

Culture Is Key to Brand Building

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The ANA recently asked a group of chief marketing officers to peer into the future and assess what it will take to lead a successful marketing organization in five years (and beyond). One of the central themes that emerged is the importance of organizational culture in keeping employees aligned toward delivering a positive customer experience across touchpoints.

"People talk about differentiation of products, services, and cost, but culture is very difficult," says Raj Subramaniam, EVP and chief marketing and communications officer at FedEx. "We pay a lot of attention in this area."

As important as culture is, corporate leaders too often assume that the responsibility for employee engagement should fall to the human resources department. In reality, the culture of an organization is defined by how people are treated by all managers, and how they interact with each other, which has a direct impact on how they interact with customers.

"Brand and culture should be tightly integrated and aligned; you need to have a mutually reinforcing relationship between the two," says Denise Lee Yohn, author of *Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*. "Marketers need to be thinking about employee experience as much as they think about customer experience. The

implementation may actually fall to other departments like HR, but marketing should be involved in influencing and inspiring an employee experience that will then allow them to deliver on the customer experience."

While marketing leaders already have a lot on their plates, it's worthwhile to invest some time and resources on building the brand within their own walls. Here are three tips for syncing culture with brand.

1. Build the Experience

The strongest organizational cultures create regular opportunities for employees to connect with the company's purpose and values. Lee Yohn points to Airbnb as a prime example. "Their brand platform is all about belonging, and they want you to feel like anywhere in the world, you belong," she says. "The executives knew that if they want guests to feel that way, their employees need to feel like they belong, too."

All new hires at Airbnb talk about belonging as part of their interviews, and the company sponsors regular opportunities for employees and hosts (the company's primary customers) to connect. "Employees are required to stay with hosts when they travel on business, and they're given incentives to travel with hosts while on vacation," Lee Yohn says. "It's so employees feel they belong to this community. They didn't just adopt the idea of belonging for this brand, but it guides everything they do."

Key takeaway: Create opportunities for your company's people to experience the brand for themselves. "Employees don't need general engagement," Lee Yohn says. "They need to be engaged with the brand so they know in their head what the brand is about, and so they feel in their hearts the desire and passion to support the brand and work with each other to do so."

2. Get the C-Suite on Board

As with so many things in business, culture starts at the top. The chief marketer's job is to ensure that other C-level leaders — particularly the CEO — are all on the same page. "We have regular meetings as a senior leadership team just to have culture on the agenda," Subramaniam says.

When leaders create an environment of fear or mistrust — for example, pitting employees against each other or using more sticks than carrots — it can be toxic for the brand that culture supports. Marketers should work with HR to use surveys, focus groups, and other tools to identify pain points in the culture, with an eye toward creating a positive, supportive workplace.

"It's interesting how that if you have core respect for your people, if you clearly communicate what's expected of them and you reward and recognize the right behavior, that can cut across humanity no matter where you are," Subramaniam says.

Key takeaway: Help leaders in the C-suite understand that how they treat employees will ultimately affect the bottom line. "The CMO needs to take responsibility for building culture throughout the organization," Lee Yohn says. "They need to be influencing and partnering with

all the other executives to build an ethos, a culture around their brand for every employee, for everything the company does."

3. Build a Vocabulary

A key part of building a strong internal culture is developing a distinctive language and mode of thinking that connects people to what the brand is all about. For example, all new hires at FedEx are taught about a concept called the "Purple Promise," a pledge to make every FedEx experience outstanding, internally and externally.

"We use words like 'be here now,' or 'pass the shadow of a leader,' or 'where are you in the mood elevator,'" Subramaniam says. "We talk about culture, and we have a language around culture, and when new people come in, they're indoctrinated into these words."

For global companies, the payoff for developing a common language and set of behaviors is a high level of brand consistency across divisions and around the world. "It doesn't matter if I'm in Brussels, Bangladesh, or Brazil; the language of FedEx is the same, though the language of the country may be different," Subramaniam says. "Why is that? It's because of our culture."

Key takeaway: Focus on internal communications and training to infuse your culture with a common language that supports brand values. When MGM Resorts transitioned from a casino company to a global entertainment organization, Lee Yohn notes, the company undertook a massive internal training initiative for its 77,000-plus employees. "They used training sessions and toolkits and exercises; people were trained and equipped so they could bring this new brand to life," Lee Yohn says. "The company initiated external efforts with a brand campaign, but they knew their efforts couldn't just be external. They needed to be internally directed so the promises they were making would be delivered upon by employees."

Freelance writer Chuck Kapelke is a regular contributor to ANA Newsstand. His recent piece, "[The CMO of the Future](#)," explores what it will take for senior marketers to succeed in the years ahead.

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