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INTERNAL BRANDING —AFTER 10 YEARS— IS BACK IN BUSINESS

A decade after its debut as a potent but imperfect idea, internal branding returns as a more mature, “more focused example of employee communication,” claims the author.



By **Keith Burton**

Those who have helped pioneer employee communication as a strategic discipline over the past decade know that what goes around does, indeed, come back around. And the good works we expected to reap from the concept of “internal branding” are finally being harvested a decade after the practice first appeared in leading companies.

In 1996, America’s most recognized credit card company faced a serious problem: Its corporate brand was not aligned with a new customer service ethic the company sought to instill among its front-line

employees. The company’s brand embodied certain high-quality, high-service characteristics that suddenly were absent among the behaviors and actions of its customer-service professionals who manned telemarketing lines and customer service calls. As the voice of the brand with customers, these employees were frequently the only human interaction with the company. Their inability to translate the tenets of the brand was undermining the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars spent annually in building and protecting the market share of a highly visible credit instrument.

Our consulting team worked >

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with the company to educate the employees about the brand. The company began supplying information on what its people needed to do in their daily work to align their behaviors with the attributes of its iconic credit card. Considerable work was undertaken to define the “benefits of membership”—such attributes as the prestige of being a cardholder, freedom to make wider purchase decisions, a new responsibility for credit choices, flexibility in paying charges, more buying power and greater credit protection, among others—and to convey how these benefits could be filtered and reinforced through the actions of employees. While some progress was made, the internal branding effort did not prove to be a panacea for achieving enhanced customer service.

Over time, the company wavered, other priorities surfaced and life moved on.

Its experience was typical.

For the better part of a decade, internal branding ebbed and flowed as corporate reengineering morphed into transformation, cultural change and other forms that have been both painful and productive to millions of employees. It was the source of periodic conversations among practitioners, brand managers and academic thought leaders who theorized why it failed and when it might re-emerge in new ways.

Fast-forward to 2006: Internal branding is back—revitalized and taking on a more focused and successful approach to engaging employees in a company’s business, increasing levels of customer service and driving real business performance.

Why now?

Internal branding finds new life

So why is internal branding different *today* than it was a decade ago? Changes in the business world and with our work force have created an environment in which clear, compelling messages about our brands are more needed among employees than ever before. But this time around, we’ve learned how to make internal branding truly resonate among employees.

Internal branding in the nineties was a one-way process that failed to consider how the recipient heard or acted on the message. We “trained” them and expected them to live our brands without testing their readiness. We gave them talking points and called them brand ambassadors. We told them what our brands represented—in corporate-speak rather than in their own words—and expected them to tell our story in a persuasive way. We did a poor job in leveraging the tools of employee communications and internal branding, and we failed to connect employees with our organizations in a tone, style and fashion that suited *their* needs in helping a company achieve its business objectives with mutual gain.

Over time, we’ve learned a few lessons about how best to use the communication tools and the concept of internal branding to truly engage employees. To make internal branding a reality, key precepts and actions must be embraced.

WIIFM?

In order for internal branding efforts to be successful, we must connect employees in a way that clarifies the infamous “What’s in it for me?” question that lurks in the background. Authentic internal branding efforts truly engage

employees, invite them to participate in the dialogue and highlight the value of branded success for employees.

Let employees tell their stories

Whether it’s in internal ads highlighting “The Soul of Dell” or Quest Diagnostics’ internal ambassador initiative that encourages employees to share their stories about working for the company, it is these personal connections that humanize an organization.

I once addressed a group of executives at a leading aerospace company who were struggling with the need to mobilize their employees to adopt a change initiative. The conference room in which we worked, like the hallways of the corporate office and the plant locations, were decorated with photo after photo of aircraft, missiles, satellites, armaments and all manner of devices—without the face of a human being. The company celebrated its technology; no humanizing factor existed to knit people together for the new cause.

By contrast, Southwest Airlines goes to great lengths to adorn its offices, its airport concourse areas and work rooms with photos of the men and women who’ve made the airline one of the great companies in its field. Images and stories of the “mentors and models” who keep a company vital allow coworkers in similar positions or functions to relate to corporate messages and place themselves squarely in alignment with a company’s mission. Those who succeed with internal branding in the future will invest as much energy in their internal advertising as they place in positioning their brand among external constituencies.

Reach hard-to-reach employees

One of the unexpected outcomes of this renewed and strengthened focus on internal branding is that traditionally hard-to-reach employee populations are engaging in true conversations about business and brand. Manufacturing employees are featured in internal ads telling their story of how they impact quality. Sales reps are showcased at quarterly broadcasts for success they've had in influencing customer satisfaction. When the dialogue transcends "the corporation" and features real employees, key audiences can place themselves in the conversation and highlight the contribution of their function, location or team.

Achieving this outcome, however, is not simple. Despite the promise of corporate intranets and other technologies, most hourly plant employees have no computer access and little down time to consider the messages we so lovingly craft. And sales professionals are constantly mobile, doing what they do best—selling. Face-to-face interaction by front-line managers and supervisors must remain the primary channel through which we reach these audiences. The other channels and vehicles—e-mail, video, newsletters, corporate display units, to cite several—are important in supporting and reinforcing the face-to-face interaction.

Changing behaviors

One of the more significant areas we are addressing through internal branding is in corporate change and quality-improvement programs. At one of the nation's leading medical device companies, internal branding is being successfully used to encompass communications, training and organizational change to positively

influence their employees' overall commitment to quality and performance. When employees are engaged in the business, understand corporate strategy and the drumbeat of why actions are taken, we can truly influence lasting behavioral change—which is the true mission of effective employee communications.

Aligning organizations

The Dow Chemical Company recently introduced its new corporate positioning campaign entitled "The Human Element." This groundbreaking campaign reinforces Dow's commitment to chemistry and the role that real people play in these successes. Reinforcing this launch, the company introduced its "I Am the Human Element" internal awareness program featuring employees, shared its philanthropic commitment with

Internal branding will remain incomplete unless we can truly measure the effect of our work and show progress. We must adapt and leverage existing employee, customer and brand surveys and innovate new models—both quantitative and qualitative—to prove the value of what we do. Do employees understand the business strategy, the benefits of a merger or the value of a new product? Are employees delivering on the brand promise? Are we reaching important populations effectively? Do we have sufficient front-line feedback to help us refine and recalibrate our efforts?

employees using new Web-based features and, in a matter of hours, aligned the company's 42,000 employees behind one mission and vision for the company. More than ever, this type of inward focus is a prerequisite to aligning an organization and providing the consistency across all operations that customers expect today.

Measuring change

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show progress. We must adapt and leverage existing employee, customer and brand surveys and innovate new models—both quantitative and qualitative—to prove the value of what we do. Do employees understand the business strategy, the benefits of a merger or the value of a new product? Are employees delivering on the brand promise? Are we reaching important populations effectively? Do we have sufficient front-line feedback to help us refine and recalibrate our efforts? Are we seeing the behaviors required to advance our new customer service program? These are the kinds of questions that must be examined in detail to support an effective internal branding effort.

At the end of the day, internal branding is a more focused example of employee communications. When used effectively, this

approach will help in moderating and resolving many of the issues that are troubling corporate America today—weakened customer service, retention of key talent, recruitment of new leaders and staff, employee support of change, heightened quality efforts and embracing new business strategies and product lines. When executed ineffectively, companies will struggle as before and we'll be forced to revisit history and deal with the pains of bad karma. ■