

Three Problems Caused By A Brand And Culture Mismatch

| The power of brand-culture fusion



By **Denise Lee Yohn**

NOTE: This article has been adapted from [FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies.](#)

A culture crisis threatens to disrupt Corporate America today as much as the financial crisis did a decade ago. Whether it's claims of sexual harassment, lack

of diversity and equality, or the nearly 70% of American workers who are not engaged at work, business leaders must devote more attention to their workplace cultures now than ever before. The problem is that most leaders don't know how to build a healthy, effective, and valuable culture.

What's the secret? Savvy business leaders power their companies' performance by fusing together their brand and culture.

Independently, culture and brand are powerful business drivers, but in too many companies, culture and brand have been put in different silos. CEOs delegate culture to HR and the brand to marketing, which often leads to a disconnect between how companies behave on the inside (culture) and how they are perceived on the outside (brand).



When your brand and culture are not aligned and integrated, three things are likely to happen: your culture-building efforts are likely to go to waste; you have happy employees who produce the wrong results; and the disconnect will damage customer relationships.

Wasted Culture-Building Efforts

Many leaders are led to think that they must pamper and pander to their staff because conventional wisdom says that employees are your greatest asset. But as Gregg Lederman, CEO of the employee engagement firm Brand Integrity, observes, they're not: "The right employees who have the passion and knowledge to do the right things at work are."

Start-ups, for example, are notorious for taking extraordinary measures to create a "fun" workplace environment and to give "cool" benefits to employees—like providing free lunches, stocking their break rooms with beer kegs and foosball tables, or offering free gym memberships. There is nothing wrong with providing great perks for your employees and being generous with your benefits. But while these perks might do a great job of making people feel good, they alone do not necessarily build a culture that cultivates the specific behaviors and skills that a company needs to succeed. Social media software start-up Buffer, for example, struggled to achieve profitability because its open-handed cultural practices, including offering extra vacation

days and paying for yoga classes, ate away at cash flow instead of producing employees who were prepared to deliver great customer experiences.

Employees Who Work on the Wrong Things

If your culture and brand are mismatched, you can also end up with happy, productive employees who produce the wrong results. Many well-known brands have engaged me to improve their brand position and increase their competitive advantage. I've helped many well-known brands build their brands and realize strong gains. But they're often held back from sustained success by a culture that's out of step with their desired brand identity.

At a large grocery store chain I worked with, for example, employees were steeped in a culture that valued efficiency and productivity. As the industry shifted toward customer service and merchandising, the company needed to make its brand known more for the service and experience it offered. But its employees were so focused on increasing inventory turns and sales per square foot that the company fell behind. The culture of this organization, though vibrant and vital, was holding it back from serving its customers well, evolving its brand image, and therefore thriving in the long run.

Damaged Customer Relationships

Ultimately, a disconnect between what your organization values on the inside and how it is perceived

on the outside can damage customer relationships. This is precisely what happened when a former employee wrote a blog post exposing a culture of sexism and sexual harassment at Uber. Beyond being offensive in general, the revelations about Uber's organizational culture offended customers to such a great degree in part because they uncovered the disconnect between what they loved about Uber's brand identity—its populist ethos, progressive character, and heroic role—and the discriminatory, primitive, and predatory behavior that characterized Uber's internal operations. The lack of alignment and integrity between Uber's culture and brand eroded its customers' trust and esteem of the company. In comparison, the highly competitive culture that the New York Times exposed at Amazon ultimately made sense to customers who, whether they approved of it or not, could see how the company's culture produced the benefits they enjoyed.

The Power of Brand-Culture Fusion

While a mismatch of brand and culture can cause significant harm to your company, brand-culture fusion -- fully integrating and aligning your brand and culture -- produces meaningful, powerful results that affect your whole business.

First, brand-culture fusion aligns your workforce,

increasing the efficiency of your entire organization and the quality of your outcomes.

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Your people are less likely to function at cross-purposes or to use conflicting standards when working toward a clear, common goal.

Second, fusing together your brand and culture improves your organization's competitive advantage because it enables you to produce intangible value that is difficult to copy. Competitors may be able to match what you offer to customers and employees, but it's much harder for them to embody the unique why and how of what you do. As people increasingly make decisions about which companies to work for or to buy from based on meaning and shared values, deliberately linking your brand to your culture can increase your organization's perceived relevance, differentiation, and appeal.

Brand-culture fusion also ensures the authenticity of your brand. Customers are more savvy today. They see advertising rhetoric for what it is, and they no longer accept brands at face value. They are skeptical about the claims companies make. They want authenticity— brands that live up to their promises and stated ideals. But most companies simply slap "authenticity" on their list of brand attributes and try to

engage customers superficially via social media to appear more humane or relatable. These efforts to create a more authentic brand image rarely convince customers. People don't want brands to appear authentic, they want brands to demonstrate that they actually are authentic in the way they operate and the customer experiences they deliver. By aligning and integrating your culture and brand, you truly are on the inside what you say you are on the outside—and you pass the customer test of brand authenticity.

Finally, and perhaps most important, brand-culture fusion allows you to move your organization toward its vision more successfully, since it provides a common motivation and focus for everyone in your organization. When you align the values and behaviors of your employees with what is expected and experienced by your customers, you attract and retain employees who feel an emotional commitment to your company and brand. They understand the meaning behind their work, so they work hard to fulfill the company's purpose. They feel more connected to other employees because everyone is united by common goals. And

they feel more connected to your customers because they understand and believe in the ultimate value your organization wants to create for those customers.

(Author's note: I've created an [assessment](#) to help you determine how well your employees are engaged with your brand and how well-aligned and integrated your brand and culture is today. It's free, but I will ask for your email address to send you your personalized results.)



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