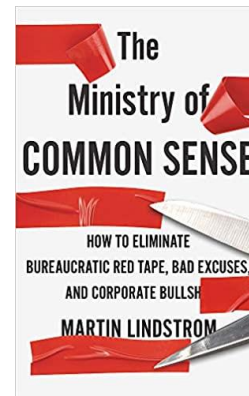




BrainCandy 66: Don't we finally need a Ministry for Common Sense? Not in Berlin, London or New York, but in our companies?

Dane Martin Lindstrom is considered one of the top international consultants to major companies such as Maersk, Google, Pepsi, Burger King, Nestle. He has written several books over the years, so far focusing on marketing topics, but now his latest book is out: **The Ministry of Common Sense** How to Eliminate Bureaucratic Red Tape, Bad Excuses, and Corporate BS. He criticises the many detailed sets of rules in most companies that can make life hell for employees and customers. Lindstrom has a knack for taking current issues and presenting them in anecdote-laden books as his consulting expertise. I still remember his first work from 2008: Buyology - Why We Buy What We Buy. At that time, neuro-marketing was a real hype and the young consultant Lindstrom entertainingly told why everything would become so much better and more successful through neuro-marketing. And of course, in his own estimation, he was way ahead in scientific understanding and real-life implementation. Since at the same time I had also become involved in the neuro-marketing field with great interest, I already knew that many of his neuro-laws were rather hypotheses up to that point and ultimately the hype died down a few years later. I have only enjoyed his next books as short summaries and have only now let myself be carried away to read his latest work in its entirety.



The book was written during the pandemic and pleasantly refrains from focusing on the alleged New Normal. Instead, it deals with an almost timeless but particularly topical issue in the pandemic of the attempt to reduce organisational costs with ever more detailed rules. Which, in the spirit of the 'unintended consequences', often leads to downright hair-raising effects in companies. Which, and this is Lindstrom's message, are no longer successfully challenged by getting used to the status quo - until an external consultant presents them as the most important roadblock on the way to a more efficient, more competitive corporate culture.



The book shows so many examples of such abstruse rules, without any discernible common sense, that one finds oneself again and again between incredulous amazement and hysterical giggles. Lindstrom loves anecdotes and there are plenty here. If you feel you work in an organisation that overdoes it with internal bureaucracy, annoying staff and customers, then this book is worth reading. His solutions are workable and would fit in a snappy technical article, but then he wouldn't be able to sell a book. So let's do as the many positive reviews on Amazon do, let's be amused by the many, many stories and resolve to going into heroic battle against the tyranny of circumstances in our environment.

For Lindstrom, it is central that a lack of empathy leads to the abuses in companies that contradict common sense. Incidentally, he notes a noticeable decline in empathy in society as a whole. His central idea for a solution is that we must move away from B2C and B2B and return to an 'H2H' focus, i.e. a human to human model.



One can literally feel how Lindstrom has just stumbled upon the importance of empathy through pandemic heightened senses. Incidentally, a lack of social empathy felt by many has led to sales of dogs and cats going through the roof worldwide. And since you can't scale animal production quickly, street dogs have probably benefited too. And the business and shares of ZooPlus.

Common sense is - when you can see things from the perspective of others. So it's about genuine empathy, not just sympathy. Many of his examples are relatively long but entertaining, so I'll give you a few appetisers in short story form:

- In Milan, toilets in restaurants were limited to just one as part of the pandemic response! Which led to people socially congregating in front of that toilet.
- It seems that round ice cubes are banned on Italian airlines because they can be misused as weapons. Square ice cubes, on the other hand, don't seem to give evil people any nasty ideas?
- The endless Zoom conferences seem to be owed another victim: The bio break has disappeared, now overfilled participants disengage inconspicuously - and later wonder what decisions they missed.



- Not only have Zoom meetings exploded, according to Lindstrom, Power Point presentations have also taken off. But the most beautiful 100-page Power Point decks prevent empathic communication and decision-making, not least because most people can only remember 3 -5 things from such presentations anyway. And who knows which part of the participants used the chart orgy for doing the down dog (yoga)?
- As a market researcher, I love his example with the security rules of one of his clients. He had to chop a 49 MB presentation into 50 equal parts because the client's system only allowed files under 1 MB through. I imagine the marketing director's assistant being allowed to assemble the file and now I go to get a coffee, chuckling quietly.

- Or you enter an empty restaurant. The waitress consults the computer system and leads you to the olfactory suboptimal table near the toilets. Absurdistan according to the rules.

Lindstrom argues that the pervasive lack of common sense hinders the very business of companies - serving their customers better than the competition and being more responsive to their needs. To stay attentive and constantly re-adjust to customers. Companies are so caught up in their own internally generated problems, and are additionally beset by invisible bureaucracy in the minds of employees, that they lose sight of this core purpose - and inevitably pay the price.





Companies focus on the rational-functional side in their rules: fact-based, clearly and measurably focused on everyday problems, gridlocks or miscommunications. In contrast, the emotional impact of these rules becomes the new problems: they too often show a lack of common sense and empathy: empathy between different departments or silos; empathy between upper and middle management; empathy between employees and customers.

For the solution, Lindstrom uses an experiment from animal behaviour research. Chickens were kept in isolated cages for months. After the cages were opened, nothing happened. The animals remained in their open prisons. Freedom seemed more threatening. Even visible food further away could not lure the chickens outside. But when food was placed directly in front of the door, behaviour changed quickly, the first small step made the next steps possible. Lindstrom also experiences this habituation to the status quo in workforces. The prospect of big improvements does not motivate. That is why, in addition to first small individual steps, he actually recommends the creation of an internal Ministry of Common Sense. Honestly, he mentions that the idea for this ministry came from a consultancy client. And when it is no longer needed, it disappears again.

Lindstrom: "The purpose of the Ministry of Common Sense is basically to suck one stupid thing after another out of the organisation. And at the end of the day, it's been enormously successful. I mean, in one of the biggest banks in the world that I refer to in the book, first of all, they got rid of more than 3,000 stupidities and believe me, they sold a lot more after that." Well, in my experience, my house bank has even more stupidities to show for it. Multiplied by the attempt to enter the digital age with a banker's mentality.

Well, do you have some nice stories from your company that would cheer us all up? For my part, I hope that my employees do not think that a K&A ministry is urgently needed.



Book recommendations

By Ralph Ohnemus:

Brand experience. The strategy in hypercompetition and information tsunami [> order here](#)

Brand amazement. Winning in the information tsunami [> order here](#)



Feedback, suggestions or criticism about this article:
braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com

The author

Ralph Ohnemus, CEO. Board member and main shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001.

Previously a client of K&A BrandResearch for 15 years.

National and international marketing and sales experience in senior management positions, including FMCG, fashion, media and telecommunications - most recently as SVP Consumer Sales responsible for marketing, sales and chain stores at Viag Interkom O2.

Contact: r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com

