

Creating Your Brand from the Inside Out

Why your culture comes first

By Christine Cook

Your culture is your brand; your brand is your culture. The two are one in the same—inextricably intertwined. It's where marketing, positive psychology and innovative business practices intersect. And it's the common denominator in successful companies. Virgin Atlantic, Apple, Google, Harley Davidson, BMW and Autodesk all have strong brands and strong cultures, and all are wildly successful. I'll bet you can name one or more in your industry.

Anyone who has been through a branding process knows that the hardest part of branding isn't coming up with a logo or tagline. It's getting to your company's DNA—what is at its heart—its values, vision, passion and purpose. That's your culture. When you get to that, you can create your brand.

Before you embark on a branding campaign, take a reality check. Have you uncovered your company's DNA? Defined its culture? Its values, vision, passion and purpose? Is it real, honest and yet still a little aspirational? Your brand must be rooted in reality with room to reach toward the future. Clearly defining your company culture is your first step in building a brand.

Your brand comes alive visually with words and graphics. Your marketing team can create stunning ad campaigns, proposals, brochures and web sites that reflect your brand. That's the easy part. The hard part is LIVING the brand and creating and embodying your unique company culture. It's how you answer the phone. It's how you interact with others on the team and everyone that comes in contact with your company. It's who you hire. And it's how you bring them on board. It's what you base EVERY business decision upon.

Building the culture/brand really is everybody's business, and companies that understand that have a real advantage. That's why it's important to engage your employees in your branding process—asking them to help define your values, vision, passion and purpose. Getting their input and buy-in is critical to the success of your brand. You all need to get behind the same values, vision, passion and purpose. It's critical to a cohesive, productive and engaging workplace.

You will also be asking all your constituents to weigh in on what defines your company DNA. This means clients, subcontractors, other design team members, and influencers. Asking and listening to your constituents (and employees) is a natural way to build trust and take your relationship to the next level. This is marketing and management brilliance.

One company that has successfully built its brand from the inside out is Zappos—the \$2 billion-per-year shoe and apparel company known around the world for its success in creating a company culture that spawns success at every level, from employee happiness to customer happiness to shareholder happiness. What makes Zappos different is that it has built its culture around employee happiness. Zappos credits its happiness framework for its success. The framework consists of perceived control, perceived progress, connectedness and vision/meaning.

The realization that happy workers drive business success is sweeping the world, and the research keeps growing. Researchers at Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, University of California at Riverside and Oxford University are leading the pack.



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Bestselling management books "Good to Great" and "Tribal Leadership" credit a shared company vision and purpose. That a company with a vision that has a higher purpose beyond just money, profits or being number one in a market is an important element that separates sustainable profitable companies from the rest.

Are you seeing a connection? The "great" companies build their brands around their values, vision, passion and purpose—which guide the company's culture. The two are inextricably intertwined.

When your people are living your brand, their personal values are in sync with the company's. They are happier, more productive and they are your best ambassadors. Involve them from the start, get clear on values, vision, passion and purpose, walk the talk, and enjoy your success!

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