

# Shared Experiences

BY DAVID KESSLER

STARFISH

**Y**ou don't have a brand; you have a brand experience. Consumers today define a brand by the sum total of their interactions across all channels — not only advertising, but product, packaging, in-store, service interactions, online — and the list grows longer every day. Right now, dozens of start-ups are dreaming up new ways for your customers to interact with your brand.

Even if you are a brand-experience expert, the most important question is: Who is responsible for shaping the brand experience and ensuring that it is properly delivered?

Customers experience brands in a multitude of ways, across channels and types of interactions that extend far beyond a company's external marketing programs. While advertising once had the power to define a brand and its intended experience, today's media proliferation means that truly integrated marketing communications are the cost-of-entry. But the brand experience brings another dimension that requires other aspects of a company's behavior — culture, sales, operations, and products and services — to be synchronized along with its marketing communications.

A simple model illustrates how all five of these

operational disciplines must be informed, and driven, by a singular brand positioning or brand idea (*see chart one*). In this way, all of a brand's constituents (including customers, prospects, partners, sellers, etc.) will experience the brand in an intuitive and consistent manner. It is the sum total of all of this activity that makes up the brand experience today. In short, the brand experience *is* the brand.

**It takes a corporate culture to deliver a consistent brand experience.**

This model reflects the new reality of our world. Consumers are more educated, savvy and have more access to information than ever before. Companies that work hard to deliver a consistent and meaningful brand experience have proven successful even during a time of macro-economic slowdown.

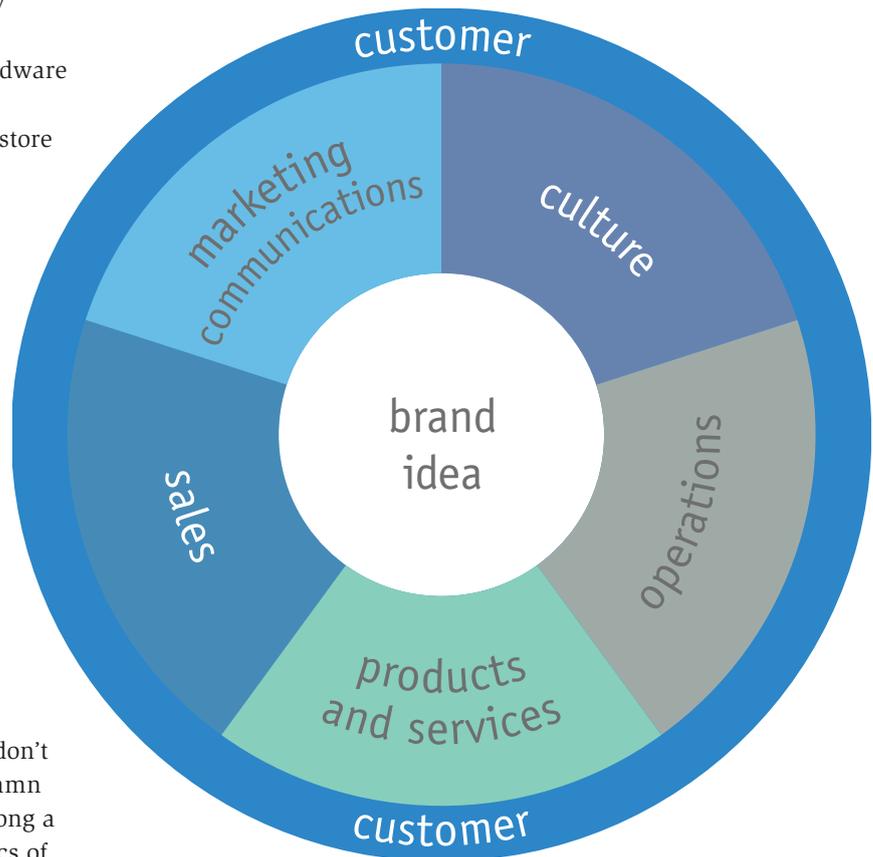
For a closer look at the different parts of a brand experience, consider a brand we all know: Apple.

- *Brand Idea*: Creativity and simplicity
- *Culture*: Flat, simple, organizational structure

Chart Two: *Customer Journey Mapping Reflects Brand Interactions*



**Chart One:**  
*The Brand Experience is the Sum Total of a Customer's Interactions With Your Brand*



fosters creativity and a desire to create highly intuitive products

- *Products and services:* Elegantly designed hardware and software that are simple to use
- *Operations:* Retail stores promote simplicity (store design, employee dress code) and creativity (genius bar and theater seating for user education and training, in-store signage and merchandising)
- *Marketing Communications:* Simplicity and creativity in all aspects, from concept to media placement
- *Sales:* Whether on-line, in-store or via resellers, the product information is delivered in a simple and highly useful manner

However, aligning these touch-points is no small task. It requires identifying—and ideally mapping—all possible interactions. It means learning how each constituency reacts to these current brand touch-points, and then removing, fixing, adding or creating entirely new ones.

The single-biggest reason more companies don't adopt a brand-experience model is that it's so damn hard. The customer journey must be mapped along a continuum that realistically reflects the dynamics of today's consumer interactions with brands (see chart two). Customer journey mapping is a tool that helps us understand and assign specific team initiatives.

**THE CHIEF MARKETER'S CHALLENGE**

Most organizations are one of two fundamental types today: traditional organizations that work in siloes, and more visionary organizations that have begun to consider this newly expanded definition of the brand experience.

Either way, the chief marketing officer typically

owns the brand in terms of internal and external marketing communications. However, today's marketing chiefs need the support of their peers to create and implement a holistic brand experience. The chief marketing officer no longer "owns" the brand, but rather is an ambassador who needs to gain buy-in and alignment across the entire C-Suite.

For this new, broader, definition of the brand experience to be operationalized, it must be championed by the CEO and stewarded by the



CMO. While many CEOs will pay lip service to the importance of “living the brand,” the key performance metrics they assign are generally linked to the core functional areas of their direct reports.

Perhaps this misunderstanding is part of the reason that the average tenure of a CMO today is so brief. Whether it is the organization at-large or an individual who believes that the chief marketer’s function is limited to marketing communications, when the business softens, — or even worse declines — it’s the CMO who is held accountable.

So, how can a marketing chief hold the organization accountable for the brand experience? One thing’s for sure, it can’t be dictated or forced, and he or she will need some real help to get it done. It is the CMO’s role to gain buy-in that the brand experience is a shared responsibility, as well as define and steward the processes to successful implementation throughout the organization.

While the value proposition and the brand idea are typically developed and managed by the marketing or marketing communications department, it should not be owned by this group alone. Because the brand idea becomes the organizing principle for all internal functions and brand interactions, its ongoing development and management should be delegated to a cross-functional team with a democratic structure that includes mandatory participation from all of the key organizational disciplines (e.g., marketing, sales, human resources, operations and products/services). If this kind of cooperation is not solicited or provided, it will be nearly impossible to implement a cohesive brand experience.

This process, and the brand idea itself, must be born from, and woven into, the culture of the organization. A good brand will contain a healthy dose of the organization’s DNA, which makes aligning the culture and behaviors easier than trying to force a foreign brand through a company.

Implementation of the brand idea also requires cooperation and public support from the senior-most management in the organization. The implementation process must be top-down or inside-out: It starts inside, at the top, and flows down through the organization before it goes out into the marketplace.

#### THE PROCESS STARTS INSIDE

One of the areas that many companies tend to neglect is that of its own people. These folks are the lifeblood of the organization, who touch customers every single day, either directly or indirectly.

When they understand the brand and how it

applies to their area of responsibility, and when they are given the freedom to bring it to life in their own way, magical things start to happen. They connect with customers in more meaningful ways, create products or services that are more aligned with the brand’s purpose, and deliver the service in a less mechanical manner.

The only way for the chief marketer to hold the organization accountable is to get senior-level buy-in and agreement that this is a process that requires consistent and persistent pressure. This cannot be done by email. We have seen too many proud chief executives hold their brands high above their heads and send out a long and inspiring email. Unfortunately, most people don’t read all of their emails...even those from the CEO.

Aligning a culture around a brand is a process, as cultural change has several stages, including the change of attitudes, the embrace of new beliefs and, ultimately, the adoption of new behaviors. Remember, humans generally resist change. We like our routines. So, this process is not one that should be taken lightly.

Campbell Soup is having great success with this new approach. Darren Serrao, the vice-president and general manager of innovation and business development, has completely restructured the company’s innovation process by creating cross-functional teams, all aligned around a particular brand experience. Campbell’s deliberately does not assign a leader to the team, as they want everyone to take equal ownership in the process.

Serrao says that Campbell’s, “with a strong marketing culture and inherent expectation for marketing to own brand and the brand process, placed the brand experience at the center of the model and consciously gave marketing an equal seat at the table.” According to Serrao, Campbell’s has had such great success with this process that it has expanded the process and group exponentially.

Your culture and its manifestation into the brand experience is the one thing your competitors can’t steal. Yes, they can create a better ad campaign, spend more money, or launch a new website. But they can’t steal your soul. ■



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