

# Future business: beyond Jekyll and Hyde

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Maintaining that the-business-of-business-is-business has led organisations into a series of ethical tangles. Making genuine service the logical goal of business would pave the way for a healthy, trusting, mutually rewarding relationship with society and the environment.

There's a kind of Jekyll and Hyde relationship with society at the heart of a disorienting logic that has become typical of the way business engages with the ongoing stream of ethical dilemmas in which it is entangled. The obesity epidemic, for example, yet again shines a light on the values of business, this time it's industrial food.

Half of Europe now registers as 'overweight' on the scales. According to the Irish Heart Foundation, 39% of Irish adults are overweight, 20% of us are obese and at risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer, all of which is building an enormous future burden on the public purse which will be asked to pick up the tab for diseases incubating in today's children as a result of their eating habits.

This is not a simple issue with a single culprit or a single solution. It's complex and divergent: the more you think about it, the more angles there are. A classic systemic problem that calls on each of us to look at our personal and corporate decision-making, shoulder our share of responsibility and begin to change our decisions and actions and shift the whole system towards more healthy patterns. But

that's not what we do, is it. Instead complexity is typically used as a way of blurring the issue, side-stepping responsibility and dodging a meaningful response.

Food advertising is a case in point. TV advertising of salty, sugary, high-fat food aimed at kids is three times that aimed at adults, so what do we do? We agree to attach a health warning to those adverts - eat in moderation as part of a balanced diet. Great. We've banned the advertising of cigarettes to discerning adults, but we're happy to subject impressionable youngsters to a blitz of commercial sermons dominated by a range of food products firmly at odds with the recommended diet. Despite the known consequences, banning ads for food that can harm our kids is not yet an acceptable option.

Lobby groups vehemently argue against such regulation. With more than half of all viewers tuning in to non-Irish channels, what's the point, they ask. All we do is cut into Irish advertising revenue. What does that achieve? Anyway, why go the nanny-state route? What about personal choice? Doesn't that count for anything? And exercise. How about these kids

and their parents get off their ass and start moving it about. And talking of parents, what about parenting? What about parents taking responsibility for what they put in their kids' lunchboxes? And how about mom and dad role-modelling some healthy eating and living habits? Anyway, all of these foods are fine, as part of that holy-grail: a balanced diet.

It's an all-too-familiar logic-pattern that prevents business from solving the problems it creates by firmly privatising responsibility for issues such as food. You're on your own. You pay your money, you make your choice.

But are we really on our own? Business doesn't simply shape the economic space in which food is produced; it also shapes the cultural space in which we ask and answer questions like: What is food? What is healthy? Vast communication resources in advertising, marketing and public relations create desires and shape our food preferences, while the argy-bargy surrounding advertising helpfully diverts attention away from the substantive question: what values are shaping the production of our most basic necessity - food?

It's hard to believe that 'health' is Number One on the food industry's values chart. Would it even make it into the top ten? A company with 'health' as a core value would never create food that damages, even potentially. It would create - and lobby for - unambiguously healthy food. Period.

There's no need for argy-bargy, nanny-statehood or stringent regulation if appropriate values are driving business decisions. But when they aren't, regulatory demands are prompted that business strenuously tries to fend off, in a schizophrenic response to legitimate concerns about the food we're being sold and the possible link with worrying health trends.

Schizophrenia is an irreconcilable split of the

mind - a mental condition involving a breakdown in the relation between thought, emotion and behaviour, which leads to faulty perception, inappropriate actions and feelings, and withdrawal from reality into fantasy and delusion.

Does that describe the business community? Are the perceptions of business people faulty? Are their actions inappropriate? Has business collectively withdrawn from reality, deluding itself with fantasy? Is business unable to care about the down-the-line consequences of what it does? *Is business schizophrenic?*

If the current ideas of business can be certified sane, then the 'sane' auto industry might drool less at the prospect of the Chinese market doubling the world's car population, while we teeter on a climactic precipice and struggle to implement even the modest requirements of the Kyoto protocol.

'Sane' analysts, CEOs and business journalists would be able to firmly reconcile their breathless anticipation of the economic upside promised by the new dawn rising on China and India with the social and ecological downside: millions of people displaced, nature laid waste and a billion more people plugged into the western consumption binge that's already sucking the planet dry of scarce resources like water and oil.

And 'sane' food companies would explain in simple terms why it makes more sense to produce and defend food that needs a health warning than it is to produce food that needs no defence.

The only way to promote and defend such absurdities is to split the mind and take on a perception of reality that conceives of business as a separate, independent entity. Until we wake up to the simple fact that business is nested within and utterly dependent on the health and wellbeing of society and the

environment, it will never be able to reconcile its economic needs with the needs of the wider system. Or see that serving the common good first is the only real way to protect its longterm self-interest.

With so many real needs awaiting the considerable intelligence and energy of business people, it seems like madness to manufacture and defend the absurd. ||| dya

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### About the author

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He helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

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