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MARKETING

EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION: BRANDING FROM THE INSIDE-OUT

DIFFERENT people have different interpretations of what brand building means. Unfortunately, many think that advertising campaigns or logo changes are equivalent to branding exercises.

However, these only scrape the surface of a holistic brand building programme.

Brands are not merely about nice logos or designs. Real branding is all about the experience and what people say, think and feel about you. It's everything you say, and everything you do. It's how the world knows it can trust you.

In fact, brands must be built enterprise-wide and most importantly, from the inside out. Employee communication is the true game changer in any branding effort.

I would go so far to say that employee communication can make or break a brand. This is the key ingredient to building great brands (and organisations) because all effective branding strategies must address the "heart" of the organisation – its people.

Gone are the days when companies competed on price or quality. Today, quality is a granted and people expect to pay a commensurate price. In such a highly competitive market, companies today are shifting towards providing brand experiences.

This includes everything from company culture to user experiences

- how the brand is presented to the consumer and the how an organisation is run are intertwined.

As such, brand custodians need to ensure that both employee communication and external communication initiatives are consistent and congruent in order to have the optimum impact on stakeholders.

Therefore, CEOs or Brand Managers play a very important role to communicate to employees the direction of the company as well as to provide the energy to drive the organisation's internal and external actions towards effective brand building.

Here are five important principles that you need to keep in mind to ensure successful inside-out branding.

1. BRANDING BEGINS AT HOME

To paraphrase an old proverb, "branding begins at home." This is the first rule of inside-out branding.

Having strong internal buy-in of a clear, compelling brand message provides the necessary direction and motivation for employees, as well as others in the value chain, to deliver on the brand promise.

If a company's brand values are communicated well to everyone within the organisation, employees will be more discerning about how their activities affect the company's Brand.

Conversely, if employees are unclear what the Brand stands for or if they

don't feel a connection to it, it is unlikely that they will be able to implement your brand strategy successfully.

The tone and manner of how we communicate with our people, is also important. No one wants to work in a boring company, especially Millennials who now make up the bulk of the workforce.

As such, communications styles have to be suited to your internal stakeholders.

2. LISTEN!

The need for today's leaders to listen to their stakeholders is greater than ever in today's hyper-informed world. It may sound counter-intuitive, but listening is the best communication tool for any business or organisation.

If managers can't know what their employees are thinking, there is no way you can communicate effectively with them.

Unfortunately, listening exercises to gauge employee perspectives are hardly carried out, especially prior to embarking on an important business decision or the launch of a new product or service.

Most of the time, companies and brands focus their entire energy on undertaking consumer research, only to forget that great products can only sell if their sales teams believe in it!

Business leaders who truly listen to their employees, and respond



In order to develop a strong brand from the inside out, you need to craft your internal communications strategy. Here are some questions to keep in mind to help you in your process of developing effective inside out branding.

1 UNDERSTAND YOURSELF

What is my brand mission, vision and values? Where do you currently stand in terms of internal branding? Where do you want to be?

2 UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCES

Who are my employees? What are their interests, concerns and aspirations? What style of communication would be engaging for them? What are your existing internal communication strategy and tools, and how effective are they?

3 UNDERSTAND WHERE YOU WANT TO BE

What does it look like when it is lived out in real life – for example, in your Accounts, HR or Sales departments? What does it look like to your stakeholders in the market?

4 UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS TO GET THERE

What is the best way to convey a consistent brand message to my employees and the market? In what ways are my employees a bridge between my brand and the market?

Most importantly, take people on the journey with you – set the example for everyone else. The best brand development processes are those that company leaders “do with” and not “do to” employees.

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appropriately, stand to win big in the employee engagement game as engaged employees outperform their competition. They value the company because they understand its purpose, and they know where and how they fit into the company’s vision. This leads to better performance and more independent decision-making.

3. SHARE THE DREAM

Just sharing business facts and figures will not motivate your people. What drives them to give their best is sharing your compelling dream for the organisation or brand.

Tan Sri Tony Fernandes and his partners had a dream that “Everyone can fly”. They built AirAsia’s brand around this dream, which eventually became the company’s tagline.

The leaders’ clear and simple vision has inspired every AirAsia crew member to strive to bring the brand value to life in all aspects of operations. The result speaks for itself as AirAsia had won Skytrax World Airline Awards’ coveted World’s Best Low-Cost Airline ten times in a row.

Truly, passionate people make dreams come true!

In today's world, a brand with a solid vision, especially one that includes a higher purpose, is a major motivation for employees to give their best in their work.

Employees look to their company leaders to include them meaningfully in the pursuit of their dreams, expressed in the brand values.

As such, a well-planned internal brand strategy and communications will help create a vibrant company culture, which in turn lays the foundation for attracting the right talent and provides them with job fulfilment.

4. BE AUTHENTIC, OPEN AND HONEST

Tell it as it is, especially when it comes to employee communication. There will always be good and bad news in life, so communicating clearly and honestly with employees shows that you respect them.

Providing opportunities for more open, fluid discussion between employees is also important.

Providing avenues for employees to directly communicate with company leaders such as town halls, direct emails or even an internal social media platform, let employees know that you are open to feedback and questions.

This goes a long way to winning employees' trust. After all, if we are not authentic in our communication, it is a matter of time when we lose the trust of our colleagues.

Employee trust is especially needed when it comes to imparting bad news, such as any streamlining or downsizing exercises. It is critical that employees are first to receive news from the management.

Managers must communicate the rationale as well as the ensuing impact or processes clearly.

You may not be able to come out smelling like roses, but the integrity with which you communicated the bad news will go a long way towards protecting your company's reputation from further effects of negative opinions.

When your new product or service eventually hits the market, the excitement from your employees will quickly spill over to customers. This builds the right momentum for sales to come in. Also, make sure you have a plan to communicate your brand values to different departments, such as HR, finance, sales, and others. This is to ensure your brand values shine through everything your company does - including all the back-end functions as they indirectly support your customer experience.

5. PLANNING AND TIMELINESS

Many organisations tend to only focus on prioritising communications with external stakeholders, particularly customers. This is a grave mistake.

While customer testimonies are critical, your employees are your best mouthpieces. They should be the first people to buy into your brand or company's initiatives.

We have personally witnessed how some of our clients' internal teams got so excited when they made it a point to sell their employees on a new initiative first before launching out in the market.

Winning employees' hearts requires effort - just like any marketing strategy. As such, employee communication needs to be planned, with timing being of the essence.

For example, engage and involve them in your planning process before the launch of a new product or service, not just inform them after everything is settled.

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BRAND BUILDING IS A JOURNEY

Granted, it's not easy to do employee communications well. There is no quick solution, however. CEOs and senior management must consistently reinforce the organisation's key messages, even though they may sound like a broken record.

Companies that fail to live up to their brand internally will inevitably face the eventual erosion of trust among employees.

Nonetheless, brands and organisations need to take up the challenge if they hope to compete in today's globalised economy.

Employees who identify closely with a brand are more motivated to talk positively about the brand on digital and social media, and in their everyday interactions in the real world.

By having great internal brand communications, you will be rallying an army of loyal brand ambassadors. **mb**

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