
Internal Branding- have you got it right?

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Introduction

Companies splurge money on fancy looking Futons in their receptions and lofty “Youtoocan” type quotes splashed all over office area. Studies suggest that less than 50% of employees believe in their company’s brand idea and even lesser percentage of people actively work to implement it. Many companies just miss the beat on “Internal branding”. Merely copying ideas from some other offices or just taking some pictures and quotes off the internet and pasting them cannot be termed as internal branding. The very objective of attempting an internal branding exercise is to *“inform, inspire and institutionalize”* the company brand and ethos into its workforce and associates.

Unfortunately, most companies pursue internal branding in an ad hoc way. Whole exercise smacks of any purpose or meticulous planning. Moreover, many companies confuse internal branding as just decking up their offices with granite statues, fancy furniture and wooden paneling. For us, *internal branding* is a means of aligning values of the employees and the corporate brand. Internal branding has its focal point on incumbent employees only. It helps to differentiate and achieve competitive advantage by delivering consistent messaging to all its employees. In this regard, we see an *employer brand* as the storytelling to showcase how you want your company to be perceived by market and *talent brand* as the honest story of an existing employee told in tandem with corporate brand. Internal branding consists of:

1. Imagery, artefacts, text that reflects the soul of company and what it believes it stands for
2. Process that invest in creating unique identity, reinforce and institutionalization
3. Routines that help build communities of practices at all levels

Internal branding approach

You do not need tons of \$\$\$ to have a powerful and impactful “internal branding program. What one needs is loads of commonsense, spiced up with little planning and salted with scientific temper. An effective internal branding program is like cooking an elaborate turkey for homecoming. Plan in advance, know the purpose and get your ingredients right and roast at the right temperature. Similarly, for an effective internal branding follow these five steps.

1. Identify the Purpose
2. Ensure consistency
3. Unified communication
4. 3E alignment
5. Run a limited trail; get feedback, make changes, and roll out

1. Identify the Purpose

Internal branding could be to communicate vision, values and cultural aspects to employees and visitors to the premises. Images, quotes and artefacts are used to inform the employees of what the company believes in and is seen practising. Internal branding is also about alignment and re-calibration of what the company perceives itself and what it wants to be seen as. Internal branding is a process to keep everyone in the company to embrace the “soul” of the brand and live enshrining it. Internal branding may also be used to drive a specific behaviour in employees or whenever the brand is repositioned. For example, companies that are looking at repositioning themselves or are realigning their company’s vision to celebrate reaching a milestone or to launch new products or services. Companies may pursue internal branding to increase employee participation or decrease employee fear about impending changes.

2.Ensure Consistency

While internal branding is all about what values, personality and culture you want to enshrine and institutionalize, it must be consistent with what your external branding is all about. If you have communicated change in direction from a service provider to an advisor to the external world, it is also important to sell the same positioning internally. Consistency between internal and external helps change the behaviour match to what is being promised to the world. Consistency is also required across all the artefacts, images, signage, and fonts used within the company and the process. Standardize moments of experience to offer a consistent visual experience. However, to meet the specific "utilitarian" objectives of a physical space, customizations may be made in the periphery while retaining the "core elements".

3.Unified Communication

Internal branding is beyond internal communications. It includes training, leadership practices, R&R programs, recruitment practices, CSR & sustainability programs and so on. Internal branding must inform employees the way they must approach the job, and how to work with clients and partners. It is also to ingrain the brand vision in their minds and support the brand in every act of theirs. Internal branding is not just HR or marketing related affair, but involves every department of the whole company. A successful internal branding must pique interest, invite participation and accelerate institutionalization.

In order to achieve this it is necessary to create an internal theme. Evaluate the theme for its communication value. Check whether it is brief, is it specific, is it relevant, does it communicate, and visualize your theme? The theme that is selected should address all of the above questions to be effective in serving its purpose. The chosen communication theme must highlight the business value, organizational culture, and innovation, impressions of products or services. Communication tools should aim at getting the Key message, supporting messages, and moments of truth across all material. Tools may include table top calendars, Post-it boards, corporate envelopes, letter heads and other materials. Messaging should be inclusive to reach out to associates with disabilities. Create inclusive aural, visual, and special needs communication platforms to reach out to all associates. Corporate jingles, specially designed ramps, and Braille signages must be invested. Communication must be race, gender and ethnicity agnostic.

4. 3 E's alignment

Internal branding efforts must be validated to include economy, environmental, and ergonomic considerations. Branding ideas must be effective but also be measured against the cost. Assess the investment and impact of each feature of branding exercise and rationalize based on budgets and affordability. Materials and props that are used for internal branding may have significant environmental impact. Fancy looking PoP or other high lead content-based artefacts may harm the employees in the long run. Evaluate the branding efforts from the carbon foot prints and green considerations. Explore native cultural artefacts and methods that may be alternately used to support the local economy and environment. Explore maximizing natural lighting that could be used to save the environment and appropriate props to reduce ecological impact. Consider deft use of locally available material like bamboo, coir and other materials to embrace and celebrate local culture. Branding ideas must also be looked at from ergonomics perspectives. Does additions obstruct movement of people in the office. Does it blend with the way people work? Functional alignment, directional alignment, utility, longevity, line of visibility is some of the areas that need be addressed.

5. Run a limited trail, make changes and roll out

Before a big bang roll out the internal branding program, run a small trial of your theme and evaluate its effectiveness. Take feedback from everybody and identify what is the impact of the ideas. Incorporate changes and roll out the internal branding across the organization.

Conclusion

Internal branding is key to build strong employee association and identify with your company. Internal branding is not just an activity but a process in itself. Key is to present and institutionalize the vision, values and beliefs of the company. The adage familiarity breeds contempt works best in internal branding situations. An external person could bring newer perspectives to the physical & cultural infrastructure and help you prioritize. Smart companies use walkthrough audits that throw up ideas of what changes could be done. A best practice is to invite suggestions & alternatives from all departments of the company. Remember not to do a rush job. Many companies faced embarrassing outcomes of poorly thought through communication and roll out strategy. While humor is great, handle it with sensitivity and cultural awareness. Some loose translations can turn out to be bloopers. Avoid cynical advertising. It does not work. Finally, treat internal branding as a change management program. Identify the goals, evaluate options and measure each step towards the goal.

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