

More Than Employees: Brand Evangelists

By William Arruda

Your advertising. Your packaging. Your corporate business cards. Even your product itself. They all reflect your brand, and your brand is your company's single most valuable asset. An asset that must be protected – and projected – in every transaction with every customer or prospect.

Brand is a component of everything your company does. And although it is nurtured and managed by your marketing department, your brand is represented by your entire organization. From the receptionist at the front desk to the customer service rep staffing the phones. That's why a strong brand requires that everyone in your organization has a complete understanding of, and ability to express, your brand positioning and attributes.

It's not a question of policing the brand. It's about creating a culture that lives and breathes the brand for the benefit of your entire organization. When your employees are aligned behind your brand identity, you maximize the strength of your brand.

Developing and implementing an internal brand communications plan will ensure that your brand is supported and nurtured throughout the company, and beyond.

An effective brand communications program consists of six steps:

Step 1: Awareness...Brand Front and Center!

Sure, your marketing department has a thorough understanding of the brand (at least, they'd better!) but others in the organization, further removed from the behind-the-scenes marketing strategizing, need -- at the very least -- a general awareness of the corporate brand and what it stands for.

The good news is that your organization is probably already prepared to start building this awareness. You can use existing communications vehicles and tools like new-hire orientations, all-company meetings, corporate e-mails, training videos, corporate newsletters, the company intranet, newsgroups and other internal communications vehicles to generate greater employee awareness. Just make sure those vehicles reflect the brand accurately! If your intranet or newsletter style and format do not reflect your brand, including an article about on-brand communications will only send mixed messages to your staff. Ask yourself: Are our internal communications on-brand?

When your employees are in constant contact with on-brand communications, they become aware of, and begin to absorb, the true essence of your brand and how it is communicated.

Here, true success requires a collaborative effort among the Marketing, Human Resources and Operations teams within your organization. In addition to communicating the brand, establishing a corporate-level brand objective at the highest levels of the company will generate awareness among all employees. This can be an objective like "Raise the brand awareness this year by 5% among a certain target group."

Step 2: Education...Show Them the Way!

Once everyone in your organization is aware of the brand, they need to understand the values and visual components that comprise the brand, how it is communicated, and what constitutes on-brand and off-brand qualities. Make sure your employees can stay on-brand at all times by developing printed or web-based tools like a corporate identity standards manual, brand usage guidelines, and creative brand communications tools. Then move beyond! Schedule special Brand Day activities. Organize brand presentations.

Communicate the current status of, and statistics behind, the brand. In short, do everything possible to deepen employees' understanding of the Brand.

Step 3: Buy-In...Make the Connection!

Do your employees understand their roles in nurturing the brand?

Establishing a brand-related goal in each employee's personal goals and objectives for the year will make sure they think about their roles in building the corporate brand.

Ensure that managers understand how to develop brand objectives for their staff. It is essential that all managers have a complete understanding of the brand, and that they express the brand clearly, consistently, and constantly. Involve employees from around the company to participate in Brand Day. Solicit their feedback on the brand. Have a brand event or periodic brand contests that recognize and reward innovative ways to spread the good word. In short, never miss an opportunity to connect your people to your brand.

Step 4: Actions...Teach Them to Fish!

By participating in brand contests and other ways to express the corporate brand, your employees take more and more responsibility for the brand -- they become invested in the brand. They're proactive in nurturing the brand. They support the brand in all their day-to-day activities. They remain on-brand in everything they do – without even thinking of it consciously. This is where the true spirit of brand evangelism becomes evident. Your employees begin to find creative ways to promote the brand.

One example of a company that has successfully fostered the highest level of internal brand building – bonding over the brand, if you will – is Yahoo! Many Yahoo! employees are fanatical about their company and their brand. If you see a car wrapped in a Yahoo! advertisement, you can be fairly certain it's not a paid advertisement – it's a Yahoo! employee proudly showing his/her true colors!

Step 5: Results...Show Them the Money!

When they see the results of their actions, your employees will further rally to the cause. Communicate with them about the state of the brand. Share brand research results, showing how each organization within the company is doing with overall brand objectives. Spread the word about recognition and awards from outside organizations. And make sure that employees understand very clearly that their bonuses and other variable compensation (like stock and stock options) are directly tied to brand valuation.

Strong Brand = More Money. That's an equation everybody can understand!

Step 6: Recognition...And the Winners Are...!

One of the best ways to reinforce positive brand actions is to reward them. Establish Brand Steward awards. Give special recognition to employees who live the brand. Reward innovative

ways to communicate the brand. And never forget that the benefits of a strong brand include being able to charge a premium and survive downturns in the economy. So share the additional profits with employees – they'll understand that corporate success is closely related to their efforts in supporting the brand.

Keep going back to step one to continue to refine and improve internal brand communications, to involve new employees, and to refresh and inspire long-standing team members.

Remember, powerful brands require clear, consistent, and constant communications. They also require vigilant security of internal communications materials, to make sure they accurately reflect the key differentiating attributes, and the latest and greatest advances, behind your brand. Once you've successfully turned your employees into brand evangelists, you are ready to develop a Brand Communications Program for your entire brand community: your partners, your strategic alliances, your supply chain, your stockholders – and even your loyal customers!

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