

BRAND-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP: ALIGNING YOUR BUSINESS TO SUCCEED IN A CHALLENGING MARKETPLACE

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As a business leader, you face unprecedented challenges in the marketplace. Customers are confused. Competition is fierce. Markets are saturated. Today's innovation becomes tomorrow's commodity. And the uncertain economy presents a triple threat: It undermines customer confidence, increases the risk of new investments, and makes it easier for lower-cost producers to undercut your position. In addition, challenges within your organization also exist – often driven by silos and divisions that make enterprise-wide change difficult to implement.

Indeed, the challenges are so intense that many businesses try to attack these threats individually and ultimately fail to survive. On the other hand, trying to address every challenge at once seems overtly risky. How do you respond effectively to the challenges of the marketplace and your organization, without losing focus?

The answer is brand.

Leaders who commit to Brand-Driven Leadership experience greater alignment, more innovation, and stronger loyalty from employees and customers. By allowing brand to serve as the centerpiece of your business, you empower your enterprise to respond to each challenge, while doing so in an integrated manner that will break down internal barriers and keep your team focused. The result is a more competitive enterprise.

What, then, is brand?

Brand is a set of conclusions that stakeholders reach about your organization, based upon their impressions, experiences and understandings of it. This means that brand is something that you can design and influence, but not control – and that brand involves your whole company, not just one part of it.

In short, your objective is to define your brand and then deliver your promise. Focusing on both the definition of your brand, and the steps necessary to deliver on your brand promise, will ensure that you achieve success. The Brand-Driven Leadership model supports this essential balance by addressing five internal strategies and five external strategies for your brand.

The five internal brand strategies set the stage for your brand to be effectively defined, and are as follows:

1. Define your change vision. In a market saturated with companies touting the same messages of quality and loyalty, your business can only achieve a breakthrough if you create a compelling vision. This vision needs to clearly demonstrate what the world would look like if your products or services were fully implemented as intended.

2. Craft your brand promise. The key to a successful brand promise is its specifics: What customers you intend to serve, how you intend to serve them, and what experience they will have as a result of that encounter. Most importantly, the promise must be deliverable, i.e. it must be supported by the realities of how you do business.

3. Align systems and processes. How many times have you encountered a business that claims to offer an easy customer experience,

yet any time you ask a question to the company's employees they claim ignorance, tell you they'll have to 'look into it' or say that the information you need is in a different system? The processes by which you run your company, and the systems that support those processes, will ultimately define your customer's experience.

4. Focus on learning. Empowered and educated employees are the cornerstones of a successful and efficient enterprise. Those who are committed to Brand-Driven Leadership go beyond training and focus on employee development, mentoring and support.

5. Commit to culture. This begins with you. The standard-bearer for your business culture is you. Successful brand leaders are those who manage actively by moving around their business, talking with customers and employees, and staying connected to all aspects of the enterprise.

With the five internal strategies established, it's time to look at five external strategies that can take your brand strategy to deployment. The five external brand strategies capture the components developed internally, and use them to communicate effectively with your customers. They include:

1. Develop the language before the 'look.' In order to design a corporate logo or marketing resource that reflects your brand, we need to define that brand in words – what it represents, what it evokes and what it stands for. Starting with language also gives your employees a clear sense of your intended direction, and sets the stage for their participation.

2. Start with the story. What makes your business come alive in the marketplace best? The experiences of those whose lives are better because of it – your customers, employees and partners – described in vivid and powerful narratives and images. The more you uncover and share these vignettes, the more your brand will come alive.

3. Develop brand ambassadors. If stories are the backbone of a compelling brand, then the people behind the stories make the best storytellers. Developing and supporting these employees, customers and partners can supercharge not only your marketing efforts, but also your recruitment and retention initiatives.

4. Focus on communities, not campaigns. The evolution of social media only reinforces a reality that has always rung true – building a community around your business will always lead to more lasting results because you are creating an environment in which people contribute ideas and offer meaningful feedback.

5. Choreograph brand encounters. The gold standard of Brand-Driven Leadership is how well your company delivers powerful and reliable brand encounters to its customers. The components of the encounter include everything around the customer – environmental design, marketing communications, product packaging, forms, phone scripts, website self-service tools and much more. Focus on the details and your customers will take notice.

Brand-Driven Leadership means committing to leadership on two levels: Leadership in your organization, and leadership in your marketplace. How well you execute on the first will directly impact your ability to achieve success with the second.

Learn more about how other business executives have successfully implemented these strategies by downloading the free guide, **Brand-Driven Leadership: Ten Essential Strategies for Business Growth** online at www.wendtpartners.com/smartceo.

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