

# Brand Integrity

*It starts with internal focus.*



by Tom Peters and Valarie Willis

**A**FTER THE LAYOFFS AND BUDGET CUTS, now what do you do? Are you living up to your brand promises, or are you falling short on customer experiences? How can you sustain your brand and the power of your values? When you focus only on the bottom line and ignore people, your brand suffers—as your customers lose sight of what you stand for, and they no longer trust what you can deliver.

## What About Your Brand?

The news is full of stories about downsizing, job evaporations, and budgets being slashed to shreds. So, what happens to your brand? Does it survive? Or is it bruised and battered? As a leader, you are responsible for the integrity of your brand. You need to pull your head out of the financial data long enough to assess the current state of your brand and of your talent.

When you experience a strong economic shift, your brand can easily become diluted, especially if no one is asking, “What about the brand?”

*In the hub of your organization is your talent, and your talent is your brand.* It is the talent that brings your brand to life. If your people (talent) are no longer happy, if they are concerned about their own welfare, or they are hunkered down to stay out of sight, your brand may be on its last breath as well. And when the brand is struggling, the customer experience is compromised. Talent can become non-caring and cynical, and these attitudes permeate into how customers experience the brand.

Whenever you experience a strong shift, you must recalibrate and set the organization back on course. As a leader, you can best do this by taking these five steps: 1) revisit the ambition or goal of the organization and connect people to it; 2) spend time on the front lines talking to people and getting a handle on the issues; 3) re-state the brand promise and ensure that every-

one knows how his or her job affects the promise; 4) look at the changes and assess the impact on the brand and the impact on the customer experience; and 5) design a course of action to put the brand back on track.

If your brand is bruised and battered, your customers may be headed to the competition—the exact opposite of your aims. In tough economic times, focus on keeping your current loyal customers and clients. Now is the time to re-think how to make the brand truly distinctive in the marketplace.

*Excellence is achieved when the brand, the talent, and the customer experience are all in alignment.*



## Excellence Audit

To learn how your organization is doing, and if it needs recalibration, take our *Excellence Audit*. The 50 characteristics in the *Excellence Audit* describe the seven elements that interact in the *Future Shape of the Winner* model. As a mini-audit, *answer these five questions*:

- How can you keep focused on excellence in these tough economic times?
- Have you modified your ambitions in light of today’s operating context?
- Are your team members fully committed to pursuing the agreed direction?
- Are your people totally focused on creating value for their customers?
- Is everyone on the payroll making their optimum contribution?

The *Excellence Audit* demystifies *excellence* for you by generating quantitative data on excellence. It identifies the most promising places to target improvement; reveals whether people agree about the priorities for improvement; exposes barriers to progress; helps you compile optimum improvement agendas that fit your context; generates joint agendas for management and pro-

fessional teams determined to pursue excellence locally; helps you get your area focused and moving forward; and provides clarity and focus amid baffling complexity and conflicting demands.

## Brand Inside’s Effect on Brand

A cornerstone of our message about brand is that *your employees are also your customers*. We call this *Brand Inside*. We stirred up controversy over this notion by posting a PPT entitled *The Customer Comes Second*. The message is this: Since the customers in the firm serve the customers in the marketplace, put your employees first.

Matthew Kelly states: “Your employees are your first customers, and your most important customers.”

*Let me, Tom, get personal about all this. I love great customer or “end user” feedback! I am competitive to a fault in that regard and a slave to the market—after all these years.*

At a higher level of marketplace engagement, I *love* a hearty business backlog, especially if it’s based on repeat business—and I carefully measure it against the year-to-date of previous years. And I *love* a fee-per-event yield that exceeds last year, the year before, and so on. And yet, in an important way, I put the customer or end user second or third to employees.

It’s simple and crystal clear to me: To give a high-impact, well-regarded, occasionally life-changing speech “to customers,” I first, second, and third have to focus all my restless energy on “satisfying” *myself*. I must be physically, emotionally, and intellectually agitated and excited and desperate beyond measure to communicate, connect, compel, and grab people by the collar and say my piece about a few things, often contentious and not “crowd-pleasers,” that, at the moment, are literally a matter of *personal life and death*.

I crave great customer feedback—but in no way, shape, or form am I trying to “satisfy my customer.” I am, instead, trying to satisfy *me*—my own deep need to reach out and grab my customer and connect with my customer over ideas that consume me.

Hence, my “Job One” is purely *selfish and internally focused*—to be completely captivated by the subject matter at hand. That is Job One: *self-motivation*.

*Warren Bennis*, my primo mentor, said, “No leader sets out to be a leader *per se*, but rather to express him- or herself freely and fully. That is, leaders have no interest in proving themselves, but an abiding interest in expressing themselves.”

So I'm back to my somewhat disingenuous message: To put the marketplace customer first, I must put the person serving the customer "more first." Excitement and self-stimulation first. Customer service second. That's my cause-and-effect scheme.

My message is that in order to *put the marketplace customer first, I must put the person serving the customer "more first."*

***There is no great external focus unless a great internal focus is in place.***

I contend that finding and keeping and co-creating with great folks is not about clever tools to induce prospective "thems" to "shop with us," but a 99 percent internal effort to create such an exciting, spirited, entrepreneurial, diverse, humane "professional home" that people will line up by the gazillions (physically or electronically) to try and get a chance to come and live in our house and become what they'd never imagined they could become!

***If you are serious about developing leaders,*** I suggest that you construct small leadership opportunities for people within days of their start on the job. *Everybody a leader* is entirely possible. So give you folks leadership responsibility from the outset, if not day #1 then within the first month. Hence, leadership development becomes a theme activity from stem to stern.

### ***Boost Your Brand***

***Take this quick quiz*** (only 10 questions) for assessing your organization. Ask team members to rate themselves and the team against each question.

1. I know what my organization does to provide value to our customers.
2. I understand our products and services well enough to explain them.
3. I see how my job contributes to the value our organization creates.
4. I understand what a brand is.
5. I can tell the story of our brand.
6. I believe our brand is valuable.
7. We continually improve how we deliver products/services to customers.
8. I understand how my job brings our brand promise to life.
9. I can develop my talent while contributing to this organization's success.
10. I'm passionate about my work.

These questions investigate how connected you and your team feel to your *Purpose* and *Brand Promise*. The consolidated results can be used in a team discussion to identify the most promising targets for development. **LE**

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***ACTION: Put the person serving the customer first.***

**Leadership Excellence**