STEWARDSHIP

How brand becomes an operational discipline

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A QUESTION I KEEP RETURNING TO

There is a question I have returned to in very different contexts throughout my career:

How does an organization ensure that what it intends to stand for is reflected in what it actually does?

In my earlier work as a political staffer, I learned how quickly a gap between intent and execution could become consequential. Part of my role was to identify those gaps before they became public problems: instances where a decision was moving in one direction while policy, communications, stakeholder expectations or operational realities were moving in another. An inconsistency could undermine a government's stated direction, damage stakeholder relationships, create public fallout, and end up above the fold.

Later, as a founder, I encountered the same underlying question. Building brands with distinct points of view requires knowing what belongs within their worlds. As decisions multiply and responsibility extends beyond the person who first established the foundational principles, the enterprise needs some way of maintaining coherence—not only across its visual identity, but across the functions through which it delivers on its promise and builds consumer trust.

The contexts were different, but the question remained: How does an organization ensure that what it intends to stand for is reflected in what it actually does? This guide examines that question through a practical framework for assessing what may be required to maintain that connection.

WHEN INTENTION IS NOT ENOUGH

An organization's intention provides the starting point for the work that follows. That intention may have been formally articulated through foundational documents, established principles or other forms of guidance. It may also exist more informally among the people closest to the organization, expressed through the decisions they make, the standards they apply and a shared sense of what the organization is trying to create.

In either case, an intention can be clear without being consistently implemented across the organization. A founder, executive or leadership team may have a strong sense of what the brand represents and how people should experience it, while the decisions, practices and arrangements required to support that intention have never been established with the same degree of clarity. As responsibility extends across different functions, people may interpret the brand differently or lack sufficient guidance to connect their own work to the principles and promise that sit behind it.

An understanding held by a small number of people does not automatically translate into consistent practice as work is divided among others. The existence of a brand identity or set of principles may establish a sense of direction, but it does not necessarily answer the practical questions that emerge throughout the organization: what those principles require of different functions, where particular responsibilities sit, or how people should exercise judgment when existing guidance does not provide a complete answer. The connection between what an organization intends to stand for and what it actually does can therefore depend too heavily on individual interpretation when the structures and practices required to maintain it are unclear or absent.

Other organizations may already have structures in place, but find that the circumstances in which those arrangements were developed have changed. An organization can grow in size or complexity, leadership can change, responsibilities can shift and new functions, locations or business units can be introduced. Partnerships, licensing arrangements and external operators may create additional layers of responsibility, while competing priorities and the gradual accumulation of decisions and actions can make coherence more difficult to maintain. Arrangements that were sufficient at one stage may therefore require further attention as the organization itself develops.

As those circumstances evolve, the gap between brand promise and execution can become visible through smaller signs. Customers may encounter inconsistent experiences across different touchpoints, recurring feedback may reveal a disconnect between what the organization intends to offer and what people believe they are receiving, or teams may be working from different assumptions about what the brand requires.

Those inconsistencies can affect commercial performance. An organization may see declining traffic, engagement or revenue and assume that it has a marketing problem, responding by investing more heavily in campaigns designed to attract attention.

Yet stronger marketing cannot resolve a gap between what a brand promises and what the organization is able to deliver.

Understanding where that gap exists, and what may be contributing to it, requires a closer examination of the organization itself. The following framework offers a way of considering the structures, practices and conditions required to maintain a connection between brand promise and execution.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING WHAT IS REQUIRED

The structures required to support a brand promise depend on the organization's ownership and operating model, the resources and guidance already in place, and the complexity of the relationships and functions through which the brand is experienced.

The framework therefore begins with an examination of those conditions before considering what additional support may be required. Across each stage, the same considerations remain relevant: whether people have sufficient clarity about the outcome they are working toward, appropriate ownership of their contribution to it, and the guidance and authority required to exercise sound judgment.

01 — Understand Ownership

Understanding ownership provides the starting point because it clarifies the organizational structure surrounding the brand and the responsibilities that already exist within it. In some organizations, ownership and operation sit within the same entity. In others, licensing, franchise, management or other arrangements separate ownership of the brand from responsibility for aspects of its delivery.

Those arrangements have implications for authority, responsibility and the resources available to support the brand. An organization may retain ownership of the brand while relying on another party to deliver the experience associated with it, or responsibility for different aspects of that experience may be distributed across several entities. A clear understanding of those relationships provides the context for assessing where authority sits, where responsibility already exists and how the people and functions involved relate to one another.

02 — Assess What Exists

The next step is to gain a clear picture of the organization's actual starting point. This includes formal materials and structures, such as foundational documents, brand identity guidelines, operating procedures, training or established processes for review and approval, as well as the less formal knowledge and practices that influence how the organization operates. An understanding of the brand may exist among the people closest to its development without ever having been documented, while practices established over time may continue to shape the organization without being formally recognized as part of its approach to the brand. It also includes the internal environment and the way people experience the organization from within.

A clear assessment can reveal both strengths and gaps. Useful resources may already exist but be applied inconsistently, important guidance may remain undocumented, or existing arrangements may no longer adequately support the organization as it has developed. That assessment provides a basis for considering further needs in relation to the organization as it actually exists.

03 — Establish Clarity

The organization also needs sufficient clarity about the principles that provide its underlying frame and the promise those principles become in its relationship with the people it serves. The distinction between the two matters because they serve different purposes.

Guiding principles establish the underlying direction and boundaries around an intended outcome.

A brand promise expresses how those principles are ultimately experienced by the people the organization serves.

Together, they provide a shared frame for understanding what the organization is working toward and what should remain recognizable as circumstances change.

That clarity does not require every possible decision to be anticipated in advance. Its value lies in giving people across the organization a shared understanding of the principles they are working from and the promise they are collectively responsible for supporting. That shared understanding can create a stronger sense of purpose and connection to the organization's broader direction, providing a foundation for people to take ownership of their work and exercise judgment toward a shared outcome.

04 — Identify What Is Needed

With ownership, existing arrangements and the underlying frame established, the organization can consider which additional mechanisms may be required. The appropriate combination will depend on the organization's circumstances and the degree of complexity surrounding the brand.

A smaller organization may require a foundational document, distinct brand identity guidelines, appropriate training, SOPs and a clear framework establishing where autonomy exists and where decisions require review or approval.

A more complex organization may require differentiated guidance across a multi-brand portfolio, function-specific training and simulations, standards for suppliers and external partners, or a cross-functional forum that brings together the functions responsible for different aspects of the organization.

Some organizations may also benefit from a dedicated brand stewardship function or advisor responsible for overseeing the workflow, cadence, measurement and reporting required to maintain attention to the brand over time. The mechanisms themselves will vary, but each should serve a clear purpose and support the people responsible for contributing to the outcome.

05 — Enable Judgment

The structures and mechanisms identified through the framework should provide a clear basis for action without attempting to prescribe every circumstance an organization may encounter. Their design should reflect the understanding that people will still need to interpret the organization's principles and promise in situations where existing guidance does not provide a complete answer.

SOPs, for example, can establish a consistent approach without dictating every response. Frameworks for review and approval can identify where additional input is required while preserving appropriate autonomy elsewhere. The appropriate balance will depend on the nature of the work and the decisions involved.

The aim is to ensure that the clarity and guidance established through the preceding stages give people an appropriate frame within which to exercise judgment.

06 — Measure and Adapt

Measurement provides an ongoing basis for assessing whether the structures and mechanisms surrounding the brand continue to support the outcome the organization is seeking to achieve. It can identify recurring inconsistencies, gaps in guidance or changes in the organization that require further attention, allowing those structures and mechanisms to adapt as circumstances evolve.

For an established brand, existing evidence may help identify where a gap between promise and execution is already occurring and provide important context for assessing ownership, existing arrangements and further needs. Where a stewardship discipline is being established for the first time, measurement may become more formal as the relevant structures and practices are developed.

The appropriate approach and cadence will depend on the organization and the mechanisms in place. Some issues may require continuous attention through recurring operational or customer feedback, while other aspects of the brand may be examined through periodic reviews, scheduled assessments or more formal reporting. A multi-brand organization with a dedicated stewardship function may require a different cadence than a smaller organization relying on a more limited set of mechanisms.

Where sufficient clarity, ownership, guidance and authority are in place, but measurement continues to indicate a consistent failure to meet the intended outcome, the underlying issue may extend beyond brand stewardship. That finding provides its own form of clarity and may signal the need for further examination elsewhere in the organization.

MAINTAINING THE CONNECTION

Every organization makes decisions and takes actions that shape how people experience it. The question at the centre of this guide is whether those decisions and actions remain connected to what the organization intends to stand for and the promise it makes.

That connection matters. It shapes the experiences people have with an organization, the trust they place in it and, ultimately, its commercial performance. When the connection between intention, promise and action weakens, the effects can range from small inconsistencies to more significant problems that affect relationships and revenue.

The framework outlined in this guide offers a way of examining what may be required to support that connection. Understanding ownership, assessing what already exists, establishing clarity, identifying the mechanisms required, enabling judgment, and measuring how those arrangements are working are all part of the same broader work.

Those arrangements will differ from one organization to another, but the discipline remains the same: giving deliberate attention to the connection between what an organization intends, what it promises and what it ultimately does.

That is where brand becomes an operational discipline.

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