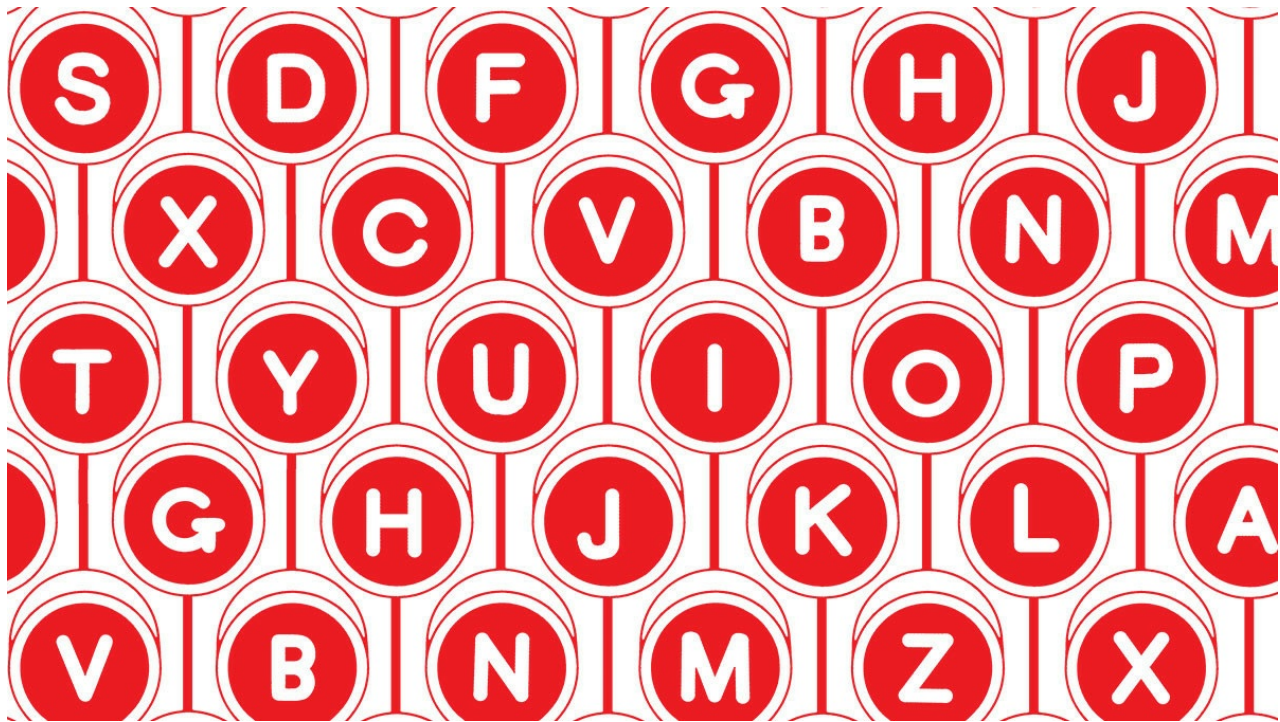


Ban These 5 Words From Your Corporate Values Statement

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Practically every organization today has a set of core values that ideally function as the “operating instructions” of the company. The goal of articulating the essential and enduring principles of your organization is to inform, inspire, and instruct the day-to-day behaviors of everyone who works at your company. But this rarely happens, because most core values statements don’t get at what’s unique about the firm.

According to the Booz Allen Hamilton and Aspen Institute’s Business and Society Program researchers, most corporations’ values incorporate similar words and ideas. 90% of them reference ethical behavior or use the word “integrity,” 88% mention commitment to customers, and 76% cite teamwork and trust.

I’ve seen this first-hand in my work helping companies define or re-define their core values. Several words always come up in practically every discussion, no matter if the company is a large enterprise or a small business, B2B or a B2C, product or service, new or established. Here are the five terms I ban from every core values list I work on:

1. **Ethical** (or integrity) — *Every* company should operate ethically and with integrity — and by stating this concept as one of your core values, you raise the question of why you

have to point it out.

2. **Teamwork** (or collaboration) — You shouldn't need to tell your people to work together — it's common sense. If they're not working collaboratively, listing it as a core value isn't the solution. (Things like organization design, training, improved processes, and new shared metrics and performance standards are.)
3. **Authentic** — You can't claim to be authentic or that you want to be — you must simply *be authentic*. And your organization will be authentic if its leaders actually act and communicate in authentic ways.
4. **Fun** — Stating that you want your organization to embrace fun makes it seem like you're trying too hard. Just like a teenager who claims to be cool, if you have to say it, you're probably not.
5. **Customer-oriented** (or customer-centric) — Again, all companies should be attuned to their customers and their wants and needs. Developing a core value that explains the unique way in which you engage with your customers would be far more differentiating and meaningful.

Not only are these concepts mere table stakes for any business that wants to be competitive in today's environment, they also don't specify what is distinctive or uniquely valuable about your organization.

Differentiation is the key driver of brand power. Your company's core values must embody what makes your company uniquely "you"—what makes you stand out from others.

To start to identify what your core values really should be, start by thinking about your business category. *Core* values should differ from *category* values, which all companies in any given category must adopt. For example, all fast-food restaurants must embody the values of speed and convenience; all software makers must value reliability and ease of use. A fast-food restaurant that says it values speed . . . well, it's not saying anything different from any other fast-food restaurant.

Second, for your company's values to be unique, the words or manner in which you choose to describe them should be distinctive. Instead of defaulting to overused terms, express your core values differently from other companies that might hold somewhat similar beliefs. Use a style or voice that uniquely represents your organization. Doing so provides more than a veneer of differentiation; it makes your values more distinct because they embody the spirit and personality of your organization. If your core values are not expressed with distinct words and in a unique style, how likely are your employees to pay attention to, much less care about, values that seem commonplace and conventional?

As a litmus test of whether or not a core value is unique, ask yourself the following question: Could another company claim this value as its own and live it out in the same way we do? Many companies list "passion," "innovation," and "caring" as their values—and they embody those values every day in expected ways such as developing new products and serving their customers with care. But if one of your values is to "deliver WOW Through Service," as is

Zappos', you're claiming unique territory. "WOW" conveys the organization's personality and spirit. Your people know to deliver—and your customers expect to receive—service that is above and beyond what's called for and that triggers a visceral, emotional response.

Alternatively, ask yourself: Would any company select the opposite of your company's value as its own? Some companies might take the position that "done is better than perfect" and many start-ups embrace the value of "just ship it" because they believe it's more important to get a product into the market quickly than to ensure all the bugs have been taken out of it. But other companies like Google believe that "great just isn't good enough" and they value striving for excellence. Both points of view are valid—and valued by different organizations. If the opposite of your value is one that an organization would find inspiring or instructive, then that value you've identified can distinguish you in a powerful way.

There isn't one right set of values for every organization. Your core values should describe the collective attitudes and beliefs that you desire all employees to hold, translate those into specific actions and decisions that they should make, and then in turn show how those behaviors produce customer experiences that define and differentiate your brand. Your core values need to be unique.