

HOW TO BRING CORPORATE BRAND PURPOSE TO LIFE THROUGH A SUPPORTIVE CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Corporate brand purpose defines the reason for an organization's existence and helps it focus and realise its ambitions. Central to the discussion on purpose is whether organizations pay sufficient attention to moving beyond rhetoric by embedding it into the core of the corporate brand and aligning the corporate culture with it. In this qualitative study, we explore how to build a supportive culture that can help corporate brand purpose to flourish. To investigate this, we have conducted an exploratory case study of a purpose-driven pharmaceutical brand. The findings show how a supportive culture has been built by re-aligning different human resources policies and practices, which include training, recruitment, promotions, and incentives. In the next stage of this project, we will conduct interviews with senior managers in other organizations to validate and develop our initial findings on corporate brand purpose.

KEYWORDS

Corporate brand purpose; corporate culture; human resources policies.

1) Introduction

Brand purpose is a “central life aim” (Williams et al., 2022, p.703) that defines what a brand stands for, beyond the generation of profits (Mirzaei et al., 2021), and the positive transformational impact it wants to have on the world (Iglesias et al., 2023). A strong brand purpose can strategically differentiate the brand (Kapitan et al., 2022), develop higher levels of customer loyalty (Williams et al., 2022), and earn higher levels of trust among stakeholders (Kjeldsen & Schmeltz, 2024). Brand purpose can also play a key role in attracting and retaining talent (Keller, 2023). Additionally, it can confer more agility to the strategic decision-making process (Iglesias & Ind, 2020).

However, unfortunately, too many brands fail to embed purpose into practice and “walk the talk” (France et al. 2024, p. 939). A key reason for this failure is the lack of a supportive corporate culture, which can help brand purpose to thrive (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Iglesias et al., 2023). Nevertheless, surprisingly, there is extremely scarce research on the key role that corporate culture plays in bringing brand purpose to life. Given this, the main objective of the present research is to explore how to promote a corporate culture that facilitates the successful enactment of brand purpose across the organization.

2) Literature review

Early conceptualizations define brand purpose as an internal tool (Crittenden et al., 2011) that adds incremental value to a brand, “by bringing a degree of distinction” (Osler, 2007, p. 438), which enhances desirability and improves profitability (Simmons, 2009). However, progressively, more contemporary conceptualizations have arisen that adopt a more externally oriented and duty-based perspective. Accordingly, brand purpose is defined as an aspirational commitment to positively transform other stakeholders (Mirzaei et al., 2021) and contribute to the betterment of society (Spry et al., 2021), instead of solely focusing on profit maximization (Agus Harjoto & Salas, 2017). Following this perspective, Iglesias et al. (2023) claim that a corporate brand purpose is an internal moral compass that defines why a [conscientious] corporate brand exists and what its intended transformational impact on the world is.

The following table summarizes the most relevant definitions of the construct in the brand management literature.

Table 1. Definitions of brand purpose

Author(s)	Definition
Hollensbe et al. (2014, p. 1228; 1232)	The reason for which business is created or exists, its meaning and direction [...] It provides a basis for organizations and their stakeholders to reflect on the scope of business activities and the implicit contract they have with their employees, communities, and society. Purpose provides an overarching framework to substantiate the need for businesses in society, and to amplify the positive impact they generate in the communities where they operate.
White et al. (2016, pp. 103, 105)	Is not an add-on. It's not an initiative. It is a culture change and it never finishes. [...] Purpose should be something that capable of existing for decades as opposed to a goal, which might change at any point of time. So, we identified our purpose as helping people to achieve their ambitions in the right way.
Williams and Montgomery (2019, p.11)	A force with the power to change the world around it and to deliver tangible improvement to human life and the environment.
Dhanesh, (2020, p. 586)	The reason organizations exist as a way to meet an organization's diverse set of responsibilities.
Hajdas and Kleczec (2021, p. 5)	The brand aim and activities directed towards challenging status quo principles and aimed at both user empowerment and the transformation of social practices.
Williams et al. (2022, p. 703)	A long- term, central aim that is a predominant component of its identity, meaning structure and strategy, which leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world that transcends the brand's profits
Bhattacharya et al. (2023, p. 966)	The overarching guiding force that permeates all corners of an organization (including its CSR activities) and drives all aspects of the business.
George et al. (2023, p. 1847)	It captures the essence of an organization's existence by explaining what value it seeks to create for its stakeholders. In doing so, purpose provides a clear definition of the firm's intent, creates the ability for stakeholders to identify with, and be inspired by, the firm's mission, vision, and values, and establishes actionable pathways and an aspirational outcome for the firm's actions.
Keller (2023, p. 3)	The broader reason for being and the greater value that the brand can create, directly or indirectly, for customers, employees and society

Iglesias et al. (2023, p. 2)	An internal moral compass that defines why a conscientious corporate brand exists and what its intended transformational impact on the world is.
France et al. (2024, p. 9).	Purpose bridges market, brand and societal orientations, in a strategic approach that is adaptable across the organisation.

Corporate brand purpose encourages organizations to think beyond shareholders, who tend to focus on short-term objectives (Quinn & Thakor, 2018). Instead, purpose fosters the adoption of a more balanced multi-stakeholder perspective, which aims at reconciling short and long-term objectives (Iglesias et al., 2023).

Corporate brand purpose is a strategic ambition that should drive the brand strategy and long-term relationships with stakeholders (Crittenden et al., 2011, Iglesias et al., 2023), to increase competitive advantage, generate higher levels of brand loyalty and foster consumer advocacy (Du et al. 2007). However, in parallel, brand purpose is also “a process of engagement” (Kaplan, 2023, p. 297), because it only comes to life when employees care about it and behave in accordance with it (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). This requires internal coherence and the strategic alignment (Mingione & Abratt, 2022) of employee behavior with the intended purpose (Morrison & Motta, 2023). From this perspective, the existence of a supportive culture is key to enacting purpose (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Luo & Kaul, 2019; Smith & Besharov, 2019). According to Geertz (2000, p.145), corporate culture is “the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions”. However, Aguilera (2023) suggests that a supportive culture only flourishes when purpose is materialized in concrete policies and practices (Aguilera, 2023). Interestingly, although human resource (HR) policies and practices are a well-accepted tool to reinforce a corporate culture (Begley & Boyd, 2000; McAfee et al., 2002), the role of HR policies and practices in promoting a supportive culture for the corporate brand purpose has not received attention in the literature.

3) Method

To understand how a corporate brand can build a supportive culture for its purpose, this study adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach aiming at building theory from multiple case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989). Primary data, through semi-structured interviews, represented the leading source of information (Eisenhardt, 1989). Secondary data helped to increase the trustworthiness and validity of our findings (Gibbert et al., 2008). To reduce potential bias and enhance the richness and thickness of our primary data, we have used a purposive sampling technique (Bryman, 2016), with various different informants who view the studied phenomenon from different perspectives (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Accordingly, we conducted 11 interviews with top managers, middle managers and employees at different organizational levels working for a purpose-driven international pharmaceutical brand, which has an explicit focus on social justice. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 50 and 65 minutes, with an average duration of 57 minutes. The data collection process is still in progress and the final sample will involve informants from different brands (4-5), and its final size will depend on the theoretical saturation criteria. Table 2 summarizes the interviews which have already been conducted.

Table 2. Sample

Nr.	Position	Interview Date
1	Sustainability Director	24/03/2025
2	Communications Manager/Lead	25/03/2025
3	Sales Manager Spain	26/03/2025
4	LatAm Region Director	26/03/2025
5	People & Sustainability Director	28/03/2025
6	Operations Sustainability Lead	07/04/2025
7	Director of Communication	07/04/2025
8	Talent & Culture Lead	09/04/2025
9	Healthcare Experience Manager	10/04/2025
10	Regional Director, CEE, Russia, Middle East and North Africa	10/04/2025
11	Talent and Culture Director	15/04/2025

Using NVivo 10 software, we conducted the preliminary data analysis in three stages (Gioia et al., 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 1990): open coding, axial coding and selective coding. First-order concepts have been identified through a micro-analysis stemming from open coding, via a line-by-line reading and coding of our interview transcripts. At this stage, informant-centric data terms have been generated and assembled into a compendium. Next, in the axial coding stage, first-order concepts have been compared with current literature to generate theory-centric second-order categories and sub-categories. This comparison also helped to ensure transferability, aiming to identify similarities and differences with previous studies on the topic, and thereby contribute to the development of theory. Finally, we integrated all the emerging categories into a theoretical framework. This emergent conceptualization was compared with previous existing literature to validate and improve the final theoretical framework.

4) Findings

The interviewees acknowledge that corporate brand purpose needs to drive strategy and transform the conduct of business. However, to achieve this and develop a corporate culture that helps purpose to flourish, the organization needs to promote an internal cultural change. The following quotes illustrate this:

“And we came up with this sentence (purpose), we use business to fight for social justice. This was just the first step. [...] we as a company exist to change things in society and in the world, which is our purpose. [...] The business should be a means to try to reduce this gap between inequalities [...] So, the company started to try to find ways to bridge this gap [...] we needed both a business transformation and a cultural transformation” II.

“The cultural aspect of it was the first thing that we covered. They said, look, this is a cultural transformation. We need to get everyone on board, everybody on board. [...] We need to hire people that believe so. We need to keep the people that believe so and maybe

not have the people that don't believe in this purpose first. We have to create this culture, and we did it through many different ways” I2.

By investing in different HR policies and practices rooted in the ambition of the new corporate brand purpose the corporate culture began to change. The first of these initiatives was purpose-related training across all organizational levels. For instance, top-level leaders in the organization took part in a mindset workshop and all brand employees in an ikigai workshop.

“And with the management committee, we did a mindset workshop, I would say, because it's important to understand that you are not working in a regular company and that when making decisions, you need to bring into the table other concepts or frameworks [purpose]” I7.

“[Ikigai workshop] We have a training course that is voluntary, but it's a course that normally is full, where we are helping you to define your purpose, your own purpose [...] And for us, it's a key course to start your process in the company, understanding your own purpose, the purpose of the company, how to connect them, and then you finish the course with an action plan” I8.

The second set of policies and practices relate to internal communications, which are key to generating internal awareness regarding brand purpose and the appropriate level of engagement.

“I remember when I came in as an external communications manager, obviously, my job was to communicate externally, and I remember having really interesting conversations with Mario [CEO] and Sergi [PRESIDENT] because they didn't let me communicate anything. So, for two years, all our work was just internal communications” I2.

Internal communications include many different activities and events, together with the content generated for social media, and the internal intranet. The following quote illustrates this:

“We did a campaign called Day-to-Day Activists. We involved so many people from the organisation, talking about how they could contribute to the purpose from a personal standpoint and also from a professional standpoint [...] We've been sending emails through that campaign. We published in our intranet. We also did a bunch of videos. We stuck vinyls in all our production plans and our offices “

In parallel, the brand also puts a lot of emphasis on recruiting employees whose values and attitudes align with the corporate brand purpose, while also promoting the best-performing employees who have this purpose-fit.

“We try to reinforce this culture, for example, we start from the beginning in the recruitment process. When we are recruiting people, [...] we check the connection between the candidate and our purpose, we check that we have a match”. I4

“When you promote someone that it's somebody that is aligned with all that [purpose and values], other people see that as well. If it wouldn't be like that, I think that would go against, maybe, to this kind of culture that we're trying to build

Finally, the brand has also developed a very comprehensive systems of metrics that measure how employees perform their jobs and their alignment with the brand purpose and values.

“So, we are all measured on how we do what we do (alignment with purpose) [...] and that has a direct impact on your bonus” I4.

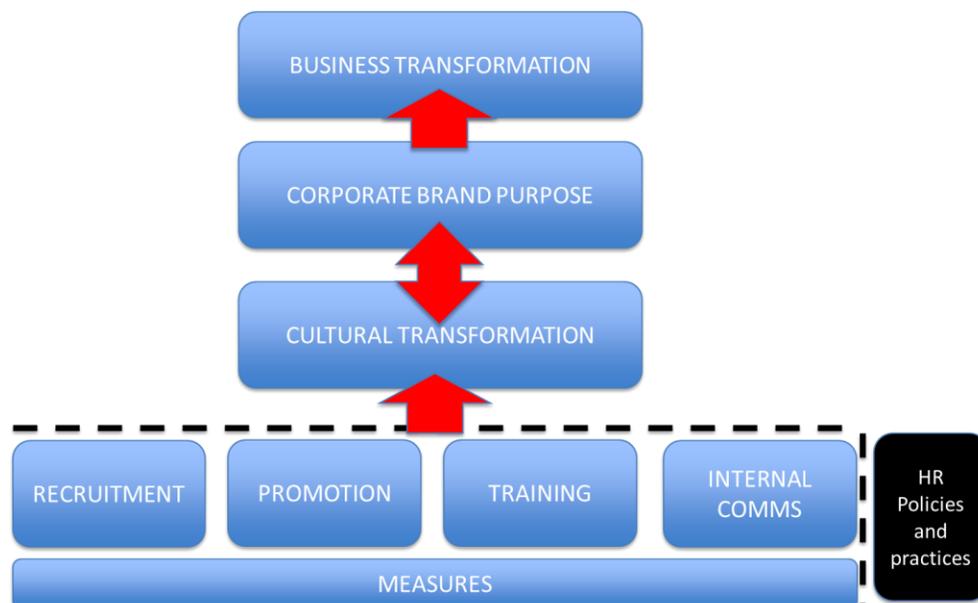
“So, the how and the what are for us at the same level. And this is something that I would say that people understand, and we use it in the feedback conversations. [...] [ON HOW] we have a final score from one to five stars, okay?” I5.

5) Discussion

Our findings suggest that the corporate brand purpose drives strategy and thus steers the business transformation process. However, for this strategic transformation to happen successfully, the corporate brand purpose needs to inspire a cultural change that results in the enactment of purpose across all organizational levels (Iglesias et al., 2023). Whenever this cultural transformation happens and the resulting corporate culture supports the corporate brand purpose, the latter will flourish.

The following figure visually summarizes the key HR policies and practices that can be used to promote a supportive culture for a corporate brand purpose, so that it can be successfully enacted across all the organizational levels.

Figure 1. The role of HR policies and practices in building a supportive culture for a corporate brand purpose



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