

How much does culture matter in branding?

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Deep Dive

These days, fusing culture and brand may be essential for brands hoping to engage customers with more authentic messages.

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Company culture is a buzz phrase for job candidates and human resources departments — but it's something that marketing departments should think about too. Culture and brand ought to go hand in hand, argues Denise Lee Yohn in her new book, "Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies."

In it, Yohn encourages companies to build their brands "from the inside out," integrating it with employees' experience, not just customers'. Some companies have already pulled off this approach — think Patagonia's extreme stance on preserving national parks or Outdoor Voice's motivational marketing. But many other retailers, especially big-box players, have disconnected these two crucial aspects of their identities.

It's a fusion that requires thought and effort — like any business decision — and one that executives must consider strategically as it relates to their core mission. On the topic, [the discussion forum RetailWire asked its BrainTrust panel](#) of retail experts the following questions:



- Do you agree on the need for companies to fuse culture and brand?
- Why do brand communications often vary from an organization's cultural messages?
- What advice do you have for companies looking to fuse culture and brand?

Here are eight of the most provocative and insightful comments from the discussion. Comments have been edited by Retail Dive for length and clarity.

1. Time to tell a story

[Max Goldberg, President, Max Goldberg & Associates](#): A company's brand should be reflected in its culture; otherwise there is a disconnect that will impact morale, which will impact sales. Companies need a story behind their brands that encompass what the company does and why it's important. That same brand identity should be part of the company's internal culture.

2. Think of it like a long-term relationship

[Brandon Rael, Retail Excellence Leader, Tulip Retail](#): Consumers are seeking long-term relationships with their favorite brands, and have a connection with the company well beyond the products themselves. We associate certain emotions and nostalgic feelings with certain brands not because of the products, but because of what the brand seemingly stands for.

All of the magic we see with Coke's iconic ad conveys a sense of culture and a sense of why that still resonates today. So yes, your culture is your brand.

3. Can culture become a cult?

[Nikki Baird, VP of Retail Innovation, Aptos](#) Where I pause, not because I have an opinion yet but because I think I'm probably going to have to have one at some point, is the balance between building an organization based on this deeper meaning and crossing some line into cult or group-think status.

If my company stands for, say, mental health in teens, then do I insist that every new hire care about that and buy into that? What if they don't? And with current high awareness of diversity — its challenges and its values — then by demanding buy-in to a company's deeper meaning, are you locking yourself out of opportunities that would come from different world views and perspectives? I don't have an answer to that, but it's something I think every company needs to think about.

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4. Just let culture happen

Doug Garnett, President, Protonik: Some things need to 'happen' — not be manufactured. An intentional, bureaucratic, corporate-led project to create 'authentic' culture fused to brand is a train wreck. Sure, it sells nicely to the board — but customers will know it's not the least bit authentic.

What leads to this answer are executives who set the company focus on what matters (service, quality, responsiveness) and management practices that don't impede people's natural impulses to deliver these things.

Sadly, it's rare to find a company focused on doing the work — which is what motivates employees most. Instead, politics, quick successes, etc... tend to win the day.

5. Promote 'work that doesn't feel like work'

Gabriela Baiter, Founder, Whereabout Studio: Rather than trying to only implement solutions that give employees a 'break from work,' brands should come up with ways to reinvigorate their minds through 'work that doesn't feel like work.' These tactics should always make employees feel closer to the product or service that the brand provides.

A few examples that come to mind are Patagonia, Airbnb and Uber. Patagonia allows their employees to take one service-based trip a year that protects the environment. Airbnb gives their employees \$1,000+ travel credit a year to travel the world. Uber allows their employees to suggest real projects they want to solve and if their project is chosen, they provide them with a team and plane ticket to solve it for 10 days over holiday break.

6. Help employees be your fans

Cate Trotter, Head of Trends, Insider Trends: Employees who connect with a company's culture are also more likely to stick around at a company. Some companies have even employed staff from their biggest fans because if they love the company as a consumer they're probably a good fit for the culture. I think these days if your company doesn't have a defined culture then it doesn't have a USP or a story to tell customers. And that doesn't come from foosball tables.

7. Set the C-Suite example

Art Suriano, Chief Executive Officer, The TSi Company: A massive disconnect exists between the vision and objectives of the C-level executives and what is taking place with store-level associates. There are too many chiefs with their agendas, and they are not on the same page. Culture starts at the top and leaders need to share it with everyone in the organization by example.

8. Be more than a Facebook post

Cathy Hotka, Principal, Cathy Hotka & Associates: In the age of social media, brand

authenticity is everything. Consumers are savvier than ever and want meaningful and predictable interactions with brands they trust. Companies that can deliver (The Container Store, Chik-fil-A, Dunkin' Donuts) win loyal followers for decades.

Companies that slip — a Starbucks employee throwing out two patrons who were waiting for a third — suffer mightily.

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