

Nurturing the Soul

Adam Shell, Jun 1, 1996 - Public Relations Tactics

Summary: Patrice Tanaka, CEO & Creative Director of PT&Co, has a unique philosophy when it comes to running a business. She believes that the workplace, like individuals, has a soul, and that it should be nurtured. To nurture her own agency, she has created an office environment specifically designed to take the drudgery out of work to make the office a pleasant place to be for employees. Her techniques are definitely unique, some say revolutionary. Her office has a living room, where employees can gather to chat, and a meditation room, where workers can go to escape momentarily from their hectic jobs. She also has gone to great pains to make the office visually appealing to the eye through the use of space, light, colors, flowers. Here, Tanaka talks with Editor-in-Chief Adam Shell about her progressive, new age work environment.

Full Text: **In a recent speech you said that nurturing the soul of the workplace is the wave of the future. Why?**

We believe that organizations, like individuals, have a soul, and that the collective soul, like the individual soul, needs to be nurtured in order for it to thrive, to be happy, to do great work and to feel good. And that's what we're trying to do here at the agency: to really kind of nurture the soul of the company. We feel it's the bottom line for doing any kind of great work, whether it's painting the Sistine Chapel or creating a breakthrough PR campaign.

We want our people to have the resources to do great work. We make sure that they're challenged intellectually, that they're provided with a comfortable workplace environment that the space, the light, the colors, the texture everything in the office kind of delights and inspires the soul.

I want all my account people to contribute in a positive way. The effects of people who are unhappy at work can really contaminate other people. People who may be doing OK can be made to feel unhappy by a couple of people who are really unhappy. That's what I want to try to avoid. I don't want negative energy in my agency because it can be very draining, and it can detract from the work at hand. We need positive energy to deliver results for clients.

How does your philosophy impact the way clients perceive your agency? Is it too hip and touchy-feely for some?

You can't be all things to all people. We attract clients who are attracted to us. We don't get hired by clients who find our corporate culture the antithesis of what they feel comfortable with. And that's fine with us, because we are who we are.

But what really speaks to clients and prospective clients is the low turnover at our agency. That means a client's account team is going to experience low to no turnover, which is an important thing for a client, because it's very disruptive when someone on the account team leaves. I don't want our clients to have to suffer through that kind of disruption. And, selfishly, I don't want the agency to have to suffer through that kind of disruption, because it costs money when we have to re-train someone, and maybe it puts the account in jeopardy if the client is too attached to the account person. It makes a lot of business sense to maintain as low a turnover rate as you can.

Everyone accepts the fact that work intrudes on one's personal life. But you're one employer who allows an employee's personal life to intrude on their work lives. How do you strike the right balance?

There's no formula. We don't have established guidelines set to help us determine how we navigate every situation. My theory is if you treat people with respect and you try to accommodate their real-world needs that are outside the workplace, people will not only appreciate it but will also give you respect and appreciation in return. I don't think we've ever had people taking advantage of a situation. They understand that it's a fair trade. If during the week you need to go to a doctor's appointment or a PTA meeting, you can do it. That's part of the deal. On the other hand, you might have to work on the weekends, so we're willing to give you time off during the week when you need it.

How does this flexibility benefit the agency?

Because our lives are becoming increasingly more complex and complicated with the personal and professional demands, providing this kind of job flexibility is really a benefit and an advantage to us in hiring the best and the brightest talent. It doesn't come down to this company is paying me \$5,000 or \$10,000 more; it's that the other company is giving me more in terms of quality of life benefits and job flexibility. That ultimately is more meaningful to me than another \$5,000. We do not pay the highest salaries in the PR industry, and I don't ever want to do that. I don't think paying the biggest salaries gets you loyalty. I don't want someone to come to me because I'm paying them more than other agencies. Because, guess what, if some other agency pays them \$10,000 more, they're history, they're out of here. So they're coming to us because they're looking for a particular agency environment.

Your agency takes quality of life issues seriously. In a recent speech you talked about how the workplace can be enhanced by the poetry of space, light, colors. What's the story?

I like surprise. The eye likes surprise. Our employees like to turn a corner and see a wall that's warm red, or purple, or teal, or toys, or artwork, or these wonderful floral arrangements that we have throughout the office.

What's the power of these subtle benefits?

It just delights you, and delighting the soul is an important thing to us. On a rainy day, for example, when no one wants to go out, we'll order in soup and sandwiches for everybody. And then someone will get on the P.A. system and announce, Soup and sandwiches are being served on the Fiesta Deck. We try to keep things fun and light and surprising. Unexpected surprises, big and small, are what make the workplace fun.

Do your account people actually play with toys to relieve stress at work?

Yes. On our refrigerator we have poetry magnets, and people are always leaving messages in poetry. They're hilarious; they don't mean anything but they're funny. Our account people also play with yuppie tinker toys that we have in the conference room, or the easel (and colored markers) that we keep up permanently; people are always leaving messages on that board. Whatever.

Most people have a living room at home. You have one in your office. Nice perk or strategically placed?

The living room is, in my mind, about making a statement. It says this workplace is a living environment; it's not sterile, it's not just a bunch of people in these little cubes a real clinical, sanitized environment. That's why we have a kitchen and a living room and a meditation room, different public spaces where people can mingle and talk and sit and relax and chat and meditate or whatever, because that's all part of a person's day. I don't think you should exclude those aspects from the workplace because that makes the workplace a place of relentless work

only, with no infusion of the real needs of the body to sit and play for a few minutes, to gossip with someone, to take a nap if you're tired, or eat lunch in a communal lunch room. It's part of life.

Humor helps, too. There's nothing more energizing than getting a really good belly laugh. It just gives you so much energy. It raises the energy level of the whole group and is directly linked to higher productivity. If you are low energy and you don't lighten up, I think you can feel yourself getting lower and lower and lower during the day.

You have a meditation room in the office. What does that symbolize?

It's like our kitchen, our lunch room, our living room. It's there to be used by our people whenever they need to use it and however they want to use it.

What's the power of meditation?

The soul needs quiet. It needs time for contemplation. It needs time to recover from all the messages that bombard us during the day. It allows you to step outside, to center, to focus. The meditation room is a spa for the soul. When you come out of a meditation session you're more energized.

Businesses are measured by the bottom line. Is there a link between happy employees and profitability?

There is a direct linkage. It really does result in increased creativity, productivity and profitability. We have grown 584 percent over the past five and a half years. That's pretty significant growth. That kind of growth really puts a strain on the organization when you are growing as quickly as we are. It means that every person in the organization has to be operating at optimal power and speed in order to keep up. And happy employees keep up better than unhappy employees.

Before buying back your firm from Chiat/Day in 1990, you operated within an ad agency. What's the difference between running a PR shop within an ad agency or as an independent?

We were part of Chiat/Day for more than three years. We learned a lot about advertising. One of the things we learned, though, is that ad people are not committed to public relations. Most of them don't understand it and most don't know how to integrate it into a total marketing program. And if you are owned by an ad agency, because the ad budget is so much bigger than the PR budget, oftentimes the client will let the ad agency run their marketing effort, which means directing the public relations effort, which I don't think is a healthy thing for any company to do. I think it's in the best interest of any client to have independent PR counsel.

What was the origin of your management philosophy?

A recession hit in July 1990, the month we concluded the buyout from Chiat/Day. Six months later we lost half our billings. So what seemed like a neat idea a few months earlier quickly seemed like the worst idea ever in the history of business start-ups. But rather than laying off half our staff, we didn't lay anyone off, we all took pay cuts, and we rode it out. Nine months later we recovered all of our billings. From that period, we were very bonded and had made a commitment to each other.

If you follow the passions of your employees it can take you exciting places. For our agency it has helped us become a vehicle for positive social change. That impulse is what has helped us create campaigns for Liz Claiborne, a huge public service campaign on the issue of domestic violence, or for the Coors Brewing Company creating some exciting work around the issue of women's literacy or for helping Avon revitalize the Avon breast cancer crusade. Those are cause-related marketing campaigns. We don't only do cause related marketing but because that was a direct result but because that was a direct result of going with the passion of the people here it resulted in that kind of work.

What you're doing may not be revolutionary, but it is unique.

You're right. We haven't come up with anything that's revolutionary. It's old stuff; it's fundamentals that people have gotten away from. And it seems to me that just because we've gotten so far away from it that it's viewed as radical. Some people view us as radicals, and that's sad because that is how businesses should behave. It's the way you would want another person to behave towards you. Businesses are just a collection of people, so why should the collective soul be so antithetical to the individual?

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