



Journal of
Brand Strategy

This article first
appeared in the
**Journal of Brand
Strategy Vol. 9,
No. 3, 222–230
Winter 2020–21.**

Putting your purpose into practice: Why introspection is essential for building a successful brand

Brand purpose is a topic that is widely discussed but little understood. Recently published in the Winter 2020-21 issue of the Journal of Brand Strategy, our article, “Putting Your Purpose into Practice: Why Introspection Is Essential for Building a Successful Brand,” is now available for download.

Co-authored by Bailey Brand Consulting President and CEO Christopher K. Bailey and Cornerstone Building Brands Chief Marketing Officer Susan S. Selle, the paper offers valuable insight, analysis and recommendations to help organizations align behind a shared purpose and vision for the future—and demonstrates our passion for collaboration with our partners.

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Putting your purpose into practice: Why introspection is essential for building a successful brand

Received (in revised form): 1st July, 2020



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Abstract

This paper discusses how brands must identify, embrace and act in accordance with a carefully considered purpose across all internal and external touchpoints. Generational factors have contributed to sweeping changes in the corporate ecosystem, and it is only through individual and holistic understanding of an organisation's purpose that businesses are able to remain competitive and relevant. By aligning the entire enterprise to advance a shared vision for the future, companies can realise tangible results today and best position themselves for future success in today's crowded, consumer-driven marketplace.

Keywords

authenticity, brand purpose, corporate governance, identity, internal branding, relevance

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The purpose of an organisation is an existential principle that can be easy to ignore or take for granted, yet today it is more important than ever. The Business Roundtable, a consortium comprising nearly 200 CEOs, including Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Tim Cook of Apple, James Quincey of Coca-Cola, as well as executives representing General Motors, Goldman Sachs, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, JPMorgan Chase, and myriad others, recognised as much when they signed their revised Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation in August 2019. In stark contrast to their previously defined Principles of Corporate Governance, which have remained largely unchanged with regard to brand purpose since 1978, the authors rejected the premise that a corporation exists principally to serve its shareholders.

The statement reads:

It has become clear that this language on corporate purpose does not accurately describe the ways in which we and our fellow CEOs endeavor every day to create value for all our stakeholders, whose long-term interests are inseparable.¹

Today, the breadth of stakeholders a brand must consider includes customers, employees and the greater community. In the simplest terms, this means that an organisation must exist to serve a greater purpose than simply to maximise revenue and shareholder value. For some, this represents a seismic shift in corporate philosophy; for others, it is an obvious and overdue evolution. Many brands find themselves in the former position, struggling to build and maintain relevance in a market that moves more quickly each year and that increasingly demands authenticity in addition to excellence and affordability. In the eyes of today's

market, why you do what you do is often more important than what you do.

WHAT HAS CHANGED? HOW HAVE BRANDS LOST THEIR WAY

Gone are the days of the brand as the sole and self-appointed arbiter of truth. Consumers are assuming an ever-increasing role in shaping the overall perception of a brand, and today there are more channels and touchpoints to monitor than at any other moment in history. Brands must consequently be more fluid than they have been in years past—creating one clear and ubiquitous experience online, in store and across internal operations. Without a true and actionable purpose, the lines between what you do and why you do it can easily become blurred or severed entirely. As a purposeless brand bushwhacks its way from one decision to the next, the organisation is invariably led deeper into the wild and driven further from the reason it set out on its journey in the first place. There is real peril in this approach to leadership; 48 per cent of US consumers who are disappointed by a brand's words or actions on a social issue complain about it, 42 per cent abandon the brand in frustration and 21 per cent never return.²

The path that led naturally to this precarious moment in branding has been marked by a series of almost imperceptible adjustments in consumers' attitudes over a period of years and across generations; many organisations do not recognise that they have lost the trail until it is too late to turn back. And brands today must reckon with two great global transformations: one of behaviour and the other of values. The rise of digital drives the former—smart devices have put a world of data at consumers' fingertips, and the way we shop will never be the same. The latter is a response to the single-minded pursuit

of profit and shareholder value, which has forced brands into the trap of reactionary decision-making, wherein day-to-day operations are driven by wholly external factors, such as a desire to conform to fleeting trends or in imitation of their competition. This behaviour—the impulse to focus on how or what an organisation does rather than why or whether it should act—distinguishes truly purpose-driven brands from their more capricious executorial counterparts.

WHAT IS MEANT BY BRAND PURPOSE?

A brand's purpose is its most valuable guiding principle. Intangible yet ubiquitous, it is the inalienable reason why you exist as an organisation, expressed with singular focus through every facet of the business. It is the answer to the question 'What difference are you trying to make in the world?' Your response ought to be aspirational and inspiring, though it need not be explicitly altruistic. A strong purpose statement provides the foundation for every decision you will ever make as a company; as such, it must be direct enough to be unambiguously understood by all stakeholders and expansive enough to direct your organisation's external ambitions as well as the realisation of those ambitions.

Purpose is a compass that is as applicable to high-level business strategy as it is to office layout and amenities. It is essential in organising your operations and must be truly understood by every employee, from the boardroom to the breakroom. To illustrate, consider the anecdote of JFK and the janitor. It is said that in 1961, a year before President John F. Kennedy would give his historic 'Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort', he visited NASA Headquarters in Washington, D.C. The newly inaugurated Commander in

Chief asked a man tidying up what he did at the agency, and the man responded, 'I'm helping put a man on the moon'.³ The story speaks volumes about the importance of having a shared purpose and is no less impactful today than it was six decades ago. Tesla founder Elon Musk expounded on a similar point during a conference call with *Wired*, explaining: 'Putting in long hours for a corporation is hard. Putting in long hours for a cause is easy.'⁴

WHERE DOES BRAND PURPOSE COME FROM?

Many organisations struggle to articulate their purpose, and even fewer truly allow their purpose to drive the business forward. In her post on the Belief Agency blog, Cali Pitchel (Vice President, Strategies & Insights at Porter Novelli) offers the following succinct insight: 'If you know what you believe, your purpose will become clear—it's the most logical expression of your belief'.⁵ It is a straightforward place to start: brand purpose begins with what you believe as an individual; what passes through your mind when you step across the threshold of your workplace every morning? What brought you here and what keeps you here? Your purpose statement must answer those fundamental questions and create a compelling ideological foothold accessible to every member of the organisation. A brand's purpose is at once a mirror reflecting the formative values that have shaped it and a window to future opportunity. It is who you are and who you must become.

There is no one correct approach when it comes to developing a resonant brand purpose statement. The best examples feel at once deeply personal and unique to a particular organisation, yet broad enough to fully encompass everything that they have done, do today and might do in the

future. The following brands live by the purpose they have outlined for themselves and have built a powerful identity around it.

Bentley: To create extraordinary cars for extraordinary customers.

Coca-Cola: To refresh the world. To make a difference.

Disney: To entertain, inform and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling.

Google: To organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.

Microsoft: To empower every person and every organisation on the planet to achieve more.

Nike: To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world. If you have a body, you are an athlete.

The Red Cross: To prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies.

Starbucks: To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup and one neighbourhood at a time.

Tesco: To serve shoppers a little better every day.

Purpose can be a challenging concept to wrangle for start-ups and nascent organisations, and the complexities increase 10-fold when attempting to establish and roll out a purpose later in the life cycle of a company. Change is hard and old habits die harder; creating a purpose powerful enough to align an entire organisation is difficult and risky if not handled with the appropriate strategy and care and can actually damage the long-term health of a brand if it is perceived by its end audience as inauthentic. Consumers expect more than ever from the brands they ally

themselves with, believing that companies must not only be trustworthy in their messaging and interactions, but also practise good corporate citizenship as well. Brands can effectively deliver on this expectation through a purpose and a fundamental set of values that honestly reflect who they are. When brands abide by a set of principles that employees and consumers alike are proud to stand behind, fostering positive change, even in a small, indirect way, becomes a natural extension of the brand—and that change can consequently inspire passionate evangelists inside and outside the organisation.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE PURPOSE DRIVEN AND WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Brand loyalty is hard won and fragile, and consumers will move elsewhere if you cannot continuously deliver on their expectations. These consumers, empowered by access to more and better information than ever before, are naturally sceptical. In fact, 51 per cent believe that less than half of brands create content that resonates as authentic. Conversely, and perhaps unsurprisingly, 92 per cent of marketers believe most of the content their brand creates resonates as authentic with consumers.⁶ This disparity illustrates the challenges brands face in today's crowded, consumer-driven marketplace and the uphill battle they face in winning consumers' trust and increased market share. How does an organisation attract and grow an audience and increase its bottom line in this ecosystem?

The good news is that developing an actionable and inspiring purpose is also plain good business. Studies have shown that brands that live their purpose grow

three times faster than their competitors'.⁷ The psychology is simple from the consumer's perspective; externally articulating a purpose your audience can believe in places your brand within the five distinct fields of human values: eliciting joy (Coca-Cola, Disney), enabling connections (British Airways, Facebook), inspiring exploration (Google, Jeep), evoking pride (Nike, Mercedes-Benz), and impacting society (Habitat for Humanity, The Salvation Army).⁸

Predominantly known for its chain of retail pharmacies, CVS illustrates a meaningful example of purpose-driven branding. As part of the organisation's long-term strategy to lead the market in health and healthcare services, the company made a seemingly unthinkable decision: to remove all tobacco products from its stores as of September 2014.

Larry Merlo, President and Chief Executive Officer of CVS Health, in an article for CNN Business, said:

Without question, going tobacco-free was a bold, purpose-led action that significantly impacted our bottom line, but it was the right decision for our brand, our business and the health of the country.

Our own actions to exit tobacco came out of a realisation that not only was the sale of tobacco a barrier to the future growth of the company as a trusted health care provider, but also that smoking—which remains the leading preventable cause of death and disease in the United States and costs the economy US \$300 bn annually—had no place in a setting where health care was delivered.⁹

Moreover, our exit from tobacco helped validate CVS's evolving role in the health care marketplace and disrupted access to cigarettes.

In other words, while the short-term implications of CVS Health's decision

meant the loss of a reliable portion of its revenue stream, the move is part of the brand's long-term survival strategy, backed by a clear, concise and carefully considered purpose statement: 'Helping people on their path to better health'. Five years later, the brand has strengthened this position through its acquisition of Aetna, Inc., which has created value for shareholders far in excess of projected revenue for tobacco products. At the same time, studies have shown that smokers bought nearly 100 million fewer packs of cigarettes in states where CVS holds a 15 per cent or higher share of the retail pharmacy market.¹⁰

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BRAND PURPOSE AND A MISSION STATEMENT? WHERE DO CORE VALUES FIT IN?

'Your external brand and internal brand should not clash', says Barbie Brewer, Chief People Officer at payment card company Marqeta. 'If you want to empower your customers, you should also empower your workforce'.¹¹ A strong brand purpose communicated effectively throughout an organisation can inspire employees and create a culture wherein purpose is not a slogan but a way of life. Employees who truly believe in what they do and understand why it matters have the potential to become the ultimate ambassadors for the brand, expressing its values internally through touchpoints with customers, and externally as well. The physical space a company occupies—from interior design to internal signage and workspace orientation—should all tie back to the brand itself, allowing the message to infuse every aspect of the employee experience.

This is easier said than done; even when employees believe in and demonstrate an

intuitive understanding of the brand purpose, there is often lingering confusion in how to activate it in the course of regular business. Part of this uncertainty stems from competing or occasionally contradictory information conveyed by traditional mission and vision statements; such descriptors must specifically reinforce your purpose, or they risk doing more harm than good. In short, if your purpose explains why you do what you do every day, your mission outlines what you do and often includes concrete benchmarks you hope to achieve along the way; it is an explicit statement of strategy to be leveraged in furtherance of your purpose. A mission statement may also provide additional context to explain the brand's relationship with the industry in which it exists or clarify ambiguity inherent in the purpose, while the vision statement articulates where you hope your mission will take you in the future. Underpinning each of these are core values: the qualities and behaviours expected from internal stakeholders in order to deliver on your purpose.

In this way, brand purpose flows through every facet of an organisation at its highest levels and should likewise manifest itself in everything a brand does. It provides the essential foundation upon which all other elements are built and should permeate every aspect of the business, from corporate structure to product development, from go-to-market strategy to the customer experience, and from marketing to hiring and beyond. To explore more fully how these foundational principles are created, implemented and disseminated throughout an organisation, consider the following case study developed for Cornerstone Building Brands, a leading manufacturer of residential and commercial exterior building products in North America.

DEVELOPING AN ACTIONABLE PURPOSE: A CORNERSTONE BUILDING BRANDS CASE STUDY

Ply Gem Building Products and NCI Building Systems merged together in November 2018. The nascent organisation gained obvious advantages from consolidation but faced the substantial challenge of aligning its sprawling portfolio of subsidiary companies and constituent sub-brands—comprising over 22,000 employees across North America. Leadership recognised early on the gravity of the task at hand; without a unifying purpose to serve as a lynchpin during this critical period of transition, they could not effectively dismantle existing silos or establish expected behaviours. In order to address these issues and optimally position itself for future growth, the organisation embarked on a journey of open-minded introspection.

Over a period of several months, leadership engaged important stakeholders across a range of strategic initiatives, including workshop sessions, surveys and in-depth, one-on-one interviews to form a clearer understanding of the organisation from the inside out. Questions answered during this stage of the journey ranged from pragmatic ('What makes us different from our competition?') to aspirational ('What does our company truly stand for?'). While stakeholders aligned on the fundamental values and attributes of the organisation, they also recognised the need for transformative change to create a new identity greater than the sum of its parts. This insight confirmed the necessity of developing a new name and branding platform to unite the enterprise around a shared vision for the future—one that could span the breadth of the commercial and residential markets without alienating a single employee. On completion, leadership held a live town

hall meeting to reveal the new corporate brand ('Cornerstone Building Brands') and accompanying logo, purpose statement, mission statement and core values:

Purpose Statement

Our building solutions are the cornerstone of the communities we serve. We believe every building we create, and every part of that building, positively contributes to communities where people live, work and play.

Mission Statement

We are relentlessly committed to our customers and to creating great building solutions that enable communities to grow and thrive. By focusing on operational excellence every day, creating a platform for future growth and investing in market-leading residential and commercial building brands, we deliver unparalleled financial results.

Core Values

Safety

Safety is an essential part of our culture. We approach each day with careful attention to the well-being of every individual. From the moment we leave home to the time we return, we take personal responsibility for our safety and the safety of those around us.

Innovation

We challenge the status quo and proactively seek opportunities for continuous improvement and transformative breakthroughs. We develop products and solutions to meet our customers' evolving needs and improve communities through our commitment to environmental sustainability.

Integrity

We are honest and accountable in our actions with one another and with all our stakeholders, and we strive to build trust at every opportunity. Our commitment to doing what's right underscores everything we do each day.

Teamwork

We work side by side to create an environment of collaboration and mutual respect. Our backgrounds are as varied as our talents, and we stand together as one winning team whose diversity reflects the communities we serve.

The purpose statement neatly conveyed the organisation's value proposition (by bridging the gap between commercial and residential building materials, the new brand touched every type of building, and thus every member of the community)—and created a central ideology all employees could contribute to, regardless of their function, role or stature within the company.

Cornerstone Building Brands prepared a comprehensive launch plan to socialise and reinforce the new name, purpose and fundamental set of values across all internal touchpoints from leadership to middle management to current and prospective employees. These efforts were supplemented through sequential team meetings, an employee ambassador programme, regular physical and digital communications and collateral materials, including intranet, e-mail and newsletter campaigns as well as a series of CEO leadership videos and new signage throughout the company's many offices and manufacturing plants. Employee orders of new branded merchandise via the company store and strong customer retention offer qualitative feedback on the success of the initiative.

The roll-out of the new brand platform strongly aligned not only with the external ambitions of the organisation, but also with its desired behaviours and established beliefs as well. Its purpose ('to contribute to communities where people live, work and play') was further reinforced through the company's actions, such as its annual Home for Good charity programme executed in partnership with Habitat for Humanity (one of the most loved and most trusted charitable brands in the world), as well as country music stars Luke Bryan and Darius Rucker. Dedicated to helping build homes for those in need of affordable housing, the social responsibility programme has to date generated donations totalling more than US \$2m in residential building products and contributed to the construction and remodelling of more than 500 homes in 70 communities across the US.

Objectives for the programme in 2019 included driving awareness of the new Cornerstone Building Brands corporate brand, bringing its purpose to life for customers and communities across the country and building employee engagement with the new brand. To that end, the organisation executed a wide-reaching, purpose-driven marketing campaign to promote the programme; offered paid time off for its employee volunteers; and leveraged its social media platforms to showcase real employees volunteering on-site, including Cornerstone Building Brands CEO Jim Metcalf. The integrated campaign earned over 1 billion potential impressions and drove a 73 per cent increase in web traffic and customer involvement in over 800 distribution locations.

In short, Cornerstone Building Brands recognised the opportunity to build brand equity by fostering strong emotional connections with its internal and external audiences while living its purpose to

contribute to the communities it serves. This purpose-driven strategy produced measurable improvements in employee retention and recruitment by creating a palpable shift in company culture, ensuring the entire organisation had a clear story and message it could relay to external customers and stakeholders across the country and around the world.

Successful branding necessitates a singularity of purpose. All aspects of the brand must be aligned in order to achieve the best results today and to best position the enterprise for success in the future. By putting this philosophy into practice every day and by embracing the power of brands to change the world for the better, businesses can foster powerful connections between their brands and their audience; these connections are predicated on establishing a shared sense of purpose between all parties involved. A meaningful purpose statement provides an organisation with the clarity and guidance needed to overcome the challenges and obstacles that inevitably arise and threaten its business, and only those brands that understand and truly live their purpose will stand the test of time.

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