

Marketing

[TOP OF MIND] CONSUMER INSIGHT

Internal brand, external results

Corporate culture drives performance

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In today's climate of intense competition, rapidly evolving technology and skeptical purchasers, consumer and B-to-B marketers recognize the value of branding. Yet what's often overlooked is the experience that customers have when dealing with a brand's "human face," including customer care representatives, the sales force and even employees. The nature of such experiences is determined by employee attitudes and behaviour, which is where corporate culture comes in.

Corporate culture consists of the organization's fundamental values and beliefs as well as the official and informal processes for getting things done. It influences how staff are led and how management decisions are made. In essence, corporate culture functions like an internal brand, involving the exchange of value between the company and its employees. Corporate culture is a significant business asset that can be created (albeit slowly), strengthened and even measured.

Examples of an organization's official or mandated corporate culture include the decor of the office reception area, the way company infor-

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mation is shared with employees, and the welcome given to new hires. Unofficial corporate culture is manifested in the way work teams celebrate staff birthdays, the level of participation in company-facilitated charitable activities and the pervasiveness of the company grapevine.

While much work is being done to demonstrate a causal relationship between brand investment and financial return, establishing a conclusive return on culture is even more challenging. Yet the strength of a corporate culture can be readily assessed and tracked through regular employee qualitative sessions, workplace ethnography (anthropological observation), staff retention measurements and exit interviews (which can reveal what is and isn't working inside the firm).

Trained researchers can gain deeper insights into a corporate culture by observing groups of staff and management to uncover their degree of personal commitment to the company's vision, and note areas of agreement and disagreement.

Despite its fundamental intangibility, corporate culture can profoundly influence business performance, either positively or negatively. Especially during times of organizational change, businesses that respect and value their staff are usually rewarded with greater employee loyalty and commitment, which leads to greater customer satisfaction, higher sales and increased profitability.

Tips on strengthening corporate culture:

- Engage staff in the external brand. Even if they are not in a position to purchase your offering (as in B-to-B companies), every employee can be a brand champion, providing they understand and believe in your brand.

- Enable employees with the right tools. Workplace technology and infrastructure should help workers get more done in a day. Time and energy wasted on unnecessary processes weakens staff commitment.

- Share business results. Talking with employees about business initiatives and success stories builds trust and fosters pride. Don't sweep bad news under the carpet; instead explain what happened and the corrective action being taken. Employees can sense a lack of honesty better than most.

- Provide a feedback channel. Actively solicit employee suggestions and feedback, then act on the input—or at least acknowledge receiving it.

- Recognize effort and results. Salute the hard work of individuals and work teams both informally (congratulatory notes; lunch on the company) and formally (company-wide party or an awards program).

- Stick with it. Although building a great internal brand requires insight, empathy and lots of hard work, the business rewards of possessing a strong corporate culture make the effort worthwhile. ■