

# Activating Brand Culture: Rethinking the Internal Communications Platform

**W**hat has been called “internal communications” is now at the center of the corporate agenda. Why? Because the communications function is a linchpin in employer branding efforts – as well as other immediate corporate initiatives like leadership, innovation, and corporate social responsibility. Yet many organizations are aware that their internal communications are sub-optimal, which presents a significant obstacle to internal brand activation.

This reality has a great deal to do with the changing nature of communications in general. The proliferation of new communications channels – from email to text messaging to social media and beyond – has democratized internal communications in an exciting and challenging way: internal communications are now co-created between employees and leadership.

Given this new co-creation process, the approach that most organizations take to internal communications is fundamentally flawed. Most focus their internal communications on providing – or pushing – information to employees through traditional corporate communications channels. As a result, today’s default internal communications strategy remains broadcasted corporate-speak. These communications are part of the clutter of everyday organizational life that dull innovation, hamper discretionary effort, and undermine the brand experience for employees and customers alike.

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## Moving Communications from “Think-Feel-Do” to “Feel-Do-Think”

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What employees think about their work experience is obviously important. In fact, think is widely regarded as the first step in the preeminent employee engagement model of “think-feel-act.” The purpose of the model was to explain how employees become and stay engaged in their work within an organization. The reasoning goes like this: First employees think. Next, that idea leads to a feeling, which in turn leads to action. The more action and effort, the more highly engaged the employee. And every CEO today wants to have highly engaged employees, particularly given the productivity and revenue improvements that engagement brings.

As engagement grew in stature and the link between internal communications and engagement became increasingly apparent, the think-first model came to govern internal communications as well. This helps to explain today’s internal communications landscape dominated by emails, memos, and PowerPoint presentations. These methods convey information and make people think.



*Jonathan Willard*

*Global Director of Organizational Communications  
JWT INSIDE*

The bigger question is what involvement employees have in the internal communications process, how they perceive this process, and what the communications vehicles and channels make the employees feel. This feeling – what the employees experience in their work and then convey to customers – is at the heart of employer branding and engagement. Internal communications must now become much more effective in driving emotion and idea engagement to help deliver an employer brand experience.

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## Employee Experience Management: The Intersection of Brand and Talent

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Employer branding is timely. Though the concept has been under discussion since the early 1990s, it’s only recently that large organizations have embraced the idea, which is somewhat analogous to customer experience management (CEM.) Whereas CEM focuses upon the delivery, perception, and business impact of the customers’ experience, employer branding focuses on the deliverer of the customer experience: the employees, and how they experience and translate the organization.

This point of view places employees at the center of the brand delivery equation. The hospitality industry has long adopted (and quantified!) this idea, but now everyone is getting on board. The Ritz Carlton's employer brand of "ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen" is a great example of employee experience management. Employees that are treated with dignity and respect are more successful at providing a customer experience predicated on dignity and respect.

It's a simple concept, but challenging to execute: the notion that the whole organization serves as the foundation for brand positioning and activation. The challenge stems from the inherently cross-functional nature of the employee experience. Every function plays a role in shaping and determining the employee experience. So whereas an employer branding program can begin in HR, Marketing, Communications, Recruitment, Customer Service, or somewhere else, it will ultimately have to extend across functions in order to holistically impact the employee experience and shape culture. The intersection of brand and talent is in culture, and an organization's brand culture determines both employee and customer experiences. Part of the promise and power of employer branding is that it focuses organizations on understanding these functional and cultural intersections as never before. In this sense, it is a model for corporate cultural innovation.

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## Employer Brand Activation: The Uncommon Denominator

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This anthropological view of brand as culture has gained significant currency as of late. Clearly there's a one-to-one ratio between most admired brands and most admired cultures: think Apple, Ritz-Carlton, or Southwest. Everyone plays the role of customer at some point, and everyone knows what a great brand experience is. Employees do not turn this awareness off when they come to work.

Because of the correlation between brand and culture, there is no shortage of employer branding advisors at the moment. Perhaps the greatest confirmation of employer branding's merits is the proliferation of practicing professionals and advisory firms in this space. Whether in-house leaders, PR firms, advertising agencies, branding shops, design boutiques, or management consultancies, everyone sees the merit and opportunity in bringing the concept of brand to life with employees.

Strategic models for employer branding abound. These frameworks tend to focus on inquiries like "what is our brand essence?", "what are our mission, vision, and values?" and "what makes us different as an organization?" These questions are essential to understand and make for worthwhile and thought-provoking inquiry.

But these are only pieces of the brand activation puzzle. And if you notice, these questions once again default to the

cognitive, command-and-control communications model of "the company tells employees." This is where internal communications can add real value. Go beyond asking what the employer brand intends to tell employees, and ask what employees do with the employer brand? How does the employee brand make your people feel? Do these feelings inspire employees to join in creating, celebrating, and protecting your employer brand?

Remember that in employer brand activation, the most successful programs center on co-creation of brand communications and experience with the employees.

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## Bringing the Employer Brand to Life

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There is no one-size-fits-all employer brand activation solution. Often times, organizations push into employer branding to spearhead some larger change management initiative, and have therefore targeted organizationally-specific objectives and outcomes. However, there are some emerging best-practice internal communications ideas and approaches that can greatly improve the success of any employer branding program:

**Become a map-maker:** No one would embark on a long journey without the appropriate set of maps. Employer brand activation is nothing if not a journey. Take the time to map the terrain. Thoroughly understand the different audience segments in your workforce. How do they live at work and what do they care about? What are they feeling right now and what emotions do you want them to feel? What are the actions and thoughts these feelings will generate, and how do they line up against customers' moments of truth with your brand? Build in your existing brand work, engagement results, and anything else you believe relevant. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote that every battle is won or lost before it is fought. Take the time to develop rigorous communications maps.

**Focus on feeling:** For internal communications, the focus on feeling means several things – all of which add up to change. Use a more visual approach to internal communications strategy. Try to avoid the same-old PowerPoint format. Employer branding is storytelling. It's about painting a picture of what is possible, so add images, symbols, textures, colors, sounds, whatever...as so much of the employee brand experience will be non-verbal. One large multinational client had invested heavily in Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. They initially reported news and results of their support in emails and postings from their CEO. It became clear that the emotional impact of the investment on employees was negligible. They then invested in a short video that captured the essence of the disaster and the magnitude of their help, which was shown to every employee. One year later, when I conducted employer branding focus groups with employees around the country, the video was still top-of-mind in employees' perceptions of the organization. From a branding

and engagement perspective, the return on the organization's investment was extraordinary. But they had to think differently about internal communications. Make your story visual and compelling, and you will see results. And don't fear feedback: Getting to the right employer branding program means working past a series of speed bumps and culs-de-sac to find the best brand activation path for your organization.

**Think stories:** Storytelling in corporate culture has really caught on as an actionable idea. A recent client – a CEO who had been one of the highest-ranking leaders in the US Military – would passionately share his belief in the power of storytelling with me. Yet despite his support, bringing stories to life within his organization was very challenging because so few people understood the challenge. The employer branding storyteller must enter the hearts of the employees, where the emotions live, even as the information he or she seeks to convey rents space in employees' brains. Our minds are relatively open, but we guard our hearts with zeal, knowing their power to move us. So although the mind may be part of your target, the heart is the bulls-eye. How about your employee value proposition: is it a bunch of corporate-speak or does it tell a story that attracts, engages, and retains people on an emotional level? Build your stories into an employer brand personality, creating a persona of what your brand culture is and is not.

**Embrace interactivity:** More often than not, technology sits far outside of internal communications core competencies. Yet a company's culture is really just a large, ongoing conversation. Without interactivity, that conversation becomes a one-way street that is fraught with cracks. Telling employees that they are your most important asset is one thing. Inviting them into the ownership fold is quite another and the way towards ownership is through dialog and empowerment. A terrific example from our recent client work involved building a YouTube-like platform for a leading airline. Needless to say, the airline industry is not a hotbed of employee engagement. The goal of the platform was to engage employees and involve them in the employer brand building process. The execution of this program had several pivotal employer branding elements baked in, and the results have been a staggering success in making employees feel the employer brand. This campaign has kicked off a new wave of entertaining, brand-building, and interactive communication across the organization. Employer branding campaigns succeed when successive communication waves such as this are launched, embraced, and sustained.

**Connect functionally:** Cross-functional cooperation is the most recent and important trend to emerge in employer branding. Not too long ago, employer branding clients represented a single function, and that function's ability to affect change was by definition limited. Today, we are entering client relationships with several different functional representatives at the table, and as such there are far greater

opportunities to have powerful impact. There are many events within corporate life where communications plays a supporting role. When it comes to employer branding, internal communications must become a lead actor, driving cross-functional co-creation and participation. Past experience with large-scale employer branding efforts indicates that the opportunities for communications to create significant wins and return on investment lay largely in cultivating these cross-functional relationships. Every functional leader I have ever met would like to improve their communications. Employer branding opens the door for internal communications to step up to the challenge in high impact and measureable ways.

A company's culture is essentially the organization's soul, shaped collectively through success and setback. Employer branding is an opportunity to breathe new life into that soul. Emotive and interactive internal communications can be a powerful source of new life.

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*Author: Jonathan Willard, Global Director of Organizational Communications, JWT INSIDE*

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