

Succession Planning Your Brand

“Translating brand promises into behavioral performance standards is a step toward creating authentic brands.”

Businesses scrutinize leadership candidates. They scrutinize, dissect, and vet the candidates. Do they appraise how the choice affects corporate brand identity? The selection can influence whether the brand identity continues or dies. Is Wendy’s the same without Dave Thomas? How did Apple shift without Steve Jobs at the helm? What about Twitter’s future with Elon Musk?

Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield built Ben & Jerry’s, the Vermont-based ice cream manufacturer, on the values of innovative products and social responsibility. These values became part of its brand identity. When Unilever purchased the company in 2000, there were brand-decline concerns—and indeed, there were changes. In 2001, Unilever hired a new chief marketing officer, Walt Freese, to preserve the founding corporate culture. According to Advertising Age magazine, Freese befit the role. He said, “I really wanted to work for a values-driven business with a sense of social mission; that was probably the driving factor for me.”

A powerful brand has a clear and unique image that stands for something important to targeted customers. Green Mountain Power Corporation established a reputation as an environmentally sound energy company. Since 1997, their customers have avoided over 110 billion pounds of CO₂. Customer communications wrap around an environmental message. They sent seedlings to customers as part of a past program to emphasize the importance of trees. Customers don’t all value this approach, but those who do are *key targets* for the company.

As you begin succession planning your corporate brand, define your target customers. What is the demographic profile of the individual consumers, or the firmographic profile of the business customers? What’s important to them? What keeps them up at night? This knowledge helps you refine and deliver your core brand promise.

Developing—and maintaining—a solid core brand is a pivotal strategic decision. Even more so for service and business-to-business firms where customers buy the company as much as its

products and services. Even products not visibly connected with corporate identity can benefit from the corporate brand. And vice versa. Knowledgeable leadership is vital. Leaders must establish a strong corporate culture that will withstand their departure, select a successor supportive of the culture and brand, and develop performance systems that tie to the brand.

Examine the values and culture of your organization. Look at the culture from both an internal and external perspective. Ask yourself the following questions.

- What values does the company embody? Friendliness, speed, attention to detail, work-life balance, integrity—or lack of these—can be values.
- Have these values been consistent over time?
- Do you want to continue these values in the future?
- Would your customers describe the firm in the same way as employees?
- Is the image different from the competition—and do customers care?

Assess what customers believe your values are. Translate those values into performance outcomes. Customers expect philanthropy from Ben & Jerry's because of its value system. They expect Walt Disney to provide family-centric offerings. They expect Southwest Airlines to be friendly because of the people-centric policies.

What do customers expect from your organization? Really think about it. Include both rational ("I expect consistent quality") and emotional ("I want to trust you") expectations. Are there *implicit* promises that, if not kept, would cause customers to lose trust in your firm?

To keep those implicit promises requires appropriate performance standards. Bill Marriott, former CEO of the family's hotel chain, conceived a service quality wheel. He suggested that true customer satisfaction depends on motivated employees. Training, processes, and rewards must support the end-goal of customer satisfaction. Companies with winning brands fuse those systems and processes into the corporate strategy. Consider these questions.

- If customer service is part of the brand promise, are there performance measures for customer responsiveness?
- If quality is part of the promise, is there a comprehensive quality control system in place?
- Are customer promises aligned with internal policies and procedures?

- Is there clear responsibility and accountability for these policies and procedures?

By translating promises into performance standards, you increase the likelihood employees deliver the brand promise. An average brand becomes a great brand when employees live its values, and when the result is ongoing customer satisfaction. A powerful brand, therefore, is a realized promise of customer satisfaction.

Stay true to your brand. If the brand promise is safety, deliver on safety. If the brand promise is excitement, deliver on excitement. If the brand promise is trust, deliver on trust. And be sure that any intended successor to leadership believes in the ideals and related policies that are linked to this brand delivery.