

5 Ways to Keep Your Own People from Killing the Brand

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You've run the gauntlet just getting your branding strategy implemented. The campaign's launched and seems to be working – so why can't you just move on to the next project?

Because selling your brand is as much an internal focus as an external one!

Branding, you see, needs to be more than a jingle or logo. It must be about painting a picture in the mind of the customer, based on the actions of everyone on your team. It's walking the talk and living the brand with every single customer interaction.

The Branding Barricades

But what happens to your branding efforts when an internal obstacle gets in your way? You know the kind. Your heavily promoted “caring” organization has an ogre in nursing or admitting. The latest campaign features a ready-for-anything trauma center, but when patients arrive there's no room for them. Advertising directs the public to your call center – which is only open 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

These breakdowns of the brand promise can be prevented. But it's important to remember that it's everyone's job. So how do we do our job and still make sure everyone else does his or hers, too?

1. No Surprises!

Keep the right people involved in the branding strategy development. This includes the front-line people, the volunteers at the front desk, the RNs and LVNs, the housekeeping staff, the office managers at the physicians' offices – in other words, anyone who might “touch” the customer.

Ask them for their perspective. Ask employees what your organization is known for and what they would say to convince someone to use your service. This is a powerful way to gain valuable insight into the heart of your brand's personality. Listen to what they say – and then act on it!

Talk with department managers about potential speed bumps, detours and land mines that could sabotage the brand. Ask them, “Is there anything at all that could prevent this brand strategy from being successful?” If there is, address it up front, before you waste your time and budget promising something your organization can't possibly deliver.

Keep the decisionmakers in the loop. True, most of them are almost always involved anyway, but you may need to include some people who think they're decisionmakers so they'll feel involved. This means anyone who's implementing the strategy, from physicians who get referrals to call center staffers to the people who provide the actual care.

Observe and listen. Involve your decisionmakers by having them explain how their area works now – how they handle new patients, answer the phone, what they say or do when X or Y occurs. Let them show you, so you can be on the lookout for disconnects with the branding promise.

Give people ownership. Involve people in advance and you'll see them take ownership and pride in the overall strategy.

Cover your brand. If you're in charge of rolling out the brand strategy, you're held accountable for the results. Keep good notes of interviews and input sessions, documenting names, dates and deadlines.

Branding Tip: Craft a Solid Plan

Once branding decisions are made, it's critical to put them in writing via an action plan. You'll have guidelines to refer to during the process and a document to keep you on track. Here's an outline to follow:

- Action (what are we doing and when?)
- Rationale (why are we doing this?)
- Action Steps (key activities required to implement the action)
- Measurement (what are the terms for success and the key indicators?)
- Resources (budget, including direct costs, labor, equipment and facilities)
- Responsibility (name of one individual to be held accountable for each major component of the action plan)

2. Translate it to the Tangible

It's easy for the brand promise to go in one ear and out the other. To make it sink in, you need to be clear about what it means to your internal customers.

Translate ideas into behavior. While it's one thing to hear from someone that he thinks he can be more “customer service-oriented” or “more responsive to callers,” it really has to happen! Tell your team what it means in terms of changing their behavior. And give people the tools to translate the brand promise into something real. Work with your management team to ensure that it's clarified and quantified – and put into action.

- Be specific in your strategy. Could you reduce wait time on hold by 20%, 50%? Could you pick up the call by the second ring? Demonstrate how it can be done.
- Then build it into customer satisfaction surveys as appropriate.
- Put it into performance reviews and reward it!
- Doing all of this also can mean explaining new policies clearly and enforcing them. This could mean walking people to a location rather than pointing, answering the phone in three rings or resolving issues within 78 hours.

3. Belabor the Benefits.

In any situation where you're involving people and translating it into tangible behavior, you need to accept that everyone's tuned into one radio program: WIIFM. We all listen to it at one time or another – What's In It For Me.

Buying decisions or relationship decisions are personal and emotional decisions, and are unique to everyone. Think, for a moment, of your own life. You make customer decisions in your job, at home, with your bank, your grocery store, your Web site choices. Think of why you relate to certain people, or choose not to.

It's the same in a health care situation. As you build brand behaviors, measure expectations and sell your internal team on these behaviors, look for the mixture of behaviors that are of interest to them. For example, with a physician, you might appeal to his/her personal ego, desire for workplace productivity and positive reputation among patients. Bottom line: position the value of brand behavior in terms that are of benefit to every member of your organization.

To help people tune into the benefits, think about the four levels:

- Corporate-level benefits that are good for the organization. Things like increasing market share, retention of covered lives and capturing out-of-pocket health care dollars that are self-referred.
- Department-level benefits like increased volume and improved productivity.
- Personal benefits such as job security and a sense of pride in successfully delivering a brand.
- Customer benefits. When your organization keeps its brand promises and makes them tangible, your customer connects them with a provider he can count on. And you become a trusted health care partner.

4. Show, Don't Tell.

You can't merely tell people to "live the brand" or "be nice." Often, you have to show them what that means – or train them to recognize what it means.

Think like a customer-oriented person. When you've agreed on what the desired behavior should be (the radiology department wants to be more customer-oriented with physicians, for example), consider a scenario that tests the behavior. What would you say when you can't meet the scheduling demands of the physician? And fill in the blank.

Model behaviors in before-and-after terms. Before the branding strategy was implemented, the radiology scheduling person might have said, "Nope, that time's taken. What's your second choice?" After the branding strategy was discussed, he might say, "I'm sorry, Dr. X. An early morning slot on that day isn't available. Is it early morning that you're looking for – or is it that specific day that is the priority? Let's see what else we can find for you." While the answer is "no" in each example, the customer service-oriented delivery works much better. Make sure you

confirm that people can understand the difference.

Script questions and responses. Don't leave these things up to chance.

Have people say it out loud. Record it. People make natural improvisations – some will be good and some won't. Re-script the good ones until they're second nature.

Formalize the process with training. Don't hesitate to enlist the help of Personnel or an outside trainer to help you reinforce the message.

A Best Practices Brand Empowerment Model:

Southwest Airlines is, without question, one of the best-known and most-respected brands around – thanks to their dedication to their customers and employees. According to Kevin and Jackie Freiberg in their book, *Nuts! Southwest Airlines' Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success* (© 1996, Bard Press), this philosophy has become an integral part of the airline's brand ever since its first flight left the gate in 1971.

In large part, Southwest's success lies in the empowerment CEO Herb Kelleher has given each employee to make decisions and use basic common sense. Employees embrace the Southwest brand because they feel proud to be part of such a company and they're eager to pass that feeling along to Southwest customers.

As the book discusses, Southwest has a formal University for People – a learning facility that gives employees the tools to be good leaders. The University features a catalog of courses that teach employees how to "lead with integrity, run a profitable airline, practice the principles of stewardship, care for customers, and live the company's core values."

It's a lesson the rest of us can learn something from, too. In order to elicit

loyalty and support of your brand from employees, you need to give them something to hang on to. You have to tactically create how your organization is going to live and deliver the brand, rather than merely paying lip service to it.

5. Stay the Course.

Stick to the strategy. Face it. You're going to get bored with your campaign, your image – even your logo – long before anyone else does. Rather than jumping ahead to the next campaign, think about how to make sure whatever you do next fits the brand strategy. In everything you do, consider how your message aligns with your brand persona.

Think about your organization as a real person. How would it talk in a certain situation? How would it behave at a party? Make sure everything you do is consistent with that image.

Ignore the competition. Instead of getting wrapped up in where they're advertising or how big their ad is, say "so what?" Don't play the same game they do, or you'll end up getting lumped into the same commodity they are.

Keep the brand sacred. If you're going to keep your brand's integrity, mandate compliance at every turn and keep your eye on the brand.

Postscript: Branding Takes Vigilance

As the Keeper of the Brand, your job never ends. It requires ongoing vigilance to help everyone recognize that they're responsible for getting and keeping a customer. And, in order to spread that message, keep these tips in mind:

1. Audit the roles in your organization for what they could or should be to deliver the brand promise.

2. Make sure your message matches or fulfills the brand strategy.
3. Make sure internal behaviors like actions, words, deliverables and tools deliver on the brand promise.
4. Confirm that your tools (people, products and services) are up for the job – or evaluate if you need new and improved ones.
5. Create measurement and accountability always. Your people are your biggest part of creating a customer-oriented strategy. Train, educate and reward them for proactive customer management.



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