

brandinstinct*

Using Appreciative Inquiry for internal branding: going beyond internal advertising

by Gillian Garner

People often need more than instruction to make changes to their normal patterns and routines. Essentially, what we are asking of people when we try to align internal culture with the brand, is to share our values, our vision and act within it. Internal branding aims to develop this cohesion. I will discuss how we use appreciative inquiry to facilitate employee brand engagement, briefly discussing some theory and illustrating it with a case study. I would like to share this practice to emphasise that more than internal advertising and brand training is needed to create strong brands.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an approach which can be utilised to maximise employee brand engagement, whether setting a new direction or boosting your current brand. The aim of internal branding is the adoption of shared and cohesive values, beliefs, purpose, and core behaviours across staff and stakeholders at all levels of the organisation. We see AI as a way to actively involve people across the organisation in exploring the meaning of the brand and collaboratively deciding the use of brand strategy for for both individual and organisational benefit. Internal branding is an elusive yet important success factor in the building of brands. Common methods of internal branding currently fall into events, internal communications, and

brand training which, although needed, can fall short in developing a deeper connection for staff to the brand.

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to organisational development which enables positive change and brings an optimistic, structured and energising quality to the potentially intangible task of change. Changing core behaviours can be a challenging task to take on, but it is critical to the success of your brand. In addition, many potential employees are shown to be drawn to companies with strong brands, whose values they can relate to. Whether boosting current brand engagement or creating changes in your brand identity, people within your company will need to re-evaluate their contribution and make changes towards the brand. What better way to develop than to do it based on who you are, and what you do well, rather than trying to fundamentally change who you are.

The challenge is in moving from awareness raising initiatives (like brand training and promotions) to integrating the types of behaviour you want into daily practice. You need to create the environments (systems, structures, and approaches) that will allow brand engagement to be sustained. Our approach is one of facilitating a company's best resources: its people. With our approach to change, we work with people from senior management

“Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an approach which can be utilised to maximise employee brand engagement, whether setting a new direction or boosting your current brand.”



and other key players to explore the best qualities and experiences of the organisation and determine what will work in your company to help you achieve your brand vision.

The traditional approach to change in western business, analysing problems and finding ways of fixing them, represents the antithesis of what AI brings to an organisation. As opposed to starting with problems we start by finding what is working well, finding the moments of experience which energised people, and experiences when people felt their actions were making a difference. More than an analysis of strengths; people are invited to reflect on and talk about their positive experiences which will help define the desired culture of the organisation. Solutions are found in the array of conditions, relationships, and actions within which their highpoints occurred. Our aim is to give people the means to find the conditions under which the brand can be realised.

Although our approaches do not involve problem solving, a consultant practising in this way does not ignore problems. The consultant explores the contexts that define your company's experience. It is by appreciating the context and listening to many views in the organisation, that the consultant and client develop an appreciation for the challenges that are present. It is not only the positive elements that are in focus, as this can itself impose an artificial lens for change. The key in the consultation is to manage these challenges and confirm people's common experiences, but not to remain bound by problems. A problem will end up halting change and defeating you at the outset.

The primary foundation of AI is social constructionist theory, which states that our knowledge and perception of our world is constructed in social interaction. As the view of the world

is constructed socially, we see that there are numerous possibilities for interpretation of the world each providing different opportunities for different kinds of actions. Wittgenstein (a 20th century philosopher who inspired this theory) postulates that reality is created in language. As our reality is formed by language, our choices to act in this reality are dependent on our interpretations. The power lies in knowing that we can consciously determine interpretations and use of language to create organisational culture as we want it. Therefore, Wittgenstein leads us to recognize that language not only shapes our worlds, but influences how we go on constructing them. The assumption that our perceptions of the world are co-created in language is pivotal to using AI. Within this social constructionist frame, the valuing of differences and hearing multiple views of the system becomes a foundation for the creation of change. Ethically, we facilitate in a manner which is appreciative, permits difference and multiple views, while inquiring into people's experiences at the company. It is this social and collective dialogue which will provide the context from which development will occur.

Secondly, but equally as important to AI is the hypothesis which states that social systems evolve toward positive self images. David Cooperrider (one of the originators of AI) draws our attention to research such as the placebo effect (a beneficial effect that cannot be attributed to the placebo itself), and the Pygmalion effect (performing better simply because it is expected by others) and the use of positive images of success in athletic training to support this view. Cooperrider states that when presented with the option, organisations will move more rapidly and effectively in the direction of affirmative imagery (those images that

“Inner dialogue refers to the stories told outside formal gatherings; the stories which create beliefs about what the organisation is and what is possible there. These informal conversations are what sustain an image of an organisation.”



are most bright, purposeful, and highly valued). It is not however just any positive image that will suffice, but a vision that is relevant and meaningful.

The Social constructionist principle also links us to the organisation's inner dialogue. Inner dialogue refers to the stories told outside formal gatherings; the stories which create beliefs about what the organisation is and what is possible there. These informal conversations are what sustain an image of an organisation. If decisions for change occur in formal meetings, but are not reflected in behind the scenes conversations, the changes will not become a reality. Often, people need more than instruction to make changes or to implement a brand promise. AI can facilitate people to generate and tell positive stories to create a shift in the inner dialogue and build confidence. External consultants and managers within an organisation direct attention to and propagate the stories of achievements and positive experience in order to create a productive balance of stories within the organisation.

Dialogue is key to any change process. We use inquiry to begin creating that dialogue. This is where change begins, right at the start, when we begin our inquiry. We state here that inquiry and change are not separate moments. The act of inquiring appreciatively creates increased awareness of different points of view, enabling the client to make new connections between their own actions and consequences in relation to others and create new interpretations of the situation from which to act. Through inquiry, change begins as the inquirer asks their first questions. So for change to permeate we need the right people in the room when we begin; usually a group of key decision makers who are committed to seeing the processes

through. Inquiry is the change catalyst, not merely an analysis that gets constructed by the consultants.

AI opens a space for a positive collective future vision to emerge in conversation. The appreciative focus is critical, as people have more confidence to journey into the future, when they carry forward the best parts of the past.

Using AI:

AI can be used from the first steps in developing a brand strategy through to internal branding. As I have been developing AI into our practice, I have used it as a tool for designing and facilitating specific workshops, as the case study below demonstrates.

The case study:

Brandinstinct was approached by a large, multi-national, technology company, sited in 12 countries and consisting of 25,000 members of staff, to help them integrate the brand into their normal working day. In order for the brand to have success, the company rightly felt that the organisation's staff needed to act with the brand values in mind.

To bring the brand 'alive', we discovered that the client wanted others in the organisation to see the brand as a guide for setting up processes and systems which would generate a shift in the culture of the organisation. The alternative culture was seen as one which would promote their values and provide an anchor for more positive and 'on brand' behaviours, such as cross-team communication, or exploring customer needs and ensuring they were addressed. The purpose was to create an improved customer experience by generating a more optimistic, friendly, and customer-focused culture.

“As one employee said: ‘we have done a remarkable thing, by even beginning to talk together and work together in this way’.”



The brand vision was developed from within the organisation by its global marketing team. Our commissioners for this project were the marketing team, however we recommended that other key players in the organisation were involved, such as internal communications and HR who play a critical role for this type of change.

The key factors that attracted the client to our approach were building on what is working well in relation to the the current vision, connecting the vision with the wider organisation and facilitating the staff to design specific steps to get there. It was important for the vision not to be seen as just a marketing position, but a company wide position; a vision which would shape their working practices.

We introduced AI as a method for facilitating employees' connection to the brand and further, to generate the behaviours and actions that would best articulate the brand and develop a more cohesive culture. We recommended a series of workshops targeting key people from across departments and countries working together. Twenty groups were created in total, each group receiving two to three days of workshops; with the exception of the brand implementation team who received 5 workshops spread over 10 months. We can create structures for triggering and cascading the change which best fit an organisations structure, regardless of its size. Although workshops can be used in isolation, we also recommend internal communications and events to disseminate messages widely.

Incorporated with the AI process was the client's new brand vision and the values and the articulations which define it. Senior management played an active role in discussing the meaning of the vision with the workshop participants and engaging in conversations together about what

it meant to them. We expanded on these conversations by inquiring into people's experience of the values and eventually to how they felt they enacted or could enact those values. For example, when exploring the value of inclusiveness, an employee related to internal networking conferences and talks, which helped her understand other people's roles in the company and know more about what other departments do. She related to how she felt part of something larger and more meaningful than just her job as a result of her attendance. She then related her experience to behaviour. She was able to approach others in the company when she had ideas or needed support in finding solutions to issues in her area of responsibility. Some of the most meaningful moments are those when people realise it is these seemingly simple day to day actions which make the difference to the organisation's culture and ultimately to its brand.

Consultations:

Our consultation process begins well before the workshops begin. It is important to have access to a group of relevant senior decision makers throughout the project, as our process of change begins from our first inquiry. The project is not one that can be managed by a project manager alone. There need to be regular and consistent group meetings with the right people in the room to ensure that as change progresses, the right people are brought along.



The workshops:

It is key for our exercises to match what is acceptable to the group we are dealing with. We use small groups and pairs to break out larger teams of participants to work in depth with one another. We use activities like interviews, focused discussion and observational exercises to engage people in thinking and creating dialogue. We take attendees through a cycle:

- 1) Discovery – exploring what is working well, what are the high points here?
- 2) Envision- what does it look like where you want to go, what is the vision?
- 3) Design – how are we going to get there? How can we see the high points becoming regular every every day occurrences?
- 4) Deliver – do it, adapt the actions and sustain the process.

Matching language is a key issue in the success of workshops. We were particularly aware that people from across Europe were involved and some people are therefore using English as their second language. Although we work mainly in English, we connect with members of staff who are fluent in both English and other languages to assist the process. In addition, we are also aware that much of consultant language can be inaccessible to clients. We are open to continual exploration of our processes and concepts to help the client understand what it is we are bringing to the fore. The work is based on providing processes; processes which are much like therapy, with the clients bringing the content of who they are and where they want to go. We do not tell others what they must do to be successful, but we explore what actions will be right for them given their

unique context. We try to make the process tangible, whilst also trying to maintain the integrity of the process.

Conclusion:

Our work with this client is still on going. The achievements towards their vision have been marked. As time goes on they have behaved in some new ways and maintained some old ways but ultimately brought themselves closer to an organisation whose values have relevance. As one employee said: “we have done a remarkable thing, by even beginning to talk together and work together in this way”. The workshops have helped them explore their culture and vision in a collaborative way; a collaboration which in itself is changing the organisations culture.

References and recommended reading:

- Barge, K and Oliver, C (2003) Working with appreciation in managerial practice. Academy of Management Review 28:1, 124-142.*
- Barrett, F (1995) Creating appreciative learning cultures. Organisational Dynamics. 24:2, 36.*
- Bushe, G (1995). Advances in appreciative inquiry as an organisation development intervention. Organisation development journal 13:3, 14-22.*
- Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., Stavros, J (2003). Appreciative Inquiry Handbook. Lakeshore communications inc & Berrett-Koehler Publishers.*
- Cronen and Lang (1994) Language and Action: Wittgenstein and Dewey in the practice of therapy and consultation. Human Systems, 5:1-2.*
- Hammond S. (1998) The thin book of appreciative inquiry. Thin book publishing co. 2nd ed.*
- Mitchell, Colin (2002). Selling the Brand Inside. Harvard Business Review, Jan 2002.*



Author: Gillian Garner

Gillian heads up the cultural development practice at Brandinstinct. Her approach facilitates organisations to increase their intra-company dialogue and to build their brands from the inside out. Gillian has a psychology degree from the University of Western Ontario and a post-grad degree in Occupational Therapy from McMaster University, both in Canada. She is currently completing an MSc in Systemic Leadership and Organisation Studies at KCC, London.
ggarner@brandinstinct.com