

An Open Letter To McDonald's New Brand Leader: Start Brand-Building Inside

F forbes.com/sites/deniselyohn/2016/07/13/an-open-letter-to-mcdonalds-new-brand-leader-start-brand-building-inside/print/

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7/13/2016 @ 5:07AM



McDonald's is undergoing a turnaround, led by CEO Steve Easterbrook. (Photo by CHRISTOPH SCHMIDT/AFP/Getty Images)

Dear Colin Mitchell,

Congratulations on your new role as global VP-McDonald's Brand! No doubt you will play a key role in the turnaround that [CEO Steve Easterbrook](#) has been driving, including rolling out and now expanding all-day breakfast, streamlining the menu, and improving the quality of McDonald's products.

Easterbrook's latest decision, to move McDonald's headquarters from the suburbs of Chicago to downtown, is perhaps his boldest and most important, as it involves shedding many top managers to create a leaner, newer, and more focused organization as well as embedding employees in a neighborhood filled with the very type of people — young, hip, and urban — that McDonald's must become more relevant and appealing to.

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That's why I'd like to suggest that your first and top priority be building a brand-led culture inside the organization — in other words, start brand-building inside. This is not a typical approach for companies that want to reinvigorate or re-position their brands. The more conventional tact is to upgrade external brand communications and expressions like your logo, tagline, and advertising campaign.

In fact, your company's past efforts to revive the brand — the "Lovin' > Hatin'" and "Pay with Lovin'" campaigns —

have reflected this external orientation and your marketing department is currently conducting a review of advertising agencies. What's more, you were recruited from the advertising world and the [announcement](#) of your appointment indicated that you "will be tasked with impacting major pieces of the McDonald's brand, including advertising, visual identity and packaging."

But before you can expect customers to embrace a newly-inspired brand vision and positioning, employees and other stakeholders must be engaged and aligned with it. This is even more important as McDonald's continues to rebrand thousands of stores primarily to large corporations which are more likely to have their own priorities and agendas than the mom-and-pop franchisees they replace.

Everyone who works on the brand — from executives to frontline employees to franchisees — must share one common understanding of the McDonald's brand and be working on bringing it to life in everything they do. But you can't expect to achieve brand alignment and engagement of this scope and depth by launching a simple corporate communications campaign or hanging new posters in conference rooms and break rooms.

I know this because I experienced a similar challenge at Sony Corporation's electronics company in the early 2000s. It was the height of the industry's transition to digital technology and we struggled to transform ourselves while Apple and other emerging brands posed increasingly potent challenges to our brand advantage. We understood that we needed to reinvigorate our brand and to challenge ingrained ways of doing things that produced success in the past. So we started brand-building inside — we directed our efforts at the people responsible for delivering on the Sony brand every day, our employees.

We undertook a thorough and multi-dimensional brand engagement program in which we staged a series of interactive experiences across the organization to educate, empower, and equip our people to interpret and reinforce the Sony brand appropriately in their daily decision-making and actions. Our efforts included a company-wide online forum for everyone to share insights about and examples of the updated Sony brand platform, a game show-style challenge at the national sales meeting on key facts and statistics about the value of the brand, and an experiential online "toolbox" chock-full of brand information and tools like planning frameworks and our brand touch-point wheel. The result? A re-energized, re-focused workforce ready to embrace and advance the much-needed changes in culture, process, organization, and products.

I continue to use brand engagement programs with my clients as the first step in their journeys to pursue or reclaim brand leadership. The type and scope of brand engagement program you will want to initiate at McDonald's will depend on your resources, infrastructure, and timing, but in general the experiences should be designed to:

Inform people so they understand the McDonald's brand platform — its purpose and values, key attributes and differentiators, and target customers and competitive positioning — for example, help them understand what differentiators should they focus on to make McDonald's more memorable and valuable to the desired customers

Inspire people to change their attitudes and behaviors to support the updated brand vision and positioning and ignite their passion for McDonald's and the roles the company, their team, and themselves as individuals play in people's lives

Instruct and mobilize people with the tools and resources to infuse the brand platform into their decisions and behaviors — for example, produce role-playing videos for employees to learn how to serve the new customer target appropriately or publish a new product decision-making guide to help those in R&D develop new products that are on-brand

Once you've cultivated a strong and vital brand-led culture inside your organization and it produces the fruit of compelling customer experiences, then you have something worth communicating to everyone outside your company.

Respectfully,

Denise Lee Yohn

Denise Lee Yohn is a brand-building expert, speaker and author of [What Great Brands Do](#) and [Extraordinary Experiences](#).

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