

WHITE PAPER

Designing Authentic Connections to Form A Complete Brand Ecosystem

by **Jamey Boiter**



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Why Do We Brand?

Why don't we just make everything the same? There are legitimate, tangible reasons why companies brand themselves, their products, and their services. To be recognizable, to differentiate themselves, to be unique, to create value, to build equity, and to sell and market. All good reasons. There have been scores of blogs, articles, and white papers on the merits of branding and how you should brand. They deal primarily with the strategy and/or tactics of creating a brand. I've written several myself. But there's a deeper, more emotional

and psychological reason out there of why we are drawn to companies, products, and services that brand themselves in certain ways. It is a tribal impulse. It is about community. It is about culture. And it is about behavior.

In this article I explore a few reasons why we brand and the cause and effect of designing authentic connections between people and big ideas that create a complete brand ecosystem.

Let's start with need. We, as individuals, need to belong. We have an instinctual desire to be connected to others whose

ideas are similar to our own. This starts at a very young age. Family. Friends. Teams. These early interactions begin to teach us how and why to connect with ideas that are attractive to us. Ideas that make us feel good about ourselves and each other, and the idea itself.

We are attracted to brands for the same reason. Because the brand says something about us and our association with the company, product, or service the brand represents. We purchase items for functional need, but we desire them for the emotional connection. If the functional need outweighs the emotional connection, we may settle for a brand other than the one we desire. But often, the emotional connection can outweigh the functional need, and we purchase purely on desire. Communicating clearly and simply why your brand exists and what it stands for may be the most important mission your organization can undertake.

The ultimate goal is to design brand experiences that come through at every touchpoint. To create those authentic connections between your offering and your customer. A brand ecosystem allows the emotive qualities of the brand to extend up to and beyond the functional needs of your customers, so that your offering is unique, ownable, believable, desirable, defensible, and sustainable. But in order to pass all those tests, your brand must have purpose and be aligned with your business goals. That is how these brand experiences influence culture and change behavior positively toward your brand. Simple, right?

What is Brand?

To build a brand ecosystem, we must first commit to a definition of "brand." We prescribe to a lengthy explanation, because the concept of brand is complicated. *Brand: The sum total of all visual and non-visual, verbal and non-verbal, tangible and non-tangible elements that help to identify, form, create, and influence unique and positive associations for a product, service, or entity, that differentiates it from its competition, creating meaning, value, and preference in one's mind.*

To say that it is anything less does not do justice to the importance of a brand. It is an asset to your business with the influence to shape and mold the perception of your company, product, and people. A brand exists to visually and verbally connect ideas and people. Hopefully, ideas that people will love.



The Ecosystem

So how do you manage this? Just as our environment has an ecosystem where survival and proliferation requires symbiotic relationships and cooperation between elements and entities, so does your brand. Aligning those elements [in this case, business, brand, and behavior] is imperative to maintaining a brand ecosystem that will thrive and grow. Consider your business vision and purpose or mission. How do they align with your brand promise? They should be reflective of one another. What are your core values or guiding principles? These are behavior drivers. They too must be aligned with the promise of the brand. In essence, the brand should be used as a filter to guide every part of your organization—from operations, finance, and product development to customer service, human resources, sales, and marketing.

Your brand provides lanes with guard rails in which your business travels. The tighter the focus, the narrower the lanes. Immersing your brand ecosystem in every aspect of your business nurtures consistency and continuity. In message and behavior. And by treating your staff, employees, shareholders, and even the board, as customers, you create brand experiences that will transform them into brand ambassadors.

Elements of the Brand Ecosystem

If your brand is to drive behavioral change through designed brand experiences, it must be present in all areas of your business. Communicating the brand promise at every touchpoint.

Use your brand as a filter to align your business' goals with your brand strategy and purpose in order to influence behavior and instill value and meaning. Here are some areas of your organization to do that:



1. Brand in the Boardroom

Make sure that every conversation regarding your business goals, strategies, and tactics includes a review of how they align with your brand foundation—your purpose, your promise, your personality, your pillars, and your positioning. If they don't, that may be an early flag that you're off target. Or the idea is wrong for your business. Your brand should influence behavior—both internal business decisions and external customer decisions. A full integration of your brand strategy into your business plan will unleash its full potential and allow for discovery of latent opportunities in how your brand can serve your business more fully. But this approach can't stop at the boardroom door. What happens next is critical to the successful integration of your brand.

2. Brand as Part of Your Internal and External Culture

In performance reviews and casual office corridor chats, discuss your brand with employees. Culture and behavior come from the top. Think of the powerful influence that entrepreneurs such

as Steve Jobs and Richard Branson have had on their brands' culture and behavior. The brand's DNA is set with the attitude among top executives. That attitude trickles down to every employee. Make sure it matches the promise and purpose of the brand. And is then communicated with clarity. But be sure to listen, too.

Often employees are the "canaries in the coal mine" that identify a shift in or movement of cultural behavior. Brand experiences are not just limited to your customers. Very often, the best brand experiences start with your internal teams. How they communicate, collaborate, and interact is typically a great indicator of how much they care about your brand. Design brand experiences that are meaningful and valuable to your associates. Creating an environment that your employees love produces a brand that your employees love. Allow them to own the brand emotionally. This leads to converting every employee into a brand ambassador. How they respect and converse about their brand—socially and professionally—can have huge rewards.

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3. Brand as Part of Human Resources

What part does HR play in your brand? You should only be hiring personnel that reflect the qualities and ideals of your behavioral goals and principles, and can display those qualities in their work. Make sure that prospective employees feel their value and why the brand exists from the very first interaction. This begins to develop the cultural response you want your employees to have and feel. How the employment ad is written should reflect the personality of the brand and the type of personality you want to hire. The call-back should be as inviting as the ad. The interview should reflect how the employee will be treated and how you expect them to treat others, both inside and outside of your organization.

Have you ever decided not to buy a product or service, even though you wanted it, simply because of how you were treated on the phone or in the store? That was a brand experience. It influenced your behavior through the employee's inability to communicate the values you were expecting from that brand, resulting in a lost customer.

Conversely, have you ever made a purchase particularly because of the way you were treated, even though you knew there was a better product out there? Because brand experience was just too convenient, too compelling, too enjoyable to resist. You may say that's just good customer service. Indeed it is, but that's also experiential behavior influenced by the brand's ecosystem, aligned with the goals of the business for the benefit of the brand and the delight of the customer. In fact, according to a McKinsey study, 70% of buying experiences are based on how the customer feels they are being treated.

4. Brand as Part of Your Product Development Process

A recent survey identified the most successful companies on Wall Street have been design-led companies. Being design-led ties the brand to the products and services. Are your industrial designers and engineers working hand-in-hand with your marketing team? Is there a visual brand language for your

product line that reflects the core pillars of your brand? Would your customers recognize your products as being yours even without the packaging and logo? If not, it may be time for a re-immersion session with your product development team into the core promise and pillars of your brand. Why it exists and what it stands for. Successful product development depends on gathering and applying brand insights into the form and function of the product design. Complemented by the integration of your brand into every touchpoint. Your product is often the most enduring impression of your brand. They need to be in *simpatico*.

5. Brand as Part of Customer Service

Put yourself in your customers' shoes for a day. How does your company respond to questions, concerns, or problems with your products? Swiftly? With a clear, strong voice reflective of your brand's foundation? Are your waiting rooms pleasantly appointed with current technology? Is customer satisfaction distinctly measurable? Do your customers speak directly to a representative when there's an issue or to a recording? So often the only personal interaction a customer will have with your brand is through your customer service. Or your receptionist. These employees' understanding of your brand's promise could mean the difference between a customer for life or an ex-customer with an ax to grind. Making certain that your customer service is delivered with empathy will allow your employees to personally deliver the promise of your brand. Think about how you feel about your brand. Do they feel the same way? Designing the customer service experience with your brand in mind will lead to greater customer satisfaction, word-of-mouth referrals, and customer preference.

6. Brand as a Function of Sales & Marketing

Traditionally, Marketing was the producer and the keeper of the brand, and Sales was the seller of it. Marketing is still a good place for the brand to call home and should be the primary steward of the brand, ensuring the consistency of message and providing the tools for which the brand will be fostered, nurtured, and sold.

Sales' job is to not only sell the brand and its products, but also perhaps more important, to protect the integrity of the brand. As the customer-facing entity of the organization, Sales has a unique opportunity and responsibility to protect the brand and its assets. Understanding the purpose and the promise of the brand are paramount to accurately communicating its meaning and value to your company's constituents. Explaining who the

brand is for, and who it is not for, helps keep the brand aligned with your business goals. Sales also communicates insights back to the organization to ensure the relevance of the brand and report on how it is connecting with outside customers.

7. Brand as Part of Operations, Legal & Finance

Ok, so now you're wondering how your brand can influence Operations, Legal, and Finance. Simple. The people. Your people are the connective tissue between your brand and your organization. We're back to the tribal thing. The idea of belonging. Happy employees are good employees. It's the exchange of abundance concept. Your employees should be the best advertising, ambassadors, and salespeople of your brand. They should represent your brand with pride in the way they work, the products they turn out, how they report, and how they influence. If an idea is presented to you with an opportunity to connect with it and participate in its growth and evolution, you will take ownership of the idea—you will believe in it. And isn't that what you want from your associates? For them to take an ownership role in everything they do for the organization. It ensures excellence. It commands respect. It defines the culture.

It is often said that the product you produce is one of the most enduring reflections of your brand. But we believe your people may be the most enduring reflection of your brand. When you create a system in which your brand is allowed to flow throughout the organization, it will feed off of and nurture the everyday moments that matter (brand experiences)—both inward and outward facing. This system will keep your business goals aligned with your brand strategy so that your brand is influencing each of those moments and will set in motion the development of a brand ecosystem. One that will be unique, ownable, desirable, believable, defensible, and sustainable. For years to come. ■



MEET JAMEY

As BOLTGROUP's brand principal for over 25 years, Jamey Boiter leads all brand strategy, design, and experience teams. He has been a featured speaker at national conferences and college campuses, a writer on the subject of brand strategy, design, and experience, and a featured blogger for Fast Company. Jamey has served on the Executive Advisory Board for the Charlotte Chapter of AIGA, and is currently serving on the Advisory Board for CPCC Advertising + Design.