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BE LAGOM, LOSE OUT

Speaking up about the better qualities of Swedish brands

The Swedes are equally cursed and blessed by their stereotypes. Not all of them are negative, of course, but nevertheless the Swedes' reputation certainly goes before them. In industrial terms they are seen as being forward-thinking, constantly implementing the latest ingenious technologies. Socially, however, they have a reputation for being quiet, understated and perhaps a little distant. Stereotypes don't appear from thin air, of course. So perhaps it's worth looking closely at the fire, without which there would be no smoke.

There is no direct translation for the word 'lagom' in English. The nearest translation is probably 'adequate' or 'just enough'. But 'just enough' is never enough when you're trying to claim your fair share of the market. You have to overdo it somewhat. Not lie, exactly, just stand up and grab the attention. Your conscience can cope with that.

There are plenty of brands around the world which are wholly or partly Swedish owned; Ericsson, H&M, Volvo, IKEA, SAAB, etc. and they are seen as safe, trustworthy and reliable. The same applies to Swedes themselves, they are seen as reliable and trustworthy but at the same time this is coupled with an idea that they are awkward on a social level.

In business, it's important to be confident in 'blowing your own trumpet' but often Swedes, with their long history of equality and community-mindedness, have trouble speaking up about their particular qualities. The principles of Jantelagen are deeply embedded in the national psyche, even if they are not always adhered to by everyone they still lurk in the back of the mind, keeping people in check. Jantelagen deals with the "little soul's struggle for coequality and recognition, never without consciousness that all the others are greater than he", but this is never going to help 'the little soul' become a big brand.

The Swedish Institute of Public Opinion Research conducted a survey in which they found that the most popular character trait with which Swedes identified themselves was envy, coming in at a huge 49%. In Britain and the USA the whole idea of being better-than-the-Joneses is a fact of life long-established in a society of post-industrial affluence. In the second part of the last century, Sweden moved from being a largely agricultural country to a progressive, organised, modern nation. With this transformation came wealth, but, with the shadow of Jantelagen hanging over their heads, the Swedes have struggled with the idea of being 'flashy' (something which the English, for example, have accepted with open arms).



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Modesty in business may be honourable but it will not shift many units. Lies, of course, will not bring longevity, but if your product is as good as you believe it is then don't be afraid to shout about it. Otherwise someone else, perhaps with an inferior product but a louder voice, will stop you effectively communicating to your would-be customers. It's not a question of giving up the very core of your 'Swedishness', more about feeling comfortable speaking up about the qualities your brand possesses.

It may sound like the beginning of a corny joke about the European Union but if you imagine an Englishman, an Italian and a Swede trying to sell their products, then based on reputation the Swede will be much more trusted than the other two because of his steadiness and trustworthiness. But the punch-line is that the Swede won't get the business because the other two will steal the limelight.

This, of course, is not to say 'be less Swedish', more a way of saying 'sell your swedishness'. Ingvar Kamprad still drives an old Volvo and his company still has deeply-ingrained principles of equality and co-operation. But Ikea would not be where it is today without hard work. Of course, in the relatively small Swedish market, it may be possible to sneak up on success in a quiet and stealthy way, but in the wider world it's important to have a strong voice as well as something to say.

It's not a clash of cultures if you adapt to other people's ways. Sometimes it's good to hang on to things, sometimes it makes no difference, and sometimes it causes problems. A merger of the American pharmaceutical company Upjohn with the swedish Pharmacia ran into problems. The Americans didn't like or understand the fact that the Swedes spent the whole month of July on holiday. The Swedes couldn't get used to the American way of not drinking alcohol at lunch. These aren't necessarily major problems in themselves but if people are too set in their ways and refuse to budge then they can put off people from other countries.

The emphasis on consensus and equality, including a reluctance to enforce authority directly can also mean things take longer to do. Avoiding challenging or negative speech in favour of compromise, rather than risking hurting a subordinate's feelings, may get results in the end but will take extra time. When trying to sell a product or service, your company won't have this kind of time. The message needs to be given loud and clear. Foreign customers will appreciate the particular qualities that make Swedish brands trusted, but they want to hear about them. They aren't sitting around waiting. They need to be jolted into action. Global business doesn't hang around.

Companies today are becoming increasingly international, both in the make-up of their personnel and in terms of their client-base. To achieve the best results in this new framework you need to arm yourself with the best information available. You need to make sure your brand is communicated strongly and effectively with the necessary local knowledge. Your product needs to be seen for its strengths, which go beyond



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international borders. Above all your product needs to be heard to be believed. You can be as lagom as you like in your own time.

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