Building your Brand

A step by step guide to developing and maintaining your brand

the marketing centre

Supercharged Fractional CMOs

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1 Brand building: what's it all about?

Brand is essentially the perception someone holds in their head about a product, a service, or an organisation; a person, a cause, or an idea. It acts as a mental shortcut for consumers so that when they need what you're selling, they think of you first.

So what about brand building? Put simply, it's the deliberate application of effort to create the desired perception - the mental shortcut - in someone else's mind.

Brand building has to start internally, and it has to start at the top of the business. So ask yourself this. How do you perceive your business? What do you think the business stands for?

Now, ask the rest of your board this question. Then middle management. Then everyone in a customer-facing role. We confidently predict you'll get a whole range of different answers. Many business leaders find their perception of the brand or the company doesn't filter down to the rest of the business. If your employees don't know what your business is all about, what chance do your customers have?

In this guide, we'll lead you through the basics of building your brand - what it is and why it matters. We'll show you how to establish your current brand values and implement a vision that changes them, if needed; how to pick the right channels to communicate your message and how to set a company culture that makes that message ring true. And finally, we'll run through the major mistakes we see businesses make around brand activity, so you know what to avoid doing.

All of this will pay off at the bottom line. Research indicates that brand management has a predictable, meaningful impact on every aspect of customer lifetime value: acquisition, retention and profitability all improve if your brand is consistent and positive, and decline if your brand is incoherent or neglected.

The better known your brand is, the better it performs in the marketplace - there’s a direct link between brand identity, marketing activities, and the bottom line.

2 What is a brand, and why do you need one?

The most crucial thing to understand is this: every business has a brand, even if it has made no effort to create or curate one. Everything your business does, every touchpoint between the business and the customer, every interaction and every transaction contributes to your brand.

As those elements accumulate, your business will build brand equity - in other words, it will gain value over its competition in the minds of clients or customers.

Your brand is not just a logo, not just a code of conduct, and not just a marketing matter. It's a part of your overall business strategy, and it should influence your policy, your development and even your choice of partnerships. Your business, after all, is only as good as the people it does business with.

Brand equity can be positive or negative - and often, it's both at the same time. Think about Amazon: the e-commerce giant has positive brand equity as 'the everything store', able to sell more or less anything and deliver it fast, and negative brand equity as an avoider of taxes[1], an exploiter of workers[2], and a fund for owner Jeff Bezos' bizarre vanity projects[3] (like building a gigantic mechanical clock inside a mountain).

As a response, brand managers at Amazon have attempted to shift the conversation around some negative aspects of its brand: paying more taxes in many countries[4] and soliciting feedback from staff[5]. It's an ongoing process - and there may be no managing the impact of Jeff's mountain - but there's a compelling reason for Amazon to make the effort.

Brand equity matters because positive brands are profitable brands. Research by a team of marketing professors from four major universities, working with the American Marketing Association[6], revealed that

a. brand equity has a direct impact on customer acquisition, retention and conversion rates, and
b. marketing activities exert both direct and indirect impact on brand identities

The exact impacts are highly variable, so there's no universal "brand will boost profits by X or Y %" truism that stands up, but there is a demonstrable link between marketing, brand identity and the bottom line. The better known your brand is, the better it performs in the marketplace.

Acquisitions are one way to give yourself a brand leg-up. McDonald's bought out Pret A Manger in 2001[7] because there was no way they'd crack Pret's customer base with their own brand values. L'Oréal took over The Body Shop in 2006[8] and demonstrated an interest in its ethical values, improving its own brand equity by association (without having to change anything).

If you don't have the funds or the inclination to buy another brand, though, you'll need to focus on getting your own brand right.

A brand can have negative and positive equity. Amazon's status as "the everything store" is positive; its reputation for exploiting workers, underpaying taxes and sinking money into bizarre vanity projects less so.

3 Getting your brand right

Building a great brand is a long term, complex process, but there are three central pillars around which your brand activities revolve.

1 Brand values - what your brand stands for

Brand values are the starting point for marketing activity. When our Marketing Directors arrive at a business, they conduct a workshop in which they search for the core values of the organisation. Once those are well defined, the business' leaders can establish a clear vision of what they want the company to be and do. Brand values have to be more than superficial claims; they have to be borne out in how the business operates. If you're pushing eco-friendliness and sustainability as brand values, but you don't have paper recycling bins in the office, your business vision is hypocritical. Your employees will treat it with the cynicism it deserves, their treatment of customers will reflect that cynicism, and eventually, your customers will recognise how hollow your 'eco-friendly' business is.

2 Brand audits - where your brand is now

Often, our Marketing Directors find that companies are either spending too much money on their brand and not seeing return on investment, or they're seeing their brand equity decline and they can't establish where the value is going. Sometimes, the business simply doesn't know what it stands for - the early vision has been lost in the daily grind of getting products and services to people. A brand audit is how a business starts to get its brand back on track. Nine times out of ten, it's best left to a third party. An insider often has their own sense of the brand's values, however muddled and hard to articulate they've become; outsiders have the perspective to appraise the brand as it is, not as they've experienced it during their day to day.

Brand values have to be more than superficial claims; they have to be borne out in how the business operates.

The process itself, however, is fairly straightforward. The brand audit looks at:

- **Brand positioning**. Where does your brand stand in relation to its competitors? What differentiates you from them? What do you stand for that they don't? If you've done analysis in the past, this helps you establish whether or not you've moved on: if it's your first time, this is your starting point for brand strategy.
- **Brand awareness.** How often do people talk about your brand? In what context? Do people know your product or service by name? This can go as far as you like it to: it may be simply "how many likes and shares we get on Facebook", or a deep dive into how often your brand crops up when people are talking about your industry in the pub.
- **Brand engagement.** How are people talking about you? We're not talking about automated journals or Twitter bots - we mean value-added discussion that takes some effort, like editorials, reviews or responses to your business' operations. Regurgitating your press releases is OK, but analysing your product and comparing it to the competition or adding it to a list of essentials? That's so much better.

By taking time to understand what you think your brand stands for, and comparing that to what *your customers* think it stands for, the brand audit highlights where there's room for improvement in your brand activities. Digging down into awareness and engagement statistics reveals how different demographics perceive you, relative to the rest of the industry. And once you know that, you can start to identify where your brand might take root and grow: your target market.

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3 Getting your brand right continued

3 Customer insight - what your target market believes about your brand

Your own perceptions are only half of the game. Ferrero Rocher's brand may have a pretence to class and glamour, but Ferrero Rocher's product is often found at the bottom of supermarket aisles alongside lesser known brands. Does the buyer really think they're fancy?

The disconnect between customer understanding and product/service has an impact on the bottom line. Ferrero's bestselling product is actually Nutella[9], which isn't burdened by the same brand inconsistencies. It's an indulgent product, but an unpretentious one, and is positioned as such - so it's built up a resilience which transcends temporary declines in chocolate sales.

In a real and definite sense, your brand stands for what your customers believe it stands for - and you need to understand what your customers think of you before you can start to change it.

You can recognise a lack of customer insight by an overall lack of innovation in your business (nobody knows what your customers want, so nobody knows what to offer them). If you're collecting data but still struggle to describe where your custom is coming from, that's another bad sign. It's not enough to know their genders, salaries, job titles and buying habits - that doesn't tell you what they're trying to achieve, and how your business can help them.

Establishing that knowledge - what your customers do every day, what their frustrations are at home and work, and how they expect suppliers to support them - allows businesses to pinpoint how their brand, product and service fit into their customers' lives.

Building customer insight

Building this customer insight demands a similar level of analysis to the brand audit. The process goes like this:

1. **Establish what you already know**. This stage is a data audit - look at what you already know about your customers, your target and most successful segments.
2. **Define the scope of your research** - which, in this case, is what your customers want your brand to stand for and what they want your product or service to provide.
3. **Choose your method.** Online surveys, telephone interviews, focus groups, vox pops - go out there and ask questions about what your customers think of you, and what specific actions could change their minds.

This doesn't have to cost the Earth. Richard Sholton of Manning Gottlieb[10] famously carried out a brand expansion for a menswear brand with no research budget to speak of simply by showing people two photos. Flashing them a photo of a Topman bag, and another of the same man holding a New Look bag, he

9 https://www.ft.com/content/b244b9a6-2040-11e7-a454-ab04428977f9

Steer clear of off-the-shelf reports; conduct active market research of your own, asking qualitative questions of your own customers.

asked which one looked more attractive. Mr. Topman got the majority of the votes, and Mr. Sholton knew which way his brand aesthetic needed to go.

We advise against buying an off-the-shelf report, instead of conducting active research of your own. These reports often provide quantitative or numerical data - how many, how much and so on. What you're looking for is qualitative - what and why information that helps you understand the pure numbers. Similarly, don't ask the sales team to carry out this research. They focus on recent feedback, not historical insight, and they're often tempted to pitch a product or service - offering the answer before they've understood and recorded the question.

It's important to establish specifics, and to keep an open mind. You're going to hear some things you didn't expect, and more than a few you didn't want to. Remember, you're seeking out this information so you can change the way customers feel about your brand and what it can do for them - what the Harvard Business Review memorably defined as "the job to be done."[11] Once you know that, you can start delivering something that's concrete and helpful - something that will make your brand feel real.

You can recognise a lack of customer insight by an overall lack of innovation in your business. If you're collecting data but still struggle to describe where your custom is coming from, that's another bad sign.

10 https://rouser.se/choice-factory/

11 https://hbr.org/2016/09/know-your-customers-jobs-to-be-done

4 Making your brand 'real'

Marketing, customer services and sales - the customer-facing aspects of your business - are the body language of your brand. They're how you express and execute your brand values in the real world, making them more than just words on a mission statement.

Choosing the right communication channel for your business is make or break time for any marketing endeavour, and brand building is no exception. No matter how good the materials are, if they're not put where the target audience will encounter them, they're useless.

Channels are the media by which you put your message across - direct mail, telephone campaigns, print media, posters, email, social media and so on. Some channels split down further: 'social media' covers such a wide range of platforms with such different user bases that they no longer have a great deal in common.

The main things to consider when you're looking for the right channel are:

- **Your customer personas and market segments.** Who are you trying to sell to, and where do they spend their time? Guardian Graham and Mirror Mike might not read the same papers, but do they both use Twitter every day?
- **Avoiding the novelties.** Channels are often sold on the basis of features, but bells and whistles don't matter. What matter is who uses the channel, and whether they're buying what you're selling.
- **The ROI for each channel.** If your direct postal mail is getting the customers in, it doesn't matter if the telemarketing is cheaper and the LinkedIn profile is sexier. Effective brand building is about getting your money's worth - not cutting costs.

That said, there is a way to control your spend at the start. Focus on using a few channels well, not lots of channels badly. If you spread your message too thinly, and tailor it too much for each channel, the message becomes inconsistent and invisible. Monitoring channels takes time, and a failure to respond can damage your brand by making you look aloof and disinterested in your customers.

It's worth registering your brand name on every social media platform going - if only to stop someone else getting it first - but you don't need to make them all part of your push. Start with a limited, careful, informed selection of channels, and build up your efforts based on research and results.

Five channels you should definitely think about

Public Relations tell your brand's story with confidence and credibility, raising your profile and positioning you within the sector at large; it allows you to stay on top of brand equity and control the narrative surrounding your business.

For SMEs, PR is often the most cost-effective way of creating and building a relationship with consumers. By taking action when there's a good story to be told, or a crisis to be managed, you take charge of the conversation around your brand, and can steer that conversation in the right direction.

Pay Per Click advertising often turns into an addiction for businesses. To make it work, you need in-depth keyword research that indicates which phrases customers are using to find your business, and spend directed toward making sure you come first in those searches. Good PPC is precise - it's not a race to the top of Google searches that describe your entire industry.

To make sure customers stay on your web page, you need a well designed landing page, with some content that directly addresses the search term, answering whatever question customers expect your brand to answer.

Twitter works well when you're trying to build brand awareness. People are often more engaged with their Twitter feed than with their email, and a combination of shared content and carefully targeted @ mentions can help your brand connect with relevant users and influencers.

No one communication channel is going to do anything. You will have to use more than one.

4 Making your brand ‘real’ continued

You do have to commit time, people and resources to the platform. Twitter profiles grow based on discussion, not broadcast, so brands need to talk to users. Get involved in discussions about relevant topics and trends, share breaking industry news with commentary, and answer questions from people looking for expertise in your area. Just be sure to have a strategy for handling public complaints - customers like to complain on Twitter because the public nature of the conversation means brands are more likely to act fast and in their favour.

Facebook is often a standout for B2C brands. Users will happily connect with brands if they interact in the same way a friend or relative would, focused on interesting content and conversation - social networking, in other words. It’s not the right environment to pitch equipment sales to manufacturers, or IT support solutions to information officers.

However, if you have an ongoing supply of high quality content, and you want to focus on building personal connections with people rather than business links to their workplaces, Facebook may work out for you. Facebook offers a tool - Power Editor - which enables brands to target consumers who’ve interacted before, as well as those who have a demographic element in common. If you know your customer personas well, the sky is (in theory) the limit.

LinkedIn is often the go-to for B2B social networking. If you’re relying on developing and deepening professional relationships with clients, connecting your address book to your profile and endorsing the people you’ve worked with, LinkedIn can work wonders. In particular, the platform suggests contacts using the “introduction” facility - the digital equivalent of “oh, you really should meet Steve, he’s in procurement…”

Talent recruitment is also high on LinkedIn’s radar. Your brand will grow in people’s estimation if it’s attracting people they respect, so LinkedIn is worth courting to get the right people looking for work. However, there’s another people point to be aware of about LinkedIn - it does demand effort from you to pay off. Without continued investment of time, energy and personality into original content, marketing on LinkedIn isn’t going to be worthwhile. The platform needs daily, detailed attention if it’s to provide the crucial ROI.

Focus on using a few marketing channels well, not lots of channels badly.

People power

Your choice of channel will ultimately depend on your customer segments and personas - who you're trying to sell to and where they spend their time. You'll have to tune your approach over time, based on the ultimate measure of success - Return On Investment (ROI). Where are you seeing the value-added discussion that builds your brand? Focus your resources there.

The marketing channels you choose aren't the only way you communicate, however. Sales and service personnel are a channel in their own right. The way they treat customers, the tone of voice, the customer experience as a whole: they're all ways in which your brand values reach your customers. In fact, they're among the most direct ways: to go back to our body language metaphor, they're the facial expression and the strength of your handshake, the elements that suggest your values are really authentic.

First Direct is great at this. The bank's customer service is a repeated award winner[12], precisely because it creates authentic, positive memories. Humanity is at the heart of First Direct's customer experience: according to head of brand and marketing, Zoe Burns-Shaw, it saturates everything from "our amazing reps [or] the language used in a welcome pack [to] the way a product is designed or a digital interaction"[13].

Brand value builds up through repeated encounters. Each touch point adds to a schema - a set of logged experiences and feelings that shape future responses to the brand. What this means for brand building is very simple. **You will need to communicate through more than one channel.** Brand equity builds up across multiple encounters between customer and brand, so you'll need to engage in multiple places and on a regular schedule to nurture and sustain customer loyalty.

Your brand's message will also need to be consistent. If you're presenting yourself on social media as a luxury brand, you can't have your direct mail pushing low prices. Tailoring your message to a channel is about saying the same thing in a different way - not about saying whatever it takes to close the sales. Your message is going to concern one of the classic pillars of marketing - the four Ps - and establishing that message clearly is the next step to building a better brand.

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12 https://www.marketingweek.com/2016/09/22/first-direct-reclaims-customer-experience-crown/

13 https://www.marketingweek.com/vision100/profile/zoe-burns-shore/l

5 The four Ps and brand building

*Classical marketing theory divides marketing activities into four categories: **product, price, place** and **promotion**. Modern theory treats these as pillars around which three other aspects circulate - **people, process** and **physical evidence**. Not all of these immediately leap out as marketing activities - and that's the point.*

Marketing permeates every element of your business. Price, for instance, is a vital part of market research - finding out what people are willing to pay to have their pain points addressed. This is the crucial difference between marketing tactics and marketing strategy; the deeper strategic work is what will give direction to your activities and set the shape into which you're building your brand.

Product

Product innovation has to be aligned to actual customer needs, offering something people want. Watching the trends and deciding that your next clothing release needs to be shapewear or your next watch minimalist is all well and good, but you need to know whether your customers want and trust you to produce it - and if not, what do they think you can do?

Price

Pricing is another key element of a strong brand. How much you charge for a product or service indicates how much you think it's worth; it also suggests who you want to buy it, whose values your business is aligned with. Lower prices say 'affordable, accessible', but also 'cheap and cheerful', and to some consumers - who equate higher prices with higher quality - it suggests a second-rate offering.

Place

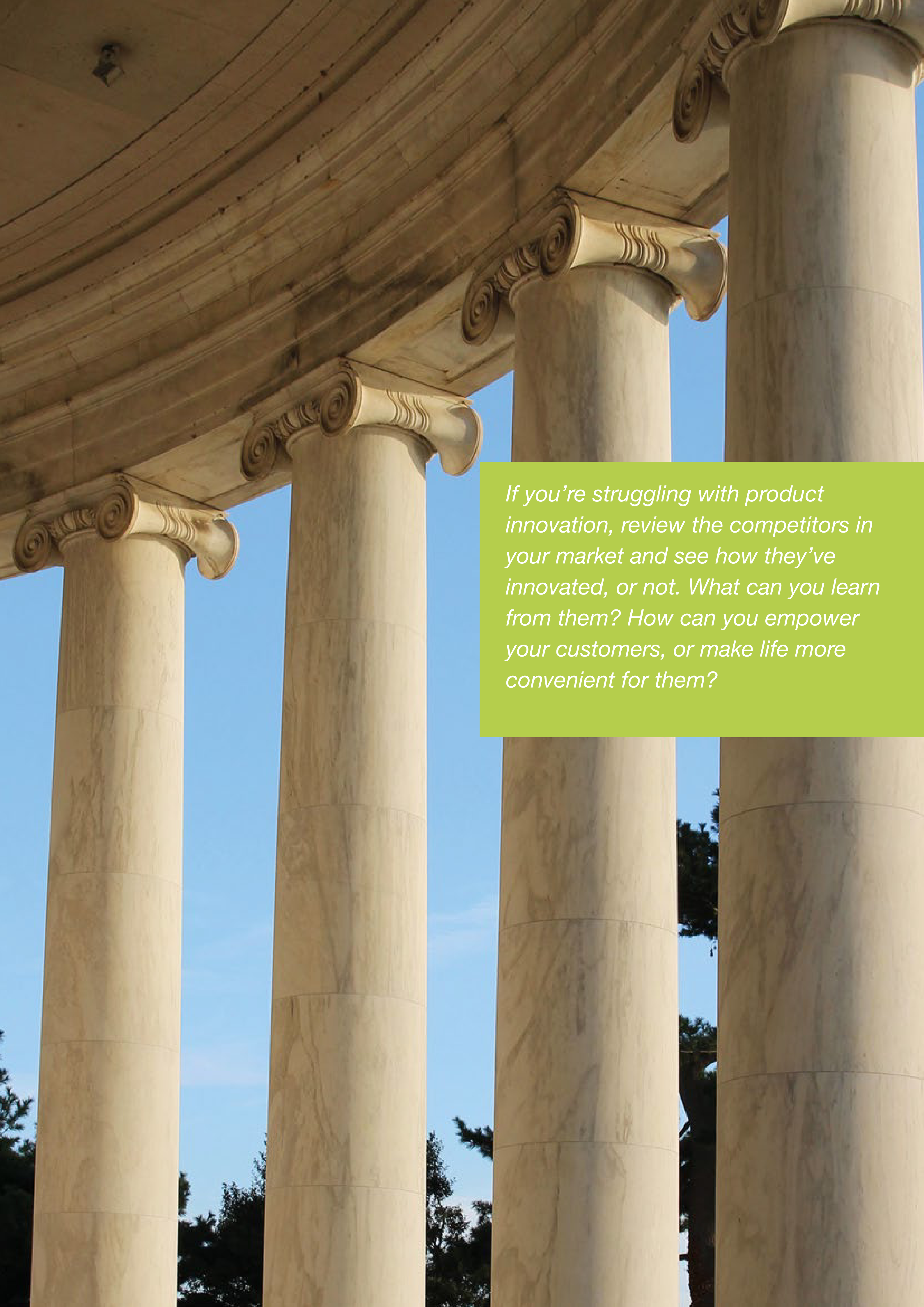
Place feeds into consumer reception and perception in the same way. Where you sell - the specific marketplace to which you're bringing your product - is a decision that goes hand in hand with how much you charge. In retail, an upmarket arcade and an industrial estate broadcast very different brand values; a handful of showcase items says something that stacking high and selling cheap doesn't.

Promotion

Promotion is the final element. Assuming that everything else is lined up as it should be - you're selling what your target demographic wants, at a price they think is fitting, from a place they want to be seen buying from - you still have to differentiate your product or service somehow, standing out from the buzz of everyone else's marketing. That's the role of promotion: flagging up the specific points at which your offering is unlike everyone else's.

However, brand isn't all about what you sell, or even about how. It's about who's selling. The way in which your people conduct themselves is possibly the single most important aspect of brand; it's what makes all your claims seem real.

By thinking of price in terms of value, you can set a price which reflects the value you deliver. This comes down to market research: gathering as much information as you can about your customers. What do they value?



If you're struggling with product innovation, review the competitors in your market and see how they've innovated, or not. What can you learn from them? How can you empower your customers, or make life more convenient for them?

6 Your internal brand: setting your company culture

Building a brand is a hollow exercise if it doesn't permeate your entire business. As we've already seen, without the customer-facing aspects - marketing, sales and service - living and breathing your values, they're just words on a page.

Every aspect of your operations needs to be on-brand to make sure your values are being communicated truly, accurately and honestly to your customers. Your brand starts with your company culture - one of the most mutable and hard-to-define aspects of a business - and company culture starts at the top.

You, as the business leader, and the rest of the board or management team, must be able to explain what your business does and stands for at the drop of a hat, and go beyond the products and services you sell. What do you do for your customers? How does your business improve the world by being in it? What does 'improve the world' mean, from your business' point of view?

Leadership doesn't exist in isolation. Business leaders have to be actively engaged with their people, modelling the behaviours that express the values they want to see. They also have to listen to their employees. If your employees are working in cramped, isolated, overlit offices, they're not going to be open-minded team players.

This isn't to say that an open plan, naturally lit office is the perfect solution: it may well be that your employees value confidentiality and the comfort of their own space, and can pass those values onto customers if they have a personal office in which to meet, greet and do business.

The only way to find out is to engage with them and secure honest feedback. Face to face interactions won't always do this - people want to keep the boss happy, and no matter how much you say you want to hear the truth, the power dynamic will always be in play. Anonymised surveys are your friend here: they allow your people to say what needs to be said, without fearing that it'll come back to haunt them somehow.

Like a brand, company culture is often something that businesses struggle to articulate - it's hard to see the wood for the trees. Rebrand within your business, building the company culture you want to communicate to your customers, has to start with a frank appraisal of how things are at the moment.

94% of executives - and 88% of employees - believe a distinct workplace culture is important to business success.

Source: Deloitte[14]

These questions will help you establish your current company culture - what your employees think is important, what they can't help but see as a negative, what opportunities they think you provide

Company culture
1 What five qualities should a new employee have in order to fit in?
2 What makes you proud to work at this company?
3 What process could be fixed or improved?
4 What do you need help with? On a daily basis? On a monthly basis?
5 What's causing you frustration or delays in your work?
6 Looking back on this week, what would you like to see improved?
7 How do we support your professional development and growth?
8 What's one thing you could change about the company if you could?

As with customer insight, you have to be prepared for home truths that you might not want to hear - but you need to hear them in order to build the business you want to lead. Of course, refusing to hear the truth is only one way for your brand building to go wrong: there are other common mistakes of which you need to be aware.

Companies which work on improving their cultures see a fourfold increase in revenue growth.

Source: Forbes[15]

7 Common mistakes when updating your brand

Brand building isn't easy, and it isn't always clear what a business needs to do. When our directors join a business that needs to work on its brand, they tend to find the same problems coming up again and again. We see five major brand mistakes on a regular basis when a company embarks on updating their brand: they are as follows.

1 Confusing brand problems with business problems

Business owners spend a lot of time thinking about their business - and living and working in such close proximity can mean they lack perspective. If a business is experiencing major barriers to growth, working on the brand won't necessarily tackle the root problem. It'll certainly give the impression that the business is working on itself, but it'll only be an impression. brand without substance behind it is nothing but an empty promise.

2 Neglecting existing brand equity

This mistake stems from a belief that brand means nothing but logos, taglines and colour schemes. In truth, a business' brand extends into its premises, its employees, and its workplace culture; its products, services and prices. The visual signifiers of the brand call all those things to mind - and changing those signifiers of the brand means throwing all those associations away.

3 Underestimating the size of the job

This is the other consequence of misunderstanding how deeply your brand permeates your business. It takes a week or two for a designer or agency to produce a new logo and mastheads; it takes months to establish a mission, vision and values, and realign the company's culture along those lines. A full rebrand is a big deal - it may be wiser to refresh one element at a time, within the confines of a larger brand strategy.

4 Not getting team buy-in

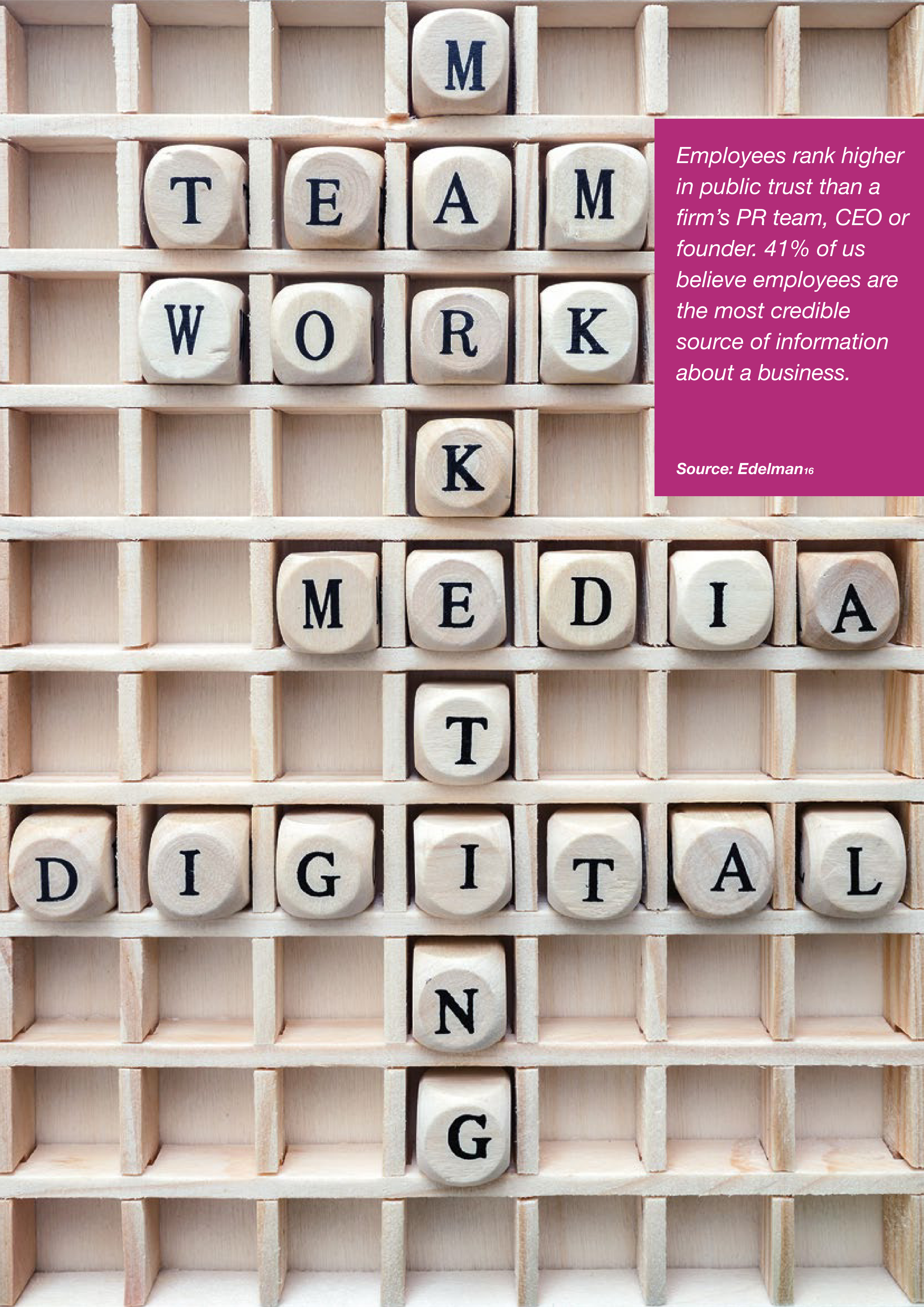
An effective brand should affect every aspect of daily operations - including how employees greet customers, write emails, answer the phone and respond to reviews and social media. This means the employees need to buy in to the brand's new values - and to an extent, those values need to come from how staff choose to act and the values they already hold. Imposing new values from the C-suite and expecting staff to adopt them is unrealistic.

5 Crowdsourcing your decision making

While you ideally want to build your brand on the values and beliefs of your employees, it's also important to establish boundaries and have a clear vision of your own. At the end of the day, business leaders do have a perspective on the whole business, and are aligned to that business' future - that's what being a leader means.

That leadership perspective has to guide the brand project as a whole, leading the business from where it is to where it should be.

Brand without substance behind it is nothing but an empty promise. Rebrand without shifting your operations and offering to fit is a waste of time.



Employees rank higher in public trust than a firm's PR team, CEO or founder. 41% of us believe employees are the most credible source of information about a business.

Source: Edelman[16]

8 Conclusion

A successful brand is hard to define.

Some, like Jayson DeMers, say the best brands have a thorough understanding of their target market, their interests, and how they communicate[17]. Others, like Mitch Joel, claim it's being on the consumer's side and making them feel the right things that counts[18].

For our money, it's something a lot more practical. Consistency is the most important thing.

There are lots of things you need to do - and do continually - to build and maintain a good brand. From the brand audit and the setting of brand values, through to the consultation with customers and employees that sets your company culture, you as the leader of the business have to look at and listen to the current state of affairs.

You need a vision that you can communicate clearly, simply and directly, through actions as well as words - and you need to know where that vision's target audience will be most receptive to hearing it.

You'll know when you're doing it right: productivity will be up, operations will be efficient, customers will be satisfied, and you won't struggle to explain what your business stands for - your brand will speak for itself.

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