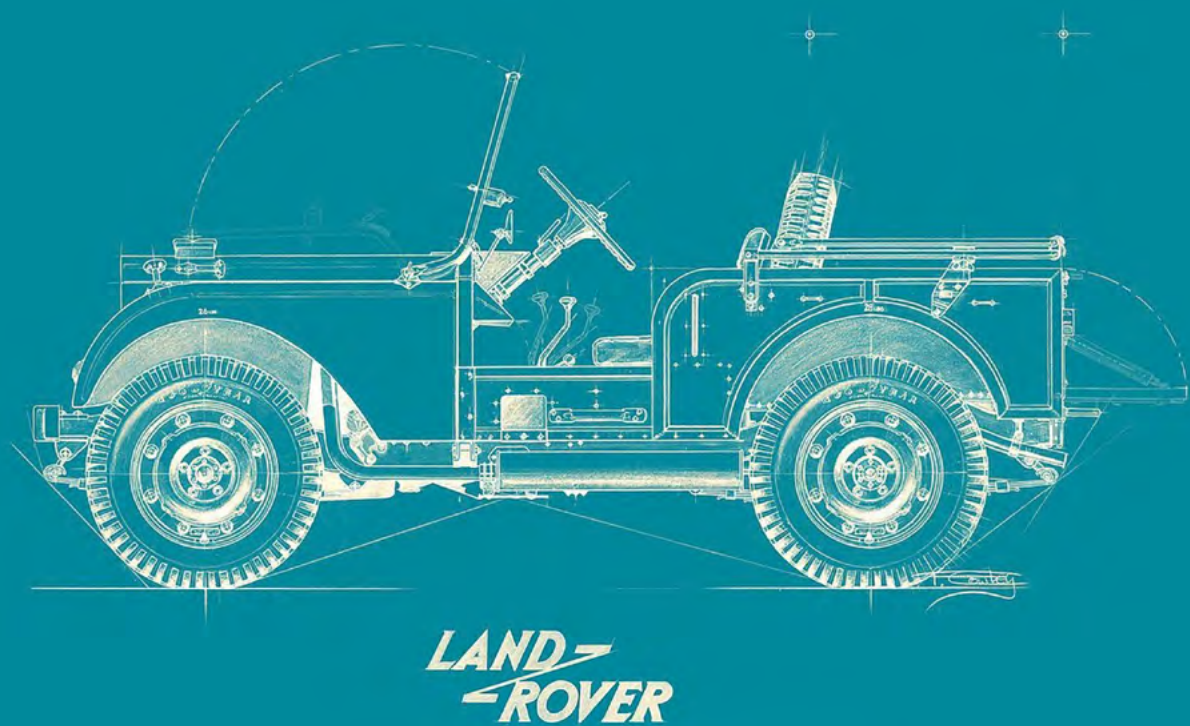


WHITE PAPER

What Is a Brand Experience? And Why Is It So Important Today?

by **Jamey Boiter**



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“Most brands fail. Not in the design. They fail in the delivery. To achieve brand traction, companies must first win the hearts and minds of their employees. Of whom fewer than 1/3 know how their job affects brand success.

Brands must escape the communication silo, using targeted internal marketing campaigns. That coordinate relevant behaviors across 100s of brand touchpoints. That empower brand ambassadors, convert agnostics, and weed out antagonists. Across the entire organization. Because

ultimately, people—not advertising—deliver the brand. And the bottom line.”

-- Nader Tavassoli, Professor of Marketing,
London Business School

Professor Tavassoli is talking about creating moments that matter for the brand. Moments where the exchange of brand is abundant. Daily communications are full of openings that can be imbued with branded content, creating brand touchpoints. These moments become brand experiences. But brand

experiences begin at home. They begin with your employees. Internally. They influence behavior that can then be turned outward toward the marketplace as focused, intentional brand experiences.

I recently witnessed the irony of the brand experience firsthand. We were in Las Vegas at a couple of huge trade shows. Vegas is the land of the brand experience—restaurants, hotels, attractions—all vying for your attention. And your money. They go to incredible lengths to position themselves above their competition. Employing all means available to create an experience that is emotional, sensory, and connects their customers with their brand. Sound, smell, lighting, messaging, ambience, and action, all choreographed to trigger a response based on the pillars of the brand. The goal is that the next time you visit, or when you recommend a must-have Vegas experience, their brand is front of mind. We actually had such a moment with a restaurant waiter at The Venetian. His humor, depth, breadth of knowledge, and desire to facilitate a pleasant evening did not go unnoticed. He even suggested dishes not on the menu and made sure we were not rushed. The meal would have been great regardless, but he made the experience special. And he didn't have to. He had a captive audience. But he genuinely wanted to. And it showed. It appeared effortless, and was supported by all the other physical, visual, and verbal properties of the experience. That's the trick.

Compare that to our trudging the endless aisles and miles of the tradeshow, barely being able to find a single brand experience that stood out. There were a few. Maybe. But none that left me wanting more. Or connecting with me on an emotional level. Or creating a desire to buy a product. I will say it was a target-rich environment for BOLTGROUP, because I know we could offer tremendous help to a lot of them. But they didn't even see it. All of these visceral brand experiences surrounding them and the vibe at their own booth—blah.

Last month I **blogged** about the unfortunate dismantling [over time] of Virgin America after its merger with Alaska Airlines. The most recognized brand experience airline on the planet is going to be shelved. Where is the value in that? As companies and brands, do we even understand what a brand experience is? And how it can dramatically and positively affect the bottom-line?

At BOLTGROUP, we define a brand experience as: "The intentional design of moments that physically, visually, and verbally integrate into people's lives and their lifestyle, expressing the purpose, positioning, and pillars of the brand, and triggering an emotional response—ultimately a positive

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behavioral change toward the brand." But how do you get there? And where do you start? You start, and finish, with people.

As CEO, you want to make sure that all your associates are brand ambassadors. Even brand evangelists. And you want each and every interaction to be a brand experience for your customers. To Professor Tavassoli's point, this exchange of brand abundance is what converts the brand agnostics and weeds out the antagonists. Each person comes to understand that their words and actions build your company's brand culture through these intentionally designed brand experiences. The results are measurable. And if done correctly, sustainable.

Ed Holme recently wrote about **five imperatives** to intentionally design brand experiences that build brand value. They are:

- 1. Have a deep and critical understanding of your brand.**
- 2. Know the current perception of your brand in the minds of your audiences.**
- 3. Know the parameters of your brand's value proposition to these audiences.**
- 4. Know every step of your audiences' journey with your brand.**
- 5. Gain the expertise to design and deliver the desired brand experiences.**

Each of these imperatives have an internal and an external component and focus. Let's unpack a few to see how they can be applied to your various constituents to build brand experiences that equate meaning, create value, and drive preference.



Know Your Brand from the Inside Out.

It really can't be overstated. Do your employees understand and embrace the purpose of your brand? In a conversation at a cocktail party, can they articulate why the brand exists, and what the most compelling truths are? Being able to communicate the why behind the brand can elevate the meaning and value of the brand in the minds of your potential customers, consumers, shareholders, and even your competition. Every employee can and should be an ambassador for your brand, delivering the positive messages of why. And every employee has an audience, whether they know it or not. The conversations you have with suppliers, vendors, creditors, or other employees in turn have a huge impact on how their personal customers perceive the brand. Understanding current perceptions of your brand allows them to elevate the conversation and focus on the value proposition for each of their customers. This is then amplified and reflected through personal interaction with the brand. Using your product, shopping the environment, and researching your brand online are all tangible ways to deepen and reinforce the communication of the brand in even a casual conversation. Being consistent in every detail presents and delivers the brand with truth, transparency, and authenticity.

Know Your Customer's Journey from the Inside Out.

If you think your brand is right for every single person on the planet, you're wrong. No brand is right for everyone. But knowing who your customers are and what their complete journey toward your brand entails, will allow you to engage their passion and enthusiasm even more. Have you ever shopped for your brand? I'm talking about full customer empathy. Identifying a need state, then beginning the journey to research, discover, and ultimately experience your brand? From the customer perspective? You might find it's missing a thing or two that could make your proposition more compelling than your competition's. There are brands people buy based on experience even more than need. This is where the value is personally measured and the preference becomes legitimate. Understanding your constituents and how they come to your brand will give your team the insights to influence positive behavior toward your brand.



Deliver the Brand Through Every Single Touchpoint.

Alyssa recently wrote about how **sweating the details of the brand experience** can make all the difference, and how capturing human senses through sight, language, sound, and smell can be just the differentiator your brand needs to stand out and command preference. Expressing the truth of the brand at every touchpoint is how to capture mind and market share. As I've said before, the truth rarely needs a lot of adjectives or hyperbole to be described. But rich visual and verbal storytelling around the truth of the brand can be fulfilling, satisfying, and full of flavor. Especially when the senses are brought into it.

Everyone has a favorite brand. And probably a rich story that goes with that brand to solidify its meaning, value, and preference in their mind. We all know the Disney brand experience. The delight it puts on millions of faces annually. The many touchpoints the brand has available with which to arouse delight. There is so much about the Disney brand experience that is sensory, yet seamless. Did you know that the Disney World consumers experience on a daily basis is actually not at ground level? It is elevated one or more stories to provide throughways for employees, vendors, clean-

up crews, and emergency equipment. They are never seen coming or going, but their effect is experienced. And just try and buy a stick of gum in the theme park. Won't happen. They don't sell gum and thereby keep their pristine avenues virtually gum free. These are all intentionally designed moments to help create an overall brand experience guests can cherish forever.

So, What's Your Favorite Brand?

Think about it. Mine is Land Rover. Above and Beyond. What is it about Land Rover that draws me in, more than any other SUV brand? I've owned other SUVs. The car I learned to drive in was my parent's Jeep Grand Wagoneer. Then about 12 years ago, I bought a Land Rover. I'd always dreamed of one. You know, the old Defender 110, like you see on Safari or racing through the desert toward Dakar? I find comfort in the whole traditional British Isles countryside thing. (Along with Duck Boots, a Barbour jacket, and a good dog.) That's a mental place I find very relaxing. One I can go to just driving my Land Rover, even in the city. So, for me, Land Rover has lived up to a value and ideal—above and beyond the product. They've been able to paint a picture for me and create an ongoing brand experience.

The Land Rover brand visually and verbally embodies its tag line—Above and Beyond. The printed materials are beautiful to peruse and present on your desk. The paper stock is a premium sheet and tactile. The photography, the videos on the website, and the storytelling are all imbued with the same mental images I've carried around for many years. The product reflects all the attributes in its finishes and British accent. Even the physicality of the dealerships. The older ones look like Alpine Ski Lodges and have big boulders out front that you can actually drive up and over in a test drive. The newer ones are clad with sleek gunmetal grey horizontal



panels and big chamfered windows—giving them a precision, machined design look, much like their newer line of vehicles. The customer service is a brand experience all on its own. I'm always greeted and treated very well. There is a loaner on hand. A quick call when my Land Rover is ready. The technician comes out to explain what he did and why. For me, there's truth, transparency, authenticity, simplicity, and clarity in the brand. It does not pretend to be something. It's the real deal. It's aspiring. Land Rover even has a new sustainability program called Waste to Waves where they recycle the foam and plastic used in making car models into professional grade surfboards.

When you are able to connect with a brand, as in my case, it often becomes a tribal thing. You feel a kinship to other brand aficionados. You share certain values and ideals. There is a connection with them you really can't explain. The brand experience has elevated the meaning, value, and preference for that brand. That experience is brought to you by people, through design and communication.

So, how can you apply these tools to create more compelling and consistent brand experiences? Think about everyone in your organization knowing the brand from the inside out. Think about everyone in the organization knowing their customer's journey from the inside out. And think about delivering the brand through every single touchpoint. Inside and out. Your brand is one of the most valuable assets you have. Because no one else has it. It's what you do with it that will make it your customers' favorite brand experience.



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.