

RESEARCH

## Brand experiences shaped by people on the front lines: BCG

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*Still from The Ritz-Carlton's "Miao" video*

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By JOE MCCARTHY

The perception of a brand tends to be splintered, with customers, employees, investors and influencers all holding differing views that can end up muddling a brand's image, according to a report from Boston Consulting Group.

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Employees are essentially ambassadors and have the ability to foster a coherent brand identity if properly trained. As employees interact with the many parties involved with a brand, the opportunity to express a singular identity can be seized or squandered.

"Brand was once highly product-oriented," said Antonella Mei-Pochtler, a senior partner at BCG and lead author of the report, Austria. "But brand experiences are now largely shaped by the people on the front lines who interact daily with customers, who have rising expectations.

"Employees have become, in effect, brand ambassadors," she said.

For the "[Companies Must Unite the Employer, Corporate, and Product Experience into One Brand](#)" report, BCG interviewed executives in the European operations of ten global companies in diverse industries with leading brands.

One purpose

BCG argues that the current generation of consumers expect more from the brands they interact with and have less patience for inconsistent branded experiences.

Consequently, brands have to focus on hiring employees that understand the brand mission and developing a culture that fosters that mission.

There should not be a disconnect between the marketing and human resources teams, for instance, because it is the employees that ultimately exude what a brand stands for and that identity can become fragmented if departments are divorced from one another.



*Audi sales associates at Goodwood*

Oftentimes, a brand's image emerges through an organic, reciprocal process with consumers. Now that consumers have a louder voice than ever before, brands can take into consideration consumer suggestions that can be worked into their employee culture.

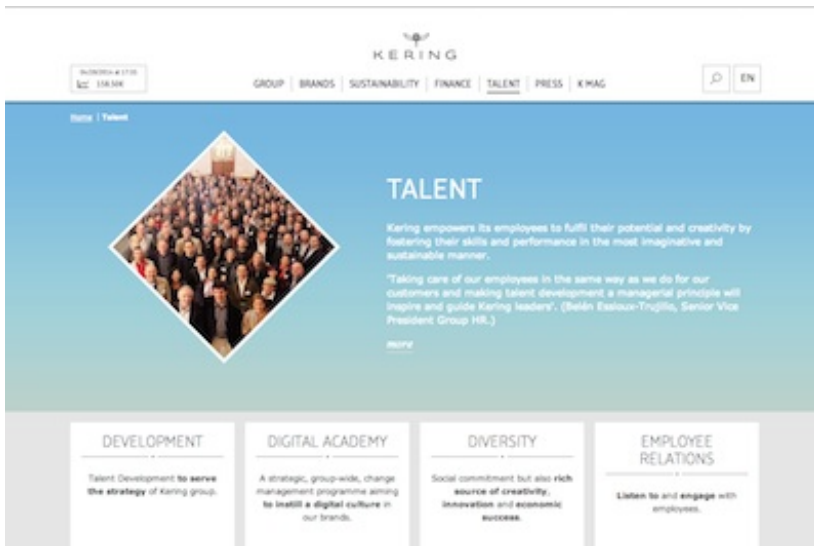
As a brand delineates core ideas, it is then up to the employees to spread the message.

BCG identifies six guiding principles companies should follow to achieve effective employee branding.

First, brands have to create a well-defined employee acquisition and retention process from which everything else can flow.

Next, brands should identify employee motivations to tailor internal and external employee branding tactics. An example of internal branding is the development opportunities available and an example of external branding includes the partnerships a brand undergoes.

Brands must then recognize that corporate culture has to be arranged in such a way that employees can "live" the brand values each and every day.



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Building off of this, employees make the best brand ambassadors and gatekeepers. Employees both get the word out about a brand and can ensure that the brand's decisions are culturally sound.

Although social media is critical to extending a brand's message, every channel must be continually assessed.

Finally, brand management should embrace a flexible direction instead of set-in-stone plans, so that all corporate components move together in harmony.

All apply

Employee branding applies to companies of all product categories.

As vehicles become more sophisticated, the main differentiating factor for auto brands will be the customer experience, argued the president of Mercedes-Benz USA at Forrester Research's Forum for Customer Experience Professionals: "Why Good Is Not Good Enough."

The automaker looks not to expected competitors such as Lexus and BMW when differentiating the experience it delivers. Instead, Mercedes-Benz considers Four Seasons, Starbucks, Nordstrom, Google and others as its chief contenders, since consumers compare the experiences from these brands with those received at Mercedes ([see story](#)).

Hotel brands, in particular, tend to excel in fostering strong employee values.

For instance, The Ritz-Carlton Shanghai, Pudong, highlighted the efforts made by its staff to enhance guest experiences in a social video.

The "Miao" video shows the culmination of a year's worth of preparation at the Shanghai property as a performance group put on a theatrical performance for guests. Although they are often removed from campaigns, hotel staff can elevate or diminish a guest's experience, and seeing such exuberance in actors playing hotel members likely left an impression on those who attended ([see story](#)).

"Not every company must be a leader in all three brand-management disciplines," said Rainer Strack, a senior partner at BCG and report author, Düsseldorf, Germany.

"But companies must gain a basic command of each, as they discover how to differentiate in the areas important to their business," he said. "Only then will they be able to achieve integrated and consistent brands."

Final Take

*Joe McCarthy, staff writer on Luxury Daily, New York*

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