How to Use External Communications for Internal Branding

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External communications primarily focus on customers, although they have often-overlooked effects on a “second audience”: employees. By considering several success factors, organizations can address internal and external stakeholders with a single organizational practice, thus enhancing both the effectiveness and efficiency of external communications.

As employees are directly or indirectly involved in the fulfilment of a company’s brand promise, they represent an important, internal target group for brand management efforts. For that reason, companies have started to engage in internal brand management (IBM), trying to implement the brand in the employees’ minds, emotions, and behaviours. This represents a holistic management approach comprising relevant employee-related objectives such as their brand understanding (i.e. cognitive objective), brand commitment (i.e. affective objective), and brand citizenship behaviour (i.e. behavioural objective) and activities to affect these objectives (Figure 1).
External Communication often overlooks the “second audience”: employees

Pertaining to activities, companies tend to focus mainly on internal activities, especially on internal communications e.g. by designing brand handbooks or brochures, performing brand workshops, or publishing articles in staff magazines. But why are external communications not considered IBM activities? Advertising, public relations, event marketing, or sponsoring, also help achieving employee-related objectives. Undoubtedly, external communications primarily aim at building brand awareness and communicating a brand’s identity and promise to external stakeholders, such as customers, in an effort to build a positive brand image. Nevertheless, this sole focus on external stakeholders ignores the full potential as external communications have often-overlooked effects on employees as a “second audience”.

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Research shows that external communications can have as much effect on employees as on customers. It has the potential to affect their minds, emotions, and behaviours even stronger than internal communications. Several success factors of external communications in an internal context have already been identified (Burmann & Piehler, 2016, 2017; Burmann et al., 2018; Piehler et al., 2015, 2018):

Highlight the importance of employees for the brand’s success

In terms of quantity, managers need to ensure that employees are regularly exposed to external communications. While this is common in B2C sectors with a large number of customers and the use of mass media, it is less likely in B2B sectors with a small number of customers and more targeted communications. To ensure the employees’
exposure, managers should internally announce external communications prior to the external launch. Such announcements not only affect employees on the cognitive and behavioural level by increasing their brand understanding and ensuring a brand-consistent behaviour, respectively. They also have effects on employees’ emotional attachment to the brand by increasing their brand commitment by feeling recognized and valued as an important target group.

„By highlighting the importance of employees and their efforts for the brand’s success, managers can trigger feelings of pride and emotional reactions and thereby increase employees’ brand commitment.“

Don’t make a promise you can’t keep

In terms of content, managers should focus on topics that are relevant to employees (e.g., the brand promise, products and services, values, or employee behaviours) and be very specific to make it meaningful for employees in order to increase their brand understanding. By highlighting the importance of employees and their efforts for the brand’s success, managers can trigger feelings of pride and emotional reactions and thereby increase employees’ brand commitment. By illustrating desired employee behaviours and their positive consequences in external communications, managers present a model for employees to emulate. As requirements in terms of content for external communications, managers should consider following:

(1) Don’t communicate promises that employees can’t deliver: The product and service benefits should not be exaggerated.

(2) Don’t portray the organization inaccurately: Externally communicated culture should be congruent with the actual culture in the company.

(3) Don’t misrepresent employees: Employees shown in external communications should match actual employees.

(4) Don’t deliver inconsistent messages across external and internal channels: External communications should be congruent with internal communications.

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In terms of processes, managers need to ensure that external communications are coordinated with affected areas, so that these areas are prepared to react properly to the upcoming communication and consumers’ expectations. This might even mean involving employees in the development of external communications or by using actual employees as credible role models in external communications. Moreover, the human resources and marketing departments should cooperate closely to coordinate the development and execution of communication messages. Finally, managers should not only pre- and post-test external communications externally with customers but also internally with employees. Their reactions can be a valuable source of information regarding potential communication success and increase the quality of external
communications, which has been shown to affect employees’ effort on behalf of the brand.

„Managers should not only pre- and post-test external communications with customers but also with employees. “

By considering these success factors, organizations can address important internal and external stakeholders with a single organizational practice, thus enhancing both the effectiveness and efficiency of external communications.