

The Identity Game

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I recently came across an article written by Dr. John Raible, a sociolinguist, focused on how we create identity. To give a bit of

background, Dr. Raible's research and writing typically focus on transracial adoption and transracial families, specifically, children of color adopted into white families. Academically, it appears Dr. Raible has a specialized interest in the impact of transracial adoption and education. Although this article, and our industry in general, is only loosely connected to interracial adoption, his commentary made me think about how we, small technology start-ups, self-identify, and how those organizational identities may help, or hinder, our ability to transform into stable businesses past the start-up phase. It also made me start to think about if we began to view our organizational identities conceptually as Dr. Raible defines identity, our progression through the phases of start-up to stable might be a little bit more fluid and perhaps a bit more productive.

Within the world of the social sciences, identity is typically defined as contextually emergent. A mix of our self-talk, self-concept and environment determine who we think we are, how we present ourselves and who we are willing to engage with and how we are willing to engage with them. Social science tells us that although there are core characteristics that might help to define someone, there is no such thing as a stagnant identity. Social science also reminds that as identity is fluid, we can have multiple identities based on where we are and who we are with. According to Dr.

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Raible, identity isn't formed by labels we assign to ourselves, or perhaps that are assigned to us, but that identity is something that we have or something that we do. He also emphasizes that identity is a constant negotiation between an individual and the person with whom one is communicating. This definition guides us to the idea that identity is inherently communication. How we communicate and with whom we communicate and when we communicate, or are willing to communicate, will dictate who we think we are and who we are willing to present ourselves as. To further his line of thinking along identity and identity development, Dr. Raible explains that language adaption is then a vital tool of survival. He posits that people who are highly sensitive, or hyper-sensitive, to changes in social environments are able to change how they present themselves, how they communicate and how they identify to ensure success. Additionally, he notes that for this to be possible, we have to be overtly conscious about things that change around us and how we adapt the language we use to ensure the 'correct' social identity is put in to play in each unique context. Together, this brings us to this idea of having a flexible identity. Or perhaps, identity is a social chameleon.

Now you are probably wondering how I am going to connect adoption, interracial adoption at that, identity, language and chameleons to the med-tech industry.

A drawback of working in the corporate world is that it is somehow expected that as organizations, we have some sort of identity. In business, I think the correct term for identity is branding – the pieces of our organizational constructs we use for marketing. Our branding allows others to identify who we are, what we do, what our purpose is, and perhaps what we stand for. As branding takes hold, we become stuck in that identity. We must be who we branded ourselves as for fear change will negatively impact our ability to gain market share or increase sales or maintain customers or create brand loyalty. In many regards, this is vital. It creates a path of longevity for our businesses.

However...

In the world of small business and start-ups, we have a tendency to brand ourselves straight out of the shoot. Perhaps in an attempt to create an identity, we corner ourselves with catch phrases, logos, colors schemes, taglines and vision statements and purpose statements and ground into a permanent digital history with webpages, flyers and business cards. I am absolutely not here to say these summative parts of branding are not important – because we know they are.

The argument is that as start-ups, we need to think more like social chameleons and find flexibility in how we identify, the language we use and how we fit into the industries we are trying to break into.

When we uphold the belief that there is no room for change - that we must stick to our branding guns - we restrict our ability to maneuver in the industry and really explore opportunities that might exist in corners we once overlooked due to the way we identified ourselves. Or perhaps, our ability to use identity as a verb and not just as a noun, creates this path that permits us to fit into more than one industry corner. Even with all the market research in the world, until you are past the phase of research and development and getting your technology to market, your final niche in the market is unknown. If we are unable, or are unwilling, to be flexible with how we self-identify, adapt the language that we use, and realize that we can be a consistent, ethical, focused, purposeful organization that has a different identity to fit into different markets.

Think about it this way. In my 'real life' I am a college professor, a mother, a daughter, a writer and a friend. Or, these are the different ways I identify. There are also core characteristics about me that are constant. I am typically a bit out-spoken, over-analytical, and high strung regardless of where I am. My students see it, my children see it, my parents see it, it is apparent in my much of my writing and my friends see it. However, how these core traits present themselves to my different "contexts" (as you will) is quite different. I am an assertive, yet relatable, professor. My kids see me as bossy and nosy. My parents see me as independent and mouthy. All different manifestations of the same characteristics. Why different? Different contexts demand that I engage and interact with people differently. The same goes for companies. If we are not willing to change how we engage, which is dependent on how we identify, we are unwilling to truly explore an industry that we are not yet a part of. We must be willing to see past our initial self-built constructs to determine how we really fit in and who we really are to ensure we do have longevity within an industry we are fighting to be a part of.

The lessons embedded in this are that as start-ups, we have not yet found our homes. We are definitely not orphans, but we are trying to figure out how the industry will adopt our technology and our organization. That means we have to be willing to rethink how we present ourselves and recognize, that there is more than one right way to do this.

Identity dictates who we are, who we are willing to engage with and how we are willing to engage with them. If we are not flexible in our identity, we are constricting our field of people with whom we

are able to engage with. As start-ups, we need to build a network that is as deep as it is wide. This means we must be social chameleons. This does not ask us to let go of our beliefs, technology, goals and organizational mission and value statements. But, it does demand that we rethink how we are showing these characteristics to the world.