

WHITE PAPER

Why Building a Brand Culture is Critical Today

by **Jamey Boiter**



Recently, I had the pleasure to guest lecture at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. My audience was third- and fourth-year BFA candidates, all working on their exhibit / environmental design track. I talked to them about brand culture because I believe it's critical to the work they'll do. We discussed how a strong brand culture can and should influence their design. That, as designers, they have the ability to push understanding of what a brand stands for at every single customer touchpoint: floor plan, reflective ceiling plan, environmental graphics, wayfinding, furniture, fixtures

and equipment, supportive collateral, and signage. But to communicate understanding, you must first understand the brand yourself.

As CEO, you want all your associates laser-focused on your brand. To do that, they must know what they're looking for and how to communicate it. Each person should understand that their words and actions will build your company's brand culture through brand experiences.

Purpose is First

Let's start with this premise: A brand must have purpose to exist. The purpose of that brand should have meaning. That meaning creates value, and that value drives preference. So, brand culture starts inside your company. This is where the brand ecosystem is built, and where a brand culture is ultimately curated.

What are some of your favorite brands? (In addition to your own brand.) It could be a car brand, a fashion brand, a tool brand, a food or beverage brand, a hotel or destination brand, or whatever speaks to you. What is it about those brands that attracts you? What characteristics draw you in and connect with you personally? My guess is they all embody truth, transparency, and authenticity. And they do it with simplicity and clarity. It's what I call TTASC in the brand (Truth, Transparency, Authenticity, Simplicity, Clarity). Most companies have TTASC somewhere, but few project it in their brand so well that they've developed a culture around it. This is what separates ordinary brands from great brands.

Tell Your Story

The truth rarely needs a lot of adjectives or hyperbole to be understood. However, storytelling around your brand truth can be rich, satisfying, and full of flavor. Even though individuals are completely unique, your story allows people to connect with your brand through a deeper understanding—creating almost a tribal sense of belonging. You feel a kinship with fellow brand enthusiasts that you can't really explain. That's when the brand ecosystem is working. It creates meaning, value, and preference—brands that people love.

So how can your brand develop this culture that begins internally and extends to your outfacing audience? A culture that elevates the value and preference of your brand?

Peel Back the Onion

An onion is the perfect analogy for a brand because it works as a metaphor for social penetration. Your public self is on the outside and your private self on the inside. Peeling it back, layer by layer, exposes more and more of the authenticity, truth and transparency that exists within. Each layer should be an experience, revealing more and more of the truth. The same is true for a brand. Authentic expression is effortless. It's a story that wants to be told.

The people who surround the brand can help get the story out through their cultural behavior and outward support for the brand's foundational purpose. They become brand ambassadors, even brand evangelists. This is critical to

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brand success today. It is the brand's job to peel the onion, exposing its meaning, beliefs, and values, so they are seen and embraced by the public. To soften the company exterior so people can see its heart—the deeper purpose, meaning and value of the brand.

Nourish Your Ecosystem

I published a white paper about a year ago on developing a **brand ecosystem** within your company. At BOLTGROUP, we believe the most powerful and successful brands share several important elements. One of the most compelling is that their people—employees, associates, staff—all unite in common values, ideals, and likely a passion for their brand. It is THEIR brand. This spirit of engagement and ownership that resonates with outside customers and consumers is measurably greater in successful brands. These brand ambassadors not only have a greater respect for themselves and the performance of their jobs, but also for their company and the products they make. It is well documented.

The **2013 Edelman Trust Barometer** says, “Employees rank higher in public trust than a firm's PR department, CEO, or Founder. 41% of us believe that employees are the most credible source of information regarding their business.”

So, the brand experience your top employees create with the customers they touch or the products they produce is key to the success of your brand.



Here's How It's Done

Let's look at a few examples of brand culture emanating from inside a company that transform all beliefs and ideals—visual, verbal, designed expressions—into full-blown brand experiences on the outside.

Texas-based grocer H-E-B cares so much about their customers that they recently went on high-alert with the landfall of Hurricane Harvey. They immediately dispatched a team of more than 100 employees to assist with the disaster relief. They had even built their own disaster relief units—45-foot semi-trailers equipped with full kitchens and food to serve 2,500 hot meals per hour. Additionally, they provided dry ice, bottled water, and dry goods. H-E-B never charged a penny for ice during the disaster, and even set up a mobile pharmacy to help with emergency medical needs. But they didn't stop there. They had mobile business service units for displaced residents to cash checks and pay bills, complete with an ATM. Why? Because H-E-B values their people. And their people believe in their brand. And their brand believes in doing the right thing: "Because People Matter".

Apple is another example. Think about the metamorphosis of Apple over the past 20 years. Before 1997, if you were a proud Apple / Mac devotee, you were on the outside. Non-conformist,

a rogue. You were likely creative or involved in a creative or educational field. Then came "Think Different". Steve Jobs returned from the wilderness and reasserted himself and his vision upon the company. And the brand. Apple's purpose had always been to "empower creative exploration and self-expression." It never said it had to be a computer ... that was simply the expressive conduit of the true beliefs and values of the brand. Consistently accomplished through a visual brand language that was, and is, authentic. Apple retail stores are a perfect example of brand consistency (not conformity). Clean, simple, minimal design, with a backdrop that celebrates the Apple brand through every associate. You see employees of every shape, creed, size, age, and color—unique individuals all sharing a common passion. Today, Apple products are the most ubiquitous devices in the world. And today, Apple is the most valued brand in the world. So much for being a rogue. Apple has become a brand culture with a tribe of millions.



FOX Rehabilitation, a BOLTGROUP client, is another excellent example of brand culture. FOX is the largest clinician-owned private practice of physical, occupational, and speech therapy focused on older adults. FOX believes that people are strong—all people. And that optimal aging should be a right, not a privilege. They also are dedicated to the abolition of ageism. The FOX brand culture is exceptionally strong because the brand is built upon these inherent truths in why the brand exists. Their clinicians and associates work as a unified team to provide evidence-based results, always embracing the culture of respect for people. All people. Clinicians. Clients. Support staff. Partners.

We recently launched the new FOX Rehabilitation [website](#). It is steeped in the brand and culture. The site celebrates clients' successes and clinician passion. With truth, transparency, authenticity, simplicity, and clarity.

Other brands that stand out as having TTASC and projecting their brand culture outwardly are: Warby Parker, Shinola, Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, Land Rover, and Chick-fil-A. Have a look and see what you think.

7 Steps to Building and Projecting an Authentic Brand Culture

1. First and foremost, engage your employees culturally.
2. Help your employees grow from brand ambassadors to brand evangelists.
3. Provide training with the brand through mentors and use internal tools like a **Brand and Culture Field Guide**.
4. Offer incentives and rewards. Allow associates to wear or use your product every day.
5. Encourage authentic messaging from them—not just the marketing department—through an intentional social media strategy.
6. Celebrate each and every individual who passionately communicates what they love about your brand. Consistency, not conformity.
7. Take every opportunity to turn a customer transaction into a brand experience, from answering the phone, to delivering a message, to chatting around the water cooler.

To know your brand is to learn from it. Let the purpose, meaning, and value of your brand guide your culture. Align your business goals with your brand strategy and open the gates to release your cultural behavior. Are you up to the TTASC?



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 CPEC Advertising + Design.