



How to distinguish your company starts from the inside out

Creating a brand is about living the promise you are making to your customers in a distinct way, consistently. Building a brand can translate into big rewards in mounting customer loyalty and increasing assets. For example, Interbrand Magazine assessed that over 50% of Sony's assets come in the form of its brand equity. Sony has become so associated with fulfilling its promise of quality in its industry category that over half of its total market value comes from its brand equity.

How to distinguish your company's brand starts from the inside out. This can be more challenging when you are bringing together distinct cultures within the larger organization and wanting to retain the separate brands at the same time. Whatever the industry or service, there must be an alignment of internal and external factors for a company to act as one. When what you project is not who you really are, your customers will know it and you'll pay the price sooner or later.

From my firm's experience in helping companies align where they are with where they want to be, four critical elements emerge as necessary to be addressed if you're going to build a brand from the inside out. These four alignment factors are:

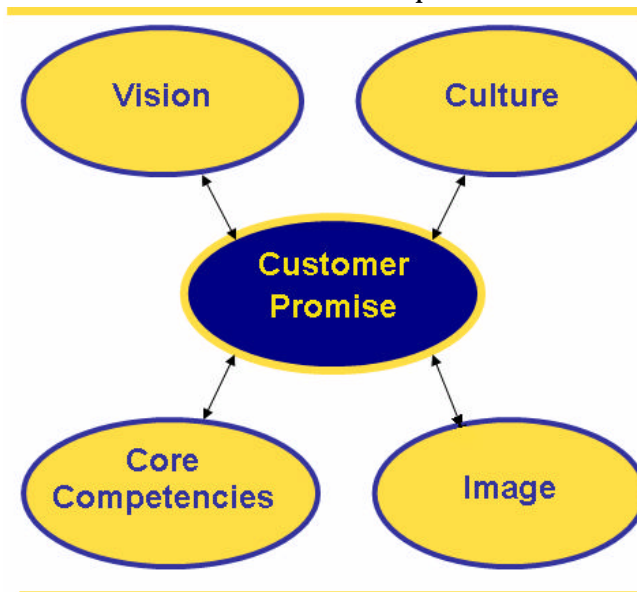
1. The *vision*, or the leadership's picture of where the organization is going long range and the values or its guiding principles. A vision is a compelling and realistic view of the future that inspires the organization to reach "stretch goals." How the leadership conveys the vision and how they involve employees in making the vision reality are all factors in whether or not a company has a true direction. Ask questions like, "Is this vision compelling and does it set a standard for excellence?" and "Is the leadership's picture of success for the company supported by employees' attitudes, behaviors and perceptions?" or "Is there a discrepancy between where the leadership of the organization sees the company going and how employees perceive its future?"

2. The organization's *culture*, which includes the collective values, attitudes and behaviors displayed within the company as well as how employees perceive the company. So many times in branding, the history or "roots" of the organization are ignored in hopes that the company can become something new.

For instance, if the company has built its reputation on quality and suddenly decides to be a low-cost provider, there may be a “culture-clash.” Many of the employees might take great satisfaction in producing a quality product and suddenly find their work values compromised. This desire to leave behind one’s identity instead of building on it often leads to disaster. Be honest and gauge, “Is the **culture** inside the company acting in alignment with the *promise* being made to our stakeholders?” “How can we honor and build on what has worked in the past as we reinvent ourselves for the future?”

Values are your code of ethics that can’t be compromised. Values should embody what truly matters to an organization in how it performs and in the ways it satisfies its responsibility to key stakeholders – employees, customers, investors, and the rest of society. “What do we stand for?” and “What are the rich principles that have made us special and successful?” are good questions to consider in the development of values. Your values as a leader impact the selection of a vision because values influence the questions you ask about possible directions. They guide which possible visions you can consider, what criteria you would use to adopt the vision, and what measures of success you use to judge whether your organization is moving toward its vision.

3. The external image or how stakeholders (customers, media, stockholders etc.) see the organization in general. Here it’s important to conduct an “audit” and look at the image you are currently projecting to your customers and other stakeholders. Also, it’s important to assess who your target customers really are and how they feel about your products and services.



Probe to ask questions like, “What is the **image** we are currently projecting and is it consistent with the promise we are making to our customers?” and “How can we align our **external image** with the **vision** and **culture** of the organization?”

4. The core competencies or the collective skill set of the organization. Your plan for the future may require developing core competencies beyond what you currently have in your company. For example, you may have developed a core skill of responding quickly to the changing needs of your customers. With the brand that you are developing for your company, you may now need to focus on quality as well. This may require setting different organizational priorities, investing in training and development, and hiring people with the right expertise. Assess “Do we have the right skill sets and

abilities to build the *core competencies* necessary now and in the future? What are the gaps and how do we bridge them?”

Once you have assessed where you are in relation to these four factors, the next step is to see where the biggest gaps are among them. For example, you may discover that the image conveyed to customers is that your organization strives for excellence in all you do; yet your customer

service group may not be experienced enough in the services you offer to model excellence beyond routine requests. Start by setting priorities and tackle the biggest gaps that compromise what customers are expecting from you and your organization.

It is these four factors of **vision, culture, external image** and **core competence** that must be acted upon in relationship to each other for organizational alignment to occur. The organization must be viewed as an evolving system. Inside out branding starts you on the road to building enduring profitable growth and becoming a great company to work for.

Mary Key, Ph.D. is an international consultant, author and speaker headquartered in Tampa. She is president of Mary Key & Associates, Inc. She can be reached at mkey@marykeyassociates.com or 813-831-9500.