

Sustainable branding

The single-minded “big idea” has long been the holy grail of the brand industry. Building a strong service brand calls for a greater focus on organisational values and behaviour. Geoff Dodds examines a new approach to creating a more sustainable, values driven brand.

The professional services industry has an uneasy relationship with the “brand” word at the best of times. The prevailing view is that brand equates to one or all of logo, communications and spin. It’s something you only have to do occasionally. And it’s almost always associated with high expense and rather flaky consultants. At best it invites scepticism. At worst, and most often, cynicism.

One trait of the industry that has perhaps contributed to this reputation is its fixation on finding a single-minded idea that characterises the organisation and that can be used as a rallying cry for brand alignment.

On the one hand, the single-minded idea is necessary to cut through the communications clutter that surrounds every market. It is also the essential point of focus that creates a distinctive position for your brand in the minds of your target audience. Volvo owns safety. Orange owns optimism. Apple owns user friendliness.

On the other hand, it risks over-simplification of the business. It’s tough for partners to accept that their business can be summed up in a word or short phrase. And it’s hard to define how the idea can relate to the daily tasks of every person in the firm.

The “brand idea” is necessary, but on its own is not enough. The solution is to go deeper.

Brand alignment

Creating a strong brand is largely about alignment. All the pieces of the business – its products and services, its environment, its communications and identity and its behaviour – are aligned behind a central position that is meaningful to the customer and different from its competitors. In a service business, the critical aspect is behaviour.

In an organisation of talented and strong-minded individuals, aligning behaviour to a consistent template is challenging, to say the least. Behaviour is driven by values, both personal and organisational. People come together with their own set of values. Understandably, they resist any attempt to conform to a different set of values that someone else has “made up”.

At the same time, many leaders would like to use organisational values to encourage greater consistency of behaviour, but are put off by the difficulties of dealing with a so called “soft issue” in the face of demands for a focus on harder commercial measures, such as utilisation, realisation, profit per partner etc.

There are two key questions.

The first is how to move values from being a soft issue to being a hard issue, so that they can take their rightful place in the toolkit of hard commercial drivers essential to any successful service business.

The second is how to align the personal values of your workforce, including leaders and partners, with the values of the organisation and the desired brand position? Or to put it another way, how can you become the brand your people want you to be? It's all very well to aspire to an idea created by a brand agency, but how much more powerful to aspire to an idea that not only differentiates in the market, but also fits the aims and beliefs of your people. That's sustainable branding.

How to achieve this?

The answer lies in a top down and bottom up approach. On the one hand, you are trying to create a brand that fits perfectly with the organisation's mission, vision and strategy and that carves out a distinctive competitive position. On the other, you are trying to create a brand that reflects a strong, well-aligned culture. The ideal is a perfect fit between the two.

The first part is relatively well trodden by brand professionals and calls for conventional approaches, involving:

- Mission and vision development
- Strategic review
- Competitive review
- Brand definition

Dealing with culture is more difficult and merits a new approach, in which values are measured and made tangible.

Values assessment

A number of values assessment tools exist. Among the most effective are the Cultural Transformation Tools (CTT), developed by Richard Barrett Associates. These give much deeper insights into an organisation's values than would be possible through conventional qualitative interviews. They also provide a unique perspective on how values are balanced across the different stakeholders – company, clients, employees and community.

The starting point is to be able to measure the current position – what drives your employees and how would the current organisational culture be described?

Three questions need to be answered.

1. What values are your people (including leaders and partners) bringing with them to work? What are their personal values?
2. What are the current values of the organisation? The real values not the espoused ones.
3. What values do your people believe the organisation should have in the future, for it to achieve its highest performance?

Once you have the data on each of these questions, you can begin to look at:

- The degree to which the current culture aligns (or not) with the personal values of the people who make up that culture
- The degree of change required to create a culture that better fits the aspirations of the workforce
- The kinds of organisational values you need to adopt in order better to align with the personal values of the workforce.

Cultural Transformation Tools

The Cultural Transformation Tools are easily applied. A Corporate Values Assessment can be administered on line to the entire workforce and consists of three simple questions that take about 15-20 minutes to answer:

- Which of the following values and behaviours most represent who you are, not who you desire to become?
- Which of the following values and behaviours most reflect how your organisation currently operates?
- Which of the following values and behaviours in your opinion are essential for your organisation to achieve its highest performance?

In each case, the respondent is asked to select their top 10 values.

This may sound almost too easy. The reality is quite challenging. To select the top 10 values from a list of 80-90 takes some thought and involves the respondent in making some tough choices. The resulting outputs are rich. Especially valuable is the ability to cut the data by level, practice group, geography etc.

The primary output is a detailed report, at the core of which is a chart like this.



Flexite: Values Plots (50)

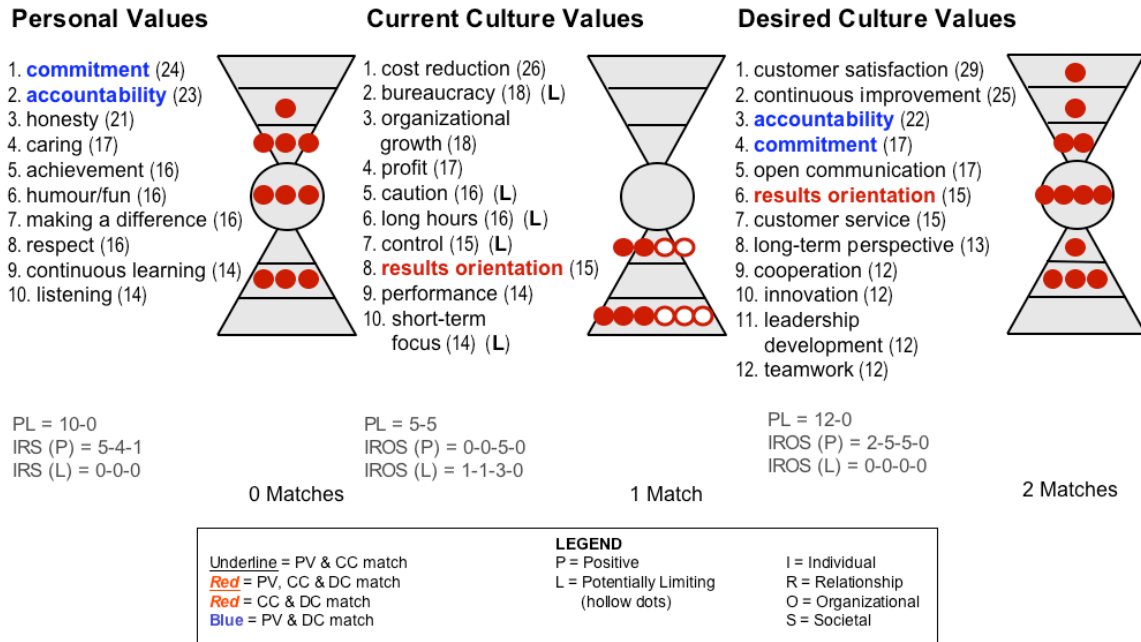


Figure 1

Stay with me – it's not as painful as it looks. It shows the top ten values for the people in the organisation, the perceived top ten current organisational values and the top ten desired organisational values. These data provide the stimulus for a conversation about alignment.

What is immediately apparent in the case of Flexite is the significant mismatch between the values of the people in the organisation and their perception of the current organisational values. The top three personal values of commitment, accountability and honesty contrast starkly with the top three organisational values, which these people are experiencing at work, of cost reduction, bureaucracy and organisational growth. In short, the employees are effectively prevented from bringing their real selves to work.

What they are seeking is an organisation that displays values more closely matched to their own. The top three desired values are customer satisfaction, continuous improvement and accountability. They want to replace the potentially limiting values of short term focus, control, long hours, caution and bureaucracy with long term perspective, teamwork, cooperation, open communication, innovation and customer service.

Imagine the power of letting that happen.

Values driven organisations

Central to the CTT approach is the concept of the “Seven levels of consciousness” (see figure 2). The label may sound a little “new age”. In truth, it’s disarmingly straightforward.

Simply put, it classifies values according to a hierarchy based on Maslow, where level 1 represents survival values and level 7 the highest order of community service, with varying shades in between. In effect, the first three levels equate to Maslow and his fourth level of self-actualisation is further broken down into levels 4-7.

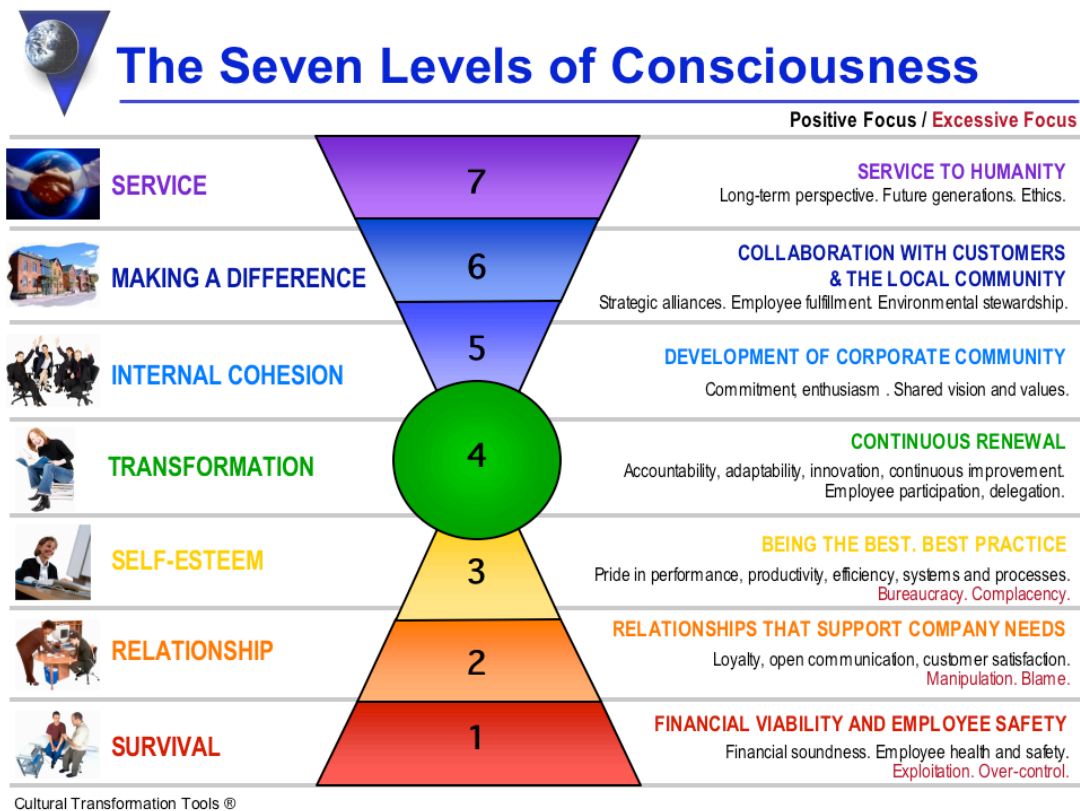


Figure 2

There is strong evidence in the public domain (Kotter and Heskett, Collins and Porras) that those companies which have strong, adaptive cultures based on shared values outperform other companies by a significant margin. Who you are and what you stand for is becoming just as important as the quality of products and services you provide. This adds a further dimension to the definition of the ideal brand and its degree of sustainability.

Those companies which maintain a focus on satisfaction of all their key stakeholders – clients, staff, company and community – are arguably the companies with the most sustainable brands. The John Lewis Partnership, to name but one.

Bringing it together

The real advantage of the values assessment is that it makes tangible what was previously regarded as a soft issue. It brings a level of rigour to the measurement of culture that previously either didn't exist or at best was hard to get your arms around. Given that culture is increasingly the principal source of competitive advantage for professional services firms, this is an invaluable tool for brand development. It opens up a much more specific discussion about alignment than was previously possible.

So we have a tool which enables a more accurate assessment of the kind of organisational values that would better fit the profile of the people working there - the bottom up approach. How much faith should we put in that as against the top down approach, which is driven by vision and strategy? How can the two be brought together?

Having taken both views, there is a point at which you have to face up to the alignment between the brand as defined by your mission, vision and strategy and the brand proposed by your desired culture. Culture should support strategy. If the top down process has been equally rigorous, the outputs of the two approaches should complement each other. If not, you're faced with the question of whether you have the wrong strategy or the wrong culture.

I think I know where I'd place my bet.

For more information on the Cultural Transformation Tools, contact Geoff Dodds Consultants

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