

HBR Blog Network

Use a Brand Council to Help Steer Strategy

by Denise Lee Yohn | 11:00 AM July 24, 2014

David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, once observed that “Marketing is too important to be left to the marketing people.” A more current corollary might be, “Brand-building is too important to be left to the brand people.”

The historical role brands have played – serving as symbols to guarantee a certain level of quality or as images to attract attention – is no longer relevant or useful today. A brand can’t just be a promise; it must be a promise delivered. And brand stewardship can no longer be under the exclusive purview of marketing departments and brand managers.

A 2008 survey of chief marketing officers and brand managers by the Association of National Advertisers found that 64% say their brands do not influence decisions (<http://www.marketingcharts.com/wp/traditional/half-of-marketers-dont-fully-understand-brand-value-6577/>) made at their companies. Brands may drive communications activities, but little else. This means that nearly two-thirds of companies are pouring millions of dollars into marketing and advertising to promote certain values and attributes that may or may not be aligned with the reality of the business. Customers no longer tolerate the disconnects that arise from such gaps – and companies can no longer afford to keep brand-building a costly, discrete, and subjective set of activities.

Brand-building is a function that business leaders, owners, and general managers – the people responsible for the culture, core operations, and customer experiences of an organization – must drive. Smart companies form brand councils to meet this leadership imperative.

Brand councils are comprised of senior executives from a range of company functions: key business unit leaders, influential staff leaders from human resources, marketing, legal, and finance, and sometimes even the CEO. On occasion, these senior executives may designate lieutenants to sit on the brand council as their representatives, but they ensure the designees have the social capital, as well as the authority, to participate fully.

The brand council is charged with using the brand as the lens for strategic business decision-making. It uses the brand identity and positioning as guardrails to assess the appropriateness of proposed initiatives and as standards to evaluate their execution. The charter of a brand council is usually limited to oversight and approval, not implementation, so it draws the line between what is on-brand and what is not, and holds project teams and working groups accountable to it.

Brand councils usually devote the most attention to three areas of the organization.

- Product development often requires strong executive brand stewardship because the pursuit of innovation and the pressure to fill the pipeline often cause teams to veer off-brand. A brand council can resolve conflicting priorities, or at least bring the parties with different interests together in a brand-focused discussion.
- Partnerships are also potential brand stumbling blocks that deserve attention. Whether it’s a strategic partnership, a distribution deal, or a co-marketing campaign, companies often enter into agreements with a focus on the business opportunity and the business terms of the contract. A brand council can ensure brand objectives are also met and brand equity is protected in the arrangement.
- Brand councils are actively involved in people issues. Not only do they shape people strategies throughout the employee lifecycle, from recruitment to transition, but they also serve as champions for brand alignment and engagement throughout the organization. Brand councils often oversee the development and deployment of brand guides and tools, and they may provide leadership for brand rollout meetings and experiences. Brand council members also represent their functions on the council, giving them voice and visibility to other executives by recognizing their brand-related successes and raising their brand-related concerns.

Forming and running a brand council requires a significant investment of time and energy by executives who already

have very full plates. But companies must stop thinking about and using brands as static outward-facing, image-oriented objects. No longer is a brand an experience mediated through messaging and marketing communications. It is the experience that is actually delivered and expressed through every single thing the organization does, every day. As such, brand-building needs to be led at the highest levels of the organization. It can't be delegated to a marketing department or an advertising agency. It must be driven – and embraced – as an enterprise-wide approach. A brand council is how savvy companies ensure this happens.

Ultimately, though, the best brand councils operate with the goal of making themselves unnecessary. Rather than relishing the role of brand police, they inform, inspire, and instruct the organization on stewarding the brand, so that over time, everyone in the organization knows how to appropriately interpret and reinforce the brand.