

identity as **strategy**

**how your corporate identity
can fuel your success**

stijn van diemen

Identity as Strategy

For Bram and Guus.

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Preface.

Nada nos maravilla tanto como el descubrimiento de lo que ya sabíamos.

Antonio Muñoz Molina.

The concept of identity has been my faithful companion for some thirty years now. Whether from a purely design-led perspective, or in corporate identity and branding projects and programmes, or in the positioning and marketing of organisations, sectors and territories, or in the development of organisational strategies, identity has always been connecting the dots. It has played its part as the visual and communicative centre of branding, as the key connective element in marketing, and as the guiding principle and starting point for strategies. I have learnt that it can tell compelling stories, guide daily work, pave the way for development, innovate organisations, create regional coherence, forge surprising but valuable connections, ... And all the while, and in all the challenges I have been asked to help with, I have become more and more fascinated by its nature. What is identity if it can do all this? How can something so intangible be as strong as I experienced it to be? How is it possible that we can share an understanding of something that no one really knows how to describe? Why do we trust it so much? And why does it seem so constant and untouchable?

One of the nice things about identity is that everything and everyone has one. It's just there, whether you know it or like it or not. Being aware of who you are would seem to be a natural thing, but in my experience it is not. We take our identity for granted. It's inescapable us and ours alone. And that's what's fascinating about it — for me, anyway. That no matter what happens to you, and no matter how it changes you, you will still be you. Now why is that?

I firmly believe that the answer lies in the values that make up any identity. Becoming someone or something, developing and

displaying a personality, defining the relationship between you and the world you live or operate in — all depend on the values you hold. I have learnt that staying true to yourself, to your values, is the best guarantee of success for any organisation, sector or region. More than that, I believe that by staying true to your values, you actually become yourself and build a stronger personality every time you make a choice. You do not freely ‘choose’ and activate an identity — because that would mean that you are not being true to yourself, but to external goals. Sooner or later you will either lose track of yourself, or the environment will ‘unmask’ you. But if you consistently reflect on the meaning of your values, you will always be yourself.

In this sense, there is an ethical dimension to identity, or more precisely, ethics is part of identity. Living up to yourself means living up to your values. If you do not make yourself a steward of what you hold dear, you are ignoring who you are. And since no organisation, region or sector lives in splendid isolation, this means that your identity is also part of the public debate about the quality and development of your context. In other words, being who you are means playing a role in the world around you.

We live in an extremely interconnected world. It may not, as is often said, be getting more complex per se, but we are now extremely connected, we know about more coexisting complexities and, to make matters worse, we know about the connections between those complexities. As complexity increases, we ourselves need to be consistent to deal with it. We need conduct principles rather than targets. Conduct principles, based on values. That is, identities. As I have said, if you live by goals with an ‘external’ definition, you will be volatile. This belief has been a steady drumbeat throughout my career: that in order to have real meaning and responsibility, you need to show and live up to your values. And that you can do this through conduct that is your own, that affirms you, that is simply ‘the way you do things’, recognisable and understandable.

I have learned to trust the relationship between consistency and complexity by looking at this relationship from an identity perspective. Grounding what you do in your identity will enable you to make the right strategic decisions (even under pressure) because you will be guided not only by what you have to do, but also by what you want. Who do you want to be, what kind of country do you want to live in, what kind of organisation do you want to work for, which organisations and people do you want to work with? Following your own ambitions and values, while facing your challenges, will make you a continuous and responsible factor in any changing environment — and therefore a strong player. I learned that this, and much more, is what identity can do. And I would like to share my discoveries with you, hoping to fuel your success.

Introduction

**What identity
can do for
your strategy.**

Suppose you are someone who works on the management of an organisation, its strategy, marketing or CSR. Or your job is to position, protect or develop a region. Or you have some responsibility for a sector and need to be able to identify and respond to the challenges facing that sector. You might be a manager, civil servant, politician, project developer, consultant or expert. In these roles, you will have to make or support strategic decisions from time to time. And in doing so, you will have experienced the dilemma between evolution and consistency. Between complexity and clarity. Between change and continuity. How do you ensure that your strategic decisions take you to the next level, but are also understandable, logical and feasible?

This book will help you resolve these dilemmas and make these choices by bringing the identity of your organisation, region or sector into play. I describe examples, models and programmes that will show you what awareness of your identity can do for you and help you harness the power of that identity. The book will tell you how to stay true to yourself while charting a clear course for your development. How to make choices that reflect your loyalty to who you are while responding to the challenges you face. How your purpose and responsibilities define you. It will tell you about the relationship between values and identity, and the perspectives that your identity can give you on your choices, ambitions, developments and relationships. In short, it will tell you what being aware of your identity can do for your strategy.

Firstly because, as I said, it will enable you to make better strategic decisions. If you base yourself on consistent beliefs, which you will naturally do if you are aware of who you are and what that means, you will have clarity about where you want to go. 'We've come from here, we've experienced all this, we've learned all this, so the next logical step is this. Not because "we always do it this way", but because we know who we are, what we want to achieve, what our role is and where we can

go. Because we can envision a future based on our past. If we are aware of the values we hold and what they will mean in that future, we will always know what to do.'

Secondly, because it will enable you to build a better organisation, a more prosperous region, a more structured and effective sector. If you are aware of the identity of your organisation, region or sector and where you want to go, you will know how to organise yourself. 'What do we need to play our part, how do we balance our resources, efforts and challenges, how do we track our success, who do we work with?' The answers to these questions will not be easier (your identity is not a magic wand), but they will be more logical and explainable. 'This is how we do it — because this is who we are. We respond to challenges and expectations by being true to ourselves and our values.' No one will doubt you.

Another way in which this book can contribute to your success is that it will help you stay on track, whatever happens. Everyone who has responsibility experiences difficult moments when everything seems to go wrong, when opponents seem to have everything right, when doubts grow about the course you have taken. In these moments it is extremely helpful and valuable to reflect on who you are, what has made you that, and what this means for you and your next steps. You'll see that you can follow a clear path, play a certain role, respond to competitors and opponents by being true to yourself and basing your response to changing contexts and new challenges on your identity.

This book will show you how to inspire those around you. By sharing who you are, the values you hold and the role you want to play, your peers, employees, partners and stakeholders will not only understand you better, they will experience leadership. They will recognise, acknowledge and learn from your values, ambitions and choices. Knowing who you are and acting on it will inspire many and strengthen the role you want to play.

A final topic that I address in this book is how to overcome what I would like to call 'excessive brand focus'. You will find several places in this book where I describe the difference between 'identity' on the one hand and 'brand' on the other. I will comment on the value and strength of these concepts for your organisation, region or sector. Brands are psychological constructs in the minds of your target audiences, perceptions of your importance; they should not be confused with the personality and character that will ultimately lead you to make the right decisions in the long run. After all, it is you, not your audience, who should determine your strategy.

This book consists of seven chapters and an epilogue. Each describes a case study from my own experience, looks at the identity aspects of that case, and offers a specific perspective on what identity meant and did in that case — and can do in others. The book presents models that can be used, design principles that you can apply yourself, and definitions that might help you reflect on yourself. Rather than trying to be a showroom of cases, these cases are meant to be thought-provoking and offer ways of explaining what an identity perspective can mean for any organisation, sector or region — including yours.

I will start out by describing some basic dimensions of identity. How does the concept of identity relate to concepts such as 'ambition', 'interaction', 'origin', 'drive and energy', 'inside and outside'? Please bear with me through this somewhat abstract first chapter, as we will need these 'academic' definitions for the more practical applications I will describe in the rest of the book.

Next, I focus on the guiding principles that your identity provides; in other words, the logic that is a natural part of who you are. If you can define what you actually do and make that manifest in a way that is understandable and inspiring to you and those around you, you will demonstrate your value and relevance.

In the third chapter I will talk about the relationship between identity and strategy, mainly from the perspective of your ambitions and how you can work on those ambitions, and in Chapter 4 I will present identity as a collective development dimension and a basis for innovative capacity. Moreover, I will talk about the ethical aspects of identity.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to collaboration and partnership. It describes how identity serves as a recognisable touchpoint for the environment and creates opportunities for collaboration. Stakeholder management is the central theme of the sixth chapter: Identity can act as a 'sensing model' for your position and connection with your environment. Chapter 7 looks at project, programme and process management. Here, identity is presented as a reference point in time, in spatial aspects, in stakeholder environments and in environmental dynamics.

Finally, I wrap things up with an epilogue which deals with aspects of the process of self-reflection. This epilogue is more process-oriented and less about the relevance of identity as such; at the same time it shows how identity serves as a link and inspiration for the daily life in the office and the reasons why we come to this office every day.

So, in retrospect, here's a quick summary of what identity can do for your strategy: it can define you, guide you, share and justify your ambitions, connect you, support change, make you relevant and keep everyone involved. But most of all, it can inspire you to be your best self, simply by virtue of its intriguing nature as an important yet intangible asset of your organisation, region or sector.

With this book, I hope to share with you some of my fascination with the enigmatic, dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity, and inspire you to think about what it can do for you.

Before diving into the cases and chapters, a brief word about what I call 'A Designer's Fate'. If you would look at the current state of things of the cases I describe in this book, especially the older ones, you will see that in the real world things are not (quite) as I describe them here. Names and brands may have changed, organisations may have disappeared or merged, sectors may have been reorganised. This is the life of a creative consultant or designer: over time, clients take the next step, possibly with other consultants and designers, and change or even discard the results of the previous collaboration. Or so it might seem. All development of organisations, sectors or regions is made up of steps and phases, showing a growing insight and awareness of who one is. New challenges require new answers — and I believe that these answers can be consistent if one is sufficiently aware of one's identity and values. In other words, there is no fundamental break in development, and the steps taken after we have left as consultants or designers are only possible because of the steps we have taken together. A designer's fate, then, is to accept the ephemeral nature of his work: precisely because it is effective, it will be superseded by the client.

We accept our fate with resignation.

Identity, interaction and consistency.

Basic definitions.

**Floriade World Expo 2022
'Holland Central' reveals
the value of a region.**

**Corporate identity and
corporate image.**

1

Some basic theory.

Identity and alterity.



WORLD EXPO
HOLLAND CENTRAL
FLORIADE 2022

Floriade World Expo 2022.

How a region discovered and activated its value.



Stijn van Diemen (Laren (NL), 1963) studied modern Dutch literature and philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He worked as an editor and designer for various cultural and government institutions and in 1988 founded the design agency and publishing house Plano, which he ran for ten years. He held various positions at Tel Design in The Hague, lived and worked for several years in Valencia and Madrid, and taught at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. For almost fifteen years he worked for Total Identity (Total Design), as director of the The Hague office, later as group co-director. He then worked for a number of years as a strategy consultant at TwynstraGudde, before setting up his own strategy practice in 2020. He was a venture partner at Creative Capital Studio and currently also teaches at Utrecht University of Applied Sciences.

These environments have given him more than 30 years of experience in tackling strategic identity challenges in various sectors. With extensive consulting expertise in healthcare, education, government, ICT, digital platforms, industry associations and business services, both in the Netherlands and internationally, he has helped more than a hundred organisations, sectors and regions define and project their identity to build a successful future.

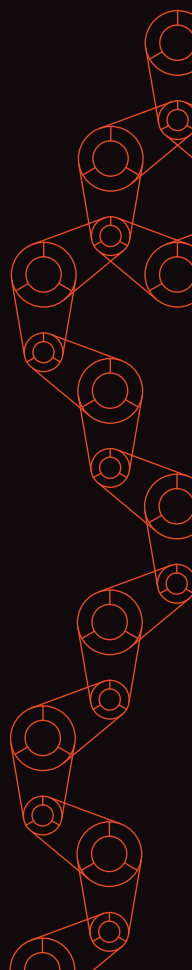
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The identity of your organisation, sector, or region is a hidden treasure that can drive your strategy. A clear understanding of who you are provides both a foundation and perspective for shaping your future. But identity can feel intangible — so how do you unlock its potential?

In this book, seasoned identity consultant Stijn van Diemen explores eight strategic perspectives on corporate identity, each illustrated with engaging real-world cases. These cases bring the concepts to life, showing how the strategic models can be applied in different contexts. By following these examples, you'll be better equipped to translate the insights into your own organisation, sector, or region.

Filled with dozens of practical models and design principles, this book helps managers and marketers make better decisions, gain stakeholder support, and build a solid foundation for their strategy. The practical case studies make it easier to see how the strategies work in real life, enabling you to adapt them to your own unique situation and drive success.

Stijn van Diemen has over 30 years of experience tackling strategic identity challenges across various sectors. With extensive consulting expertise in healthcare, education, government, ICT, digital platforms, and business services, both in the Netherlands and internationally, he has helped more than a hundred organisations, sectors, and regions define and project their identity to build a successful future.



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