



The Brand Inside

Are you overlooking your most important audience?



There is an audience group that is disproportionately powerful in building long-term value for your brand, a group that carries greater influence than any influencer, opens more gates than the most yielding gatekeeper and is better able to make investors smile than Warren Buffet on a unicycle!

Now is the perfect opportunity, as we emerge from the lockdown, to take a deep breath and carry out a systematic review of our brand and marketing strategies. In particular, to assess how our audiences might have changed over the past few months. We will, probably start with an analysis of existing and former customers before we consider potential new customer groups. Then we'll review the various influencers and traditional gatekeepers before, maybe, thinking about investors and shareholders. But before we go any further we should stop to consider an audience group that, for most companies, probably outweighs all others in its power to change the fortunes of the brand.

This audience is, of course, our own employees; and there has never been a more critical time to inspire and motivate them with our brand purpose. Everyone who works in the name of the brand ought to be a living, breathing representative, and enthusiastic advocate, of it. That means being as excited about it and as convinced of its benefits, as its most loyal customers. But, honestly, how much time and attention have we devoted to engaging those inside the company with the values that define our brand outside it? If our brand values are the heart and soul of our marketing programmes, should they not also be the driving force to unite and motivate our staff at a time when a great many are feeling distanced, even disconnected, from that heart and soul?

Various studies have shown that companies whose employees believe-in and live-out their brand promise have a greater sense of shared purpose. This is something that is not just motivating to employees (and customers) but increasingly compelling for new talent—who are more passionate than ever to seek-out ‘purpose-driven’ companies whose values they can identify with. Indeed, PwC’s recent ‘Workforce of the Future’ survey, found that 88% of millennials (who will represent 75% of the global workforce by 2025) want to work for a company whose values reflect their own. It should be no surprise, then, if the war for talent is increasingly won by organisations where the purpose and values promised by their brand are enthusiastically engaged with and lived-out by their employees (Google, Apple, Patagonia, John Lewis, Prêt-à-Manger, etc. being a few notable examples).



Now, if you are a marketing chief you might, at this point, be forgiven for thinking this sounds like a call for what HR refers to as an EVP and so not, strictly, within your remit. And, if you are an HR chief, you probably haven’t even read this far because you think this is about brands and, therefore, marketing and so is not for you either. But, even before recent events, it was becoming increasingly obvious that developing separate parallel value propositions for customers and employees was an oversight caused more by traditional management silos than good practice (tantamount to the CEO having one person choose a shoe for their left foot, then repeating the process with someone else for the right one—but never really questioning whether they ought to match!)

So, how do you go about creating a coherent brand-centric, purpose-driven culture?

At the risk of making it sound sound deceptively simple, the key will be to express and sustain the three fundamental components of your brand promise: distinctiveness, relevance and consistency. Now that the brand is no longer the preserve of the marketing department it must be relevant and differentiating for everyone.

The distinctive values and attributes that define our brand should be the ones that shape our organisation’s cultural norms—those, often unconscious and undefined, shared ‘rules of belonging’ that characterise our workplace. We need to show how they can be relevant to everyone, then lead by example, demonstrating how they can become a familiar and enriching part of what it is that makes our organisation unique. Our goal should be to make the brand truly relevant to our staff and a source of pride for them.

1. **Use your brand's distinctiveness to motivate your employees**

It might be worth refreshing the answers to a few existential questions: Why does this brand exist at all? What are the essential needs that it satisfies and the value that it delivers? How is it, or the way it is delivered, unique and different from anyone else? Above all, what are the values and purpose at the heart of the brand proposition? Even if you have already these from a customer perspective, a few working sessions with staff will help ensure they not only get it but have a chance to add value to it (who knows, they might provide fresh insights you hadn't thought of). Now encapsulate your purpose into a set of actionable behaviours that all employees can share. Base these on, say, six differentiating core values which, when delivered through employee behaviours, will help differentiate your brand from any rival. These should not be 'hygiene' factors that everyone should be delivering (e.g. honesty, commitment, trustworthiness, etc.), rather they should be a distinctive combination of properly-focused motivating factors (e.g. pride in a distinguished 120 year history, commitment to the environment supported by an ethical supply chain from grower to consumer or, maybe, being supremely agile and adaptable to change, etc.) that will genuinely set your brand apart.

2. **Make your brand feel relevant to your employees**

There must already be some shared ground or your employees wouldn't (or shouldn't) be working for you. The single most vital way you can heighten the relevance of the brand values is to lead by example. This starts at the top, your board members, partners and leadership team must be seen to champion the purpose and values that you have captured in your brand promise. Its relevance will snap into focus as the redefined cultural norms cascade down and across the operation—especially if you recognise and reward individuals for living the values (as opposed to merely hitting short-term commercial targets). It goes without saying that all external marketing communications should consistently uphold and reinforce the same brand promise.

3. **Be consistent in applying and recognising your brand values**

Define clear markers to maintain the consistent delivery of the values and don't allow them to be compromised. Depending on the values you want to reinforce, behavioural change could include anything from speed and efficiency of response, more (or less) flexible working, commitments to training or team-building, social, environmental or fitness initiatives with all, or some, of these incorporated into individual KPIs for personal appraisals. Remember, also, that when times get tough (such as during the recent lock-down) it is the brands that hold fast to their purpose that stand out and reap the long-term benefits (think back to the examples suggested earlier). The true value of a principle is tested when there is a cost at stake. The moment a brand makes compromises by putting short-term profits before purpose, the world sees the façade crumble and all those carefully crafted communications look like cynical marketing bluster. Brand-building is a long-term mission, shrewd investors hold their nerve in the short term to reap the best returns later.

This is, of course, something of a potted overview. There are many more layers of detail, with dedicated tools and models that help make the process as intuitive and rigorous as you could want.

Suffice to say the ultimate prize should be a substantial increase in the long-term value and loyalty generated by your brand across ALL of its audiences—including the prickliest shareholders (or holding company) whose ruthless focus on short-term returns often snuff-out long-term, value-building initiatives. Just imagine, if the brand-driven thinking that used to live exclusively in the marketing department were, ultimately, to inspire the imagination of the finance department we might even see more of the long-term value creation of which Warren Buffet so heartily approves.

Which sounds like an easier way to make shareholders smile than persuading Mr Buffet to ride a unicycle!





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