

Why Your Company Culture Should Match Your Brand

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Ask people how to develop a good corporate culture, and most of them will immediately suggest offering generous employee benefits, like they do at Starbucks, or letting people dress casually, as Southwest Airlines does. Rarely do people point to encouraging employees to disagree with their managers, as Amazon does, or firing top performers, as Jack Welch did at GE.

But in fact, it's having a distinct corporate culture — not a copycat of another firm's culture — that allows these great organizations to produce phenomenal results. Each of these companies has aligned and integrated its culture and brand to create a powerful engine of competitive advantage and growth. Their leaders understand that a strong, differentiated company culture contributes to a strong, differentiated brand — and that an extraordinary brand can support and advance an extraordinary culture.

It doesn't matter if your company culture is friendly or competitive, nurturing or analytical. If your culture and your brand are driven by the same purpose and values and if you weave them together into a single guiding force for your company, you will win the competitive battle for customers and employees, future-proof your business from failures and downturns, and produce an organization that operates with integrity and authenticity.

When you think and operate in unique ways internally, you can produce the unique identity and image you desire externally. You need to have employees who understand and embrace the distinct ways you create value for customers, the points that differentiate your brand from the competition, and the unique personality that your company uses to express itself — and your employees must be empowered to interpret and reinforce these themselves. You achieve this by cultivating a clear, strong, and distinctive brand-led culture.

If your culture and brand are mismatched, you can end up with happy, productive employees who produce the wrong results. For example, at a grocery store chain I worked with, employees were steeped in an operations culture that valued efficiency and productivity. As the industry moved toward an emphasis on customer service and merchandising, the company fell behind, because its employees were focused more on increasing inventory turns and sales per square foot. It had to confront the fact that its culture, though vibrant and vital, was holding it back

from serving customers well and improving the brand image.

Without using your brand purpose and values to orient your culture efforts, you're also likely to waste a lot of money. You may think you need to take extraordinary measures to attract and retain in-demand talent, like providing free lunches to employees, putting foosball tables and beer kegs in break rooms, and offering free gym memberships. As you try to one-up your competition in the war for talent, you'll probably draw from a pool of perks and benefits that sound great but produce little more than a generic, fun work environment. And you may end up like social media software startup Buffer, which struggled to achieve profitability because its generous cultural practices, including offering vacation bonuses and wellness grants, ate away at cash flow instead of producing employees who were passionate about the brand offering and committed to developing on-brand innovations.

With a single, unifying drive behind both your culture and your brand, however, you reap the benefits of a focused and aligned workforce. No one needs to expend extra energy figuring out what to do or how to act in order to achieve what you want your company to stand for in the world. Your human resources aren't trying to decipher what skills and behaviors will be needed in the future, or maintaining performance evaluation systems that are out of sync with your values. And your sales and marketing departments aren't working at cross-purposes, each with its own view of what success looks like. Organizational silos are bridged and disjointed initiatives are minimized because everyone is singularly focused on the same priorities.

How can you tell if your culture and your brand aren't interdependent and mutually reinforcing? A disconnect between your employee experiences and your customer experiences is a telltale sign. If you engage your employees differently from how you expect them to engage your customers, your organization is operating with two set of values.

I'm not just talking about the obvious problem of managers who treat their employees poorly. I recommend using the same principles to design and manage experiences for both employees and customers. If you want to consistently introduce new products and technologies to your customers, then cultivate a test-and-learn mentality among your employees and encourage them to experiment with the latest gadgets. If your brand is differentiated by the way your products and services look and feel, then infuse your employee experience with design and creativity. You can't expect your employees to deliver benefits to customers that they don't experience or embrace themselves.

Another indicator of a mismatch between your culture and your brand is the lack of understanding of and engagement with your brand among your people. Your employees should understand what makes your brand different and special from a customer perspective. They should clearly understand who the company's target customers are, as well as their primary wants and needs. They should use your brand purpose and values as decision-making filters and they should understand how they contribute to a great customer experience — even if they don't have direct customer contact. If your people think they don't play a role in interpreting and reinforcing your brand and that brand building is your marketing department's responsibility, then your culture lacks brand integrity.

To address these gaps and align and to integrate your brand and culture, start by clearly identifying and articulating your brand aspirations. Do you want your brand to be known for delivering superior performance and dependability? Or is your intent to challenge the existing way of doing things and position your brand as a disruptor? Or is your brand about making a positive social or environmental impact?

Once you know what type of brand you're aiming for, you can identify the values that your organization should embrace. In the case of a performance brand, you should work on cultivating a culture of achievement, excellence, and consistency inside your organization, while a strong sense of purpose, commitment, and shared values is needed for a socially or environmentally responsible brand. When you have clarity on the values necessary to support your desired brand type, you can use it to inform and ignite other culture efforts, including organizational design, leadership development, policies and procedures, employee experience, etc.

How you operate on the inside should be inextricably linked with how you want to be perceived on the outside. Just

as brands differ, there is no single right culture. Identify the distinct cultural elements that enable you to achieve your desired brand identity, and then deliberately cultivate them. When your brand and culture are aligned and integrated, you increase operational efficiency, accuracy, and quality; you improve your ability to compete for talent and customer loyalty with intangibles that can't be copied; and you move your organization closer to its vision.

(Author's note: I've created an [assessment](#) to help you determine how well-aligned and integrated your brand and culture are today. It's free, but I do need your email address to send you your personalized results.)