

The brand within

 By [Jane Stevenson](#)

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Effective internal brand-building boils down to some simple human truths, quite often ignored at the peril of the brand, both internally and externally, and ultimately the success of the business.

Employer branding has been defined as the sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff what makes it a desirable place to work and the active management of "a company's image as seen through the eyes of its associates and potential hires".

With a floundering jobs market, the hunt for talented, skilled professionals remains intense as competing firms vie to attract the top talent. Savvy employers understand that the best candidates dig deep into the company's value proposition, weighing their options carefully and scrutinising their future employer with the same rigour that they are subjected to throughout the process.

Filling a position is a two-way street; both employer and candidate have influence. Bagging the best talent means paying close attention to how your brand is perceived by potential applicants and, crucially, ensuring it accurately reflects the organisation's corporate culture.

The 'Busy Fool Syndrome'

The 21st century has given rise to a new epidemic - the "Busy Fool Syndrome". With an imbalanced focus on deadlines and figures, it appears relationships are secondary and in many instances information transfer is now via email and other electronic modes of communication - rather than face-to-face. This has affected internal relationships. The investment in our human capital is at an all-time low, yet the expectation is quite the opposite.

Richard Branson coins the phrase beautifully; "The way you treat your employees is the way they will treat their customers". This is a profound statement that deserves to be unpacked.

These are a few pointers to guide your thinking and serve as a checklist (or conscience prick) for your consideration:

Where to begin

The starting point for any brand is what the organisation stands for. Its mission and vision, backed by culture and values, are what the brand means to employees. Any deviation from mission and culture will strike a false note.

It starts with the story

It is the role of leaders to create a story that is both inspirational and aspirational. Unpacking a vision should be exciting, motivating and uplifting for all involved. The trick is to involve every single staff member and allow them to engage, build, question and understand the full meaning of what the organisational vision is - and most importantly, how they fit into it.

Create a sense of belonging

Seth Godin in his book *Tribes*, states; "A tribe is a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea. For millions of years, human beings have been part of one tribe or another. A group needs only two things to be a tribe: a shared interest and a way to communicate." Creating an internal brand is exactly that: the vision and organisational goals, communicating how to get there and constantly encouraging internal activities that align, measure, motivate and embrace the resources and the shared interests.

Find out what motivates them

Throwing money at people is not necessarily the answer. Time is a rare commodity in today's economic environment. If management took the time to find out who their team are and what makes them tick, they undoubtedly will create a strong sense of loyalty and belonging. Acknowledgement is often the key trigger - the fact that someone notices the contribution, success, strife, commitment, and challenges faced is most often the key motivating factor.

Create a caring culture

There is a beautiful saying: "People don't care what you know until they know that you care". By living your organisational values, being consistent in your management style and acknowledging people who do things right, you will create an environment that is conducive to trust, respect and integrity.

By nurturing relationships, you invest in the very asset that affords you the opportunity to be in business - your staff.

Put the fun back into serious business

We spend the majority of our time in the working environment and it has become a very serious place to be. We can place blame on a multitude of factors, but the reality is that people are far more productive in an environment that encourages happiness and fun. We have to see the lighter side of life. Enthusiastic employees spread enthusiasm to customers. You need to market to your employees as much as to customers. If your employees don't get it, your customers won't either.

Be credible and consistent

Consistency is key, making promises and keeping them is a great way to build a brand - both internally and externally. It speaks your core values and gives others a sense of comfort that they are able to trust. Exceptions should be transparent and communicated with internal stakeholders. When people feel safe, they are more accepting of change.

Be wary of assuming knowledge

So often, companies fall short of communicating in a clear, concise manner. There is so much ambiguity in the workplace today with new languages blossoming through terminology and jargon that is used and abused. Assumption is the greatest evil so rather over communicate: keep it simple and ensure employees understand their role as the greatest Brand Ambassadors.

Communicate, communicate, and communicate!

A brand without communication is like a lone, unlabeled can on a shelf, you don't know what it is, and you really don't care.

Any communication tool, from a broadcast email, to a company-wide meeting, should reinforce the brand.

Choosing which media and when depends upon the message; the heavier the brand message, the more media you will need. Again, keep the communication consistent with your brand identity, image and aspirations; align your internal operational practices with your external brand. From the CEO to the customer service representatives to the production team, every employee must understand, articulate and implement the brand consistently.

What gets measured, gets managed

By implementing measures for feedback, as well as establishing internal checks and balances, you can ensure that you deliver on your brand promise and close any potential gaps that could erode the trust and loyalty of your internal customers.

We are often 'too busy' to spend time with our staff yet, stand in amazement when they work in a manner contrary to our expectation. Plain and simple, if your employees have a vested interest in the brand process, they are far more likely to uphold the company values and brand.

While much can be done to strengthen an employer brand it is crucial that efforts are tempered with pragmatism. Disgruntled and disaffected employees can cause havoc with reputation, so care must be taken to avoid selling a corporate image that doesn't deliver. Empty promises are soon revealed and expose the brand as 'pretending' to be something that it's not.

The proliferation of social media use has heightened the dangers by shifting corporate reputation power firmly in the hands of consumers and employees. Negative sentiment travels faster than positive and can dismantle hard won respect in the marketplace in a flash. No one likes to be sold a lie.

A fabulous internal brand nurtures retention and loyalty, and leads to a stronger external brand. An employer brand cannot be conjured from nowhere. Concentrate on building a culture that is motivated, innovative, supportive, challenging and rewarding for staff at every level. Achieve this, and your unique employer brand will reveal itself.

ABOUT JANE STEVENSON

Named by CEO publication as SA's most influential government businesswoman in the SME sector in 2012, she's big on vision, strategy and effective communication. Start with a successful business strategy and executive coaching consultancy to leading national brands... add the experience of being a Board and EXCO member of the Nelson Mandela Bay Business Chamber; and stir in some fearless Scottish roots and a dedication to building organisational vision. The result? A motivating, passionate team player.

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