

Perspectives

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When building a brand, consider culture

An authentic organizational culture is a powerful tool for driving brand experience. By building your brands from the inside out, you create resonance that can increase market share and customer loyalty.

Like most organizations, when you consider the role of culture in building your brand, two territories probably come to mind: first, consumer insights — the primary and secondary research that helps you understand the “culture” of your various constituents. And second, brand experience — the tangible sights, sounds and feelings customers encounter when engaging with your company, products or services.

I'd like to suggest a third territory well worth considering — one that's been skillfully leveraged by consumer favorites like Apple, Virgin and Target: internal culture.

There may be no better way to help ensure brand and organizational stability and sustainability than integrating internal culture as a key consideration in your strategy.

An authentic internal culture should permeate every level and division of your organization, guiding decisions about what you'll create and how you'll go to market. These decisions, in turn, drive brand experience, whether it's a sleek technology store that welcomes customers to the in-crowd, or a right-priced designer teapot that rewards moms for shopping smart. By building your brands from the inside out — leading with an internal culture people understand and trust — you generate resonance that impacts market share and customer loyalty.

How do you build an internal culture within your organization? Begin by defining and articulating three of your most important core assets: your vision, mission and values:

Stories provide sticky connections for people. Talk internally about the history of your organization and your brands. Where your vision originated. How your mission has changed over time. What challenges you've weathered. These stories will help your culture thrive through successive generations of leadership and staffing.

Vision: What do you aspire to do or be in the world?

Your vision should help you think into the future, to examine your ultimate goals and how they will impact your constituents and the broader community. While a vision statement is typically aspirational, it's often written in the present tense. This is your line in the sand. (If, like me, you see a need for bigger, bolder vision in today's world, by all means aim high. This is the place to do it.)

Mission: How will you get there?

A mission statement is a roadmap, and although it can also be aspirational, in general it should be based on your current competencies — the differentiating methods you'll use as you work toward achieving your vision. It doesn't have to take you to your grandest, outermost destination, especially if your vision is big, but it needs to point you in the right direction and inform everyone in your organization how you're going to move the needle.

Values: By what criteria will you behave and filter decision making?

Think of your values as the evergreen principles that define your company. Because values guide organizational behavior, they are instrumental for sustaining your corporate culture over time. They should ideally influence every interaction your team members have with one another and with your customers and other outside audiences, so it's vitally important that every employee believes in them and is willing to go to the mat for them.

Begin your efforts inside

To be effective, your vision, mission and values must be driven from the top of your organization. And to function as culture builders, they need to be continually communicated and backed with congruent behavior. Company leadership must consistently demonstrate them, and acknowledge and reward them in others. Creating a culture is not an event but a vital, ongoing internal process.

Next, work to develop brand stewards within your company who can champion and model your culture. Management is a good place to start, but brand stewardship can and should live at every level of your organization. Often, personality is more important than title. Seek out team members who enthusiastically embrace your intentions, and who naturally "broadcast" to others. Enlist their help and recognize their efforts.

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And finally, make a long-term commitment. To be successful, you'll need to get everyone in your organization on board, create discipline around how they express your culture, and insist on accountability. Do these, and your brand will shine with authenticity — something consumers seek out.

State your intentions outside

How do you best leverage your culture to build a strong brand externally? By constantly going back to its foundation: your vision, mission and values. Tap these assets for inspiration about what you'll create next. Use them as strategic filters as you make decisions. Look to them for clarity and consistency in everything you say and do.

In today's social media landscape, if you're not walking your talk, people know pretty quickly. Fortunately, the converse is also true. Internal clarity and authenticity can help you create more effective communications and brand experiences because you'll be consistently reinforcing what you stand for: the culture your customers have signed on with.

The inevitable caveat: Authenticity takes courage

If you're going to use culture as the foundation for a strong, resonant brand, you'll need to cultivate inner strength. But what organization couldn't benefit from a little more of that?

- Live up to your word. When your behavior is out of alignment with your stated intentions, people see. Your culture is strong only when your vision, mission and values are rooted in authenticity. And authenticity is only possible when your words match your deeds.
- Staying true to your culture may require you to weigh short-term successes against long-term goals. Can you make difficult decisions today to move your company closer to achieving its broader vision? Can you say no to an opportunity when pursuing it opposes your values? Behaving in alignment isn't always easy. But behaving out of alignment can seriously jeopardize your brands' credibility.

To sum up

Creating a culture based on an authentic vision, mission and values can strengthen your organization. It can give you greater influence over how the world experiences your brands. It can help you make better decisions and weather industry and economic challenges. In fact, there may be no better way to help ensure the stability and sustainability of your organization than integrating internal culture as a key consideration in your brand strategy.

In an era when consumer expectations are higher than ever, and information about the inner workings and outer doings of your company is easier than ever to come by, authenticity is a powerful driver of consumer trust. To build brands that people want to align with, look to your own culture.

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