

Brand building is no small feat. Developing a brand involves a meticulous process for any business. Most brand custodians reposition or rebrand every several years. Many tomes have been written about the importance of conducting qualitative research with target consumers, securing their inputs on brand associations, potential for brand differentiation and levels of brand resonance.

However, little has been said about the value of obtaining the same inputs and perspectives from internal stakeholders – i.e. management and employees – who should be integral to delivering the best brand experience to customers.

Receiving qualitative inputs from internal audiences can be critical to reinventing a brand – whether it is through one-on-one interviews, focus groups or some other research vehicle and for a number of reasons. Perhaps one of the more obvious is to gain a 360 degree view of the brand – i.e. to understand more about the dimensions of the brand and whether they are positive, negative or neutral.

For example, a nationally ranked business school that's interested in improving its ranking recently started taking steps to reposition the brand. The process included conducting focus groups and one-on-one interviews, with eight groups of internal and external stakeholders.

A key reason why this business school chose to include internal audiences in its research process was to ensure thoroughness and understand the brand from a number of angles. It needed to have full opinions and hear the good along with the bad. In addition, it aspires to become a global 500 business school.



THE INTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Muneer Muhamed writes that internal audiences prove vital for branding

And in the bargain, it also discovered internal issues, the improvement of which could drive aspirations higher.

Brand lineage – i.e. attributes associated with history, philosophy and the reason for existence – is a key dimension most likely instilled by a brand's originators. Internal audiences can have invaluable insights of a brand's history; they probably understand the importance of history better than other audiences.

If they can share their understanding of a brand's heritage, it may help reestablish brand continuity. And this in turn will link a brand's future positioning to its roots, and the attributes that made it successful and enduring in the first place.

Balancing heritage with new brand positioning opportunities gleaned from external audiences or other stakeholders is tricky; yet, it is essential.

By conducting research among internal audiences, the existence of patterns and diverging opinions (between internal and external audiences) can be discovered. This can help marketing teams formulate the brand hypothesis and identify subsequent research areas. When individuals from a variety of functional areas

or product lines that have brand contact are included in qualitative research, the employee audience's diversity helps ensure that marketers have tapped a greater number of brand perspectives.

In the case of that business school mentioned earlier, the most enlightening area of research was the difference between an internal audience's opinions of the brand and what the students said. There was a broad disparity between what an MBA means to these two audiences. In fact, different truisms about a brand can exist even within internal audiences.

Understanding prevailing brand perceptions and how they evolved can help marketing teams change future brand perceptions by ensuring that a more cohesive view of the brand emerges. When developing a completely new brand, internal audiences can provide valuable inputs on the corporate and brand visions, and values with which the new brand should be aligned.

If a brand is to remain true to its values and become a meaningful experience for customers, it should be aligned with the company's culture. And if employees are to be able to act as brand ambassadors – to believe in what the brand

stands for to communicate the brand experience – it makes sense to seek inputs from these internal audiences.

Employees can be an important source of new ideas for initiatives that strengthen the overall brand experience especially if efforts to tap those ideas involve all facets of a company. This is true not only for corporate branding but even consumer branding as employees are also consumers.

Another important reason for seeking internal opinions is perhaps more political yet psychologically important: internal audiences will feel they have ownership in the resulting brand position.

Not only does gaining inputs from managers and other employees make branding buy in easier but marketers can identify internal brand champions who can help gain consensus on the brand position sooner.

Most brands today hardly take the internal perspective into account when undertaking rebranding exercises. They spend extensively on rankings but fall far short when it comes to gaining internal perspectives when rebranding. This is true for even the best of multinational brands.



Dr. Muneer Muhamed is the cofounder and chief evangelist of a nonprofit organisation.