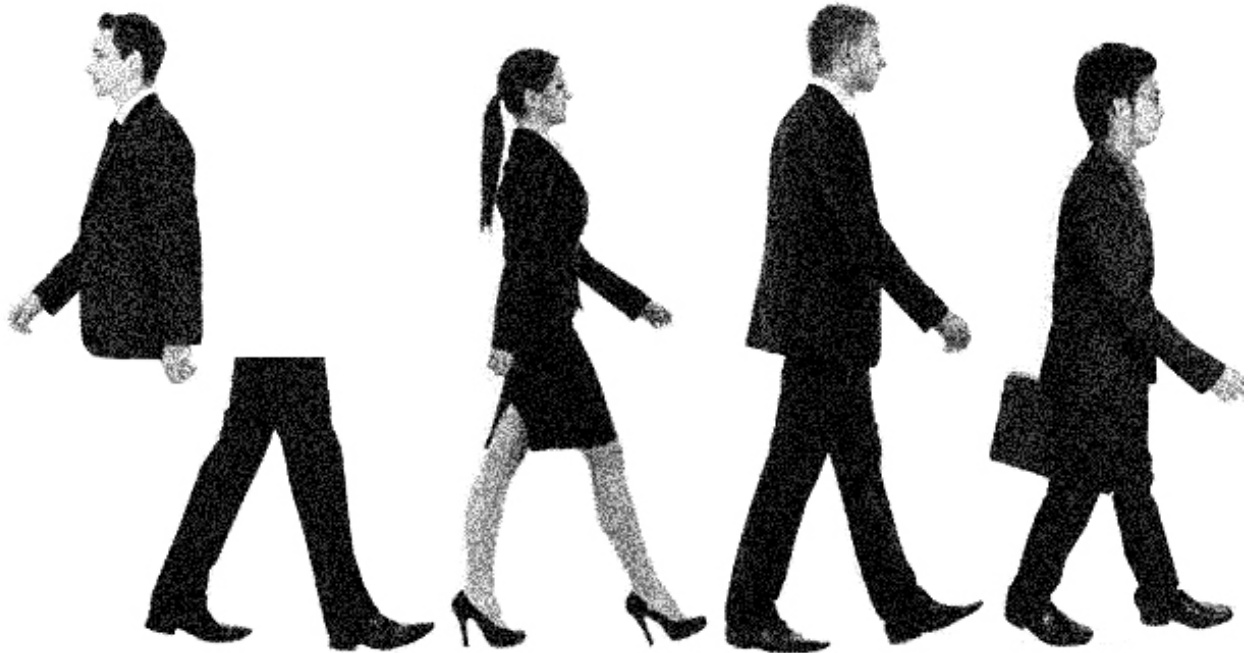


IBM: How Employees Bring “Smarter Planet” Positioning to Real-World Engagement



IBM is a company that remade its brand by remaking its culture. Today it remains a strong brand by carefully tending to that culture, making sure employees understand and reflect IBM’s mission, vision, and values. As brand-building expert Denise Lee Yohn writes in her new book, *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest*, a strong internal culture helps rally all stakeholders from suppliers and customers to vendors.

IBM demonstrates that “great brands start inside,” — Yohn’s first principle. This is especially important for a B2B company where, as former IBM chief Sam Palmisano recognized, “when your business is primarily based on knowledge, [then] people — rather than products — become your brand.”

It wasn’t always that way. Recently, an important IBM insider — Michele Grieshaber, Vice President of Demand Programs at IBM North America — spoke to me about how IBM changed its approach to culture and how it helps employees walk the “Smarter Planet” talk at Big Blue, and the growing importance of conversation marketing.

Here’s a [recent radio show excerpt](#):

Rieches: You came to IBM in the early 1990s right before Lou Gerstner arrived as CEO. How has IBM has changed since that time?

Grieshaber: Gerstner came when IBM was in desperate need of cultural transformation. A dynamic sales organization dominated the culture, but it was also very individualistic and siloed. Decentralization was no longer working, and there was talk of breaking up the company.

The first major change was that the company needed to be integrated in front of the customer and not remain a bunch of piece parts, hardware and software. IBM acquired PW, Price Waterhouse Consulting, and that brought in the consulting expertise needed to complete the transformation.

The second change occurred in the late 2000s. Sam Palmisano set the course for IBM's Smarter Planet focus, which was to make the world's systems smarter through the application of technology to better serve our needs as individuals and societies.

Right now, another change is occurring where there are a nexus of forces that are coming together around cloud, social mobile and analytics that are opening up new paradigms and possibilities and transforming enterprises.

Rieches: IBM's 100th year was in 2011. Can you talk about the process that IBM went through to define the brand for today and the future?

Grieshaber: IBM's centennial was an ideal opportunity for us to revisit and reassert the IBM brand. First, from a brand perspective, what IBM stands for is progress. It really focuses on making the world work better through the application of intelligence, reason, and science.

That Smarter Planet advertising campaign seeks to bring that to life. Second, company values are very core to our brand. These are values that compel us to seek to deliver value, invent, and stay close to client needs. There is a convergence, today, of a company's values and their core identity. More and more [people] like the company behind the product or service [and see it as] just as important as the product or service itself.

The third point, in terms of the way that IBM looks at brand, is how the brand is experienced. More than anything, it's our people that make us who we are. The skill, the experience, the intelligence, the reputation of the IBM-er is our currency.

Fourth, the last thing that any brand looks at is a stakeholder. We serve forward thinking clients, employees, investors, and communities and really invest in all of those stakeholders in order to create the experience that we want to deliver for our brand.

Consistent branding really never has been more important, especially now that companies have less control over how their brands are communicated. As employees participate in social media, they need a solid understanding of the brand to communicate consistently and appropriately.

To look like IBM, from our perspective, means that what we deliver is purposefully designed to enhance understanding. It's an opportunity to make someone smarter about something. To sound like IBM is to take a posture of listening and engaging with a point of view that projects what we call pragmatic optimism and intelligence. To think like IBM is to think with the rigor of the scientist, the scope of an industrialist, and the ideals of a statesman. We marry these different qualities in the way we approach and solve problems. Then, to perform like IBM is to deliver the quality and the expertise expected. All of things have to be aligned to the company values. Thinking through these dimensions of "What do I need to look like, sound like, think like, perform like in order to be on brand?" really does bring you back to the core essence of what you have to deliver.

Rieches: This is the specific model that you call conversation marketing. Can you explain how you settled on the idea of conversation marketing?

Grieshaber: Think about it as, "How are you going to engage a client?" We all recognize that clients are doing more self-discovery. Around 60% of purchasers report that consistent and relevant information provided by sales and marketing are major factors in their [purchasing] decision. They want consistency across these different interaction channels. Also, the majority of purchasers say that the solution providers that they choose are those that provide them with ample content to navigate the buying process.

With that as a backdrop, how do you develop a system to get marketing and sales on the same page, minimize the amount of content that you create, and stay on brand in all client interactions across the digital and physical divide? This is where we settled on the idea of conversation.

If you think about when someone learns about you to when they're ready to become one of your customers, what

does that dialogue look like? If you think about it this way and you codify the process, you can create a blueprint for conversation marketing that gives your insights into the complete and relevant brand story across that journey.

Reiches: What are the steps you take when you use conversation marketing?

Grieshaber: If I were to lock my best sales leader in a room with a client for the duration of a sales cycle — what questions would the client ask; what answers would the seller give; what information would they exchange — all the way to the point of purchase? Thinking of it this way, you codify the process and can create a blueprint for conversation marketing that gives you insights into the complete and relevant brand story across that journey.

Reiches: Can you give me an example?

Grieshaber: One of the campaigns that we run is around smarter cities and the target audience might be the chief of police. They're looking for solutions that are able to help them use analytics to predict and prevent crime in their city. We start with looking at insights on the audience and the topic of crime prevention to define what's important. We use search and social listening to identify what the audience is saying about crime prevention, and where they go for information, and whom they trust.

We can identify and understand whom we're talking to, what the language is that they're using, and we map that into the dialogue. What are the pain points and triggers, along the buying journey, that helps them learn, solve, compare, and be ready to purchase? We create a conversation map that shows the assets that align to these different parts of the dialogue. That's how we keep everybody in sync. We also use the same map of dialogue and assets to plan our marketing execution and our sales enablement. It's all from the same playbook.

Tune in to the [full radio show](#).

