

"Creating the Internal Brand" by John Baldoni

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Walk into any supermarket overseas. At first glance, the selection of products is overwhelming, especially if you don't know the language. But in a few moments, you are able to navigate your way down the aisles and find what you are looking for, with ease. How? Typefaces, color schemes, and logos are familiar. Call it the power of branding.

Now imagine you return from your trip and check your email. You sink lower and lower into your seat as you see the message counter of your email ticker creep higher and higher. When it hits triple digits you are on the floor. But alas, you pick yourself up and begin the sorting process. Within moments, you identify which messages are important and which can wait until later. Call it the power of *internal* branding.

What is an Internal Brand?

Employees, like consumers, are bombarded all day by information. Brands are a way by which we identify our priorities. Consumer brands help us simplify our lives and streamline our selection-making. Internal brands enable us to prioritize our most precious resource: time.

A brand is a powerful communication tool. A good consumer brand owns share of mind and stimulates purchasing. The underlying factors in a consumer brand also take effect with an internal brand. By linking your corporate brand to your culture and values - thereby creating an internal brand - your organization can create a platform from which to communicate to your employees the vision, mission and urgency. Internal branding helps improve credibility and strengthens the bonds of trust between leaders and employees. When people are united in purpose and know where they are headed, positive results can occur.

What is an internal brand? Let's begin with the definition of brand itself: Brand is a sum of identity, image, and aspiration.

- Identity is what the brand stands for.
- Image is what the brand represents.
- Aspiration is how the brand makes us feel.

The same principles hold true for an internal brand:

- Identity represents the culture and values of your organization.
- Image is akin to the vision and mission of your organization.
- Aspiration stands for what your organization will do.

Differentiation plays an essential role in branding. Differentiation is the mark of distinction -- how your offering differs from the next offering. Marketers play up the differences. When it comes to internal branding, differentiation complements identity and image. When strong and sharp, it can enkindle esprit d'corps and serve as an essential recruitment and retention tool. When fuzzy and indistinct, it can lead to declining morale and result in employee defections.

Internal branding is not simply a gimmick parlayed by marketing professionals with too much time on their hands. But it is simple. Internal branding is a linking of the organization's culture and values to an individual's values in ways that enable both the individual and organization to achieve their goals. Leaders can, and should, link their leadership communication to the internal branding process as a means of binding their goals to organizational outcomes.

The sum of brand identity, image and aspiration is the promise or guarantee of quality, service and performance. The concept of brand most likely originates from the practice of craftsmen signing their work. The concept was further reinforced at the height of the Victorian Age in the late-19th century Britain when, faced with stiff competition, companies sought to promote "assurance of quality" as a means of differentiation.¹ And today the concept of brand defines the product itself as a means of ensuring metaphorical consumer's share of mind.

The Benefits of Brand

The benefits of internal branding are straightforward:

- *Internal branding nurtures an organizational identity*
It helps reinforce who we are and what we are doing. Take the Red Cross, for example. Its employees working in blood donation know that their message is to augment the nation's blood supply; the net result of collecting blood is the saving of lives. It is a noble mission and employees feel good about it.
- *Internal branding serves as a platform for pushing change*
If we know where and who we are now, we have a better idea of what we can become. Harley Davidson has gone through a few organizational transformations from the eighties until now; what has made the transformational process successful is that employees are committed to the product -- and its brand -- as well as the people within the organization.
- *Internal branding is a communications shorthand for getting the message out*
Messages tied to brand come with the employee who is pre disposed to receiving them. For example, if you go into a store looking for cereal, the Kellogg brand is familiar to you; you associate the brand with good taste, good quality, and good value. Likewise, a branded message from a senior leader, or a team, is familiar to the employee and connotes a sense of importance, even urgency.

In each of these examples -- the Red Cross, Harley Davidson and Kellogg -- brand plays an essential role in unifying purpose, clarifying culture, and making selection process of either a product or an initiative simpler and easier.

Driving Organizational Clarity

In addition to the above benefits, an internal brand sharpens focus; by using brand as a communications vehicle, management can highlight priorities. At Ford Motor Company "Quality is Job 1" is more than a slogan; it's an internal brand statement that emphasizes designing, engineering, and building quality in all products. Now that is focus!

Brand helps clarify alignment. In big hierarchies, orders spill down from the top and remain clear through the first few layers of management. But over time (often in a matter of weeks) if those strategies and objectives are not reinforced, they become unclear and managers are left to improvise. While there is nothing wrong with improvisation, if it's done willy nilly it causes the organization to veer out of alignment. Internal branding can really help keep customer service and other front line employees in tune with your corporate values as they relate to product performance and service efficiency.

And finally the internal brand is an assurance of consistency. Think Ritz Carlton; inside and outside the organization their reputation for exceptional customer service is legion. That service does not occur by happenstance. It is taught in classes and reinforced on the job, over and over again. At the Ritz, corporate and internal brands are one and the same and reflected in the statement, "We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen."

Building the Internal Brand

So how would you go about creating an internal brand? Here are some things to keep in mind:

- *Build your brand on your mission.*
The starting point for any brand is what the organization stands for. Its mission and vision, backed by culture and values, are what the brand means to the employees. Any deviation from mission and culture will strike a false note. Southwest Airlines is the corporate archetype when it comes to brand and mission. As an employee owned business, its employees, from baggage handlers and ticket agents to the CEO, live and breathe the Southwest culture. Their internal commitment is reflected in their exceptional service. In 2001, Southwest Airlines was one of only two carriers to post a profit. Their internal brand was a key differentiator.
- *Make leadership the brand driver.*
The brand needs your senior management support in order to survive. It's as simple as walking the talk. Leaders need link their goals to organizational goals -- a powerful way to do this is through branding. When leaders are in synch with the organization, they have a better chance of getting results. At the same time, a leader pushing change can use brand to drive the transformation by finding the impetus and support for the initiative inside the culture.
- *Nurture the brand through communications.*
Brand without communication is like an unlabeled can on a shelf by itself -- you don't know what it is and you really don't care. Any communication tool, from a broadcast email to an all employee meeting,

reinforces the brand. Choosing which media and when depends upon the message; the heavier the brand message, the more media you will need. To keep it fresh and vital, email and banners might do the trick. Again, keep the communications consistent with the brand identity, image and aspirations.

- *Inject a sense of fun into the brand.*
Who says life inside an organization has to be dull and boring? Link the brand to activities in the organization that are of a less formal nature; e.g. corporate outings, off site activities, after hours bowling or softball leagues. Your branding can be as simple as displaying your corporate logo on a banner promoting your upcoming ice cream social, or putting your logo on hats made available to corporate retreat attendees. After all, part of brand identity is merchandising. In this way, your brand becomes a unifier and reinforces your organizational culture.
- *Grow the brand.*
Organizations either grow or they die. Same for brands. The brand must be inclusive and by that, it must embrace new initiatives that arise with regularity. Think brand extensions. When P&G rolls out a new version of Tide, the logo for Tide is prominently displayed. For example, if manufacturing rolls out a quality initiative, the team would be well served by linking the quality to the company wide brand. In doing so, they add credibility as well as awareness.

When a Brand Goes Bad

So what happens when a brand goes bad? You have only to look at the tattered history of tarnished consumer brands to see what happens. The most egregious example would be cigarette brands, which were once associated with easy living, fun, even the great American West. Today, these brands resonate disease and death. The trashing of these brands was the legacy of medical research that linked cigarettes to cancer and the role tobacco companies played in not only denying the evidence but also in making their products even more addictive with higher levels of nicotine.

Restoring the Brand

If such a situation arises inside a company, for example, in times of crisis, a pending merger, a product recall, or a change in leadership, shock waves echo up, down, and all around an organization. It takes skilled intervention to cope with each problem and when the problem is solved, it requires attention to the brand.

A good example would be IBM. A decade ago, the company that popularized corporate computing was going down the tubes. Lou Gerstner became the CEO; he stopped the decline and resurrected the business units, often through trial and error and a focus on execution. In addition, IBM worked hard to restore its credibility to customers. Along with that effort was a commitment to rejuvenate credibility among employees. Such restoration did not occur overnight but was sustained over time through a steady stream of communication backed by leadership actions and eventually renewed product performance that led to a return to fiscal health. A form of corporate branding was at work.

Brand as a Tool

Brands are powerful communication tools. Linking them to your organization's culture and values not only raises the profile of the message to the employee, but also contributes to credibility and ultimately trust. And when people are united in purpose and know where they are headed, positive results can occur. It's the power of brand!

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Source: 1 "When Growth Is Not an Option," *Economist*, 12/05/02.

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