

Internal Branding: Fluff or Necessity?

By Keith Burton

Launch a quick search of Google today to see how others describe internal branding and you'll get results for more than 282,000 entries—all in less than 20 seconds. Ask the 46,000 men and women of The Dow Chemical Co. to describe internal branding and they will likely point you to “I Am the Human Element,” an internal campaign celebrating the contributions of real people toward helping the organization achieve its vision for becoming the largest, most profitable and most respected chemical company in the world.

Or ask the more than 40,000 employees of Quest Diagnostics and they may well point out that as Quest “ambassadors,” they are expected to live and model the ethic leading to a consistent, integrated brand experience for the patients who utilize their services in the field of diagnostic testing.

Internal branding: What is it? How does it work? Is it effective? And when is it employed inside organizations?

What's In It For Me?

Internal branding today is all about connecting employees with the corporate brand to help them clarify that infamous question of “What's in it for me?” When internal branding is authentic, employees are engaged, they participate in the dialogue and they help tell the story of a brand in ways that humanize the corporation because they feel personally connected.

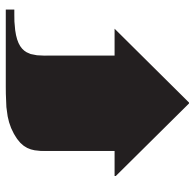
Steve Denning is recognized as one of the foremost authorities on the concept of storytelling. When Denning, an Australian, first stumbled upon the power of this tool in the 1990s, he said he was fascinated by how great storytellers could use simple words and images to create a powerful manifest for change. Today, at companies like Dell and Quest Diagnostics, internal branding is used to help encourage employees to share personal stories about their employer and what makes the organization different, more distinctive or more valued to them.

Living the Company Message

There's a greater movement than ever before as companies work to bring definition to their brand among their associates and internal stakeholders we often overlook—part-time employees, contract personnel and retirees. By educating these audiences on the mission and values of the organization, great companies can mobilize these audiences to “live” the brand, thereby helping them to deliver higher performance, better service and greater quality.

FedEx has evangelized the concept of “People-Service-Profits” (P-S-P) as a philosophy for its success since the founding of this global shipper in the 1970s. As it goes, if the company takes care of its people, they will deliver great service and shareholders will realize a fair profit. Get it wrong—by emphasizing profits over people—and the company may suffer in the long run.

From courier to CEO Fred Smith, the organization is populated with more than 290,000 men and women who believe in the values that have been instilled by P-S-P, and they can cite chapter and verse of actions they and others have taken to deliver on this philosophy and what it means to them. These beliefs have made FedEx one of



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the world's most admired companies and most trusted employers.

When practiced as a management and communications discipline, internal branding helps align the human resources of the organization. With "I Am the Human Element," Dow Chemical employees are featured in the campaign, showing how they contribute to achieving the company's ambitious sustainability goals. Employees and their executive leaders have used storytelling, larger-than-life visual images and social and digital media to help align the global workforce behind one mission and vision.

Internal branding also helps organizations engage employee segments that are considered difficult to reach. Manufacturing employees, for example, are used in training and internal ads telling their story on how they influence product quality. Sales professionals are showcased for their efforts in influencing customer retention and customer satisfaction.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are profiled to help illustrate their contributions toward creating a greater appreciation for the diversity and inclusion at the heart of many great companies. In these instances, the conversation transcends "the corporation" and features real employees, allowing audiences to place themselves in the conversation and highlighting the contribution of their function, location or team.

Not by Technology Alone

Web 2.0 brings a great promise to our work, but achieving desired outcomes cannot be assured through advancing technologies alone. Plant tours remind us that hourly workers have little or no computer access and little downtime to consume messages. Sales professionals and mobile

workers are out doing what we hire them to do best—selling and supporting customers and the company. So how do we reach them? By remembering that "high-tech" can't replace "high touch." Internal branding still requires a certain degree of face-to-face interaction by front-line managers and supervisors. Vehicles and channels like video, e-mail, text messaging, wikis, newsletters and corporate display units help support and reinforce face-to-face communication.

Through its evolution over the past 15 years, employee communications has been about improving the performance of employees. One of the more significant areas internal branding is helping to address is quality improvement. Where quality is scrutinized or worker safety is questioned, internal branding is being successfully used to influence the commitment of workers to a higher standard. Communications and training are used to engage people more deeply in the business, and to help them understand why certain actions must be taken that will lead to better products and a safer, more productive work setting.

Internal branding will remain incomplete unless we apply the rigor of measurement and evaluation. While storytelling and more vibrant employee communications may feel good, they may not "move the needle." We, as communicators, live in a world of words, images and ideas; the people who lead the companies we serve often live in a world of numbers and process steps. We must leverage existing employee, customer and brand surveys and create innovative new models— qualitative and quantitative —to bridge the gap. **PRN**

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