

You Don't Need A Mission Statement, You Need A Brand Purpose

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A company's purpose is its why—why it does what it does, why it exists. Having a meaningful **brand purpose** or being a "purpose-driven" company has become a popular notion in business today, and with good reason. In today's cluttered, ultra competitive, choice-overloaded world, each company must have a clear reason for being. You need to play an invaluable, irreplaceable role in people's lives, and you must live out that purpose convincingly or your customers can easily be lured away by any one of your more deliberate competitors.

Most business leaders know they should promote a purpose for their organization, but most also go about it the wrong way. The typical mission statement outlines the scope of the business—what the organization does, produces, or sells—and sets a goal to achieve certain financial targets or create value for shareholders. For example, a bookstore chain claims, "Our mission is to operate the best specialty retail business in America, regardless of the product we sell," but its brand purpose "to promote a love for books and reading" reveals a narrower interest. Or consider a company that aspires to industry-leading profitability as a business and yet promises generous service to all customers as a brand. These disconnects between business and brand purpose often cause confusion for people in the organization, especially when they seem at odds.

Setting financial targets and clarifying your business footprint are necessary to set the expectations of investors, business partners, and other stakeholders, but you shouldn't separate them from the way you engage and motivate your primary ones: customers and employees. The purpose of your business and the purpose of your brand should be seamlessly integrated, tightly aligned, and articulated as a single overarching purpose.

Traditional management theory differentiates between an organization's purpose (its reason for being), vision (its desired future), and mission (how it achieves its vision or fulfills its purpose). But it's not necessary to articulate all three of them in separate statements, which can be quite confusing to your employees. A single statement that articulates a single purpose for your business and brand works best. It's clear, simple, and easy to remember.

It's not enough to simply state an overarching purpose by identifying the mark you want to make in the world; you must operate your company so that it becomes known—internally and externally—for it. Mark Zuckerberg has achieved this coherence with his company purpose —“to make the world more open and connected.” It's one of the cornerstones of the company's culture as well as how he runs the business. “We believe that a more open world is a better world because people with more information can make better decisions and have a greater impact,” Zuckerberg explains. “That goes for running our company as well. We work hard to make sure everyone at Facebook has access to as much information as possible about every part of the company so they can make the best decisions and have the greatest impact.”

With a single overarching purpose, Zuckerberg creates enduring inspiration and motivation for people inside Facebook and out. Similarly, Henry Ford started his company to “build a car for the great multitude,” and the company continues to thrive over 100 years later because the ethos of democratizing transportation resonates with employees and customers. The purpose of the New York Times—to be the news authority— has also fueled that company's culture and brand for over 160 years.

An overarching purpose can power your company to sustained success too.

Pinpoint Your Brand Purpose

To identify your overarching purpose, go deep and think big. Steve Jobs wanted to put a dent in the universe. What difference in the world are you being called to make? What do you want your organization's legacy to be? Sometimes it's helpful to go back to your company's founder and revisit why he or she started it in the first place. And consider what would be missing—or how the world would be worse off—if your organization no longer existed.

You can use several established exercises and approaches to formulate your overarching purpose:

Five Whys exercise. Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras, authors of the seminal book *Built to Last*, recommend getting at your purpose by starting with a descriptive statement such as “We make X products” or “We deliver X services,” and then asking, “Why is that important?” five times, each time asking the question in response to the previous answer. In a *Harvard Business Review* article, Collins and Porras describe using this technique to help a market research company uncover its deeper, richer purpose. In a working session with company executives, they started the process by describing what the company's most basic purpose was: “To provide the best market-research data available.” Then they asked them why providing the best market-research data available is important. After continuing to ask “Why?” in response to their

answers, the executives concluded that their company's ultimate purpose was "to contribute to our customers' success by helping them understand their markets." Porras and Collins observe, "The five whys can help companies in any industry frame their work in a more meaningful way."

Random Corporate Serial Killer game. In this exercise, also designed by Porras and Collins, you are challenged to think about what would be lost if your company ceased to exist—and why it's important that it endures. Gather colleagues and ask them to imagine that you could sell your company to someone for a fair price while guaranteeing stable employment for your employees after the sale. Ask them also to imagine that the buyer plans to completely kill the company after purchasing it—its products and services would be discontinued, operations would be shut down, brand names would be dropped, etc. Then ask them if they would still be willing to sell the company, and why or why not. This exercise, Porras and Collins write, is a particularly powerful technique to help you uncover your company's purpose beyond that of merely maximizing shareholder wealth.

Think. Feel. Do. exercise. Think. Feel. Do. is a Thematic Apperception "Test" (TAT) borrowed from the world of psychology that helps to reveal underlying motives, appeals, and concerns. Most TATs use ambiguous pictures of people and ask participants to make up narratives about the images. To use a TAT to help you uncover your company's purpose, convene a working session of your key executives and other stakeholders. Give each person two pictures of a stick figure, one representing a customer before your brand existed and another representing the customer after the brand launched (or before and after the customer becomes aware of your brand and tries it). Ask participants to come up with narratives about what the customer is thinking, feeling, and doing before and after. Ask participants to consider how the brand might have changed the customer's life—how he might relate to himself, other people, and his environments differently; what decisions he might make differently; and how he might spend his time or money differently. Review everyone's narratives, discussing the similarities between them and the reasons why they differ. The discussion will help you extract key themes that lead to an articulation of your purpose.

Whatever method you use, once you pinpoint your purpose, codify it. Collins and Porras argue that a company's purpose ought to be a way for you to put a stake in the ground about who you are, what you stand for, and what you're all about. Don't assume that your people know it—write it down and share it.

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