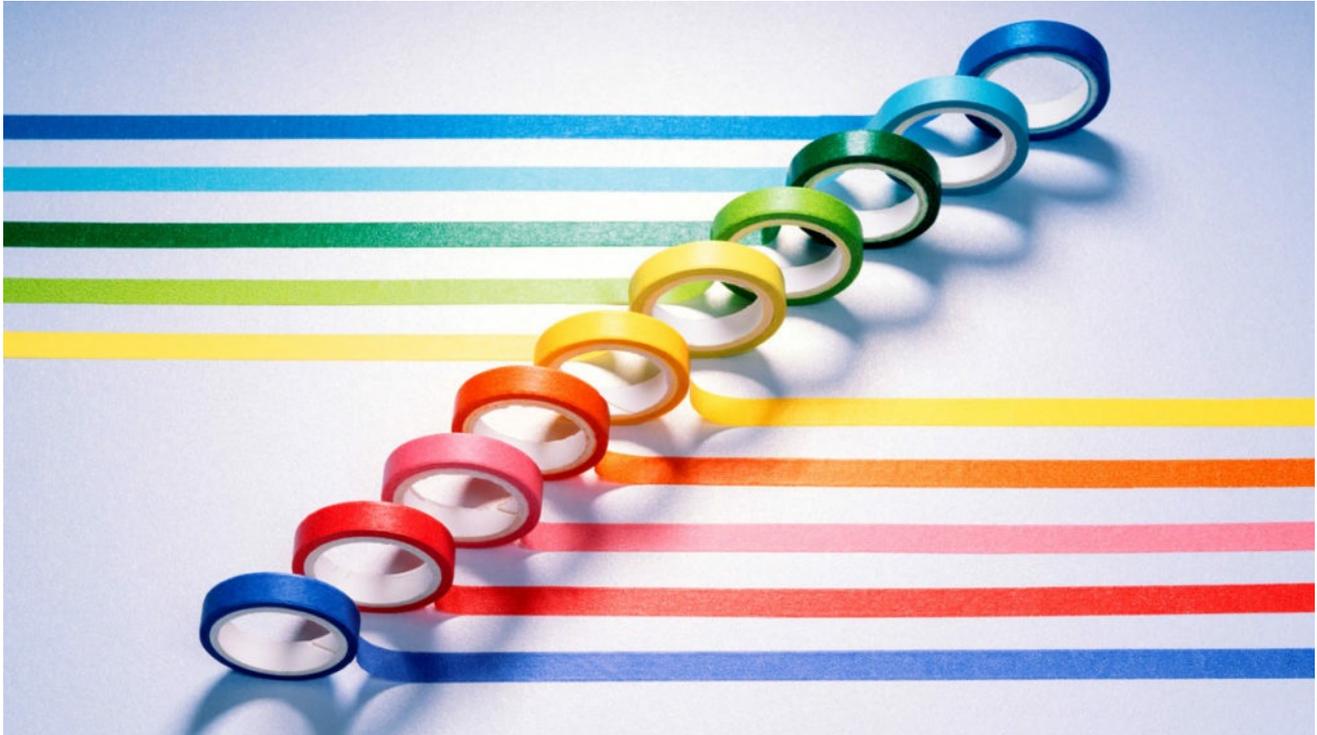


Build a Culture to Match Your Brand

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If you are simply aiming for a “good” culture at your organization, you’re setting the bar too low. An organization that embraces values like integrity and teamwork is really no different from any other. If you want to produce the kinds of specific outcomes that will allow you to differentiate your company, you need to define a unique culture that cultivates the necessary kinds of employee attitudes and behaviors.

Building this unique culture goes beyond internal aspirations. Companies that do this well also identify a *desired brand identity*, which I define as how you want your organization to be perceived and experienced by customers and other external stakeholders. If your company culture is aligned and integrated with that identity, your employees are more likely to make decisions and take actions that deliver on your brand promise.

It takes work to make this culture-brand connection. You can start by considering the different types of brand identities and where your company fits. Brand types are categories of brands that share the same strategic approach or take similar stances to shape their competitive positioning.

Brand types differ from brand *archetypes*, which classify brands according to classic storytelling character types such as the Hero, the Joker, and the Sage. While brand archetypes can be helpful in creating a narrative and tone of voice to use in advertising campaigns and other communications, the brand types I'm referring to here are strategic ways that brands compete and are positioned relative to each other. For example, Patagonia falls into the "conscious brand" type because it is characterized by its sustainability mission, while Apple is an "innovative brand" type given its pursuit of new products.

Having worked on a broad range of brands for more than 25 years — enterprises and small businesses, local and international, B2C and B2B, start-ups and companies with long histories — I've concluded that there are only nine general brand types (see the chart below). A note on the company examples I've included: There is an element of subjectivity when determining the brand type of brands that are not your own, and this is my assessment.

Brand type	How the brand behaves and competes	Reference point in market	Tone and manner	Company examples
Disruptive	Challenges the current ways of doing things and introduces new concepts that substantively change the market	Category leader	Rebellious, confident, daring	Virgin, Airbnb, Dr Pepper
Conscious	Is on a mission to make a positive social or environmental impact or enhance people's quality of life	Higher purpose	Inspiring, thoughtful, transparent	Seventh Generation, SoulCycle, Patagonia
Service	Routinely delivers high-quality customer care and service	Customer need	Humble, predictable, friendly	Nordstrom, USAA, Ritz Carlton
Innovative	Consistently introduces advanced and breakthrough products and technologies	Possibility	Risk-taking, imaginative, progressive	Apple, Nike, Amazon

Value	Offers lower prices for basic quality products or services	Higher-priced brand	Down-to-earth, practical, straightforward	Walmart, IKEA, Subway
Performance	Produces products or services that deliver superior performance and dependability	Performance standard	Precise, competent, reliable	BMW, FedEx, American Express
Luxury	Offers higher quality at higher price	Populist brand	Discriminating, refined, glamorous	Tiffany, Mercedes-Benz, Hermes
Style	Is differentiated by the way its products or services look and feel, as much as or more than by what they do	Functional brand	Creative, stylish, contemporary	Target, JetBlue, Mini Cooper
Experience	Is differentiated by the experience it offers, as much as or more than by the product or service	Customer emotion	Exciting, energetic, imaginative	Disney, American Girl, Wegmans

Source: Denise Lee Yohn

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Some of these brand types overlap, and some characteristics are—or should be—embraced by all brands. All brands should offer good service, for example. But a brand that falls into the service brand type prioritizes delivering high-quality customer care and service above anything else — and its strategies, operations, and ultimately customer value propositions are all centered around differentiating through great service.

Each of the nine brands types is distinguished by two main characteristics. The first one is what I call its point of reference — that is, the standard that your brand is positioned relative to or how you want customers to understand your brand. A disruptive brand like Richard Branson’s Virgin is all about challenging the leader in every category, so Virgin brand’s point of reference is the category leader. The second characteristic that distinguishes a brand type is its tone and manner, which is how the brand usually behaves or expresses itself. For example, Walmart and Subway fall into the value brand type and they tend to act in down-

to-earth, practical, and straightforward ways.

Brand and Core Values

Once you know the type of brand you have or want to build, the next step to aligning external brand and internal culture is to identify the kind of culture required to deliver on it. Different types of brands are achieved through different types of cultures. If you want to position your brand as disruptive, for example, then you must cultivate a culture of risk-taking so that your people are inclined to act boldly and break market conventions.

As part of this process, I recommend determining the core values you need to cultivate your desired culture. Core values — the essential and enduring principles and priorities that prescribe the desired mindset and behavior of everyone who works at your company — are the cornerstones of your culture. They reflect what's important to your organization and, if used properly, they shape your people's attitudes and actions. If you know the types of core values you need to manifest your particular brand type, you can design the other aspects of your culture to align with, build on, and reinforce them.

In the research I conducted [for my book](#) I was able to isolate the types of core values that correspond to each brand type. Here are the top organizational values by brand type:

Disruptive brand: Competition, standing out, and risk taking.

Conscious brand: Purposefulness, high commitment, and transparency.

Service brand: Caring, humility, and empathy.

Innovative brand: Inventiveness, experimentation, and continuous improvement.

Value brand: Accessibility, fairness, and pragmatism.

Performance brand: Achievement, excellence, and consistency.

Luxury brand: Sophistication, distinction, and status.

Style brand: Design, discernment, and creativity.

Experience brand: Entertainment, enjoyment, and originality.

You should use these values as starting points for drafting your own unique core values. You have to make your company's core values your own and then operationalize them. You should apply them to your organization by fleshing them out into a full set of core values that fit your organization and your specific brand identity. Then you'll need to define how those core values relate to behaviors and expectations unique to your organization.

Some of the best examples I've seen of this in action are companies like Salesforce, which is known for being inspiring; Southwest Airlines, fun; Starbucks, sincere. All three of these companies cultivated a unique organizational culture that is aligned and integrated with a strong brand identity.

Your company culture needs to be as distinct as your brand. You can achieve this whether your culture is friendly or competitive, nurturing or analytical. And remember, there is no single right type of culture, just as there isn't one best type of brand.

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