Are your company’s brand and culture aligned?

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Not long ago, a company’s relationship with its customers was paramount and “corporate culture” was deemed an internal concern. These days, however, culture and brand must be aligned, if not intertwined. This alignment provides clarity and a unified goal for the enterprise—as well as a path to growth.

Consider Zappos, which is well known for its dedication to top-notch customer service—no call-center scripts, no time limits on customer calls, and, above all, a goal to “wow” customers at all times. That philosophy is behind everything the company does; it underlies the firm’s management approach, and it drives the Zappos employee experience.

And Zappos isn’t alone. “Every company that’s crushing it right now is oriented around the customer,” says Chris Smith, managing principal of Grant Thornton’s Strategy & Transformation practice. “So the culture, the employees and everything they do is an extension of the customer experience they want to provide.”

While this alignment may seem intuitive, not many firms put it into practice. For instance, in Grant Thornton’s recent Return on Culture survey, 75% of executives assert that their organization has defined values that are communicated and understood—a statistic that only 33% of their employees agree with. “If you’re messaging one way to the external marketplace, why wouldn’t you message similarly to your internal marketplace?” says Erica O’Malley, organizational strategy leader for Strategy & Transformation at Grant Thornton. “When simplifying your messaging from the top, employees can then relate to the experience customers are supposed to have.”

For companies that are misaligned, the danger can be substantial, resulting in dissatisfied customers, unhappy employees, and other harbingers of trouble. Fortunately, there are signs to watch out for—and steps you can take to get back on track.

WHAT TYPE OF COMPANY ARE YOU?

When it comes to alignment between culture and brand, Smith says companies typically fall into one of three groups. The first, made up largely of legacy firms, hang onto the idea that culture is solely about the employee experience. They also tend to lack focus on how customers interact with, are served by, and, ultimately, experience their company. In Smith’s view, the clock is ticking for companies in this category, as they’re outpaced by those in the second group: companies that have focused on the customer experience from the very beginning, and strived to ensure that their internal culture aligns with the experience they want customers to have. “When you do that, it’s almost impossible for employees *not* to be integrated into the customer experience,” he says.

That’s what Zappos has done since the beginning. For instance, customer-service representatives keep a stack of postcards on their desks, so they can drop a line to callers now and then. Say you mention that you really need well-fitting hiking boots for an upcoming visit to the Grand Canyon; you might receive a handwritten card wishing you a safe trip a few days later.

As for the third group of companies that Smith describes: These organizations want to be customer-focused, but they act like legacy firms in their belief that culture is solely an internal issue. The result is a gulf between their intentions and their actions. “That disconnect creates a lot of dysfunction for both employees and customers,” Smith says. “And that results in lower sales, lower profitability, and lower retention rates.”

AUTHENTICITY IS KING

Culture must always be rooted in a company’s brand, says Todd Shimizu, managing director in Grant Thornton’s Strategy & Transformation practice. Such authenticity means companies whose brands are very different will have very different cultures. For instance, a financial services firm that emphasizes safety and protection should have a culture quite distinct from a sneaker brand that’s all about edgy street style and attitude. “This approach is rooted in the fundamental question of why a company exists,” Shimizu says. “If you can get to that idea, you can rally both the external brand and the internal brand around something that feels authentic to people.”

Shimizu points to a few indicators that signal a misalignment between a company’s culture and its brand. (See “3 Steps to Aligning Your Company’s Culture,” below.) For instance, a disjointed customer experience—perhaps evidenced by poor feedback in stores or online—may mean that employees don’t have the resources they need to meet customers’ expectations.

Likewise, the emergence of rogue brands inside a company—employee-generated slogans or taglines, for example—can be a red flag. “It’s a clear indicator that people aren’t buying in to the overall brand, and that they think they’ve got a better story to tell,” Shimizu says.

If you really want to know whether culture and brand lack alignment, consider surveying vendors and partners about what it’s like to interact with your organization. Negative feedback from these channels indicates some missing links—and often provides meaningful insights you won’t get anywhere else.

AIMING FOR ALIGNMENT

According to Denise Lee Yohn, a brand expert whose latest book is *FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*, the solution is a holistic approach that begins in the C-suite and must be communicated clearly throughout the company. "Look at organizations like Salesforce or Starbucks," she says. "They have hundreds of thousands of employees and yet they've achieved this integration of brand and culture because their leaders have driven it as a priority."

The same is true at T-Mobile, which defined itself as the upstart mobile brand—"the un-carrier"—and then fully committed to that experience internally and externally. John Legere, T-Mobile's CEO, "made sure everything he said, as well as how he looked, showed they would be different," Smith points out.

Legere has even listened in on customer service calls to ensure that employees are putting T-Mobile's brand into action with customers. Grant Thornton's O'Malley emphasizes that employees' goals must be linked to the customer experience. Otherwise, employees feel a disconnection between the corporate priorities they've heard about and the evaluations that determine their success on the job. "A measurement of employee success should always include a customer component," she says.

Ultimately, real alignment may involve completely rethinking the way a company functions. "In the past decade, companies have focused on employee experience and customer experience, and they've been owned by two different departments that rarely talk," Smith says. "But in the past few years, there's been a real shift to *experience* management. And that's not owned by one group—it's owned by everyone, and it includes your employees, your customers, and your channel partners. The goal is driving consistency in experience management across the board."

3 STEPS TO ALIGNING YOUR COMPANY'S CULTURE

1. **Redefine your customers.** Your customer ecosystem is much broader than it has traditionally been defined—it includes consumers, your employees, and your channel partners, including vendors and other stakeholders.
2. **Bring your brand to life.** Don't rely on company T-shirts to represent your brand and its values. Instead, empower employees to put it into action throughout the corporate ecosystem and choose partners who buy in to what your brand communicates.
3. **Commit fully.** View everything from executive hires to employee assessment through the brand lens. The goal is to both communicate about your brand and demonstrate it through the organization's actions.

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