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## Breaking ground on branding

By Barry White

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A lot of companies are faceless even to the bulk of their workforce, which may explain why surveys indicate the majority of employees feel unengaged and disconnected at work.

Internal branding, or HR branding, identifies a company's strengths and values to its current employees and helps keep them engaged while attracting potential candidates. Also, the ultimate success of your external brand depends on whether internally employees believe in the brand.

A brand is the personality of a company. It is a commitment to an aligned community. Simple enough, for a company that makes a couple of similar products, but more difficult for organizations that are expanding through mergers and acquisitions or venturing into different areas.

Ted Matthews is a brand coach who's helped scores of companies to articulate their brand.

Matthews says, "Build a brand story internally with honesty, strength and integrity, and you will ensure that each touchpoint with external customers consistently reinforces their perception of your value. A brand exists within the architecture of a workplace." You just have to find it.

"Working with people inside is the best way to go", says Matthews, adding that employees can be ambassadors for the organization.

One of Matthews' clients is Aliant Inc., Atlantic Canada's largest telecom company.

"They have 11,000 employees operating in a small market. If we can get them turned on and get them to understand what Aliant is all about, well they only have to talk to 25 people each and we've done our job."

Aliant was born May 31, 1999, fully formed from the union of Bruncor Inc., Island



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Telecom Inc., Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company Ltd., and NewTel Enterprises Ltd., owners of the major IT and provincial telecommunications companies in Atlantic Canada.

Last November, Matthews got down to work with chief executive officer Jay Forbes on branding. Each of the pre-Aliant entities had its own culture and were very competitive. They all have long histories in their own right. Trying to find the essence of each brand and a common link for them to rally around was challenging.

In March, after conducting a series of focus groups, they launched a branding campaign internally, two months prior to rolling it out externally.

“The company with the closest connection to the hearts and minds of Atlantic Canadians,” is Aliant’s vision.

The vision is important, but underneath it, the guiding principle for employees pivots on whether their work endears them to Atlantic Canadians.

“Jay Forbes posts a message on the website every Monday morning telling them what he did last week and what he’ll do this week and the impact on everybody in the company,” says Matthews.

“CEOs have to keep telling the story of the brand,” adds Matthews. Aliant’s Forbes, in effect, becomes the “Chief Branding Officer.”

Brand is what people think of you. It has to be owned by everybody, not just marketing or HR, says Matthews. “It is everyone pulling the same rope with the same message.”

You may not have heard of GSW Inc., a manufacturer of water heaters, eavestroughs, and other products. But with 1,500 employees at three operating divisions in Canada and the U.S., GSW made a profit of \$8.2 million on revenue of \$542 million, in 2002.

Andrew Ferrier, GSW’s CEO at the time, was looking to solidify the operating divisions and focus the company through acquisitions and divestitures, so Matthews was brought in to bring branding discipline to the process.

GSW and its predecessor companies date back to 1847. For over 150 years, the company has manufactured an ever-changing list of consumer-durable products.



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However, says Matthews, over the years it had become a loose collection of manufacturing entities, with little or no clear connection between them.

“Basically, at GSW we have been looking at the company and trying to figure out what it is all about,” says Matthews, who worked with senior executives and conducted focus groups with roughly 40 people across the company. “We may look like a collection of disparate products but we are all in a common cause.”

“Manufacturing pioneers since 1847” became the positioning, celebrating both the company’s heritage and its focus on innovation. To create a purpose for employees and to encourage them to live the brand, GSW introduced the “Groundbreakers Program” to recognize the difference employees can make in improving operations through innovation.

“This is a story of doing it all internally. We are making sure all employees when they interact with anybody, any stakeholder, they are communicating the brand,” says Matthews.

In August, just prior to rolling out the branding campaign, in a surprise move, CEO Ferrier left the company to join New Zealand’s largest firm, Fonterra Co-operative Group Ltd, a multibillion-dollar dairy conglomerate.

“We haven’t done everything yet because of the change,” says Peter Sharpe, the executive vice-president, who was named CEO on August 8.

As the new CEO, Sharpe says, “I have to organize where the company is and where it’s going and what are the key issues as I see them. The “Groundbreakers Program” will definitely be a part of that, but the timing is not ideal.”

Matthews says the key to branding is to have consistency of message, and that’s particularly true internally, so people don’t think it’s a flavour of the month.

His mission, as he sees it, is to try and make sure the professional management of today, the ones who wander the globe and stay an average of three or four years [like Ferrier, for instance], grasp and take on the core of what the company is about, the positioning, the passion, the vision to drive it forward and keep articulating it with clarity so people can follow it.”