

The Trusted Executive

John Blakey





Interview with Jane Frost CBE, CEO, The Market Research Society, UK

With members in more than 60 countries, the Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's leading research association. It is a professional body serving all those involved with the provision and use of market research and business intelligence (www.mrs.org.uk).

JOHN: What does organisational trustworthiness mean to you?

JANE: I believe that trust is about doing what it says on the tin. It has to go all the way through the organisation. And I think that the key stumbling block for a lot of organisations is not to realise that. It's not just what you do, it's where your supply comes from and how you treat your producers. So the whole thing has to mesh. And little cracks or failings in those areas which are difficult to spot are the real test of whether you are trustworthy or not. I currently operate in a market in which the only capital is trust. We're not a market or a sector which has machinery or a huge IT infrastructure. The whole transactional basis of the industry is based on whether people are honest with you so if you get it wrong it's critical.

JOHN: What's the best measure of organisational trustworthiness that you've worked with?

JANE: I don't think I've ever come across one measure that applies to trustworthiness. I'm sure everyone would have a different definition. I've always used proxies. And the more complex the organisation, the more complex the proxy. So I think that you have to define what your objectives are and then define what your proxies are for trust as part of that.

At Revenue and Customs, the board tracked the number of customer complaints. And the instinct is always to reduce complaints because complaints are a bad thing, but actually complaints may well mean that people trust you to do something about the problem. So you have to find a way of encouraging people not to hide problems and stick stuff in their drawers. Our solution was to measure satisfactory solutions to complaints and this was a measure we wanted to increase - that's a good proxy for whether you can trust the organisation.

JOHN: How do organisations build organisational trustworthiness?

JANE: I've always had the belief that if the CEO thinks that the small things matter then everyone else thinks that the small things matter. The big things people forgive you for. Consumers will always forgive Tesco for the fact that supermarket shopping is not much fun. They will always forgive the tax system for the fact that they don't like paying tax. But they will not forgive you for the little things that you should be able to control. So trustworthiness is about proving that you have control and care about the small details. And that means that if you say 'every little helps' because you're Tesco then the shopping trolley wheels shouldn't squeak. It means that your toilets look as good as your reception desk. If people get the little things right, then people notice.

JOHN: You've worked for some of the leading corporate brands; the BBC, HMRC, Unilever, Shell. Who would you say was particularly good at building organisational trustworthiness?



JANE: Unilever brands had their own personal relationship with the consumer; one thing that 'Persil' had over Proctor and Gamble's 'Ariel' was trust. 'Ariel' was efficient and would scrub out the dirt, and grime. But 'Persil' was a brand your mother bought and you were going to buy it as well because your mother was trustworthy. The greatest betrayal was when 'Persil Power' was launched and Unilever couldn't resist adding extra enzymes that, unfortunately, rotted your clothes. The integrity of the brand was damaged.

Once you put a finance director in charge, the risk is that it becomes 'bean-counting' and you start to salami-slice the brand integrity. You don't notice the little bits that go until they're gone. Ironically, my first conversation with the Chair of Lever UK was as a graduate trainee. He said that consumer value not shareholder value should drive everything because if you get consumer value right, the rest will follow. It is interesting that there are fewer marketers at the helm of organisations than there are finance officers.

JOHN: What do you think your role is as CEO when it comes to building trustworthiness?

JANE: I think you're there to take the flack. 'Fred the Shred' [Fred Godwin - ex-CEO Royal Bank of Scotland] and various business leaders since the global financial crisis have shown that there is a lack of personal integrity at the top. I do think that, if you're CEO of a small business or a big business, essentially it's down to you, even if it isn't.

In Shell, if the driver of a sub-contracting lorry was injured or killed, the general manager of that business would be hauled across from Malaysia, Borneo, or wherever, to account individually for that death at the Shell HQ in The Hague. And therefore the contractor of my contractor is my contractor and so you care that they went and got it right and the buck stopped with the general manager whose contract of a contract of a contract had failed in health and safety.

JOHN: Is there a leadership style that you think fosters trustworthiness better than others?

JANE: I think the key to it is consistency. So nobody ever trusted anyone who wasn't consistent. Even if you're wrong and ghastly and everyone thinks you're on the wrong track, if you're consistent at least they know where they stand. 'Tigger' bosses are the worst to work for. People say, 'Oh, but they're great because they're so enthusiastic', but my view is that they bounce and bounce and you never know where they're going to end up. That's the problem; you can't plan around them. It doesn't matter what personality type you are, you're just sort of always slightly 'off-kilter' in their presence.

JOHN: Do you think that the standard of ethical behaviour has fallen over time, stayed the same or improved?

JANE: I think it would be deeply naïve to think that things haven't been going on the way they have for a very long time. I think it's more difficult to hide things now. I think the role of the media and its ability to find things out is important.

I do think that brands could have been a driver for better ethical standards because brands have this non-physical element to the consumer relationship, but they didn't quite achieve that status they promised in the late 80s and 90s when it looked like the Chief Marketing Officer was going to sit on the board. Now you've got the Chief Customer Officer, the Chief



Service Delivery Officer and the Chief Information Architect, but no-one on the board who is responsible for the integrity of the brand.

JOHN: What has changed since the global financial crisis in this area?

JANE: So long as you still have to scream at people, 'Do this or they'll regulate it' then there hasn't yet been a tipping point in terms of behaviours. I think people are more frightened about consequences than they used to be, but the debate still seems to be framed in terms of fear rather than positive action. I have this debate in my own organisation. People say, 'Why are you doing this?' and I reply, 'Because in five years' time if we don't change somebody is going to tell us to do the things we don't want to do and we'll be over-regulated'.

JOHN: Where do you think this is all heading in the future?

JANE: Well, CSR (corporate social responsibility) is now having to be integrated into corporate behaviour. I'm not sure that it's anywhere near where it needs to be, but people are starting to behave slightly differently. If you put the CSR label on it, it becomes a habit and that is helpful. I think we've got to find a way of continuing to take personal responsibility but I think over-governance makes that less likely rather than more likely. For example, you can go on using sweatshops in China as part of your supply chain because it's not illegal, but that doesn't make it right. So you can take control of that agenda and take responsibility for it, or you can just say let's wait for regulation to tell us when to do it.

JOHN: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

JANE: Circling back to the start of our conversation; you can now spot trustworthiness in the detail. In the past, if I was the sort of leader who didn't care about my communications it wouldn't have been noticeable. Now you can spot what I write and what is written for me on Twitter. So your weaknesses and lack of consistency is exposed. People will say I've seen your corporate logo which says 'people matter for our future', but I've also seen the way you've just treated your secretary so I know people don't really matter to you.

JOHN: Yes, and by the way, I'm going on Twitter that incident later to all my ten thousand followers!



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