



Re-Positioning Your Club for Relevance

By Michael McQueen

Recent years have seen scores of iconic organizations and brands fall by the wayside. The demise of Kodak, Borders and Blockbuster can leave us with little doubt: no entity is immune to extinction - even an organization as big and successful as Rotary.

Charles Darwin once observed that “It is not the strongest that survive, nor the most intelligent. Rather, it is those who are most responsive to change.”

Having spent recent years researching what distinguishes enduring organizations from their endangered counterparts, the patterns that have emerged offer powerful insights as we consider how to ensure Rotary’s relevance.



Below are the three habits of every enduringly relevant organisation - keys that will be vital in ensuring local Rotary clubs remain relevant, strong and growing in the years to come:

Habit 1: Re-Calibration

As we change *what* we do and *how* we do things in Rotary over time, it is critical that these changes stay in alignment with *who* we are and *why* we exist - the DNA that makes Rotary what it is.

To see how important re-calibrating is, look what happens when an organization fails to do it.

For instance, consider how the seeds of irrelevance at Kodak were sown the moment they lost sight of *why* they existed and instead began to define themselves by what they did.

In the middle of last century, Kodak forgot that they were a memory preservation company that sold film, and rather began to see themselves as a film company.

If Kodak had re-calibrated as technology changed, instead of asking ‘how can we ensure people keep buying our film’, they could have asked the far smarter question ‘how can we help customers preserve their memories in a non-film way’ - a question that could have seen them dominate the digital age rather than be decimated by it.

As an organisation, it is vital that Rotary avoids the trap that Kodak fell into. The best way to do this is to become crystal clear on the answer to one question: what is our DNA?

In our efforts to attract new members in the years to come, it is vital we never lose sight of the values, priorities and commitments that will never change.

Here is the key message: relevance is not compromise. Any organisation that is willing to compromise its DNA in order to stay relevant never lasts the distance. After all, if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.

Habit 2: Re-Engineering

The second key to staying relevant in the face of change is to re-engineer how we do things as times and needs evolve.

In the words of legendary CEO Jack Welch, "The moment the rate of change outside an organisation exceeds the rate of change within it, the end is near."

As our world continues to change, we must keep pace - something that is often easier said than done. As humans we are indeed creatures of habit.

The reality is that some of the traditions, processes and protocols that we hold on to so dearly in our clubs could be the very factors that cause us to lose relevance. Many things that seem obvious and sensible to us can be entirely foreign and even off-putting to those potential members we are looking to attract.

Can I suggest that the most valuable asset we have in our clubs and districts for re-engineering and innovation are those who have the freshest eyes. It may be Rotarians who have only recently joined. Perhaps it is the guest speaker from your community who visits a club meeting. It could be your own non-Rotarian spouse or partner.

The beauty of people with fresh eyes is they don't know how things have always been done because no one has told them yet. They have no trouble thinking outside the box because no one has told them what the box even looks like! Above all, the most powerful thing that people with fresh eyes do is they ask *why*.

They'll come into our clubs and meetings and innocently ask 'why do you do it that way?' In reality, this is the most important question of all because we often forget why we do things the way we do - it's just the way it's always been done. The problem with this is that most of us don't realize there is a subtle but significant difference between being in a groove and being in a rut.

I was reading recently of a great example of the power of fresh eyes in bringing about innovation in the army. A group of new recruits were doing their basic training and got to the section where their instructing officer was teaching them how to use artillery guns.

"When you load a round into the guns", he said "You need to count 8 seconds before you fire it."

Just as the officer was about to move onto the next step, one of the young recruits did something that isn't generally encouraged in a military context - he raised his hand.

"Sir," he asked "Why do we wait 8 seconds?"

The officer was clearly thrown by the question, gave some non-response and moved on. However the question stuck with him and a few days later he asked one of his colleagues about the 8-second rule. Being a military history enthusiast, this fellow officer did some research and discovered that the reason for the 8 second rule was that in the past we used horses to haul artillery guns to the front line. The 8 seconds was the time necessary to move the horses away so they wouldn't get frightened when the gun fired.

Of course the army hasn't used horses to haul artillery guns for a few decades but the rule had stuck.

While that may seem crazy, the reality is that we do the same thing in Rotary. There are rules, procedures and traditions that served a purpose 5 decades or 5 years ago but no longer do - and yet we hold on to them.

In the years to come, new members will join our clubs and innocently ask:

- Why we ring a bell to start our meetings?
- Why we have a speaker at every meeting?
- Why does the club president wear the bling around their neck?
- Why do we pay for a full meal rather than simply a quick coffee or glass of wine after work?

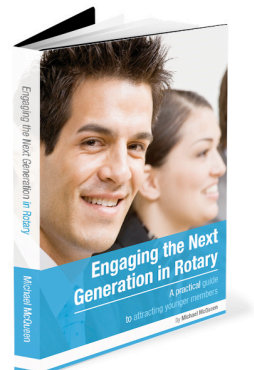
Naturally, there is nothing wrong with tradition in and of itself. In fact, traditions can provide a meaningful connection with the past. But by the same token we must always be open to change and avoid the trap of ever feeling we have arrived at the winning Rotary formula which we then set in stone. After all, the moment you think you've made it you've passed it.

Habit 3: Re-Positioning

The third and final key centers on the importance of us re-positioning the Rotary brand and our value proposition as those who we are looking to engage continue to change.

Much of my work in past years has centered on how organizations like Rotary can engage the younger generation - sometimes called the Millennials or Generation Y.

This is a fascinating group of young people who represent an enormous opportunity to Rotary from a membership point of view. They are an ambitious bunch of natural networkers who, contrary to popular opinion, have a strong sense of civic duty. Added to this, they are an enormous cohort, with half of the world's current population under the age of 30.



Due to the strategic importance of attracting young members, one of the resources I recently put together is a 2-DVD set designed for clubs focusing on how to engage young members (pictured above).

Whether you are looking to engage younger generation members or any other group in your community, re-positioning is critical in doing so.

When I am working with my consulting clients, there are a series of 5 questions I work through with them to look at how they can re-position themselves. These are as applicable for a local Rotary club as they are for a multinational corporation:

1. What motivates/impresses potential members?

This is by far the most important question of all. What represents value or benefit to those we are looking to engage in our clubs as members? It is important not to fall into the trap of making assumptions when answering this question. Although we may have a clear grasp on why we and other current Rotarians joined, we cannot assume that the same applies for others - especially those in younger generations.

Cake maker Sara Lee discovered this danger of assumptions a number of years ago. Assuming that time-poor parents desired cake mixes that would save them time and effort, Sara Lee released a range of packet mixes that required the user to only 'add water'. While the move should have been a sure winner, it didn't sell. Perplexed, Sara Lee's marketing department embarked on research to find out why their new product had missed the mark. What they discovered was that while customers wanted convenience, they also wanted to feel that making a cake involved love, attention and more skill than simply adding water.

Realizing their error, Sara Lee quickly overhauled their cake mixes so that customers were required to add milk, eggs and butter. The results were staggering - the new formula literally sold like hot cakes. Customers loved the new mixes which afforded them fantastic convenience while not robbing them of the joy of baking for their families.

How could we fall into this same trap when we are looking to 'sell' Rotary to potential members?

2. Who else is currently solving their problems?

Apart from considering what our potential members are looking for, it is equally important to note what other players in the marketplace are doing. After all, there is no shortage of service organizations, charities and professional networking organizations in most communities today. If potential members are joining these 'competitors' and not our clubs, what can we learn from this?

While I don't necessarily recommend that we simply copy or replicate competitors, there is great value in learning from and imitating *elements* of the success formulas used by others.

Professor of Management and Human Resources at Ohio State University, Oded Shenkar, concurs. He points to the commercial benefits of imitation and goes so far as to suggest that it is imitators - and not innovators - who enjoy the greatest success and profitability in the long term. He cites examples such as Diners Club who pioneered the credit card and yet enjoys only a tiny fraction of the market today.

Rather than re-inventing the wheel, are there things we can learn from those around us? After all, none of us is as smart as all of us.

3. How are we currently seen/perceived?

This third question can be confronting yet critically important: how is Rotary perceived by those in our community? What matters is not how we would *like* to be perceived, but how others *actually* see us. After all, perception is reality.

Although the Rotary wheel may be one of the most identifiable brands on earth, I would suggest that many 'outsiders' have very little real idea of why Rotary exists and what it is that we do.

As an indication of this, I recently conducted a focus group with young people to find out what their perceptions of Rotary were. Encouragingly, the vast majority of respondents surveyed viewed Rotary very positively. However, when asked to describe what Rotary is about, the most common response was that they perceived it as, and I quote one respondent, "*an exclusive club for wealthy retired men who meet once a week to socialize and eat bad food*".

Clearly these perceptions are far from accurate and yet the challenge we face is to change them!

4. How are we a category of one?

What does Rotary do that is so distinctive that no-one else could reasonably claim that they do it exactly the same way? Some would argue it is Rotary's sheer size and global reach. Others point to the track record with polio eradication and the endorsement of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Perhaps it is simply the culture of ethics and integrity with which clubs operate.

Regardless of what you feel Rotary's point of difference is, what matters is that we are clear on what it is and how we communicate it. As the old marketing adage goes, *it is better to be different than better!*

This sense of differentiation matters most in a crowded marketplace where competitors abound. Like any organisation of brand, if Rotary is not remarkable, it is invisible in our communities.

5. Where are the gaps?

What segments of the community are we failing to connect with as members? Look at your clubs membership - what ethnic, gender, socio-economic or generational groups are under-represented or missing entirely? More importantly, how can we take steps to address this?

Further still, what gaps and needs are not being met in our community that we could step in to fill? Are there individuals who have great ideas but lack the resources, network or leverage that Rotary can offer? Are there causes that may be unglamorous but are important nonetheless?

As we consider the themes of change and re-invention, I believe there is a lot we can learn from the world of sailing.

I'm told that one of the most important skills in sailing is being able to sail into a headwind. It's not easy and it requires a fair bit of skill, but it's something that every sailor will need to do from time to time.

I think that's a fairly good analogy for what Rotary as an organization will need to do in the coming years. We often refer to change as being like the headwinds we are currently buffeted by from every angle.

However, sailors know that the only way to sail into a headwind is to tack - to go with the wind rather than against it.

That is precisely the challenge and more importantly opportunity ahead of us all. We can't change the direction of the wind but we can adjust our sails.

Echoing the words of Charles Darwin that we began with, many years ago our very own Paul Harris offered a powerful mandate. He said, "If Rotary hopes to advance its aims, it must be evolutionary always and at times revolutionary."

I believe this very same mandate is more important today than ever before. Will we be willing to change, adapt and re-invent ourselves as the world around us changes? Will we be the evolutionary and even revolutionary organization our communities are crying out for?

I sincerely hope we will because make no mistake, the future of Rotary depends on it.

ABOUT MICHAEL

Michael McQueen is an award-winning speaker, social researcher and 3-time bestselling author.

Michael's first book *The 'New' Rules of Engagement* was the culmination of a 3-year study of the key drivers of youth culture around the world. With an emphasis on the values and attitudes of Generation Y, this 2007 release was designed to help business leaders, educators and parents to better engage younger generations.

Michael's most recent book *Winning the Battle for Relevance* is a landmark title that explores why even the greatest businesses and institutions become obsolete and how others can avoid their fate.

In addition to featuring regularly as a commentator on TV and radio, Michael is a familiar face on the international conference circuit having shared the stage with the like of Bill Gates, Whoopi Goldberg and Larry King.

Michael has spoken to over 150,000 people across 5 continents since 2004 and is known for his engaging, entertaining and practical conference presentations.

