
CX Excellence: Baked-in and Inspired Through Alignment

5 *Lessons Learned*

CX Excellence: Baked-in and Inspired Through Alignment

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Delivering customer experience excellence is not a stand-alone strategy; it's born and bred deep inside an organization's culture. Organizations that have created the new gold standard in customer experience excellence view it as organic and a natural expression of its culture. Customer experience excellence is the natural extension of the passionate connection employees have with their employer.

Powerful internal alignment is the result of employees believing their "personal brand" is authentically aligned with the brand of their employer. Internal "brand alignment" produces internal brand power. The result is an aligned culture that thrives on creating powerful, memorable customer experiences.



Internal brand building is the process to create and sustain internal brand power and is the secret weapon of today's global brand leaders. Internal brand building has become the source of brand power for organizations like Starbucks, Google and Zappos. These innovative, game-changing organizations believe their true, sustainable brand power resides in activating and energizing the hearts and minds of their employees. They believe in the new brand axiom "the brand on the outside is a true reflection of the brand on the inside."

For these true innovators building a strong brand is a natural result of igniting and nurturing employees' authentic passion for making a difference. This is accomplished with a two-step process starting with providing employees a meaningful context to focus their intentions and behaviors (their personal brand) reflecting the ethos and character of the organization (its brand of con-

ducting business). Employees are guided to leverage and focus this authentic brand alignment to make a positive difference for a customer leaving a lasting impression.

In this new paradigm internal brand comes first, external brand follows. Internal brand building nourishes a culture that makes the difference for a customer; external brand building makes sure the organization gets credit for the difference it makes. External brand building and internal brand building are interdependent. When integrated internal brand and external brand create a seamless connection between the character of an organization and its impact on a customer.

Simply stated – what is internal brand building?

The core principle of internal brand building is to foster a relationship with employees that's a true reflection of the organization's desired relationship with its customers. Internal brand building creates a passion inside the organization that provides employees with an intrinsic understanding of the power and impact an organization's brand can have on a customer.

Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, defines internal brand building from a leaders point of view.



"[Internal branding] It's partly internal communications, but it goes beyond the typical staff memos and HR updates. It's related to training, but it's about much more than the "how" of what needs to be done. My definition of internal branding is simply having a continuous process in place by which you ensure your employees understand the "who" and "why" behind your business proposition."

- Howard Schultz
CEO & Founder, Starbucks

Internal brand building is an integrated, sustained organizational development commitment. It's not a marketing program; it's a marketing-inspired cross-functional shared leadership program. Marketing and communication leaders play a pivotal role in implementing internal brand-building tactics. HR leaders are equal partners in creating internal brand-building momentum.

Senior-level leaders are the advocates and provide the charisma that gives internal brand building its credence. Internal brand building is the embodiment of an organization's dedication to its authenticity and the passion for using it's unique ethos to make a difference for a customer.

The power of internal brand building is its accessibility as a brand-building tool. Any and every organization can implement and benefit from internal brand building. For some organizations an internal brand building discipline can be started by coordinating and focusing existing internal communications activities. Other organizations may choose to develop a more robust internal brand-building program to get the full benefit of internal brand building. Regardless of the level of an organization's commitment to internal brand building every organization has the opportunity to leverage the long tail of engaged employees, unleashing the brand power discovered by the new breed of global brand leaders.

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5 Lessons Learned on Internal Brand Building

After more than 15 years of developing and implementing internal brand-building programs we learned a few lessons, here are a few key ones.

1. If I can name it I can know it. Define the organization's brand platform in a way that is understandable, relevant and believable to all employees. Most organizations have defined their brand to support marketing and communications professional's tactics (external brand building). As a result the language is tuned to resonate with external audiences. Tag lines and positioning statements are the exclusive language of marketers and can easily turn-off rank and file employees. Before any organization can expect employees to embrace the intentions of the brand, the language must be practical, less marketing-ese and easily translate the brand's intentions and character into action. A brand must be defined so an employee can name it, know it, act on it and become a part of it. A well-conceived brand platform translates an organization's beliefs (mission, vision, values) into an everyday business proposition in a way that enables any employee to authentically channel their personal brand for the betterment of the customer experience. A clear, credible, compelling brand platform is the lynchpin to the success of any and all internal brand-building processes.
2. Authenticity inspires. Brands that lack authenticity lack credibility, externally and internally. Employees will be the first to become skeptical and worst case, cynical about a brand that lacks authenticity in words or deeds. Employees must understand and believe that a brand's unique qualities have a proven past and in the best case have a direct link to the organization's founder or an individual that played a prominent role in its success. Authenticity starts with how a brand is defined. A brand must have a recognizable character and clearly understood, bone fide ethos that defines the innate qualities of the organization's culture. Authenticity is earned and reinforced based upon the

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actions of leaders and teams inside the organization. The most authentic and credible brand platforms have a clear lineage to an organization's founder or key historical leaders.

3. Personal knowledge is not personal commitment. Employees' literal understanding of a brand may be interesting for them, but it will not engage them to consistently act in the brand's best interest. To effectively engage employees with an organization's brand each person must feel an authentic connection to the ethos of the culture. Congruent



engagement models have proven to be the most effective in driving organizational performance. The congruent engagement model applied to internal brand building is based on facilitating the alignment of an employee's personal brand and the organization's brand. The foundation of every effective internal brand-building infrastructure rests on the strength of the authentic alignment of an employee's character and the organization's character. Without this powerful engagement process, internal brand building is nothing more than today's trendy name for internal communications.

4. Brands thrive on the 3-C's of shared brand leadership. Contrary to conventional wisdom, brands are not built top-down. The truth is different. Brand energy emanates from a network of brand nodes. At the center of those nodes are highly aligned, passionate internal brand leaders. An important source of energy of these high performers is the belief that their personal character and competency is enriched through the character and competency of the organization. These highly aligned, engaged individuals provide the energy based upon their authentic connection to the brand's ethos. These special individuals demonstrate the 3-C's of internal brand leadership: charisma, caricature and consistency. These

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three qualities of internal brand leadership power the network of internal brand excellence.

5. Internal brand building fuels the passion for an organization's brand. A brand is who you are and how you make a difference. For an organization a brand defines its character. An on-going commitment to nourishing a culture is necessary for it to grow and thrive. Internal brand building is a process not a program. Brands always weaken inside out. To sustain a thriving culture internal brand building must be a part of the way a culture operates. Every organization must maintain a sustained internal brand-building commitment. Make sure internal brand building is a line item on an annual budget spreadsheet and part of an annual operating plan.

Internal brand building fuels the passion for an organization's brand.

Internal brand building is a universal brand-building principle accessible by each and every organization. Learning from these five lessons will make initiating and sustaining internal brand building momentum attainable by any organization. Leverage the power of the brand inside to earn the benefits of the strong brand on the outside.

A sustained internal brand building commitment will ensure that customer experience excellence is truly baked-in an organization's culture.

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