

Messages aimed at customers or shareholders are often in conflict, and this is becoming a major challenge for brand management, marketing and media relations. In the past one could keep messages separate but in a web-enabled world they collide in embarrassing and counter-productive ways.

Here are two diametrically opposed core messages:

Marketing: We are here to serve you as a valued customer, making life better for you at a fair price. We believe in the value of what we do for you.

Investor: We are here to charge customers as much as we can get away with, creating as much wealth for shareholders as possible, without breaking the law.

In a web-enabled world both messages are seen side by side by both groups and differences can be disturbing as well as destructive.

Take a life insurance company: try telling policy holders that the only aim of the company is to charge the largest amount possible given competitive pressures, pay staff as little as possible, provide the absolute minimum to those whose relatives have died, look for every excuse not to pay theft or accident claims, and rip as much wealth out of the business as possible to give to shareholders.

Sadly that is not so far from the public perception of the insurance industry in general - and is what you can expect if you follow the "shareholder value" mantra to an ultimate extreme, and are overheard in public places including the online world.

The irony is that nothing could be further from the truth.

A life insurance company exists for only one reason, and was created for that purpose: to pay out...

Supporting families in the "club" who are in trouble because their relatives have died. Allied to that is a secondary purpose which is to enable members of the club to sleep at night, knowing that if disaster strikes, financial help will be available from pooled resources that the club has collected in the past. Insurance companies should never forget that their reason for existence is to allow people and organisations to share risk.

Of course, their shareholders should be rewarded for their help, with dividends and the

expectation of capital growth. But you cannot drive a successful insurance company for long if you talk only about rewarding shareholders.

This is an issue of overwhelming importance. You must remain connected with your primary mission of creating in some way a better world, or you will lose customers and staff, both muddled by your mission and disturbed by your values.

But insurance companies are not unusual: all businesses exist to satisfy the requirements of their customers - in a mutually rewarding and profitable way. And every business sector is experiencing this same crisis of purpose to one degree or another – at least when it comes to the largest corporations.

* Adapted from [Building a Better Business](#) - book by Patrick Dixon, keynote speaker on leadership, marketing, corporate image.