

When Purpose Not Slogans Drive The Brand

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The truckers were stuck. A strike had closed main roads to a client's factory. The drivers wanted to take back roads, but a small bridge couldn't support the trucks. With every minute lost costing the factory significant sums, employees of leading global automotive logistics and supply chains firm GEFCO seized the initiative and hired a mason to reinforce the bridge to make it safe to cross.

It's an example of when a company's purpose is its incredible driving force, beyond simply mouthing the words. The best brands authentically represent a company's values, which permeate the enterprise.

"The external identity and internal culture need to be integrated and aligned," says Denise Lee Yohn, brand leadership expert, and best-selling author. "If you don't have it, at best you don't fulfil your promises and at worst you open up the organisation to problems."

Often a merger or acquisition combines different groups, creating opportunities to form new cultural identities. Following GEFCO's spin off from Europe's second largest carmaker, PSA, the company set out on a multiyear journey to develop its own identity based on the concept of *Infinite Proximity*, a concept focussed on placing all partners at the centre of its operations.

Remaining as close to your client as possible can give your employees an intuitive knowledge of where the client is going and how to respond. When another strike blocked train services to a customer, and road access also was compromised, employees redesigned barges and refitted docks in order to shift deliveries to the Seine River. "This is 'Infinite Proximity' in action. I don't see people waiting for an order to do something," says Stéphane

Milhet, GEFCO's Executive Vice President of Human Resources. "There is an appetite to solve problems, it's in our company's DNA and it shapes everything we do culture-wise. It also allows us to develop long term customer relationships, and relationships in new areas where it is difficult to develop otherwise."

The firm grants huge latitude to employees as long as it's in the service of the customer. "In addition to SOP booklets and customers specific expectations, ten IP principles guide employees' daily decisions and actions. These principles are founded on core values we uphold such as cooperation, flexibility and trust. If whatever you do matches at least three or four principles, it's a good decision," says Milhet.

With a purpose-driven image, "you are creating a competitive advantage that is more sustainable because it's more unique," Yohn says. "Competitors can copy what you do but it's harder to copy how and why you do it."

The competitive advantage extends to the workforce. A report by Gartner CEB Research found recruits with a high brand connection are three times as likely to switch employers without a raise, versus those with a low brand connection. Happy employees are 12 percent more productive than unhappy or neutral workers, according to a University of Warwick study.

But happy workers are not the only driver of a company's competitive edge. According to GEFCO's Milhet, "employees that come together to create a collective intelligence often give companies an upper hand due to the proximity it creates with their customers." Through internal workshops and sessions focussed heavily on collaborative principles, GEFCO colleagues are encouraged to look inwardly at the company and learn from its successes and mistakes collectively, which helps them work to create a more cohesive working environment.

Only a few companies figure out how to take culture to the next level by integrating it throughout the company, Yohn says. While some of the best-known brands are consumer-oriented, B2B companies can excel - even if the broader public doesn't know them, their clients do, she notes. For example, at software company Adobe Systems Inc., the culture "is all about creativity and engaging people to express themselves," Yohn adds. "It enables Adobe's people to create products that are excellent. There's this tight, reinforcing relationship between what they're known for and their corporate culture."

Similarly, at Salesforce.com Inc., a cloud computing company, "the CEO has created a culture and organisation that is engaging, authentic and purposeful," Yohn says. This is demonstrated through action. For example, Salesforce employees are given seven paid days off a year to dedicate to philanthropic causes. "The culture drives everything they do and shows through in their client or customer relationships," Yohn adds. The company's

Dreamforce conference, which brings together customers and partners, puts on display Salesforce's values around diversity, fairness, inclusion and openness. It also illustrates how culture doesn't just stay at the top echelons but permeates the entire organisation.

To encourage inclusion and empathy, GEFCO launched a programme called 'Live My Life' that places employees in different departments or subsidiaries to understand their colleagues better, fuelling cooperation and transversal relationships while reinforcing trust in the company.

Companies that have an integral, effective culture that permeates throughout the entire organisational structure, can use their brand to build and make internal core values visible to customers.

"An enhanced employee experience both works in tandem with, and contributes to, the customer experience. At GEFCO we believe we're getting that mixture right, and strive to maximise the momentum it can bring," says Milhet.

That combination, is "a mutually reinforcing relationship," Yohn agrees, concluding that cultivating a strong, authentic culture takes time, and requires regular, unending attention. "Culture isn't a one and done thing."