

# BRAND ORIENTATION

# Brand orientation

**“It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.”**

The words of W. Edwards Deming are a haunting warning call for both business and individuals. To not only survive but to thrive in a complex environment demands adaptability and change.

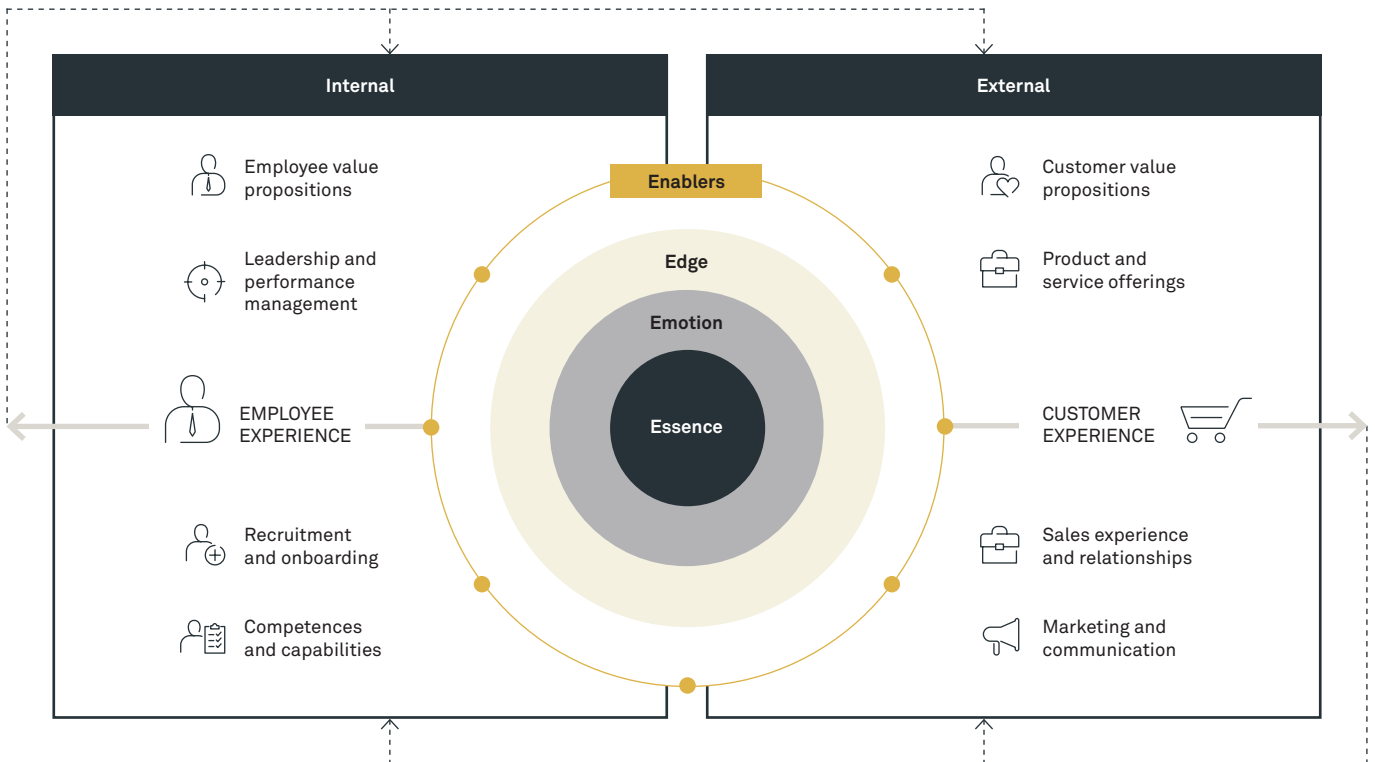
But change is difficult. Especially when consistency is so highly valued. How can you deliver a consistent customer experience if the world is constantly changing? How can you instil trust when the world is a fundamentally different place today than it was yesterday? And how can you attract and retain customers and employees when their needs are continuously in flux?

There are many answers. But an unexploited one is the **brand**.

The brand is more than just a marketing and advertising activity. Under the right conditions, it can engage employees and customers. It can power strategy. It can align decision-making and behaviours. And it can provide meaning for employees and customers alike.

But to recognise the full potential of the brand, it must be lifted to a higher realm than marketing and advertising. It needs to be placed where it rightly belongs – at the heart of business strategy. Only then can it provide direction. And only then can it provide agility through stability.

This approach is called **brand orientation**.



# What is brand orientation?

Brand orientation<sup>1</sup> is a management philosophy that places the brand at the heart of the organisational

decision-making. In a brand-oriented company, everything it does, both internally and externally, is informed by the brand. Everything from products and services to the recruitment policies and the office layout – it is all designed to express and reinforce the brand.

At first glance, it might sound as if brand orientation is incompatible with customer centricity. If the company primarily revolves around the brand, does that not mean that the customer is secondary? Not at all. In brand-oriented companies, the brand is built upon a purpose – an answer to the question of why the company exists, and what it wants to achieve. A brand purpose is more than just a goal of achieving a certain size or market share. A strong brand purpose is centred on making a difference for a group of people, improving something for them, somehow.

This means that customer centricity is built into the heart of the brand. If everything the company does revolves

around a purpose, then everything the company does will be about fulfilling that purpose for the defined target group.

Brand orientation's effectiveness comes from the alignment it achieves between the internal and the external realities of the organisation – between employees and customers. Placing the brand purpose at the core of organisational decision-making gives employees a central, lasting idea that guides their actions. If everyone's decisions revolve around a common idea and purpose, then everyone has a common vantage point from which to deliver a consistent customer experience.

Brand orientation brings the brand and purpose to life by enabling and operationalising it. The brand is deliberately expressed at every touchpoint in the customer experience and in everything the company does internally in the employee experience. People are recruited based on it, the internal culture and ways of working are built upon it, and people are rewarded based on it. The brand becomes the blood that flows through the veins of the organisation.



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<sup>1</sup> Mats Urde, “Brand Orientation – A Strategy for Survival” and “Brand Orientation: A Mindset for Building Brands into Strategic Resources”

## What are the benefits of brand orientation?

Studies have shown that brand orientation is related to higher brand equity and gains in financial performance.<sup>2</sup> But few companies are truly brand-oriented, and that is because it demands a completely different organisational mindset. For the ones who do succeed, here are some of the benefits that follow.

### Consistency and alignment – from experience to the core

Consistency is key for brands. A brand is the sum of all associations of a company. Therefore, it becomes the collected set of **expectations** of the next encounter. The degree to which the company delivers on those expectations becomes the **brand's reputation**. Living up to that reputation – being consistent and reliable, and thereby trustworthy – is what makes a brand strong.

As a company grows, so does the difficulty in maintaining consistency. A growing business means more customers to satisfy, more employees to control and more touchpoints to cover. In today's day and age, this means new technologies to adopt, new customer needs to address and new digital experiences to provide. In this environment, it's impossible to deliver a completely consistent **experience**. That is why brand orientation focuses on consistency and alignment in the **brand core** instead – the purpose, beliefs, values and principles that form the heart of the brand.

By aligning around the brand core, brand orientation allows for **flexibility** in the customer experience. After all, a tightly defined experience can easily become a straightjacket in unforeseen situations. To counteract this, brand orientation provides employees with a set of **commitments or principles** to adhere to. Within the boundaries of those principles, they are free to take care of the customer as the situation demands. The days of the “brand police” with rules, policies and strict guidelines are over.

Marketing and brand legend Norman Berry advocated for the “freedom of a tightly defined strategy”. Brand orientation achieves just that. It is a core belief and a set of tightly defined ideas that are never compromised on and that provide a direction. But within that defined space, there is the freedom, flexibility and empowerment to customise when necessary. Agility is created from stability.

### Differentiation and distinctiveness – from features to DNA

Differentiation and distinctiveness are at the heart of marketing. If you can define and communicate **what** you do better than the competition, by **how much**, and in a distinctive way so that you **stick out** from the crowd, then the customer has a very compelling reason to choose your offering.

**“HAVING A PURPOSE CERTAINLY IS GOING TO ATTRACT THE VERY BEST TALENT IN THE WORLD.”**

Elon Musk, Founder and CEO of Tesla and SpaceX

Brand orientation helps to achieve differentiation and distinctiveness by incorporating uniqueness into the core of the brand itself. A brand-oriented company revolves around a set of ideals, purpose and values that are **unique** to the organisation. In many ways, it is the DNA sequence of the company.

This unique combination of concepts that form the heart of the brand cannot be replicated. Since all decisions are informed by the core of the brand, then all decisions will, in diverse ways, express that uniqueness. Differentiation then becomes more than just a sales and marketing feature. It becomes an integrated part of the whole organisation's way of working. This common foundation of uniqueness then frees up sales and marketing teams to focus on translating it into targeted and customer-specific value propositions.

<sup>2</sup> Gromark & Melin, “Brand orientation index – A research project on brand orientation and profitability in Sweden's 500 largest companies” and “The underlying dimensions of brand orientation and its impact on financial performance”

## Emotional connection – from needs fulfilment to real fulfilment

Competing for talented employees is a timely issue for business leaders. A recent survey<sup>3</sup> of more than 1,300 global CEOs showed that 77% struggle with a lack of people with the right skills. They claim that the availability of talent is the biggest threat to their business.

To meet this challenge, many companies focus on building an attractive “workplace culture” by offering Ping-Pong tables, free lunches and casual dress codes. While these initiatives are not harmful, they do not sustainably differentiate the company in the battle for skilled employees. Anyone can buy a Ping-Pong table, after all.

So how can an organisation appeal to top talent in a differentiated way? The answer is to provide **meaning**. This might seem like a big, hairy concept to grasp. But it simply comes down to helping employees to experience a **meaningful reason for why they do what they do**.

Being purpose-driven provides meaning to employees, under certain conditions. Firstly, for employees to experience meaning they also need to **believe** and **identify** in the same purpose. If they cannot identify with the cause, then it will not resonate, and it will not motivate. Secondly,

employees need to experience a sense of **contribution** to that cause. If they cannot see how they play a role in fulfilling the company’s purpose, what possible meaning can they gain out of that? Thirdly, the sense of meaning needs to be **shared** by the rest of the employees. Meaning is created in connection with others – that is when meaning actually **means** something.

This need for purpose and meaning has not been lost on Generation Y and millennials. A recent survey<sup>4</sup> found that “sense of purpose” was the strongest predictor of retaining millennials for more than five years. “Emerging leaders are looking for one thing above all else in a career: purpose,” says Liz Maw, President of Net Impact. Amazon’s founder and CEO Jeff Bezos emphasises the point, saying that, “I strongly believe that missionaries make better products. They care more. For a missionary, it’s not just about the business. There has to be a business, and the business has to make sense, but that’s not why you do it. You do it because you have something meaningful that motivates you.”

For a brand-oriented company, meaning and purpose are baked into how things get done. Everything the company does revolves around improving the lives of defined target groups. If employees can sense this, and they can see how their individual efforts contribute to that cause, meaning can be shared and experienced.



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Jeff Bezos, Founder and CEO of Amazon

<sup>3</sup> PwC, CEO Global Survey 2017

<sup>4</sup> Deloitte, The Deloitte Millennial Survey 2016

## Who is responsible for brand orientation?



**THE NEW “POWER COUPLE” INSIDE THE BEST COMPANIES, I CONCLUDED, WAS AN IRONCLAD PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN MARKETING LEADERSHIP AND HR LEADERSHIP. YOUR BRAND IS YOUR CULTURE, YOUR CULTURE IS YOUR BRAND.”**

Bill Taylor in Harvard Business Review

The benefits of brand orientation apply as much to customers as they do to employees. Of course, you need to differentiate, be consistent, provide meaning and be outward-focused to win customers. And it is just as important to differentiate, be consistent, provide meaning and be outward-focused to convince employees to join and stay with the company.

Traditionally, these two worlds have been kept apart. Brand management has typically been a marketing responsibility, while talent management has been housed in the HR department. But the only way to make brand orientation work is to put the brand at the heart of organisational decision-making as the jurisdiction of the **whole organisation**. Brand management and talent management then do not become two separate functions with two separate agendas. Both revolve around the same set of ideas.

“We need to stop thinking about ‘brand’ as a marketing priority and ‘employer brand’ as an HR and talent priority,” says Kevin Keohane, author and business strategist. “They are of equal importance, they need to be aligned, and it should no longer be a sense of an uneasy alliance as it can often seem to be.”

Aaron Hurst, purpose evangelist and CEO of Imperative, agrees. “Marketing and HR have traditionally been the two core functions in a company concerned with people,” he says.

“They both focus on how to attract and engage people in the mission of the company, and for a long time they have been able to operate in a largely disconnected fashion, but that is becoming less possible or desirable. Smart companies today have started to think of these roles in less siloed ways ... By combining these functions, organisations are not only more efficient and effective. They become something far more important, more human-centred.”

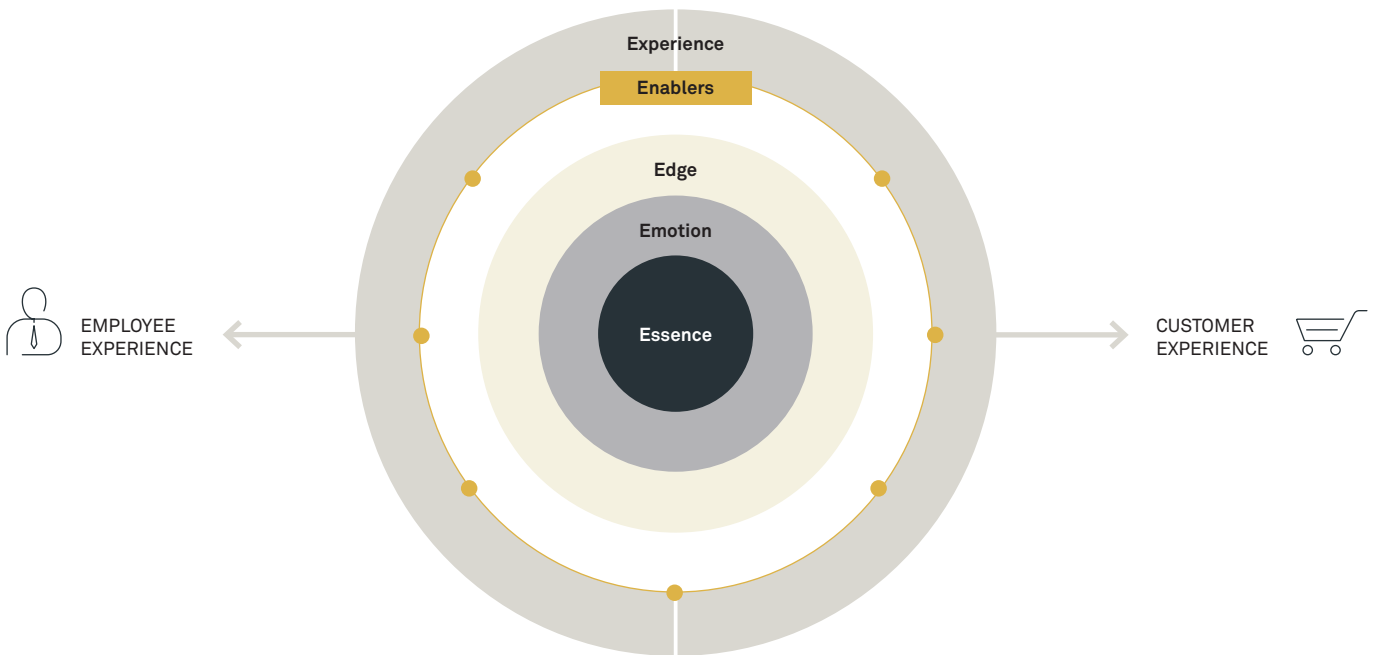
As the only person with full cross-functional responsibility, the CEO has the role of the chief brand guardian. But brand ownership does not end there in a brand-oriented company. It is not just the CEO and brand managers who have responsibility for the brand. **All** employees become brand ambassadors in everything they do, both inside and outside the walls of the organisation.

# Conclusion

Adopting brand orientation as an organisational philosophy is not a quick fix. It is a continuous process that requires constant questioning and revisiting. After all, a brand is not static; it is **dynamic**. “A brand is more than delivering on a promise,” says brand guru David Aaker. “It is also a journey, an evolving relationship based on the perceptions and experiences that a customer has every time he or she connects to the brand.”

Brands are not rocks; they are **living organisms**. They shift day by day and week by week, as customers, employees and the world at large change around them. They need the right conditions to grow, to expand and to adapt based on the demands of the people who interact with them. But a steadfast spine – a brand core with a clear purpose that is a constant source of inspiration, meaning and passion – is needed to withstand those changes.

Navigating the stormy waters of the fast-paced global marketplace is not easy, and brand orientation is no different. But by defining the core of the brand and orienting people around it, the organisation has its own guiding star. No matter the weather patterns and the adjustments they demand, everyone on board knows what direction to head towards. They can respond to the turbulent environment, while staying true to the course. They can achieve agility through stability.



Essence	Emotion	Edge	Enablers	Experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose – the reason why we exist</li> <li>• Ambition – what we strive to achieve</li> <li>• Promise and values – what we guarantee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personality, attitude and emotions evoked – what the brand feels like</li> <li>• Brand archetype – what the brand’s role is and how the story is told</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competitive edge – what makes us remarkable</li> <li>• Distinctiveness – what makes us stand out</li> <li>• Differentiation and value propositions – what makes us valuable and unique</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structure and processes – how we structurally bring the brand to life</li> <li>• Behaviours and culture – how we behaviourally bring the brand to life</li> <li>• Products and services – how we tangibly bring the brand to life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer experience – how the brand is expressed and experienced externally</li> <li>• Employee experience – how the brand is expressed and experienced internally</li> </ul>

### How we work with brand and culture development

- Uncover and articulate the brand core and identity (values, purpose, emotion, differentiators) and develop a competitive brand strategy
- Design customer experiences and employee experiences that express the brand – and that provide differentiated value to prospective customers and employees alike
- Operationalise and enable the brand:
  - Internally through culture, i.e. through organisational structure, processes and systems, leadership principles, development programs, performance management and incentives, office spaces, traditions and symbols, and more.
  - Externally through product and service offerings, sales experience, customer service and support, customer relationship management, advertising and PR, visual identity, content strategy and more.

## Contact

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