
Internal branding and the sustainable company

WTR has previously investigated the issue of trademark greenwashing. For those companies aiming to truly incorporate sustainability into their corporate brand identity, an important aspect to consider is internal branding – an activity that requires a multi-stakeholder approach

The growing prominence of environmental values throughout the world has led many organisations to align their image with sustainability-related identities, while increased public pressure for organisations to reduce their environmental footprints reflects continued interest in such issues. Furthermore, state and federal policies are requiring that institutions operate in ways that do not harm the earth's delicate ecosystem. However, as operating in an environmentally and socially responsible manner becomes the standard for leading companies, it will become ever more important for corporations to institutionalise sustainability and make it part of their organisational identity. For many, sustainability has three elements: environmental, economic and social. This means that for an organisation to be truly sustainable, it must address all three elements of the term.

The marketplace is becoming saturated with more socially responsible products and services, which have names that include words such as 'green' or 'organic'. However, as these terms become defined by governments or regulatory agencies, corporations will have to adhere to those standards and determine which communication tools will effectively brand their company as sustainable and what actions their legal departments will engage in to make sure they comply with the law.

WTR has previously covered the issue of 'greenwashing', whereby companies adopt a 'green' mark that suggests an environmental image at odds with the reality. For those organisations that do embrace environmentalism, however, often ignored are the organisational aspects of a company during the process of 'going green'. While ample research exists on possible strategies to achieve just that, very few propose internal branding as an instrument to achieve this, especially as it pertains to corporate sustainability. The question is how a business can use internal branding to incorporate green and socially responsible practices into its organisational identity so that sustainability becomes part of the company's brand. This is relevant to trademark professionals because in establishing a name for a company and handling its reputation, careful

consideration must be given to the people who are going to support that brand from the inside, especially because of the legal liabilities that exist when a brand is misrepresented or when employees speak incorrectly about their company.

Internal branding

The Canadian Marketing Association defines 'internal branding' as "a set of strategic processes that align and empower employees to deliver the appropriate customer experience in a consistent fashion. These processes include, but are not limited to, internal communications, training support, leadership practices, rewards & recognition programs, recruitment practices and sustainability factors." Accordingly, internal branding is important because employees often deliver the brand experience to customers and because it connects employees to the brand, allowing them to embody what the company stands for.

Organisational identity

Internal branding benefits an organisation's identity. A coherent organisational identity helps individuals to understand how they can gain a competitive advantage by all being on the same page. Thus, a rewarding internal branding campaign creates solidarity among stakeholders. For this, employees must be psychologically committed to the fulfilment of corporate goals, because when individuals are motivated to engage in a cause, it is easier for them to align their actions with the mission, vision and objectives of the organisation.

Consistency in brand promise

Another benefit of internal branding is the consistency in brand promise that results from a strong organisational identity. For an organisation to deliver a consistent brand promise, customer service representatives must be consistent when they encounter customers. In a 2007 research study titled "The role of internal branding in the delivery of employee brand promise", Punjaisri and Wilson discovered that training programmes and internal communication tools were crucial elements in internal branding because they help to establish brand attitudes that employees then pass on to the customers. The study revealed that the marketing and HR departments of an organisation must become involved in the implementation of internal branding so that employees can effectively deliver the brand promise. Additionally, Punjaisri and Wilson found that an organisation's advancement depends on how employees feel and act when they represent their company. Rewards

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may improve employees' morale because of the way they positively reinforce a certain behaviour. Conventional wisdom dictates that behaviour may be reinforced with financial rewards. This leads to a discussion about the potential profits derived from a solid organisational identity, since the possibility of generating profits as a result of well-delivered brand promises may encourage employees to behave a certain way.

Profits

Internal branding can foster profits because of the way that an organisation projects itself to the public and the financial gains that follow as a result of their consistent brand delivery. However, employees must first be on the same page about their identity before they can consistently deliver the brand. Employees who are representative of the company's philosophy could garner the business more money, but only if they use that strong sense of identity to perform better and to be more efficient. According to Sasha Strauss, brand expert and managing director at Innovation Protocol, who has implemented numerous internal branding projects, "Internal branding manifests itself externally when your internal staff, sales staff, distributors, and third parties start communicating on far more than just the product function and price. They will talk about why the brand matters and why they believe in it, which will ensure that the seller or distributor cares about your business far beyond price and function." The financial gains come once the organisation establishes a loyal following, because devoted customers tend to buy or pay more.

So what do the benefits of internal branding mean for a business? Internal branding will help members of a company to establish a cohesive understanding about their organisational identity as it pertains to the company's role in sustainability. As companies are increasingly scrutinised for the way in which they reduce their negative impacts on the environment, it is imperative for companies to ensure the prosperity of their current and future sustainability programmes. This means that companies will have to make sustainability part of their brand, so that stakeholders identify the company as an environmental ambassador. Furthermore, they will have to involve multiple facets of their organisation, including the legal department, as they strategise on ways to remain relevant in today's market. As such, companies may want to ask the following questions before they implement an internal branding campaign:

- How familiar are employees with the company's sustainability initiatives?
- What types of internal branding practice should be

implemented to incorporate sustainability into its existing organisational identity?

- How can internal branding initiatives focused on sustainability increase the competitive advantage for such organisations?

The exploration of these questions sets the framework for the following sections, as they aim to demonstrate the effectiveness of internal branding in achieving corporate sustainability goals.

A corporate view

In research I recently conducted, 11 executives from multiple organisations in the United States were interviewed. Five interviewees work for the public sector in the international trade and commerce, aviation, education, city management, and space exploration industries. Six of the interviewees work in the private sector, in the children's entertainment, automotive, waste collection, food manufacturing, engineering design, and energy drink manufacturing industries. Organisational size ranged from more than 3,000 employees to well in the hundred thousands. This array of organisations was selected because of the scalability and relevance of their sustainability programmes to other industries and, accordingly, common job functions for most of these professionals.

Although executives varied in their answers, they all agreed that being involved with their employees was very important. However, according to executives, being sustainable is not without obstacles. Limited resources and funding are common issues for most corporations, especially in this economic climate. What is more, meeting sustainability federal and state regulations is an obstacle because of the increasing number of guidelines that organisations must adhere to. Defining sustainability as it pertains to individual organisations was also described as a hindrance because of the ambiguity that still exists in the nomenclature of the term. While executives have faced obstacles during the implementation of sustainability programmes, they have developed strategies for overcoming those challenges. Data revealed five sustainability implementation elements, which are considered internal branding best practices by executives because of the way they help to create organisational identity. They are as follows.

Managerial buy-in

Managerial buy-in is a way to make sustainability an integral part of the organisation's brand because managers must set the policy that will guide the environmental goals and objectives. Management's involvement should begin with an announcement from the chief

executive officer (CEO) or president, because employees look to the CEO for guidance on how they should represent the brand. Therefore, the CEO's involvement will influence employees to be serious about eco-related issues at the workplace. Management must, however, obtain approval from the legal department to ensure that messaging and measures are in line with standard legal practices – in this regard, the trademark counsel's role is critical.

Moreover, management's support drives employees' cooperation and motivation because of the potential for managers to reward employees' positive behaviour. Yet managers cannot assume full responsibility for transforming an organisation's eco-behaviour. Multiple departments must work together to make this a reality. Hence, executives also emphasised the importance of cross-functional collaboration.

Cross-functional collaboration

Executives noted that increased collaboration among multiple departments results in efforts that are more efficient, especially when establishing sustainability as an integral part of a company's brand. To do this, organisations must first decide upon the departments that can best contribute towards this cause. The legal, human resources (HR), marketing, and corporate communication departments are considered most important because of their role in transforming the way sustainability is conducted on an internal level. Strauss emphasises the importance of the legal department's involvement: "Let's say that in your internal branding programme, you establish how to communicate in the organisation. That information goes in the employee handbook and if legal has not approved that vocabulary, you can't put it in the handbook." Regarding the role of HR, one of the interviewed executives stressed: "We'll work with the HR department because sometimes the public relations you do inside the company is more important than the public relations you do outside the company." For other organisations, HR was responsible for training individuals on how their roles as employees would change upon the implementation of sustainability initiatives.

The communication department, on the other hand, was often tasked with creating the messages that helped employees to learn about their new responsibilities and roles as they transition into greener operations. This is where the communication department can work closely with the legal department in ensuring that documents are properly worded. It was the marketing department's job to create the communication material that would disseminate this information. Environmental compliance also proved influential because of their knowledge on the environmental regulations and procedures that must be followed. Thus, collaboration allowed for integration across the organisation so that efforts were not duplicated and were therefore more efficient. Even so, in order for departments to be efficient, they must be guided by the core values of the organisation.

Mission alignment

Incorporating sustainability-related values into the organisation's mission is a strategic way to make it a part of the organisation's brand. This stems from executives' belief that an organisation's mission statement serves as a platform for how an organisation's operations should be conducted while establishing its culture. Therefore, managers must facilitate employees' ability to engage in environmentally and socially friendly behaviour by restructuring existing mission statements if they do not already contain an element of sustainability in the wording. Revised mission statements should highlight the organisation's commitment to the environment

and society and the role that employees will play in fulfilling the organisation's environmental and social goals. Furthermore, the mission statement should be placed in prominent places such as the organisation's website, break room, training material and office entrance. Although incorporating sustainability into an institution's mission is a good step towards moving its operations and culture in a greener direction, management must also generate awareness among employees about the company's initiatives.

Employee awareness

For workers to engage in environmentally conscious behaviour and for them to become brand ambassadors for the organisation, managers must effectively communicate the organisation's environmental goals. Disseminating information about the company's environmental programmes among employees helps members to understand how they can positively contribute. To do this, administrators must first tailor the message according to the audience. For example, for an organisation that consists mostly of labourers who do not sit in front of a computer, offline forms of communication such as brochures, letters, memos and flyers are the best way to communicate. On the other hand, if most employees are office workers who use a computer regularly, then electronic communication such as emails, electronic newsletters, websites and intranets is most effective. "Any organisation with more than a handful of employees now has an intranet and not only an intranet, but a specific section for employees and employee-related content. In an internal brand campaign, you need to ensure that the intranet has the capability, resources and all things related to roll out whatever details the employees are going to need to access it," adds Strauss – which emphasises the importance of providing employees with access to information about the business.

Still, for some large companies without a single centralised office, it remains difficult for them to communicate with all employees. Hence, careful measures should be taken to ensure that communication is clear, simple and transparent. The clearer the communication, the better informed employees will be and the better they will understand their organisation's goals. Strauss notes the importance of establishing the right communication with employees: "When I was working on the Yahoo! global internal brand roll-out, we had to ensure there was an exclamation point every time we mentioned the company name for legal obligations, because we can't own the word 'yahoo'. Yahoo is a generic word, but when you put Yahoo! with a capital Y and an exclamation point, now you're talking about one of the most important companies in the history of companies. So imagine if we start rolling out this campaign and we say, 'We're really excited to tell you about Yahoo!'s new internal brand programme,' and we didn't spell Yahoo! with the exclamation point. Not only would it be a legal issue, but it's also the legal department's responsibility to ensure that every single thing that is communicated is within legal bounds. On top of it, if the name is incorrect it makes the entire brand programme look like a joke because if you can't call an organisation the right thing, then you can't tell people how they are supposed to speak about it on its behalf."

Message consistency

Executives emphasised the importance of creating a consistent message when communicating with employees in order to make sustainability an integral part of an organisation's identity. This is important because consistency is fundamental in brand identity, and the more consistent the messages, the easier it is for employees to reiterate those messages and to embody them in their everyday operations. For some executives, creating coherent messages is part of

Recommendation	Description
Recommendation 1 Increase participation of leadership	Management must set the policy that guides how employees should conduct their daily operations because managers have the ability to motivate workers to behave sustainably. CEOs should declare the organisation's new commitment to sustainability via traditional and non-traditional communication mediums such as emails, meetings and newsletters to staff.
Recommendation 2 Integrate sustainability goals into the mission	Incorporating sustainability goals into the organisation's mission helps to make those goals part of the company's core values, so existing mission statements should reflect the company's new sustainability aspirations. This mission statement should be placed in prominent places such as break rooms or office entrances. Managers should reward behaviour that reflects environmental stewardship because employees are more likely to carry out the sustainability goals of the corporation.
Recommendation 3 Ensure consistency in the company's sustainability messaging	Delivering consistent messages when communicating with employees helps to create brand identity, which then facilitates a staff's ability to reiterate and embody whatever management wants that brand to represent. Executives should create symbols, phrases and images that are specifically used for anything and everything sustainability-related for their company.
Recommendation 4 Establish collaboration among the company's departments	Increased collaboration among the multiple departments leads to better-coordinated, more efficient sustainability efforts. The legal, human resources (HR), communications, environmental compliance and marketing departments usually prove to be the most effective in collaborating on sustainability initiatives because of their roles within the organisation and impact that they have on employees. HR can conduct trainings on workplace sustainability. Environmental compliance can train HR on the elements of sustainability. The communication department can create the message that HR delivers during the training session. The legal department can oversee that everything is done within legal boundaries. In this way, departments establish better-integrated efforts.
Recommendation 5 Generate awareness among employees	Generating awareness among employees about the organisation's sustainability helps to make it part of the brand. Managers must regularly communicate with workers using electronic forms of communication. Communication must be clear but, most importantly, tailored to its audience. In doing so, the organisation is better connected with employees so they have a better understanding of how their roles fit the framework of the corporation's sustainability goals. As a secondary benefit, employees become better brand ambassadors who can speak on behalf of what the organisation is doing for society.

this process, as described by one executive: "You have to let people know what's expected of them. Make it clear upfront. Here's what's expected, here's what you have to do and here's how you can do it." For example, if a company decides it wants to improve its recycling efforts, then it must clearly label recycling bins in a consistent manner so employees are clear about how they should recycle. Eventually, this consistency will brand the organisation's sustainability efforts so that they become part of the organisation's overall identity.

Sustainability goals and subsequent obstacles

Interestingly, several managers stated that social media could pose a challenge to their sustainability goals because of how it is used to publicly criticise organisations' green efforts. "We will have critics," said one interviewee when she described the obstacles that her organisation might face as it operates by more sustainable standards. Yet just as important will be the roles that employees play in the social media arena. One executive described the importance of inspiring workers to say good things about companies: "With so much being on Facebook and Twitter, you need a workforce that does not need to be coerced into telling the good stories, but that wants to tell the good stories." However, because social media is still relatively new, it is what Strauss considers a "wild, wild west" – meaning that new rules and societies are put in place and built every day. "There's still of course what is okay and what is not okay to say, so there are those boundaries that have to be set by the legal department because when it comes to social media, internal branding and the legal implications of this, the

way in which the employees are going to indulge the internal brand is through social media," says Strauss. He adds that so much of social media is in the public domain that the legal department must be ready to respond when a legal rebuttal is necessary. "No legal action, even if you win a case, is good for the bottom line or morale. It doesn't matter if you find a corporation that's violating your market and you sue them. That legal action costs so much money and so much time, that it's not worth the money you're going to win." It makes sense, then, that a company should take all the precautionary measures through their legal department, to ensure that the organisation is properly communicating and responding via social media sites.

Future role of employees

Executives further described how "Employees will play a front-line role in making sure our sustainability efforts are followed through". Therefore, representatives must be educated and well trained on how they must conduct themselves to fulfil the mission, vision, and goals. In that way, employees will champion corporate citizenship and will deliver consistency in the brand. Ultimately, the goal is for employees to feel proud about the organisation they work for, so that they may speak positively on behalf of the organisation and share positive information about their company with others. Furthermore, executives see sustainability as a tool to retain good employees because younger generations are increasingly looking for employers that have an element of sustainability in their brand. One executive emphasised: "It's also how we can use sustainability to

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engage employees and to get them to be excited about working for the company to advance their skills and to keep the high performers, and how we can attract new talent to the company.” It follows, then, that sustainability will become a way to engage employees and keep high performers.

Hence, the recommendations (in the box opposite) for companies mirror the implementation methods suggested by the executives because of their effectiveness. Recommendations for making sustainability an integral part of the company’s identity are multifaceted and mostly of a communicative nature.

These recommendations are highly based on the findings from the interviews and are listed in the order in which they should be implemented, because one implementation phase builds upon the next to create a comprehensive project execution plan. Furthermore, the costs required to carry out these recommendations are minimal because they are mostly based on communicative changes as opposed to the implementation of expensive technology or infrastructure.

Conclusion

Internal branding is an effective way to establish a cohesive organisational identity, contributing to an organisation’s success. Internal branding can be used as a communication tool during the implementation of sustainability initiatives in order to help make sustainability an integral part of a company’s brand. Ideally, these tools contribute to the continuity and success of a company’s environmental programmes, resulting in a competitive advantage for the company as it is compared to others for its green efforts.

By incorporating sustainability into a company’s brand identity, company administrators ensure that it remains competitive and relevant in today’s environmentally conscious climate. As an increasing number of companies partake in sustainable practices, and as corporations are rated on their commitment to environmental stewardship or criticised for not living up to their green claims, it will become ever more important for companies to institutionalise

sustainability by making it a part of their organisational identity and for legal departments to become more active in the way that companies portray themselves as sustainable.

To do this, organisations can use internal branding as the set of communication tools that will facilitate the company’s transformation into an environmentally conscious institution. Internal branding best practices provide company leaders and administrators with a framework for implementing practical communication solutions in making their company greener.

This proves that communication-based strategies such as branding are instrumental in addressing today’s most compelling environmental issues. [WTR](#)

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