



Purpose, Principles Give Power

Q: Why is having a clear purpose and principles important to brand building?

A: A debate I frequently have with restaurant executives is over the importance of culture in brand building. When I explain that great brands are fueled by a clearly articulated purpose and meaningful principles or values, many of their faces express confusion or disbelief. Like them, you may consider such cultural elements to be “soft stuff” that your human resources people handle, while you focus on the “real” business drivers, such as optimizing your menu, controlling costs, and developing marketing plans.

But culture and brand power are inextricably linked—the stronger your culture, the greater the appeal and traction you’ll have with customers. Don’t just take my word for it. Purpose and principles were the main topics discussed by the successful business leaders who recently took the stage at the 17th Annual UCLA Extension Restaurant Industry Conference.

Taco Bell CEO Greg Creed credited his company’s turnaround to its work on culture. He explained that the new programs Taco Bell rolled out last year, the Doritos Locos Tacos and Cantina Bell menu, were as much a product of the cultural renewal he had led the company through as they were of creative marketing planning.

Creed said that after thoroughly examining the company’s challenges, as well as its opportunities, Taco Bell adopted a new purpose (“We feed people’s lives with *mas*,” with *mas* connoting more passion, more spirit, and a twist) and identified the principles by which it wanted to operate, including “never follow” and “act youthful.” With this new cultural foundation in place, Taco Bell employees were focused and motivated to work on revamping the customer experience and ended up with the new menu, new ad campaign, and improved service, which have revived the business.

It makes sense to start with purpose and principles. Cultivating a vital, focused internal culture is the necessary first step when you want to define or redefine your brand externally, because culture is what determines whether or not your brand is embraced by your people and appropriately interpreted and reinforced for your customers. Clever advertising and a fresh logo will prove worthless if cultural ambiguity or apathy within your company prevents your people from making the decisions and providing the service that delivers on the promises you make in your marketing. So use your company purpose and principles to shape the distinctive way you want your employees to behave in order to turn your brand promise into breakthrough customer experiences.

A clear and consistent articulation of your mission and guiding values also ensures the internal alignment needed for the focus and speed in decision making that business requires today. Without strong cultural alignment, it’s very easy for your people—as hard-working and well-intentioned as they may be—to work at cross purposes and produce mediocre results because they all have different opinions about what’s “on brand” and what’s not. It’s easy for people to get distracted by what the company can do, when they should be focused on what the company is *made* to do.

Moreover, in an environment that’s fast-paced and full of options, you’re probably finding that success lies less in strategic planning and more in strategic decision making when opportunities arise. It’s much easier for your organization to exploit openings in the marketplace and to make swift decisions that are consistent with your brand vision when everyone who works on your brand shares a clear understanding of your purpose and principles. By cultivating clarity and alignment, you boost your brand’s growth potential.

Another speaker at the conference emphasized a different benefit derived from investing in your culture: stronger customer bonds. Walter Robb, co-CEO of Whole Foods, outlined how his company attracts and develops valuable relationships with customers through its purpose and principles. He explained that emotions have a multiplying effect when it comes to customers’ buying decisions, and a resonant culture adds an aspirational component to doing business with a company. That’s why Whole Foods aims to be “as relevant outside our four walls as we are inside,” he said.

People today want to be inspired, to feel understood, to be part of something bigger than themselves. They crave meaningful experiences and interactions; they look to their purchases to express who they are and what they value. Above all, they don’t want to be sold—they want to be engaged. A compelling purpose and motivating principles can fulfill these needs and desires and help you form lasting bonds with customers far more credibly and completely than can any marketing program. Whole Foods’ purpose, which includes ambitions such as evolving the agricultural system and eliminating poverty, speaks to the social consciousness of its customers. So they not only shop at its stores and pay more for its products, but they also become loyal brand advocates for the company.

Your purpose and principles power your brand by giving it substance. Marketing campaigns are intended to express and promote your brand, but without a strong cultural foundation, there is no *there* there, to borrow a phrase. With one, however, you can drive brand renewal, internal alignment, and customer bonding.