

Is it time to dump mission statements?

By  Robert Gentle

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Quick: can you recite the mission statement of the organisation you work for? I didn't think so. Don't feel bad; you're in good company.



Photo by Glenn Carstens-Peters on Unsplash.

You're more likely to remember a message from a fortune cookie; and it would probably be more meaningful too.

Mission statements haven't always been with us. They crept up on the corporate world somewhere between the launch of the first space shuttle in 1981 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Some well-meaning management consultant probably came out of the woodwork and declared that all businesses needed a statement of purpose in order to operate successfully – conveniently overlooking the fact that businesses had been operating successfully for centuries without one.

Quality, integrity, respect

The fad caught on, aided and abetted by many a PR and marketing department. Companies large and small jumped onto the bandwagon and tried to outdo each other in complexity and sophistication. I can still recall a strategic weekend with a corporate client during which senior executives hammered out a mission statement in the comfort of an expensive country retreat. Still, at least there was golf afterwards.

From New York to Johannesburg, everyone was “committed” to quality, operating with “integrity”, treating stakeholders with “respect”. The air was thick with promises and platitudes, each more vacuous and meaningless than the last. Before long, the mission statement had descended into farce. A *Harvard Business Review* [article](#) in 2014 caught the mood with the headline *If I Read One More Platitude-Filled Mission Statement, I'll scream*.

Yet the statement industry shows no signs of exhaustion, and has dragged in its wake two more victims – the vision statement and the values statement. What's next – the virtues statement?

Enough, already!

In 2017, *Forbes* contributor, Len Sherman, [noted](#): “How much does your company's statement of mission, vision and values influence how you actually do your work every day? For most managers, I've worked with over the years across a

variety of industries, the answer usually has been 'very little', if not, 'what mission statement?'"

Customers are equally unmoved. Whether you're shopping, flying or getting your passport renewed, the last things on your mind are the mission, vision and values of the organisations concerned. Who cares?

Of course, there is immense value in companies focusing their thoughts on their business, but this is just a routine aspect of running any company, along with good leadership and management. Do we really need to dress it up in sanctimonious prose that few people will read or even understand?

Way back in 1928, when America was not as prosperous as it is today, the Republican Party had a memorable election [campaign](#) slogan: elect Herbert Hoover, and there'll be "a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage". Now there's a great mission statement for you! Except back then, it was called plain speaking.

Maybe one day, the CEO of a major company will stand up before the media and say: "We are dumping our mission, vision and values statements. If we don't know what we do, where we're going or what we stand for, then we shouldn't be in business."

I'm not holding my breath.

I'm from the old school, where a mission was something that Jim Phelps decided to accept every week in the TV series *Mission Impossible*; values were what your parents taught you; and your vision was, hopefully, twenty-twenty.

ABOUT ROBERT GENTLE

Robert runs the PR training company, www.robertgentle.com. He has some 25 years of experience in financial journalism, public relations and training. He wrote the bestseller *Read This - Business Writing that Works*.

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