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Brands are about products or services. Everyone knows that. They help you choose where you shop and what you buy, what cola you drink, the sneakers you wear, the car you drive.

However, the people behind those products and services are an important element of any brand strategy. What kind of conversation would you expect with a Coca-Cola customer service rep? How do you picture Nike's corporate HQ? Would you be troubled by a Ford dealer who prefers to drive Nissan cars?



Companies may say they understand the power of branding and they may even translate brands into dollars on a balance sheet, but many are clueless about a large part of brand management. It seems obvious, but unless employees act consistently with the brands they represent, any other branding activity can suffer.

"I reckon about 20 percent of a brand is its physical attributes, like a logo, color, letterheads. The rest is all about behavior," says Ian Buckingham, head of Interbrand Inside. "Employees bring a brand to life; they are its ultimate custodians."

Virgin is one company that has always recognized the importance of its people. Its attitude is demonstrated in its new group brand manual: "Chapter One -- Our People Come First." "We have always believed that to create a powerful external brand you need to create a culture that supports it," adds Catherine Salway, Group Brand Manager for Virgin.

Yet the process of creating and maintaining a brand culture in the workplace -- internal brand alignment -- is a difficult and delicate process. It needs more than a manual and a slide presentation. Alignment is about encouraging employees to behave in certain ways. And that means dabbling in psychology.

"You can't just say to people, 'Here's the external brand, here's the internal, and here's how it plays out in everyday behavior,' " says Salway. "You've got to be careful because people are individuals; you can make this a false thing. If you keep staff happy and still let them bring their personality to work then you're more likely to succeed."

Consultation is key, agrees Robert Swinton, head of marketing at the Securities Institute, an Australian not-for-profit membership and educational organization for the financial services sector. "It's trite to say 'Here's a set of words and we want you to behave like this.' You have to show why, to explain the business case. You need consultation and to demonstrate that it is a benefit. You have to show that the company will prosper."

The Securities Institute is in the middle of an internal brand alignment exercise. "We have recently done some research on our brand values and discovered that we had a strong brand among our customers, but we didn't have a culture of 'Here is what our

brand is.' We found it absolutely necessary to consider the internal aspects of the brand too. We recognized that behaviors of our staff needed to fit with the values that our customers wanted to see in us. People are our business," explains Swinton.

"We made sure that what we say about our brand resonated with employees. What we came up with had to be livable, feasible and acceptable. We conducted workshops with focus groups of employees to work through what our brand values mean, and define how this would translate into the work of different types of jobs."

"If you impose a brand culture it will fail. If you expect to change behavior without asking if it's a good idea you will fail," states Allan Steinmetz, CEO of Inward Strategic Consulting.

With employee backing, Steinmetz argues that communicating the brand values to staff requires the same methods as external marketing. "You need to segment your internal population just as you would your external audience and communicate appropriately. Communication needs to be relevant, and in today's climate, experiential as well. That could be rallies, workshops, online training, even picnics." Most companies also incorporate promotion of the brand culture into staff communications and their intranet. There's always a place for appropriate gimmicks -- like mouse mats with interchangeable brand reminders -- so long as they fit with the brand too.

Wal-mart even uses the mass media in its internal branding. Its television adverts featuring greeters in store are as much about demonstrating appropriate behavior to the company's own employees as they are about promoting the store to the general public.

Perhaps the best form of communication is leadership by example. Staff need role models and will be more likely to adopt brand values if they see their superiors living up to what they say.

"Marketing is the custodian of the physical brand, but who are the custodians of behavior?" asks Ian Buckingham. "If it is just HR, you've perhaps got a problem because often HR departments have lost their punch at board level. The best sponsor for an internal culture is the CEO.

"It's not good enough to run spin campaigns for staff," he adds. "The top team has to foot the bill. They need role model behaviors. You can't ask thousands of staff to behave in a way that people at the top won't model."

Naturally rewards and remuneration can provide incentives for certain behaviors, and the incorporation of the brand values with HR policies and processes is essential. There is little point in stating that the brand is about teamwork, then rewarding individual sales reps for landing deals on their own. "You have to make sure that processes reinforce what you're trying to do with the brand internally," says Buckingham. "Brand values need to be represented in the performance criteria, and people need to be rewarded according to the brand."

BP, for instance, runs its Helios Award scheme, which honors projects and work that embody the company's brand values (green, innovation, performance and progressive). Now in its third year, the number of nominations for the award far surpasses expectations. Employees take it seriously.

Human resource departments must also consider how their recruitment will uphold brand values. If you can pick the people whose natural behavior and values fit closely with the company brand then you automatically create a culture. You won't be trying

to squeeze new employees until they fit -- or are fit to burst.

Buckingham recommends interview guides that specifically address the issue of branding. "How does the interview process provide opportunities to see how a candidate fits in with the brand?" he asks. "Will they fit in with the business culture? Or you could get employees to do the recruitment process. They usually have a good feel for whether someone would fit in."

"We've always been clued up about getting the right people on board," says Virgin's Salway. "The external brand tends to attract the right people anyway. We ask a lot of questions that aren't traditional, to get a feel for what the person is like. We select on attitude and personality and a feel for whether someone's a bit different from the crowd, [can] cope with pressure and [has] a good sense of humor. That's what makes our brand come alive."

Of course, even with the best selection procedures, some employees simply don't want to know. This is particularly true when companies implement internal brand alignment for the first time. But Buckingham says that employees should see such initiatives as a positive move. "I'd raise up the effigy of the term 'internal brand alignment' and burn it. But employees should still see this as an opportunity to understand why they joined the company, apart from the basic need for pay and rations. And if you're not engaged in the process then either leave or rebel. Your voice needs to be heard." [18-Aug-2003]

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