

The role of the intranet in brand knowledge management

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Abstract:

Increasingly, the brand management community is realizing that it is folly to exclude internal brand management from their brand management strategies. This is especially the case in service business models, where the employee is critically important to the brand. Internal brand management refers to the deliberate management of the brand in the perceptions of the firm's employees to achieve a closer alignment and identification between employees' personal values and the values, meaning and purpose of the brand. This paper examines how intranets and extranets can be used to share important brand facts and strategies within a brand team network. The attributes of this networked approach are highlighted.

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[Headnote]

DEVELOPMENT

[Headnote]

It's well known that brands should engage employees, suppliers, and partners, as well as consumers. Craig A. DeLarge discusses how intranets and extranets can

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be used to share important brand facts and strategies within a brand teams network. He highlights the attributes of this networked approach and describes how it can make brand management a team effort that enhances efficiency, promotes consistency, and saves resources.

Fotograph 1

Increasingly, the brand management community is realizing that it is folly to exclude internal brand management from their brand management strategies. This is especially the case in service business models, where the employee is critically important to the brand. Internal brand management refers to the deliberate management of the brand in the perceptions of the firm's employees to achieve a closer alignment and identification between employees' personal values and the values, meaning, and purpose of the brand. This process makes for stronger and more productive networks and communities within the brand's organization and network. Internal brand management is a source of competitive advantage, and the internal resources of brand knowledge and networks, as well as intranets and extranets, play a critical role in internal brand management strategy.

This article's key premise is that brands are enhanced when brand knowledge within brand networks is shared and leveraged into brand, customer, and market understanding, as well as product and service innovation. This networking of brand knowledge offers exponential benefits when it is shared and leveraged through intranets and extranets. When brands neglect to deliberately manage their brand knowledge across their brand network, they lose part of the competitive advantage that accrues from effective internal brand management.

Brand knowledge and networking

First let's take a look at two brand resources that always exist but that are almost always underutilized: brand knowledge and brand networks.

Brand knowledge: If only we knew what we know about our brand!

Heng¹ posits that knowledge management becomes brand knowledge management when it is leveraged on process, technological, administrative, and customer knowledge, whose management contributes to enhanced brand value. Ian Richards and Ruth Morgan² further note that brands are "quintessentially knowledge," consisting of the "marketer's knowledge of the product, the customer, the market, the brand, the marketing mix operations, the customer's knowledge of the brand, and the distribution channel's knowledge of the brand's channel power." They add that "over time, these three build to a body of knowledge which can represent a critical competitive advantage."³ Given this statement, we have to ask ourselves how well we, as brand and design managers, are capitalizing on this competitive advantage.

In a brand organization, this knowledge exists in both human (tacit) and documentary (explicit) forms within disparate functions, cultures, and organizations. These "knowledge silos" result in lost perspective, insight, and innovations, and thus a loss of competitive advantage.

The classic example of silo damage, which I have seen and suffered with, usually occurs when brand management becomes so busy "driving the business" that it does not introduce network members—that is, sales, operations, finance, advertising, design agencies, and so on—to each other

and ensure that each department understands the capability, role, and contribution of the others. Doing so might require development of a map—a sort of blueprint—that displays the content and location of knowledge within the brand network to ensure network-wide understanding. This understanding improves the chances of greater brand team morale, integration, cooperation, and innovation. It also avoids the bad feelings often caused when team members work to uncover information only to find out the knowledge they needed already existed within the network.

Brand networks: A paradigm for brand organizations

Traditionally, we think of brands as managed by brand managers and their immediate teams, with the assistance of specialists and suppliers. However, as management writer Peter Doyle points out, today's networked organization makes this a dated paradigm.⁴ The fact is that because brands are born, grow, and die in the perceptions of their stakeholders, brands are really managed by the networks of managers, process teams, and external suppliers and distributors that proprietarily contribute to their value. For example, a brand like Peptic AC or Motrin starts out as an idea in the mind of the immediate brand manager and team, but what we ultimately come to know as the brand is not necessarily what the brand team started out to build. It's really the collective perception of the brand team combined with the subsequent input, finessing, and slanting of all the stakeholders in the brand network. These stakeholders include supply chain, finance, legal, marketing research, marketing services firms and agencies, research and development, thought leaders, and every other individual and entity that touches the brand.

As defined by theorist Seufert et al., knowledge networks come in two varieties: naturally occurring emergent networks, which already exist in an organization, and deliberately planned "intentional networks." Every organization has emergent networks, "communities of practice or process," whose members have similar interests and objectives, perhaps as a result of serving on the same project team or having similar job challenges. However, if a group of experts convened to serve as a task force or an advisory board, we would be creating an intentional network. Brand managers benefit by identifying and mapping the emergent networks they already possess, as well as planning and building intentional networks, which deliberately grow competencies and yield innovations.

In a network paradigm, the brand manager must embrace the role of principal brand knowledge network manager. In this way, he or she can use brand knowledge management and such tools as intranets and extranets to the brand's advantage. It's a role that will require a new set of skills and activities that many brand managers are still getting a handle on.

The best example I have seen of this type of management was when a brand management team of which I was a member initiated a "brand communications summit." All the members of the brand communications network were included. This was done to ensure that each of them was aware of the brand's situation and its objectives—and how he or she was poised to contribute. Members came from consumer and professional agencies, as well as direct-response, Internet, and point-of-purchase communications firms—entities that would normally have little involvement with each other. This networkwide brand understanding uncovered redundant efforts that were abandoned. It also uncovered opportunities for collaboration, which would never have happened otherwise. The result was an increase in morale for the brand team, better leverage of brand communications, more opportunity for innovation, and reduced costs. The trust and common understanding created in this summit resulted in one of the best integrated brand launches ever seen in our firm. You can see how such a summit can work across any specific area of the brand network—or, for that matter, across the entire brand network.

Brand knowledge networking

When we combine knowledge management practice with a network view of the organization, we get knowledge networking. Seufert et al. define knowledge networking as a combination of

people, resources, and relationships assembled to accumulate and use knowledge to create value.⁶ In the absence of knowledge networking practices, most of the value of brand knowledge is lost since tacit knowledge goes untapped and the available knowledge is never combined with new knowledge—the source of future innovation. Because brand organizations, like all organizations, can tend toward self-absorption and short-termism, they can suffer from the loss of a vertical and holistic perspective,⁷ as well as a sense of taking part in a continuum of strategic and cultural activity. (See Figure 2.)

Illustration 1 – figure 1

Figure 2

Brand knowledge networking has the potential to enhance these perspectives for the brand network so that there is a greater degree of beneficial reciprocity in the way the network works to create greater brand value for all its stakeholders.⁸

When brand knowledge is properly linked up around a common brand context, brand networks gain the benefits of

- * A holistic understanding of brand vision, context, strategy, and tactics
- * Improved brand innovation
- * Accelerated brand competence and experience
- * Improved brand-network partner selection and collaboration
- * Improved brand-process efficiency and effectiveness
- * Better retention of knowledge lost to departing network members

The benefits of this knowledge network perspective are evident when brand teams are able to avoid implementing strategies that have already been tried and discarded. Also, when teams are able to choose strategies that leverage their collective understanding of the brand's legacy and experience, rather than strategies that may be novel but are shortsighted and consequently short-lived.

Intranets and extranets: Enablers for the brand knowledge network

Brand knowledge and networks have always existed, but the ability to store, retrieve, and correlate these resources has greatly improved with the emergence of company intranets and supplier- and partner-facing extranets. These allow interactivity of a greater number of knowledge domains and network members, both inside and outside the formal organization.

These proprietary and secure networks provide the unique advantages of many-to-many communication and collaboration across traditional organizational, functional, and process boundaries. Intranets are internal company networks. Extranets are set up when two distinct organizations connect their respective intranets for business communications and transactions, allowing controlled access by authenticated outside parties. The two differ in that an intranet will be available only to company employees, but an extranet will welcome external suppliers and partners.

Extranets give brands the advantage of engaging suppliers and distributors whose component quality and purchase environments contribute to the strength of the brand. This networked approach recognizes that, while each individual component of a brand is independent, from a

customer's perspective they make up a unified entity.⁹ It is this unified view of the customer that makes internal brand management across the entire brand network so crucial, and intranets and extranets such critical tools for enabling a brand knowledge network. Intranets and extranets offer brands competitive advantages by working as:

- * Brand asset warehouses, which allow the storage, retrieval, and classification of brand assets, such as strategic and tactical plans, advertisements, salesforce materials, marketing research, and competitive intelligence reports-saving time and money

- * Enablers of brand communities that create, articulate, evolve, and educate one another about the brand and how to "live" it, resulting in a better understanding of the brand, its customers, and its market throughout the brand's network

- * Brand-process enablers, which increase the velocity and agility of brand processes, such as the supply chain, product development, campaign execution, and competitive intelligence, creating the potential for improved brand profit margins and innovation, brand community competence and morale, and competitive advantage

Case Study: Johnson & Johnson's Global Over-the-Counter Intranet

Johnson & Johnson's Global Over-the-Counter Intranet (GOTCI) is a corporate intranet that serves J&J's decentralized semi-ethical brand¹⁰ organization, which spans more than 30 countries around the world. It consists of brand asset databases containing marketing and sales materials, marketing and clinical research studies, packaging graphics, brand contact directories, and electronically enabled business processes, all of which are referred to as "brand knowledge products."

During its four-year existence, GOTCI has evolved through several stages. In each stage, its charter as a "people, process, and practice resource" has remained constant. Within this charter, GOTCI's brand team has pursued strategies of 1) continually optimizing its content with changes in technology and user network needs; 2) quantifying the business contribution it makes to the brand network; and 3) cultivating a "knowledge-prosuming" culture" throughout the brand network.

Strategy 1: Continual optimization of brand knowledge

A major strategic focus in GOTCI's evolution has been that of synergizing its information about people, processes, and practices into better-contextualized and more-actionable knowledge that supports competency development and network innovation. A constant temptation has been to try to capture everything, and we have succumbed to it at times. We have had to continually recalibrate, through constant dialogue with our users, to focus on capturing and organizing the fields of brand knowledge that best support the competency and innovation needs of the worldwide brand network.

These recalibrations have resulted in intranet micro-sites that focus on global brand initiatives, universal brand-management job functions, and brand histories like The History of Tylenol site shown in the figure below. Another content innovation has been the brand-knowledge summaries that combine practice, people, and process knowledge into a highly accessible format. These summaries have made it more convenient for brand managers to network and collaborate cross-nationally, creating more opportunity for tacit knowledge transfer and creation.

Strategy 2: Quantifying business contributions

Brand knowledge and its corresponding assets are soft and their contribution difficult to quantify in a business environment that increasingly wants the return on every investment made. We urge brand managers looking to leverage their intranets and extranets as brand knowledge tools to estimate the savings and revenues generated

based on activities avoided or innovations generated because of these tools. We have applied this approach to GOTCI to justify its continued budgetary support and to stay abreast of whether the value of our offerings is increasing or declining over time. As a result, we have an additional point of credibility with our management. Moreover, being able to track the value of the knowledge used allows us to be sensitive to changes in our users' needs and in the way in which our content is organized and presented to meet those needs. In this respect, GOTCI is truly a brand that has required us to employ a new (knowledge) product development strategy as with any brand. It's a novel strategy, because it affects internal brand management activities by applying external brand management practices.

Figure 3

Our ROI (return on investment) efforts involve taking an inventory of the time value and dollar costs of the activities that GOTCI has made unnecessary; we then allocate this inventory to each of GOTCI's knowledge products so that we can produce an activity-based cost-avoidance forecast driven by GOTCI's monthly usage reports. Note that we significantly discount the total usage from these reports, as we hypothesize that a significant number of the page views, database hits, and brand asset downloads that GOTCI experiences are mere browsing versus true value-added activity. We found that this discounting only made our forecast figure more credible in the eyes of our stakeholder.

Strategy 3: Cultivating a knowledge-prosuming culture

This third strategy is the most difficult to accomplish. It is difficult because it takes time and often has a number of cultural and managerial forces arrayed against it. One of the challenges involves motivating the network to produce knowledge as readily as it consumes it. Understanding the knowledge-sharing propensity of the culture in which you are implementing is critical. The lower the propensity, the longer the cultivation will take. The road that has gotten us to this point in our cultural evolution has been far from smooth, and we have the knowledge (and bruises) to show for it. We recommend several critical foci to facilitate this cultivation over time.

* A focus on the 4Rs (roles, responsibilities, recognition, and reward) makes the networking of brand knowledge a management practice that is part of the role and responsibility of every member of the brand network for which they will be recognized and rewarded. The 4Rs are key motivators; they encourage brand network members to contribute to, and benefit from, brand knowledge networking and the intranets/extranets that enable it. When knowledge networking becomes a recognized management practice, knowledge silos are broken down and new innovative brand knowledge is created more easily.

* A focus on continually linking brand knowledge management practices to brand values, objectives, and competence development is needed to maintain its relevance. Knowledge management for knowledge management's sake always fails.

* A focus on continuous vertical and horizontal communication with all levels of management and nodes of the brand network is needed to maintain top-of-mind awareness regarding the business benefits of brand knowledge networking.

* A focus on "listening to the customer" must be maintained via ongoing quantitative and qualitative research in the form of surveys, focus groups, user panels, suggestion boxes, and Web-trends reporting to enable proper response to the changes that occur in the knowledge and networking needs of your users.

* A focus on maintaining convenient and relevant user interfaces not only at the intranet homepage but also through email, discussion boards, FAQ databases, chats, teleconferences and, if possible, videoconferences.

* A focus on training helps assist the user in taking best advantage of your knowledge resources.

* A focus on periodic face-to-face meetings of network members maintains network trust, especially if you have a network that is farflung geographically or culturally. Without these, knowledge silos and traditional network barriers revive over time.

Remember, just as a body without a soul is dead, an intranet without a supportive culture is dead.

Conclusion

I am convinced that brand intranets and extranets, when leveraged as brand knowledge management tools, are capable of assisting brand managers in the creation and maintenance of a brand network environment in which members understand the brand values, vision, strategies, tactics, and behaviors that differentiate the brand in the marketplace. When this "brand understanding" becomes a part of the organizational and team culture, it translates into easy and naturally satisfying stakeholder experiences that make for competitive advantage in the marketplace.

I encourage all brand managers to: 1) manage their brands' knowledge and networks for increased brand innovation and profitability; 2) leverage intranet and extranet technology to capture, integrate, and share this brand knowledge throughout their brand networks; 3) cultivate a knowledge-prosuming culture; and 4) focus on the enhancement of brand competencies and processes, not the collection of every piece of brand knowledge that exists.

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[Footnote]

1. M.S.H. Heng, "Mapping Intellectual Capital in a Small Manufacturing Enterprise," *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2001), p. 53-60.
2. Ian Richards and Ruth Morgan, "Brand Knowledge Management: Growing Brand Equity," vol. 2, no. 1 (1998), p. 48.
3. *Ibid*, p. 50.
4. P. Doyle, "Brand Equity and the Marketing Professional," *Market Leader*, Issue 1, Spring 1998.

[Footnote]

5. A. Seufert, G. von Krogh, and A. Bach, "Towards Knowledge Networking," *Journal of Knowledge Management*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1999).
6. *Ibid*, p. 184.

[Footnote]

7. A "vertical approach" here denotes the idea of a collection of brand issues that must be considered at all points in time over the horizontal (historic) plane of the brand's life.
8. See Richards and Morgan, p. 49.
9. Nicholas Ind, *Living the Brand* (London: Kogan Page, 2001), p. 144.

[Footnote]

10. Semi-ethical drugs are drugs that are available without prescription, but often under the care of a pharmacist-although not always, depending on the drug and the nation in which it is marketed. Examples of these brands include Tylenol, Pepcid AC, Motrin, Imodium, and Nizoral.
11. Prosuming occurs when one simultaneously produces and consumes a commodity-in this case, knowledge.

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by Craig A. DeLarge

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