

# Driving Creativity and Innovation Through Culture

by Anne Archer and Doris Walczyk

**A**n organizations traditions and values can inspire people to excel. At Optima Group, Anne Archer, and Doris Walczyk explain how the consultancy guards its inclusive, flat structure as a way to attract the best talent. The company recognizes and rewards all those who contribute great ideas. Business and social activities overlap to nurture trust, respect, community, and out-of-the-box thinking that support exceptional client results.



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Corporate culture is made up of a complex mix of employee and corporate beliefs, attitudes, values, rituals, and behaviors that permeate a company and give it its unique personality. It has surfaced as one of the most compelling factors in characterizing, leading, and managing any organization.

Culture can attract the best employ-

ees and maintain their loyalty. It can rally people around an important belief or shape the definition of a corporate brand. Despite its impact, corporate culture is not always given sufficient weight or consideration, and its effects are underestimated primarily because they are difficult to measure.

In cases in which a culture springs organically from the nature of a passionate and focused leader, the company's whole existence hinges on its cultural heritage. On the other hand, many companies struggle to define the values that underpin their cultures, and many more wrestle with how culture should be articulated within the organization—beyond dressing up or down on Fridays.

### **Culture and Creative Inspiration**

The design industry relies heavily on a strong corporate culture. Nowhere does culture have a more direct impact than in a company where creativity and innovation represent the livelihood of the organization. At the same time, the mechanism that inspires creative people to come up with the perfect design is hardly the same as the one that inspires a salesperson to make a big sale. Creative inspiration, unlike a sales commis-

sion, is something that cannot be artificially generated or demanded.

Management expert Peter Drucker observed that knowledge workers (also known as creative workers) do not respond to financial incentives, orders, or negative sanctions. Drucker writes that the key to managing these workers is to treat them as people whose commitment is highly contingent and whose motivation

comes largely from within. In order to generate genuine inspiration or passion naturally, a company has to start at the core.

### **Culture and Community**

Optima Group USA is a brand identity firm located on the North Shore of Chicago. From the start, the company's culture is taken very seriously. This is because its ability to attract and retain gifted creative people is a direct result of the culture it has created. From the outset, applicants are evaluated not only for their skill set, but also for their ability to fit into the group. From this perspective, the ideal cultural fit is a person who has respect for others, a sense of community, and that good old Midwestern work ethic. "It doesn't matter if we're filling a design position or an administrative position—we want good people with a sense of humor. We're not so much about individual accomplishments as we are about team accomplishments," says Ann Werner, one of the founding partners.

To this end, Werner and partner Lyle Zimmerman encourage group activities that

help build a strong bond among its 20 employees. Themed potluck lunches are a staple, and summer months are full of activities, such as annual Cubs baseball and Ravinia Music Festival outings. Bowling night is a fun way to incorporate families and significant others, and children and dogs make frequent appearances in the office. From a more professional viewpoint, the founding partners have taken into account the fact that Optima is not located in Chicago's downtown, where culture, shopping, and entertainment are always a short walk away. The company tries to counteract this in several ways. Whenever we grow and need to re-locate, we make sure we find a space close to a train line so that the employees who live downtown (and in Wisconsin!) have a convenient way of getting to the office. The company even bought scooters for employees who motor down to Lake Michigan in good weather. "We want our people to be fulfilled and happy," says Zimmerman, "and we've become like an extended family. We care about them as individuals, not just as employees. It's all about quality of life."

Each year, two designers, on a rotating basis, attend a major design conference in order to learn about design trends and renew their creative spirits. One staff person is currently on sabbatical on the West Coast. Optima has design partners in Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, and plans are forming for a work exchange program.

### **Our World Is Flat**

Two fundamentally interrelated traits mark the corporate culture at Optima.

First, we are an organization that is very flat. All our employees are privy to CEO-level information regarding how the company is doing, plans for the future, and so on. We try to be as supportive and employee-focused as possible. We believe that good ideas can come from anyone.

Second, we operate under an atmosphere of mutual respect, social consciousness, and uninhibited creativity. By stressing the underlying value of individual creativity, Optima has made itself extremely attractive to both demanding clients and talented employees.

The employee-focused, uninhibited, values-infused culture is a direct product of the person-

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alities, visions, and efforts of the company's founders. They started the business conscious of their own dissatisfaction with traditional management practices and the limitations placed on creativity and personal fulfillment. "I don't think you can get the best out of people when they feel uncomfortable, stifled, or devalued," says Zimmerman.

Social consciousness and respect for others permeates the organization at many levels. Optima participates in projects that contribute to the community and bring greater personal meaning to the everyday work environment. "We're not just about brand identity. We're about human relationships, and those have to be recognized at many different levels. If we can be good people while doing our job, so much the better. And that's what everyone here aspires to be—good people, and then good designers," Werner notes.

It is an attitude that informs everything the company does. "My most critical personnel challenges have been in relation to marketing and sales personnel, whose view of our business and of our company's role with our clients can be very different from our own view," says Zimmerman. If an account exec attempts to please clients by giving them what they want, rather than challenging them to find out what they really need, the company runs the risk of missing out on an opportunity to realize a brand's potential.

#### Options for Rewarding Success\_\_

Optima team members are rewarded on multiple levels. The more promise an employee shows, the more decision-making options are open to him or her. We let employees guide their own destiny. One senior creative director, who had been in the business for years and who had helped build the company, decided she wanted a more flexible schedule. She has Fridays off. She earned that.

An open-forum structure encourages proactive efforts and free exchange of ideas. Individual efforts are continually recognized and credited in order to promote growth and success for individuals and the group. In other words, the more successful the team becomes, the more successful the team members become, and vice versa. A

good model for this was the Chicago Bulls championship team. Even though the team relied on individual stars like Michael Jordan, the focus was on elevating the entire team, which in turn yielded much greater rewards than any single player could have ever achieved by himself.

Each individual feels important, and each is treated with the same respect, regardless of status in the company. We are all friends, and we take care of each other. We believe that good ideas can come from anyone. Consequently, when we have brainstorming sessions, everyone participates, not just the designers. Similarly, everyone is given a say in the types of clients we go after. For example, our new business director recently asked each employee for a wish list of dream clients. Those are the companies she's concentrating on. The list included traditional consumer packaged goods companies, cosmetics companies, sporting goods firms, and wineries. Each person's list reflected his or her own personal interests and backgrounds, and there weren't many overlaps!

#### The Force of the Future

To ensure a steady course, Optima consistently adheres to the values and practices on which it was founded. Without fail, employees receive recognition and respect for their individual talents, and as a result clients consistently receive superior service and creativity. By listening carefully to employees and clients, Optima is able to remain relevant and competitive in a difficult and crowded marketplace. Because change is taken seriously, careful thought is given to any changes that could break down what we've built through hard work and dedication. For us, culture has become a way of life.

#### Leveraging Culture for a Competitive Edge

High-profile projects are thrown open to every designer on staff, not just the ones with the most seniority. Everyone contributes to the conceptual

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development phase; this way everyone feels he or she can contribute to key jobs, and the client has the benefit of the widest range of thinking and experiences possible. It would be safer not to do it this way, but if we didn't, individual growth would be hampered and wonderful solutions "from the mouths of babes" might otherwise go undiscovered.

Clients count on a strong creative product, and the only way for a team to deliver it is for every member to feel vested in every project. In order to make this a reality, Optima's designers are given the freedom to explore without unnecessary constraints that might stifle individual expression. The company's flat, open organiza-

tional structure avoids making people feel micro-managed or hindered. Designers are encouraged to work in free-flowing teams-, as long as they stay on track with the project's objectives.

Optima recently worked on a project for a brand that had no clear identity and had found itself competing with private-label brands. The competition was doing a

much better job at communicating to, and connecting with, the consumer. The client needed to bring new consumers into the franchise without alienating its existing and loyal user base. At the same time, consumers were unsure what this brand stood for.

The challenge was to make the package more relevant to consumers without over-promising.

Optima had created some designs, and the client had evaluated them but had no plans for further research. Because the brand had no equity to speak of, Optima suggested a revolutionary packaging change. The client had worked with another design firm on a previous "refreshing" of its packaging, but that design had been too incremental, and it failed to move the needle in terms of sales. Optima strongly believed consumer input was crucial, and at the eleventh hour, the client agreed to get the packaging concepts in front of consumers. Concepts were test-

ed to see which ones delivered a stronger "flavor story" and made the brand more relevant to core users (lower-income, mostly rural families). But in addition, the client wanted to bring new, younger users into the franchise.

This is where things really got creative. The first thing Optima did was to put an ad on Craig's List looking for respondents. This megapopular website was a bold experiment that paid off big in terms of getting a lot of respondents fast. In the first 24 hours, we had 101 responses. Staff members also called friends, family, and neighbors in the target market, and within two days we had written a discussion guide and recruited about 30 people for one-on-one interviews. The client was impressed that we were able to pull research together so fast.

As sometimes happens, the project was put on hold before the design was finalized so that the client could make some capital improvements needed to support the relaunch.

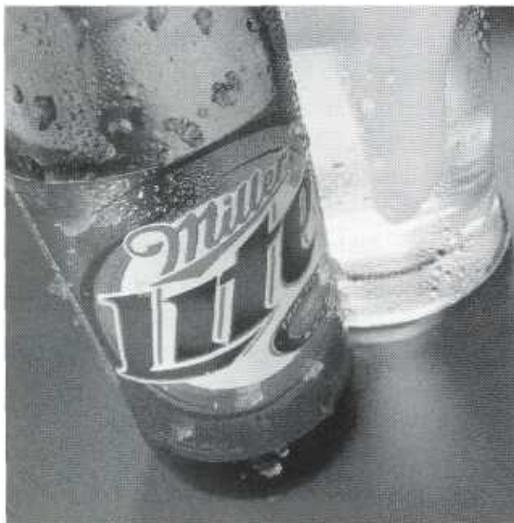
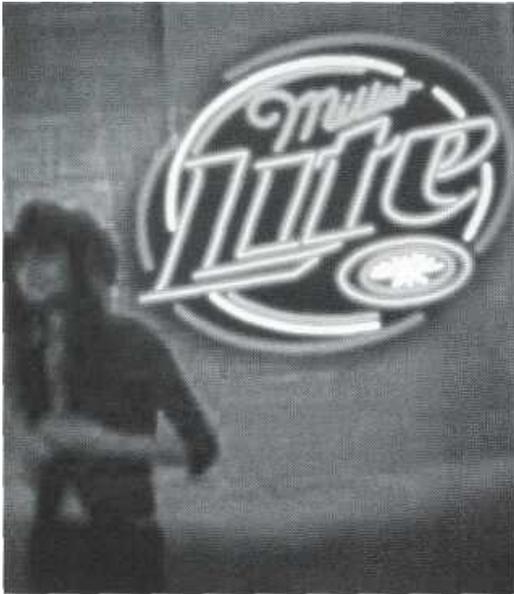
#### Case Study: Miller Lite

Miller Brewing Company's introduction of Miller Lite changed the beer industry forever with its invention of a light beer in 1975. However, within several years competition had driven Lite from first to fourth place in market share. Miller hired Optima to update its secondary packaging (cartons, six-pack carriers, and so on). However, after the briefing and some initial investigation, Optima realized that a much bigger opportunity was available and proposed that Miller drastically reposition the brand instead.

Young Optima staffers hit local bars with video cameras to meet the consumer where he drank and to bring back real-world consumer insights, not contrived focus-group data. This guerrilla-style research was encouraged by Optima's partners and embraced by the staff. They gained a real understanding of the brand's positioning, personality, equities, and consumer perceptions. What they found out was that Miller Lite was considered "my dad's beer." Miller had lost relevance with their target consumers—21- to 27-year-old males.

At the initial creative presentation, Optima presented Miller management with badges that read, "I'm not the target market." This gently humorous reminder helped everyone lay their

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Although the first true light beer, Miller Lite's competitors had caught up with it. Optima helped Miller to update its packaging so that it was no longer "my father's beer."

personal preferences aside and get down to the business of rebuilding the brand. The result of this outside-the-box approach to design was a bold, dynamic new look that infused the brand with energy and modernity, pushing it back up to the number two position among all light beers.

#### Case Study: Bun Meals

Our client, Forkless Gourmet, was in a fix. The preferred design and part of the product flavor profile for their new Bun Meals was in question. The product launch was imminent; they didn't have time to do the research, hire a firm, or wait for the results. Forkless Gourmet was not comfortable moving forward without talking to consumers. In one and a half days, Optima pulled 30 women aged 25 to 50 into the studio for research. We contacted mothers, sisters, friends, and neighbors within the target audience, and interviewed them on-site in our conference room. Once we got through 12 of the respondents, it became clear which design system was the winner and which flavors the consumers liked.

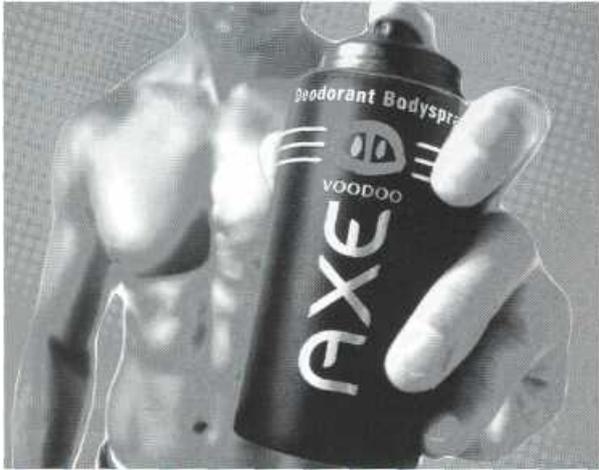
Being flexible and fast and thinking out of the box helped our client to make important decisions. The company debuted at the Fancy Food Show in Chicago last year and received a lot of media attention.

#### Case Study: Axe Body Spray

Corporate culture is more than just casual Fridays and bowling parties. It's a state of mind that shapes your perspective, your thinking, and your actions. It's how you see and interact with the world.

For example, when Axe, the world's number-one-selling deodorant for men, made the bold move to launch in North America, it had no road map, no precedent, and no fixed set of rules to follow. On the other hand, to become a leader, you cannot follow. It might sound trite or overly simplistic, and of course it's easier said than done.

Optima, because of its unique corporate culture, was able to help Axe write its own rules. The company's challenge went beyond merely introducing a new brand. It had to create a new category for the US—men's body sprays—and



Body sprays for men was a new idea when Axe targeted the North American market. Optima's research into a young and male target demographic helped to make Axe a huge hit.

change the way consumers think about personal hygiene. No small task.

No one in North America had ever heard of body sprays and they didn't care about Axe. Not yet. Axe was not about controlling odor and wetness... it was all about smelling awesome and getting the girl. So new rules were written and new methods adopted, along with new ways of working, "gathering information, and reaching decisions. Conventional corporate culture was abandoned. Axe was all about young men: fickle, skeptical, unpredictable, unconventional young men.

Research took place in dorm rooms. Focus groups were pizza parties with video games and web surfing. House parties were held to see how young men interacted with young women in a real-life setting. Brand managers got a new perspective. Armed with firsthand knowledge of what makes young men tick, they launched the brand in the US. Packaging supported high-impact point-of-purchasing displays, and by advertising that is now legendary. Axe was a huge hit, and within a few years, competitors started popping up on shelf.

#### Culture in Action

Naturally, not all agency-client collaborations have happy endings. If their corporate cultures are too disparate, they may not mesh, and both client and agency end up feeling frustrated. It's a lot like dating. Sometimes it takes one or two projects, working together, to get to know each other, to build trust and a comfort level. And, also like dating, sometimes those differences create a positive tension and opportunity for

growth. Other times, it's a recipe for disaster.

If both agency and client are too rigid in their approach, the project may suffer or stall altogether. Flexibility, openness, and respect for all participants are important. Finding a common connection is key. Timing, workflow, tolerance for risk—all contribute to a successful collaboration.

Equally important is knowing when to say when. Both agency and client need to understand their roles and duties and to stick to them. "We once turned down a huge project from an important client," explains Zimmerman. "It was a tough decision, but in the end we felt it was just not a good match for us. The project did not allow for the creative latitude we needed to do the job justice. It was a lot of money and it was difficult to walk away. In the long run, we benefited by earning that client's respect and ultimately more work, as well."

"If I had to sum up our corporate culture, I'd say, 'We have fun!'" Werner adds. "For one client that was marketing a sports drink. We created a special suitcase-sized sales kit for the product that was housed in a stadium-like box with crowds of people inside. Hidden within the crowd were both myself and my partner, our studio manager, and two of our creative directors. It was just something frivolous and fun to do, keeping spirits light and not taking ourselves too seriously." •

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