

# brandinstinct\*

## Shaping corporate culture with your brand: bringing your people and your brand together

Gillian Garner

Gone are the days when each function inside a company focused on its own work in isolation to the rest. It is widely accepted that companies that work together to achieve a shared vision are more successful.

Branding has a vital and major role in getting your people working together towards a shared vision. A brand strategy is not just about marketing a product or service. It is a statement about the company, what it values and what it aims to achieve. A brand strategy has much wider application than communication & design activities. In order to get maximum benefit, a brand strategy needs to steer all customer touch points, including how employees and customers interact.

### **Benefits of connecting your brand and your employees**

When employees are engaged with the brand values and vision, the benefits are considerable.

1. Retention and loyalty. The brand creates a reason for working beyond collecting a pay cheque, and increases employee preference for the company (so that it is the employer of choice). When speaking to directors of HR in UK retail banking, they find employees, particularly customer-facing employees, will move between banks based on a small pay rise,

creating intense competition for a limited talent resource. In fact, employees that share the values of the company and have a meaningful connection with the direction of management, will stay longer and move less often. This point is especially true for top performing employees who naturally need to feel more connected to the direction of the company as they climb the ranks.

2. Attracting new talent and the right talent. New recruits often prefer to work for well known brands consistent with their own values and image of themselves. So using the brand within your recruitment strategy, recruitment campaigns and interview processes, can not only be useful in bringing in the talent, but can also bring in talent that is already aligned to your direction.
3. Employees that clearly understand the expected behaviours and norms work together effectively to achieve the desired work environment. Corporate development becomes a matter of inherent momentum of the group towards the vision, rather than just the policing of rules and regulations.
4. Brand engagement can enable employees to reinforce the same messages as the advertising

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campaign communicates, thereby strengthening not contradicting or fragmenting the customer experience.

5. A brand strategy derived from management vision gives employees a sense of norms, stability and direction. The purpose of the company becomes clear and decisions are made with greater consistency and effectiveness toward achieving the company goals.

When a brand is disconnected from its employees the result can be internal confusion, cynicism towards management and internal communications, apathy or ignoring the brand messages. In such cases, employees will not lend strength to your brand in their interactions with customers and each other.

### **What is brand engagement?**

1. Brand engagement plans address corporate cultural realities and operational priorities resulting in defined milestones and initiatives to implement.
2. Implementation and cascading of the plans and initiatives across the company.
3. Brand leadership building to ensure consistent messages from the top.
4. Internal communications campaigns and ongoing messaging consistent with the brand strategy.
5. Ongoing measurement and tracking of employee brand awareness and engagement.

### **How do we do it?**

Our approach:

Plans and cultural patterns

It is not enough to produce an operational plan that tells you how to integrate the brand into the business if the current culture will

resist the changes in direction. If you are addressing any form of brand development, you are talking about change. This is an exercise that goes beyond the marketing team. You will want to create forums for open dialogue, an interactive and contributory process that is undertaken in a way that secures people's honest views. Using principles from organisational theory, such as appreciative inquiry and other systemic practices, you can unearth the potential cultural patterns and other factors that are either consistent or in conflict with the brand direction. You can address or utilise patterns in order to create successful change.

Cultural patterns are not created by one person alone. They are ways of working together that have developed over time, often with good historical reasons. For example, a company that goes through a period of uncertainty may adopt strict controls around risk. However, many ways of working outrun their usefulness or appropriateness to the change you are trying to create. Years later, the same company may have recovered from uncertainty and now needs to take more risks in order to achieve expansion or innovate in a changing market. Some patterns will help us in developing our brand and some will hinder its coherent implementation. These issues and patterns of behaviour need to become part of the discussion with the appropriate levels of management.

Operational plans need to be developed in conjunction with the people responsible for the work. Often when people are handed their plans or priorities without their involvement, they feel little responsibility for the result and important insights from them may not be considered. Several obstacles to their performance can be created before you have begun. The right people need to be

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involved at the right time to set the actions that need to happen and bring the others along with you.

Large events, small group events, and coaching for managers combine elements of training with culture development and action planning. These activities are not just about learning, they are about enriching the detail and meaning of the brand vision and connecting people to this vision. Using internal stories that describe 'on brand' experiences and successes can be gathered and shared in forums and then incorporated into internal communications. These stories will help others build a picture of where you are going and what is expected. Within these forums, key stages from the appreciative inquiry model can be used to develop employees thinking on important issues and bring them to the point of innovation and action planning. These key stages are:

1. Discover what works best, deconstruct and learn from successes.
2. Envisage the future with the brand vision and define what the company and employees would be doing, what the company would look like, and who would be involved.
3. Create the action plan with the vision in mind, ultimately asking what needs to be done differently.
4. Implement the plan and create mechanisms for follow up and support to sustain efforts.

### **Typical steps to brand engagement**

#### **1. Brand check**

Uncover insights into what is working well and what is not working with your brand strategy. Is this a neglected brand that needs renewed leadership and participation? Is this an existing brand that is not having its full

potential realised by customer facing employees? How do people respond to the brand vision? How has it been used so far? How is it being communicated and through what channels? Ultimately you need to ensure your strategy is relevant, credible, and differentiating.

#### **2. Plan objectives**

What do you want employee engagement to achieve? What do you want to see done differently? Set objectives that, when reached, will show how things have changed.

#### **3. Infrastructure mapping**

Map out the organisation. Find the areas where the brand is being used well and where it is not. Are there gaps in the use of the brand in any of your major functions? Develop the communication and feedback links needed to progress the project. Identify the best people and where and when they need to be involved.

Map out the inter-dependent activities that are running concurrently in your organisation. How does the brand relate to these operational and strategic directions? How does it relate to other communications and business strategies? Determine how the brand should influence and be used within these other work streams.

#### **4. Developing insights into cultural patterns**

Uncover the usual ways of working in your organisation, the cultural patterns that will help and hinder progress with brand development. What it is like to work there? What works well? What needs to be different to achieve your objectives and your brand vision? Bring these patterns into discussion with the people who need to hear it. Discuss within management teams how to address these patterns, and whether they are indeed priorities for change.

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## 5. Engagement plan

Set the priority areas to target for building brand engagement with employees and within operations. Develop the initiatives and actions that will begin the process of culture development that will ultimately synchronise the brand and culture. Set priorities for the operational areas to work on both within their usual process of working and through special initiatives. Write a plan that outlines the results of the above exercises and the important cultural and operational insights made. Get feedback and sign off on the next steps from the appropriate channels.

## 6. Implement and cascade

Begin implementation. Set up and deliver the culture development workshops as per your plan. Begin training with the brand where needed. Engage employees in their roles and responsibilities towards helping the organisation achieve the brand strategy. Communicate as widely as possible internally, developing campaigns and integrating the messages into your usual internal communications channels..

## 7. Follow-up

Any new plans should be integrated into current work practices and progress tracked. Much of what can be done is the same work undertaken in a different way, so it is not always about creating new work to do.

When obstacles arise, help each other address and work through them. Focus on the learning and successes that are happening along the way. You need the right communication links between people to ensure consistent follow up and support.

## Measurement

Running throughout brand engagement activity is measurement. You do not want to measure for the sake of it, nor to tick a box and look like you have done something complex. Keep measurement as simple as possible. You want it to be realistic for your resources to implement, so that you can capture the change and test repeatedly over time. You can capture this change by incorporating the right questions into current employee surveys, customer surveys and by relating the work to current KPI's which you would expect to be affected by the brand.

## Another perspective

The benefit of using an external consultancy is the outside perspective that facilitates and ensures progress when confronted with difficult situations. An outsider can more readily identify patterns that may be difficult to face from the inside and provide the skills needed to facilitate employee groups around issues of brand and leadership development. These issues are often best dealt with by someone other than a colleague or manager. The contribution of a consultant is to facilitate new approaches to working, develop the forums that promote reflection on how best to reach your objectives and why, and then generate the momentum to act on the common vision. Using principles from both marketing and organisational development combines the best knowledge and practices necessary for complex brand related change.

## Case Study

Budapest Bank

As a GE Money bank, the company wanted to create a differentiated brand in what is an overly generic market. Looking to the market produced no answers. We needed to look inside the company to find the answer and set the direction. Once the positioning

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was created, the company began its journey. This is when brand engagement helped them find the path to develop who they wanted to be and how they were going to make it happen. We looked across employee touch points, customer touch points, key service offerings and to the senior management team to not only create the means for expressing their story, but to create leadership in developing the company toward one vision. We did this in a way which fostered unified leadership from within and created a momentum for growth that carried on beyond our involvement.

Our brand engagement processes not only provided plans for cascading brand messages and adapting current systems to suit the brand, we also found cultural patterns within the organization that helped and hindered progress. We brought these patterns out for discussion to either challenge them, or use them. Subsequently, we created forums and experiences within which employees could innovate, be creative and find meaning in the new direction for their work. This process took the company beyond their traditional methods of planning and problem solving towards a process of change and innovation.

We did this by using the principles of appreciative inquiry (AI) to create forums and develop thinking amongst employees to find out how they would take responsibility for the new vision. Important insights developed that helped to create realistic and achievable plans that acted on the vision in each priority division.

### **The key principles used from AI were:**

1. Discover what works best, deconstruct and learn from successes.
2. Envisage the future with the brand vision and define what the company

and employees would be doing, what the company would look like, and who would be involved.

3. Implement the action plan with the vision in mind.
4. Develop mechanisms for follow up and tracking.

We created the space and time for people to be creative, to work from their own experiences and to learn from successes as much as focusing on what needed to be different.

The program was well received by employees, who found the process energizing and productive. They committed to new actions to achieve the company vision and requested more time together to further innovate and plan with the new vision. They all agreed to embed the vision across the company and they were eager to develop similar skills to ours with which to do so. The success for us was not only defined by the positive employee feedback, but by the actions which arose subsequent to our involvement.



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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.

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### **Budapest Bank Testimonial**

*'Brandinstinct's approach to brand building not only delivered a great and relevant new brand concept to GE Money Bank, but their facilitation was also fundamental to the internal approval and engagement process. With their help we have a new communication strategy that delivered positive business impact and improved brand strength significantly, most importantly our organisation is aligned to delivering what we promise to our customers.'*

*Andrea Szabo,  
Chief Marketing Officer*