



How to work with the ghost of a departed founder

11th April 2019

I've been trying to work out the lessons from the acrimonious return of Julian Dunkerton this week to Superdry- the brand he co-founded in 2003, and stepped away from just over a year ago.

I think there are 3 lessons.

We all know founders drive growth by sheer force of will and by having a singular Vision. But when Founders leave, the ghosts of the Founder's intentions have a strange habit of continuing to haunt the thoughts of those that remain, undermining the intentions of the new leadership.

So the first lesson is this: before the board lets the Founder leave the building forever, they must make sure the Founder's Vision is crystal clear.

I think, actually, it should be chiselled into the wall of the lobby: Founders' build companies with that singular Vision and no Board will ever be able to embody it or express it so well.

The second lesson is that success depends on what happens in the dark, distant corners of the business; so once the Vision is established, the outgoing Founder needs to spend time with the leadership team to make sure they're aligned with it.

Without that happening, when the Founder leaves, projects stall and financial performance suffers as people sit around arguing, 'well, what would Julian have said?' That's good for the Founder's ego, but bad news for the share price.

The final lesson is probably still to come: consumers' interest in a fashion brand can be turned off in a very short time: notice Superdry's two recent profit warnings. But it can be turned back on just as quickly. It'll be interesting to see if Julian can produce a sales bump in the coming months... and whether he chooses to make it sustainable this time, by sharing his Vision.

We've worked with a surprising number of Founders of luxury and fashion brands, and with their boards and their investors. We've also worked with a couple of Founders who were truly ghosts in their brand: Hardy Amies and Harry Winston spring to mind.

But whether alive or dead, we always we've found that the leadership's ability to answer two fundamental questions is essential:

Who are we?

What do we stand for?

They're deceptively easy questions to pose, but slightly harder to answer.

Over the last 10 years, our work has helped CEOs answer those two deceptively easy questions, defining, aligning and kick-starting growth in their companies, often in less than 16 weeks.

If you'd like to hear more about how we do it, [email me](#) in confidence.

Now I'm off to chisel my Vision into the wall here.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in a cursive, grey font that reads "Chris".

Watch the video [here](#), along with [more content on Strategic Vision](#).

To find out more or have a quick chat, just email Chris West: chris@verbalidentity.com