

The Quest for ‘Whole-Brand’ Authenticity



IN A WORLD WHERE INDUSTRIES are being disrupted left and right, having a strong brand is no longer enough to compete. These days, companies must design their *internal* experience to authentically embody their *external* image.

That’s because, with greater access to information about how a company operates, why it claims to exist, and who works for it, the ability of any stakeholder to gauge brand authenticity — and inauthenticity — continues to grow. Take the example of **Comcast**, which, ironically, is in the business of connectivity — yet there are countless documented cases of customers having an extremely painful experience when they attempt to *connect* with an actual person at the company. In short, connection is being sold externally, but the brand is not being embodied internally.

How does this happen? One reason is that most companies put far too much emphasis on the external experience of their brand, and far too little on how their intended brand

is experienced by their own employees and other internal stakeholders. In his book, *Zag*, author and brand expert **Marty Neumeier** defines brand as, ‘a person’s gut feeling about a product, service or company’. This is an important framework when considering brand authenticity, as it implies that a brand is a personal experience that exists within each individual who interacts with an organization — both internally *and* externally.

How many times have you heard someone say, ‘Company Z makes an amazing product — but I hear it’s a terrible place to work’, or ‘I hear they treat their vendors horribly’? What is your gut reaction if you hear something like this about a company, more than once? Given the negativity bias — whereby things of a negative nature have a far greater effect on our psyche than do neutral or positive things — it is very likely to stick with you.

I recently connected with the owners of a waste-management company, who had come to a critical realization: their employees who drive the trucks — and are out engaging

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with the community daily — are critical brand ambassadors. In fact, among the entire workforce, these drivers have the highest frequency of interactions with external stakeholders. The challenge they faced was that these employees also had far fewer internal experiences that embodied the firm's brand — and thus were less likely to authentically represent it.

Historically, the public understanding of companies as 'whole entities' has been fragmented. There have been external experiences — products, services, marketing and outward-facing staff — and internal experiences by employees, vendors and contractors working within the organizational system and culture. Until recently, these have remained somewhat separate.

Theoretical physicist **David Bohm** developed the concept of 'undivided-wholeness' to describe how humans perceive the same phenomena from different, fragmented, perspectives. An example of this is **Einstein's** realization that gravity and acceleration are actually the same force. Similarly, we must move towards an integrated 'whole-brand' model, whereby your brand embodies your organization, which embodies your brand. When this doesn't happen, you get brand fragmentation.

Brand fragmentation is extremely dangerous in an age when the internal experience of an employee and the external experience of a customer are inextricably linked. As the ability for people to know and understand the various experiences of a company increases, the intentionality of the way each of those experiences is designed and integrated must increase, too. Bohm explains that undivided wholeness is "in a constant state of progress or becoming"; and the same is true for an organization and its brand. In the context of a whole-brand model, every brand has three key characteristics:

1. **It is becoming.** A brand is constantly evolving with each new experience that someone has.
2. **It is permeating.** A brand is not containable or controllable. The organization is porous.
3. **It is revealing.** A brand acts as a conduit or channel for a greater understanding of the whole.

So, if modern brands behave in these ways and our ability to understand their authenticity is increasing, the implication is that an organization and its brand are always either integrating or disintegrating. In this model:

Brand Integration = Whole-Brand Authenticity
Brand Disintegration = Whole-brand Inauthenticity

Exhibit A: Brand Integration at Badger Balm

When I pick up a tin of Badger Balm, the first thing I notice is the illustration of the friendly-looking badger on the lid. Their range of products feature a whole family of badgers in various tableaux. For me, the image is strongly nostalgic and brings back fond memories of reading illustrated storybooks with my grandmother. The branding implies whimsy and warmth, with a strong family focus.

I recently had the opportunity to visit Badger Balm at their facility in New Hampshire, where this sense of family and warmth — my initial gut reaction — was strongly reinforced. Throughout our tour, the founder of the company, **Bill Whyte**, also referred to as Badger Bill, pointed to example after example of organizational artifacts that reinforced the brand to me. From its Babies at Work program to its clear depiction of its social initiatives and B-Corporation 'Best for the Environment' status, to the daily family-style lunch that we were welcomed to, the Badger brand's internal experience was meaningful and authentic. Indeed, the more I experienced Badger as a whole entity, the more my various fragmented experiences became integrated.

Exhibit B: Brand Disintegration at Mast Brothers

A fascinating example of brand disintegration is that of the Brooklyn-based chocolate company, **Mast Brothers**. In late 2015, a story broke that questioned the brand's authenticity and its claims of being 'bean-to-bar chocolate, handcrafted in Brooklyn'. Even the authenticity of the founders' beards was called into question, and used as an example of misleading customers. I admit, this flurry of news actually changed my own perception of this company's ultra-hip, aloof brand, and made me question my experience of the product. It had previously seemed fine to spend \$10 for a gorgeously packaged bar of 'premium' chocolate; but now it was seemingly revealed to be mediocre chocolate enfolded in a heavily-designed ruse. No customer likes to be made the fool.

As various fragmented experiences were revealed, the public story changed. In this case, it was a Dallas-based blogger who exposed 'secrets of the chocolate industry'. Because of the age we live in, this post was shared — quickly and widely. The true Mast Brothers brand will continue to be revealed both externally and internally, over time.

Creating the Conditions for Whole-Brand Authenticity

Take a moment to consider every single person who will experience any aspect of your company: each of them will have their own gut reaction to your brand, based on their personal experience, and — whether you like it or not — each will contribute to your whole-brand narrative. That is why, to ensure whole-brand authenticity, it's so important to focus on all of the conditions in which your brand is experienced.

The whole-brand model can be defined as follows: designing an organization and all of its elements so that the intended brand is integrated into every experience of it. Because we cannot control another person's experience, we must focus on *creating the conditions* for them to experience something meaningful and authentic.

In order to move towards whole-brand authenticity, we must design the organization to reveal its underlying truth over time. Marty Neumeier elaborates on his definition of brand to say that, "It's not what you say it is, it's what *they* say it is. The best you can do is influence that." In order to move towards a whole-brand model, it's important to let go of any perceived control that you have over your brand and instead define what you *intend* the brand to be, and integrate that notion into stakeholder experiences through the design of your organizational systems.

The best place to start is at the confluence of the intended brand, the stakeholder experience, and your organizational systems. It is at this nexus where the conditions for authenticity are created. I suggest treating the following three steps as a cycle, and repeating them over time. Your first cycle should focus on understanding 'what currently exists', and your second cycle on design. Repeating the process will allow for continuous development.

1. Define the Intended Brand

When someone interacts with any element of your organization — human, physical or digital — what do you want her to feel? What do you want her to do? What do you want her to *think*? What exactly would you like to linger in her consciousness? Utilize any external branding materials or guiding principles that your organization already has and try to understand what is at the core of the intended brand and your business model. You may be able to identify a single word, like 'trust' or 'wellness'. **KEY QUESTION:** What exactly do you intend for your stakeholder to experience?

2. Map the Stakeholder Experience

Start with the two most important stakeholder groups: your employees and your customers. Create a map of the employee experience and the customer experience, identifying key points of influence and interaction for each. Keep in mind that points of influence are the points along a stakeholder's journey in which they are most influenced; while points of interaction are points at which multiple stakeholders interact. Once you have addressed employees and customers, you can then expand to other stakeholders who are critically important to your business model. **KEY QUESTION:** At what points are your stakeholders experiencing your intended brand?

3. Integrate the Brand into Organizational Systems

Once your points of influence and interaction have been identified, develop organizational systems that integrate the intended brand and support those experiences. **KEY QUESTION:** What organizational systems will reinforce stakeholders' experience of your intended brand?

While working with a manufacturing and retail business that was growing rapidly — and wanted to ensure that its unique vendors could grow alongside it — I developed a Systems Builder Tool that covers four critical aspects of whole-brand integration:

THE OPPORTUNITY. Defining what exactly you intend to increase will allow for a shared understanding of the opportunity that the system is designed to provide. *What do you want to increase?*

ACCOUNTABILITY. Determining the specific roles and teams that are responsible for the system will allow for ongoing accountability. *Who is responsible for implementing and maintaining the system and ensuring that the opportunity is met?*

DURABILITY. The creation of artifacts and rituals that support the system allow for durability over time and through transition of employees. *What artifacts and rituals will you create to support the system?*

ADAPTABILITY. Specific metrics that track and make progress visible allow for adaptability over time. *What metrics will make the impact of this system visible?*

The Whole-Brand System Builder Tool

		↓	↓	↓	↓
OPPORTUNITY	STRATEGY What is the opportunity for improvement? What do you want to increase?	Shared Organizational Vision Among all Employees	Deep Contextual Understanding Across Teams	Consistent Brand-Aligned Onboarding For All New Hires	Effective Communication Across Functions
ACCOUNTABILITY	LEADS Who is responsible for implementation and adaptation?				
DURABILITY	RITUALS + ARTIFACTS What tangible things will you make and do to support the strategy				
ADAPTABILITY	RESULTS In what ways will you measure the impact of the strategy?				

FIGURE ONE

In closing

In order to create meaningful and authentic connections with stakeholders, leaders must focus equally on internal and external stakeholders and create ongoing opportunities for the brand to be experienced and revealed over time.

A whole-brand model of organization design will not only increase external growth opportunities, but also, the realization of internal opportunities. For instance, with greater internal brand integration, the likelihood for employees to innovate and create new value for customers will continue to increase. What organization doesn't want more of that? **RM**

Caleb Dean is Founder and Managing Director of Owl, Fox & Dean, an organizational design firm based in Boston. He is also Chief of Staff at his wife's family's 42 year-old natural products business, Cambridge Naturals, and is the Advisory Council Co-Chair of the Design Museum Boston.