

Back to the Roots

You know the Helsana posters that are everywhere, right? The ones with advice messages like: "Let's get enough sleep. Periods of rest promote mental health." or "Cry. It's liberating."

Now I wonder, if I may, why an insurance company should throw therapeutic advice about my lifestyle at me in the street - and that in the imperative.

If I want to get on with my life, my first idea is not to turn to a pump manufacturer or a health insurance company.

Helsana is not alone with such campaigns, they are just unlucky that their posters caught my eye (after all, at least that's what the campaign achieved).

I immediately agree that it makes sense for a company to place its own activities in a larger positive context that goes far beyond the company itself, and to uphold the awareness that these activities contribute to things worth striving for - in short, to have a meaningful vision. But the place given to this dimension in marketing communication is becoming increasingly out of proportion, leading to an inconsistent mix of levels.

The core of value creation fades completely into the background. The positive context is good and important, but within this context there is such a thing as an organization's direct "responsibility". This is based on the core of its value creation. This in turn is often provided in an entrepreneurial context, which means that an appropriate profit is part of the equation if this service is to be provided in the long term. Most people agree that profit is the means and not the end.

However, even this has recently suffered significant dents: Blackrock is pulling out of its sustainability program in regard to investments (probably not least because someone shouted "drill, baby, drill"). Google, Meta, Microsoft and Walmart are reducing equality and inclusion programs or disbanding the relevant teams altogether in response to changing political conditions, to put it diplomatically.

But this is a turning point, the extent of which I believe is still receiving too little attention: because these large companies can never again claim that they are concerned with anything other than profit. If profit really is only a means and not an end, then one is also prepared to forego some of the potential profits if the aim is to uphold values. When such companies emphasize their grand visions for the planet in advertisements, it just comes across as cynical.

But what can be done to avoid actually ending up in cynicism?

Well, companies could simply concentrate on what they are directly involved in and what they do well. I think it's very relevant whether their actions remain within the morally decent range, but if this is overemphasized to such an extent to the outside world, it gives the impression that good intentions are more a means than an end and that the end is mammon after all.

Perhaps the marketing industry will come back down to earth. In this sense, I am looking forward to corresponding campaigns. And there are also plenty of examples of slogans that stay close to the core business: "Fust – and it works." Or a restaurant that puts up a sign in front of the entrance: "Here you eat well." There you go. Period. They don't advertise that they want to optimize my happiness in life, although they actually do a little bit – the restaurant, I mean.

It can be done, after all.