The gospel according to Ikea

Linking Words, Short Sentences, Comprehension, Discussion, Intonation and Stress.



Activity One - ***Answer the questions and discuss with your teacher.***

Introduce each of your answers with one of these words or expressions:

Ultimately
Essentially
Fundamentally
Basically
Clearly
In all probability

Interestingly enough
In my view
From my perspective
As far as I know
In my experience

I. Ikea has very unique values. Do you think that they are being lost?
II. Ikea's values ensure that co-workers are treated with respect. Do you think that this is still the case?
III. Ikea's focus on co-worker development and leading business and people together raises co-worker expectations. Do you feel that these expectations are incompatible with the current environment?
IV. 'Ikea is more than a store, it's a religion'. This is a quote from the text below. Do you think that there are any parallels you can make between Ikea and a religion?
V. Do you believe that other big companies have such strong philosophies and values?

Activity Two - Read the article paying attention to your intonation and stress.

The Guardian "The Gospel According to Ikea

"We have decided once and for all to side with the many."
Those are the resounding opening words of a little-known tract that underpins one of the fastest growing missionary organisations in the world. The book is Ingvar Kamprad's A Furniture Dealer's Testament; the missionary organisation is Ikea, which also happens to be the world's largest furniture retailer.

"Happiness is not reaching your goal. Happiness is being on the way."
A Furniture Dealer's Testament is Ingvar Kamprad's message to his co-workers. It was written in the mid-70s when the Ikea founder emigrated from Sweden to become a tax exile in Switzerland. Every co-worker should have one: it is the path to truth, the encapsulation of the sacred concept. Kamprad's central ideas are further distilled in The Little Word Book (shades of Mao): humility, strength of will, simplicity, cost awareness, fellowship. The latter is described in Bertil Torekull's authorised history of Ikea, Leading By Design, as "a kind of catechism; its explanations are in the spirit of Martin Luther's teachings to the faithful".

As traditional institutions - the Crown, the Church, Parliament, Marks and Spencer - have become less important in the UK, Ikea fills the gap. It is more than a store, it is a religion; it is not selling furniture, it is pitching you a dream. "They have a cultural mission over and above selling furniture," explains Alan Young, a creative director at St Luke's, Ikea's UK ad agency. "They want to create a better life for the many. They also want to 'reach good results with small means' [a quote from the Testament], and to achieve that you have to do things very differently."

They do, indeed, do things differently. An Ikea store is not really a store at all: it is part museum, part shopping theme park. In a traditional, hierarchically-organised department store, everything is sectionalised: you usually head straight for the product in which you have an interest. At Ikea you are encouraged to do

the whole tour, starting at the top and working down, following the arrows on the floor (the path to freedom?), taking the occasional signposted shortcut, turning back at your peril.

It talks of "visitors", not customers; it offers a "shopping experience", not a sales pitch. Every item is named in Swedish - dozens of names just for sofas, every genus covered: Aivak, Angby, Bala, Bredbyn, Bromsta, Bya, Dalarna, Ektorp….The taxonomy reminds you of a lovingly organised museum of natural history; this is the museum of the modern world. Purchasing is optional; this is about being, not buying.

"By always asking why we are doing this or that, we can find new paths."

Kamprad's vision really is religious: the company exists to improve not just the lot of people, but the people themselves. Self-sufficiency is the watchword: you find your own way round the store, choose your goods with minimal assistance from staff, carry them to the check-out and the car, cart them home, and then assemble them yourselves. The company doesn't do this just because it keeps costs (and thus prices) down, but because it is good for you. It makes you a better person.

"In this country we have a watered-down version of north American service expectations," says St Luke's Young, "but Ikea is almost anti-service: you play the game, you do it our way, you shop our way, you'll do a lot of the work yourself. They ask a lot of the consumer."

This was a tough idea to sell in lazy, pampered Britain and at first the sacred concept didn't win many converts. Ikea's first UK store opened in Warrington in 1987, but it wasn't until the mid-90s that the company really felt it was making progress. The high-profile "Chuck out your chintz" ad campaign infuriated audiences, but it also appears to have worked: the chintz was chucked in favour of Ikea's stark simplicities.

Preaching self-sufficiency was a challenge because shoppers expected service: lots of staff on the shop floor, and large items of ready-made furniture delivered to their door. Ikea's flat-pack zealots were like the early Christian fathers faced with the pagan hordes, and the moral message was a tough one. "The idea is that you do half," says Ikea's PR manager, Shirley Jones. "We will supply you with the design, the inspiration, the knowledge and the basic tools; your responsibility then is to go home, build it and use it."

As the company's bizarre new "Tattooman" ad puts it: "This is the way of Ikea. The way it has always been." Tattooman is like Moses, showing his co-workers the Promised Land; the flat-packs are the tablets on which are written, metaphorically speaking, strength, joy and achievement. In the ad, one of the co-workers suggests it would be better to scrap self- assembly, thus avoiding the nightmare of customers bringing back furniture that resolutely refused to fit together. Tattooman is not amused: he gets the staff to remove their shirts and sniff each other's armpits. The moral: sweat is honest, work represents integrity, and it is good that Ikea customers are given a chance to sweat, too.

Self-assembly is a form of both divine worship and self-fulfilment: I screw therefore I am. It also saves you money, which in Kamprad's worldview is another way of serving God. "We tend to put behavioural imperatives into the advertising,"

"Part of creating a better everyday life for the many consists of breaking free from status and convention - becoming freer as human beings."

The Ikea philosophy is optimistic: it encourages you to take control. An Ikea store is filled with boxes and bins: containers in which you can order the clutter of your daily life. You can win the eternal battle against chaos. There are dozens of bookcases and shelving systems, because everything - books, videos, CDs - must be in its place. The shoe-rack is a cult object at Ikea; it even sells a plastic bag dispenser to give you easy access to your previously random collection of plastic bags. Nothing is left to chance: order, classification and progress are the core of the Ikea ideology.

"What we want to do, we can do and will do together. A glorious future!"

There are clocks everywhere in Ikea: time matters; it is there to be used fruitfully. Shopping is fun, but it also has a purpose - to improve our lives. We are buying not just a lifestyle, but a life. Look carefully at the room-sets, especially in stores where they have been minutely individualised: you know these

people, understand their hopes, because you lead (or want to lead) these lives.Ikea is preoccupied with relationships. Whereas traditional stores have usually appealed to individual consumers, Ikea wants to attract families or groups of friends. You often see not just couples trailing around, but the rest of the extended family, too: it is the modern equivalent of the day at the seaside in the 50s and 60s, a chance for the family to do something communally.But Ikea wants to have it both ways. It knows that the nuclear family is disintegrating, so it seeks to appeal beyond its boundaries.It ran an ad campaign, tagged "Make a fresh start", that encouraged people in failing marriages to get divorced. It pitches directly to remarrying couples, to single parents (men as well as women), and to gay couples, who feature prominently in its advertising. Part of its optimism lies in a belief that the right relationship can be found; that dud relationships should be ditched; that you have to be yourself.

"We do not need fancy cars, posh titles, tailor-made uniforms or other status symbols. We rely on our own strength and our own will!"

Ikea hates the class system, hierarchies and deference. At its Brent Park headquarters - a flat, functional building on top of a multi-storey car park - its co-workers dress informally. Offices are open-plan and even the managing director,works in a small room with glass panels to ensure visibility and accessibility. Staff are encouraged to be part of an organic whole and to challenge the corporate structure. Mistakes are not punished because, as Kamprad says, "only those who are asleep make no mistakes".

The quotes are from A Furniture Dealer's Testament, by Ingvar Kamprad, which appears as an appendix to Bertil Torekull's Leading By Design: The Ikea Story.

Activity Three - Now **answer the following questions**. Use LINKING WORDS to STRUCTURE your answer in SHORT, SIMPLE SENTENCES. Here are some examples of how you could structure your arguments…



- **First of all, Secondly, Furthermore, Also, So, in conclusion.**
- **One on hand, Then again, Therefore, So, Ultimately.**
- **It's seems obvious that, However, So, This means that.**
- **It seems to me that, In actual fact, Where, Finally.**
- **Ultimately, This results in, Therefore, However, The end result is that.**
- **Although, So, Finally, Therefore, in Conclusion**

Comprehension and Discussion Questions:

1. Which points link Ikea to a religion and what do you think of the symbols outlined in the article?
2. In what way is Ikea 'preaching' to people according to the text? (Telling them how to behave).
3. This article was written in 2000. Do you think that in today's France Ikea can still ask such a lot from its customers? Do people expect more service than they once did?
4. How do you predict that Ikea will evolve in the next two or three years?
5. Will the new generation of the Kamprad family maintain the same core values?
6. Are Kamprad's ideas timeless or dated?
7. Is IKEA France still representing these values in its decisions and actions as a group?
8. Do senior co-workers who have been in the store for years feel disappointed today that these values are no longer being respected?
9. Do new recruits understand the values?
10. Should the values change in your opinion?
11. Is Ikea a religion? Is it a family? Or, is it just a multinational company?
12. Should co-workers be persuaded that the objectives of the company are to make the world a better place, or should they be presented with a simple truth, that the aim of the company is to be financially successful?
13. Do you sense a gap or a tension between these two points?
14. What would you change if you could in Ikea's message to its employees?
15. What would you change if you could in Ikea's message to its customers?