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Internal branding made easy

using effective design

Chapter 1:

Why brand matters inside your organisation

Companies invest a great deal of time deciding what their brand stands for and how it should be represented to its target audiences. Values are agreed, design concepts developed, logos launched, and products and services deliver the customer brand proposition. But it's important to ask whether your brand also receives the attention it deserves inside your organisation. After all, your external brand is driven and delivered by your people. Your team brings the brand to life. The way they behave and how they 'live the brand' is ultimately driven by the culture of your organisation.

The Holy Grail of brand synergy depends on your customers and employees thinking in the same way about your brand. If they don't, you could be faced with a disconnect that adversely affects brand value. According to a study by Gallup, just 23 percent of employees strongly believe their company's values. And rating service Glassdoor reports that only 54 percent of its subscribers say that they would recommend their companies as a place to work.

Brands represent 'meaning and belonging', according to brand strategist Robert Jones of Wolf Olins. That is why you can always spot the red of Coca-Cola or Manchester United Football Club almost no matter where you travel in the world. Humans yearn to feel part of something, and a logo or brand colour provides the visual triggers to help them recognise what is important to them. Brands embody a set of feelings, emotions and beliefs. The way products and services are made and delivered by your team can serve to strengthen or weaken your brand.

One way of maintaining the synergy is to offer the same opportunities for meaning and belonging to your staff that you present to customers. It is essential to spend time focusing on what your people believe about your brand in order to maximise their goodwill and promote discretionary effort.

Businesses like John Lewis are modelled on partnership with all employees effectively owning a stake in the business. The principles behind the brand focus on collaboration, resolving conflict and working together. John Lewis & Partners invests heavily in communicating its values to its staff, and regularly checks in with them to make sure that they embody these values in all interactions with colleagues and customers on the frontline.

Robert Jones also cites the example of First Direct bank which has built its 28-year-old brand around good customer service that translates into an informal, friendly and caring style of communication. In order to perfect this approach, the bank has invested more heavily in its internal communications than its customer communications. Its brand style is based on simplicity and consistency as shown in its first brand book.

In the digital age in which the boundaries of organisations are more fluid, authenticity is the key to effective brand value. Brands must deliver against their promises for all stakeholders including customers, shareholders and their own employees. Steve Jobs famously cited his father when he spoke about creating a beautiful piece of furniture and paying as much attention to the reverse of the cabinet as the front that everybody sees. This speaks to the need for an alignment of company culture on the inside and outside. It is important to define 'the way we do things around here'. Culture affects your ability to deliver against brand expectations, but also impacts on diversity and inclusion, how innovative you are, and compliance with health and safety procedures.

According to Gallup, leadership and communication is the first of its five drivers of culture within an organisation. Your team wants to be proud of what they do and to articulate this outside the organisation. They should be willing to defend it if necessary, as an active brand ambassador.

Communicating the benefits of working at your company will help to build a strong employer brand, attracting new talent and skills. Highlight the benefits of working with your company. To do this, you can harness the power of your own staff in attracting like-minded individuals who are more likely to buy-in to your brand culture.

Chapter 2:

How design can improve internal communications

Design can help bring to life your brand's mission and values through a clear and simple visual representation of what you stand for. Bringing a design element into your communications acts as a consistent visual reminder, helping your people to understand the core of the organisation.

However, you will need more than shorthand and simple reminders to explain the detail behind your promises. Design can help you to communicate the bigger picture by illustrating the key stages in a service process or product development. Design injects heart and soul into what you say, reinforcing the values behind your company.

Design also brings professionalism to your internal communications encouraging better engagement. Be disciplined about applying the principles of good design to all your materials, including those created for an internal audience. Your design agency can help to ensure that you have a consistent, well-defined colour palette, brand guidelines and information architecture. This might be an adaptation of your Masterbrand, creating a distinct identity for your staff. Fonts and typography are frequently the hardest elements of design to control in internal communications, so you will need to set clear parameters and police their usage.

Start with an audit of your values and how you express them. Once you have defined your core values, it helps to visualise these and apply them as you would in a customer environment.

From there, you will be able to:

- Build familiar channels for different message types to improve the speed and efficiency of message delivery. Employing a consistent style for internal communications means that your team will always know where to find information.

- Foster a sense of belonging by representing a coherent culture with universal buy-in and acceptance. This can also promote engagement and stimulate colleagues to get involved in improving ways of working and processes. You can even achieve a sense of belonging by using immersive environmental branding.

- Make information more accessible and digestible. Just as straightforward copy delivered in a Plain English style can get help to get your message across quickly, design principles bring the message to life, improving its memorability and resonance, complementing your tone of voice.

- Liven up dry objectives and strategy using illustration, animation or infographics. Make sure you work closely with designers so that they can help you to express your brand mission internally with a powerful narrative. Data need not be dull. Representing sales figures or success ratings are more digestible through infographics or animations.

- Bring a sense of fun to your communications to reinforce that your business is a great place to work. Design enables you to adapt your brand voice for an internal audience without losing integrity.

- Collect feedback through a simple mechanism that will help you to check that messages are getting through to colleagues.

Chapter 3:

Applications of design within internal communications strategy

Let's examine some of the commonly-used channels for internal communications and how they could benefit from high-quality creative input.

Emails and newsletters

With the high volume of traffic in our inbox, emails need to be well-designed to gain cut-through. Communications targeted at staff arguably need to be even better designed to avoid being sidelined as less important than those from clients. Rather than sending emails randomly, think about how they sit within your internal communications strategy, then devise a suite of templates based on the subject type and use them according to a strict schedule to avoid information overload. Use software such as Mailchimp or Campaign Monitor to deliver your emails and you will be able to track engagement and monitor responses. Although these systems have basic templates built in, you will need a designer to adapt them for your brand, colours, fonts and brand guidelines.

Intranet

This window on the workings of your organisation should be designed with visual appeal and usability in mind. A good user experience easy helps to simplify mundane tasks. It can be tempting to neglect your intranet and relegate it to second place in terms of online projects. But don't forget about the vast amount of useful data and information that your intranet holds. Getting the design right will enable colleagues to work more efficiently and deliver a better service to your customers.

The National Trust is a good example of an organisation that has invested time and money in the design of its intranet, which evolved from an anonymous platform to an engaging, well-designed space they named Acorn. Research amongst National Trust employees revealed that they wanted their intranet to be 'more like Google' from a search perspective, simply so that they could find what they were looking for with ease.

Design can help you to get your information architecture right using defined style sheets. Make sure you continually audit the content to avoid creating a corporate dumping ground. Your design team can storyboard typical workflows and map out a range of customer journeys.

Presentations

How many times have you been sitting in a presentation, either within your organisation or outside, and cringing as each badly-branded PowerPoint slide slo-mos into view? Admit it, even your MD sometimes uses slides that were last updated three years ago. This lack of consistency can damage brand perceptions. Using your brand professionally promotes confidence and trust.

Design for presentations needs to take into account visual impact at a distance. Set parameters so that colleagues are not able to insert hundreds of words into a slide. Make sure that the logo is embedded within the template and vary these for different business units as necessary.

Environmental branding

In the physical environment, design can help you to bring your brand to life in the workplace. A design agency will help you to think about how messages can be showcased within your offices, factories or workshops, perhaps using artwork from your latest advertising campaigns. You can create discreet spaces in any environment, however small, by using graphic design and colours to delineate specific areas. This could include social or break-out spaces for staff to catch-up and exchange ideas.

Unless you're Google, you are unlikely to design your offices to include nap pods, a climbing wall or 25m swimming pool. But at the very least, consider choosing appropriate colours when you are decorating the walls or choosing furniture, and ask your designers to guide you on bringing your brand to life in the workplace. Make sure that all teams can find each other in large premises and make locations obvious by commissioning the design of helpful way-finding signage, colour coded by business area or storey level.

Social media

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram can enable staff to keep in touch and communicate with colleagues. Setting up closed groups will give them the confidence to 'Like' and 'Follow' and could help to promote a sense of belonging and wellbeing. The NHS in Essex launched its 'Join the Conversation' campaign to outline how its staff could use Twitter to share experiences, examples of where they have helped patients, and insights into how they have progressed their careers.

Recruitment

When you're thinking about your employer brand, do not forget to make sure that your recruitment materials, from your job advert to your application form, are on brand, smart, professional and easy to use. If you offer an online application form, make sure that it is mobile-enabled. If it isn't even easy to apply for a job, this might set up doubts about the likely experience of working for your organisation.

Onboarding

When they join your organisation, do your new colleagues receive a disparate collection of printed materials from the HR team? Are these designed and branded to inspire new recruits and set expectations of professional conduct and clear communication? Design can help your induction packs and appraisal forms become more accessible and less daunting, increasing the likelihood of enthusiastic engagement. Agencies have access to the latest innovative ideas and can provide sources of inspiration. For example, your agency could design a personalised video box for new employees containing a range of merchandise and showcasing an induction showreel.

Rewards and incentives

Good internal communications are central to making your teams feel valued. Employee rewards and incentives can benefit from design principles to reinforce their importance to the organisation. These can be personalised for individuals in the form of awards or gifts to recognise long service or a job well done. Merchandise is usually designed for customers, but your employees will also appreciate the gift of a branded or personalised coffee mug or water bottle.

Compliance

In some aspects of your business, it is vital that the message gets through. Compliance with standard operating procedures and health and safety regulations is mandatory, and clever design can help to ensure that regular updates around these themes are clear and impactful. By visually linking compliance back to the heart of the organisation, you are more likely to succeed in communicating mission-critical information. Handbooks and manuals need not be dull, and design can help reduce the burden of reading with snappy infographics or animated videos.

Chapter 4:

How to work best with your agency on creative internal communication ideas

Most design agencies have the advantage of working with other organisations across a wide range of sectors and can expose you to ideas that have already worked for other clients. As with any design project, never underestimate the importance of what you already know. To remind yourself of this, it is a good idea to carry out a communications audit before you start to work on the agency brief.

Start with a review of brands, sub-brands and channels. Ask yourself whether these represent an accurate picture of the organisation today. If there has been a change, whether you have added a brand, channel or set of messages into the mix, or whether historical assets have become redundant, it is hugely helpful to your agency if you can help them to see the bigger picture.

If you think you may need room within a brand hierarchy to add a new tier later, make that clear. This will help to prevent your designers from inadvertently painting themselves into a corner. There is nothing more obvious and awkward than a category or theme that has been shoe-horned into place after the concept has been completed. Leave no stone unturned during your research and plan your over-arching strategy very carefully. This will provide a clear and coherent platform on which your agency can build.

It could be helpful to use the same agency for internal and external communications as they will have a 360-degree view of your organisation. But make sure that the agency has experience of design for internal communications as the principles are similar but subtly different.

If your agency has produced concepts for customer communications, ask them to help you showcase external work amongst your colleagues. Campaigns can gain extra weight if your own team understands them. With the additional buy-in of your very own squad of ambassadors, you can get the word out more quickly. Similarly, you can ask your design team to create a mechanism for demonstrating the impact of your marketing activity. Good results can often languish within the marketing team. Don't let the success of your campaign become the best kept secret in your organisation. Use the channels available to you and involve your agency in getting the word out.

If your business operates a number of brands, you will need the help of expert designers to organise your brand architecture with internal communications in mind. Visual channels should lead colleagues to spot information on their own brand easily, while also enabling them to keep up to date with other areas of the company.

You can avoid dilution by getting the message out straight from the horse's mouth. Ask your design agency to video the MD talking about the latest company news. This could be run as a live event for colleagues, and also recorded and uploaded to the intranet for remote workers or those based on other sites. Scheduling time for a regular vlogging session with the senior management team could improve engagement with the intranet. Alternatively, you could turn to the wider team and ask people from around the organisation to deliver a message or comment on camera.

If you're working towards a big announcement, ask your agency to help devise a teaser campaign that creates a sense of mystery and enables a big reveal. Story-telling is an integral part of effective design communications. Stories spark emotions and are more likely to resonate with employees.

How are you expressing your corporate social responsibility? The initiatives you choose to support represent your commitment to improving the social, economic or environmental impact of your business. Work with your agency to develop strategies, plans and campaigns that will showcase the context in which you are operating and encourage employees to support your activities. This will help to strengthen the link between your CSR and your business purpose, values and mission.

Increasingly, businesses are realising that fun and recreation help to promote engagement. Blending business strategy, technology and consumer behaviour can be a winning combination. Consider briefing your agency to generate ways to incorporate gamification into the workplace, through quizzes or treasure hunts, for example. Follow these principles and your internal communications will be as varied, creative and engaging as those you create for your customers.

We would love to hear from you

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