions for the new venture.

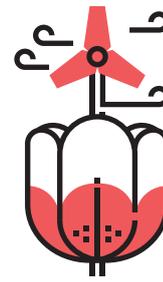
One fascinating example of strategic heritage is the Modern Elder Academy (MEA). MEA was founded by Chip Conley in 2018, while he was working on his book, *Wisdom at Work: The Making of a Modern Elder*. It is “an academy dedicated to navigating midlife transitions”, and was inspired by Conley’s realization that while rites of passage accompany many transitions in life, such as graduation, there are no clear events to mark midlife. MEA was founded as a school to “grow whole, not old”, offering workshops in which participants focus on rejuvenating their work, their ambitions, their lives and their ways to contribute to the world.

Its strategic heritage is rooted in Conley’s own career and life journey, including his prior entrepreneurial venture, Joie de Vivre Hotels, and the senior strategic roles he later held at Airbnb. Those collective experiences imbued Conley with the wisdom needed to help others as they navigate toward a more meaningful future, and MEA is fast becoming an inspiring rite of passage for those in midlife. Conley says: “In a world where people are living longer, power is moving younger, and the world is changing faster, it’s clear we need ‘midlife wisdom schools’ to help those aged 35-75 imagine how they can repurpose their mastery.” It is a unique, distinctive vision.

#### Strategic heritage questions:

- 1 What factors would stakeholders identify as unique to your organization?
- 2 What are your historical decision-making tendencies?
- 3 What internal core capabilities make the organization special?

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#### Strategic environment

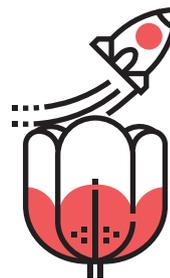
Climate crisis. Gender violence. Polarized politics. Poverty. Tariffs. These are significant, even existential, threats. Economic growth, digital innovation, a growing global middle class, renewable energy: each are windows of opportunity. Both threats and opportunities affect the world around us and the strategic environment in which we operate. By becoming a student of context and listening for the signals that influence markets and society, you will be better prepared to manoeuvre your brand as it is buffeted by the inevitable but unpredictable winds of change; and you will strengthen your ability to overcome the forces that will otherwise weaken your distinctiveness.

One firm that exemplifies how organizations can develop distinction by listening to signals in the strategic environment and identifying ways to solve intractable problems is LanzaTech, a biotech company that “recycles carbon today for a cleaner tomorrow”. Trees and plants recycle carbon naturally, but the depletion of forest ecosystems worldwide, coupled with increasing carbon emissions, means nature is unable to keep up with rising demands to recycle carbon. The result is the acceleration of environmental damage that we are witnessing everywhere.

LanzaTech addresses both existential threats and important opportunities by developing technologies that mimic what trees do, keeping carbon in a closed-loop material cycle and helping to produce low carbon products, resulting in improved air quality. What does that mean? One surprising answer: yoga pants derived from steel mill pollution. Ethanol from gasified garbage is another. LanzaTech provides a powerful example of how strategic environment can be used to drive distinction.

#### Strategic environment questions:

- 1 What are the meta-trends impacting the world?
- 2 What will happen – to you, your business, society, the planet – if these trends go unchecked?
- 3 How can your distinctive capabilities be deployed to address these challenges, producing both meaningful and measurable improvement? What external expertise is needed to help?



#### Strategic goals

Since distinction is about being outstanding by standing out and not merely blending in, your strategic goals must reflect a similar level of ambition, serving as aspirational calls to action to elevate your standing and contribution to society. They

**Incremental expectations won't energize people nearly as well as a sense of daring**

should stretch your capabilities and may even sound a bit hyperbolic, yet they must also be measurable. They are certainly not about what's easily achievable: incremental expectations won't energize people nearly as well as a sense of daring. They should electrify people's imaginations, serving as a mechanism to rally their collective energies in solving how goals can be achieved. In effect, strategic goals frame your 'moonshot'. They succinctly describe what future brand-building outcomes look like if you are successful. Strategic goals can also reinforce a sense of purpose in an organization and stimulate profound changes by focusing people's attention around a cause and not just a financial result, inspiring and galvanizing effort in a way that drives the brand planning effort.

One example comes from the history of Singapore. Singapore's independence began in 1965, after the country was expelled from Malaysia. Lacking natural resources, the country was in a precarious position, as standards of living were low and survival was not guaranteed. Led by founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the country embarked on a journey of what has now become perpetual renewal. Focus was placed on attracting business interests from overseas, strengthening the education system, and providing a safe, stable and secure society for inhabitants. This included a strong legal system based on English common law. Fast forward 55 years and Singapore is admired for its remarkable transformation from relative obscurity to widespread recognition as being among the very best places to live in the world. Animated by a desire to never fall behind, encapsulated by the local term '*kiasu*' – a sort of 'fear of missing out' – the country has been at, or very near, the top of numerous global rankings, including education, healthcare, business, standard of living, crime rates, a global smart cities index, competitiveness, and global IT. Even Singapore's Changi Airport is ranked number one in the world, widely heralded as a destination in its own right.

These successes, nurtured in a tiny country with no natural resources, reflect the government's willingness to invest with surgical precision in the factors that shape a healthy society – and combine to create Singapore's distinction. Brand Finance's *Nation Brands 2019* report rated Singapore as the world's strongest nation brand, the only country scoring above 90 out of 100 in their methodology.

#### Strategic goals questions:

- 1 Are your goals bold, stretching your organization, even at the risk of not achieving them?
- 2 Do your goals excite people and help them understand why their contribution matters?
- 3 What does success look like if you achieve your goals? Consider the short term, one-two years;

medium term, three-five years; and long term, six years and beyond.



#### Strategic positioning

Market perceptions have a direct influence on whether your value creation process has been successful. Positioning is a vital part of the planning effort because it directly influences those perceptions. When you own a unique and positive place in the stakeholder's mind, then you know the market sees your position as distinctive.

Samsung's transformation from local trading company to global brand powerhouse is well known. The company sought to raise its brand visibility to drive sales, so it became a local sponsor of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Samsung invested more in research and development, placing greater emphasis on design and innovation, while also increasing its Olympics investment, becoming a TOP (The Olympic Partners) sponsor. The relationship has helped Samsung solidify its reputation as one of the world's leading brands.

The focus of Samsung's Olympic sponsorship planning shifted over time. Initially based on driving short-term sales, it evolved to leveraging the Olympics as a strategic positioning platform. The company's brand value has increased from \$3.1 billion in 1999, to \$61 billion in 2019, and it is ranked sixth in the world in Interbrand's evaluation of the top 100 global brands. The Olympics are not the sole reason for this growth, but as Samsung has said, "Investing in the Olympic Games means unlimited growth potential."

#### Strategic positioning questions:

- 1 Does your positioning signal to stakeholders how you add unique value to them?
- 2 Have you identified the brand-building activities for developing your distinction?
- 3 Is your positioning aligned with the organization's strategic and financial goals?

Brand distinction does not arise because of inventive marketing wordplay. Superficial thinking is quickly recognized by the market and justifiably discarded as inauthentic and meaningless. The quest for brand distinction, by contrast, can invigorate people to make a meaningful contribution. The challenge is transforming anxiety – born from the uncertainty of whether your distinction aims are possible – into a catalysing energy. To ignite people's imaginations and to draw them together in the pursuit of something bold, strive for distinction. ●  
— John Davis is regional managing director, North America, at Duke Corporate Education