

DOES YOUR BRAND HAVE BACKBONE? When employees keep you from reaching 'Brand Success'

By Suzanne Tulien, Principal and Co-founder of The Brand Ascension Group

Are your employees on board with your brand? ALL OF THEM? It's a tough but necessary question. We see it all the time; CEOs with a clear understanding of the brand, able to articulate it with charisma and motivation, and yet have it fall on (some) deaf employee ears. How, if any, does this affect the overall efforts in achieving the brand's performance objectives?

What if some employees don't want to "play" on the brand team? Yet, they are crucial for the company (in regards to unique skill sets, tenure, etc.) Does that weigh differently on whether or not the organization should ignore the employees' lack of brand relevant behavior? I mean, really, what real damage could they do to the whole brand?

You'd be surprised. Employees with incongruent brand attitudes can be like the plague within a specific culture. Attitudes that shoot down or negate the positive, brand affirming, relevant ones often stall, degrade and defeat the efforts of the rest of the team. Negative, incongruent attitudes, no matter how slight, invite doubt, inconsistency, and despair into a brand culture. Further, if they're not extinguished in a timely manner, perceptions of the brand internally and externally suffer greatly. Employees truly are a brand's 'backbone.'

CASE IN POINT: We have been facilitating some high-energy "Brand Awareness Events" for a specific client in widely dispersed locations over the past year. This client has been through our Brand DNA methodology to define, create, and build their brand. They are rolling it out with an incrementally phased approach and doing an amazing job over the past two years. (Branding is a process that never ends!) These Brand Awareness Events are designed to reach out to their numerous offices and regions to expose their employees to the brand's attributes. They're also critical to educating and involving employees experientially—in inventing new behaviors that will emulate the brand. We call it "operationalizing" the brand.

In our most recent two day facilitated event to about 150 employees, the client risked a full two days of basically shutting down their operations in a key market so that everyone could participate (Kudos to them!). However, we noticed an interesting dynamic happening in the group. There was a select small group of employees who decided that they would not participate fully in the activities during the event. They all huddled together at one table and shunned the requests to interact and participate in group activities in several different instances. They teamed together to support one another in disregarding what was happening, (because teams are much more powerful than individuals when it comes to persuasion!)

By day two – they were noticeably non-participative and comments from the others (participants) started filtering through such as, "Why don't they have to participate?" "We've all committed to participating, why are they allowed to sit and do nothing?" Their V.P. got wind of this happening and strategically placed himself at the table – but that did nothing to motivate the clan

to begin participating. No discussion, motivation or ultimatum uttered by the V.P. got them to participate.

What was the value in the V.P. moving over to the table if nothing else was done to get them to participate? Did the other tables witness this? What message does that give to the rest of the culture? When this message seeps through to the rest of the culture and becomes known as a “standard way of operating”, then that is when the “plague” begins to spread! At some point the perception of “it’s o.k. that I don’t participate, even when I am asked,” needs to be dealt with or the entire culture will crumble, not to mention the degradation of the brand they have been trying to build!

This client spent a lot of money not only on the training, but the hotel, the food, the awards night event, the lodging of its employees, and more! Is that not enough to expect the full participation of the employees they’ve hired to partake in this brand-building event? Why is it so difficult to correct undesirable behavior? Have we lost the sense of worthiness to brand management? Do we not understand the huge implications of this tiny act?

This is the beginning of a dangerous situation in any business culture—especially, when the event is themed around building the company’s brand. And that in the beginning of the event, they all committed to five specific agreements to participate, yet who was responsible for making sure that was happening? It was partially the facilitators – which we did address, but MOSTLY it is the responsibility of the REST OF THE TEAM. ALL are brand representatives, ALL are charged with upholding and managing the essence of the brand.

When companies take the time to create cultures that are proud of its brand, and feel the compelling need to protect it and the culture that supports it – they grow exponentially! Too little effort, in my opinion is given to training employees on what the brand means and how it should be expressed and managed through EVERY behavior. Take a look at The Ritz Carlton, they spend over 300 hours of training on each and every employee, and continue the training throughout the lifetime of the employee. Starbucks, also fanatical about their people—constantly provide brand training for their “partners” to continue to affirm the brand’s essence – consistently!

No amount of money in the marketing budget could affect a brand’s growth when their employees continue to weaken its backbone by not living and breathing the brand’s true essence!

A brand is a living, breathing entity that exudes specific, well crafted perceptions through its products, and services, and especially the behaviors of its employees. Good brands become GREAT BRANDS when they make a decision and commitment towards managing the tolerance of the brand’s DNA (see more about the Brand DNA methodology at www.BrandAscension.com/Consulting.html) through their people – first and foremost, their brand’s champions!



ARTICLE

About the Author

Suzanne Tulien, Principal & co-founder of The Brand Ascension Group, is author of "The 6 Myths of Small Business Branding" and a regular contributor of articles to blogs, newsletters, and magazine publications on the topic of internal branding. Headquartered in Colorado Springs, CO, USA The Brand Ascension Group is a multi-faceted, consulting, training, and design firm who works with visionary organizations to define, create, and build powerful brand experiences from the inside out!

For more information contact:

The Brand Ascension Group

Website: www.BrandAscension.com

Email: suzanne@BrandAscension.com

Phone: 1.719.265.1707