

Lip service just won't do ...

Chris Denton asks 'If we don't know what we stand for, how can we expect our customers to?'



The trouble started well before I arrived. Yes, they had a vision and mission statement. Yes, they had done the infamous 'brand development' workshops and identified themselves as being akin to this kind of dog or that kind of food and, were they to get dressed, they would be found shopping at Marks & Spencer or Monsoon or wherever. There was a vision statement and they had a lovely new logo.

Looking back, it was perhaps a little too good to be true. At the end of the day, it all came down to the central question: 'Do you actually believe in any of this stuff?' So I thought I would see just how much this process had seeped into the consciousness of the organisation. A simple request to all senior managers to submit an e-mail statement of what 'Barbican' was

would do the trick, I thought. As the responses began to trickle back to my inbox, the scale of the problem became clear. They were all different and at odds with each other. By the end, I had 25 versions of what the Barbican was and what it stood for. So who was right?

Then, the bigger implication of what was happening became clear. If we didn't know what we stood for, how on earth could we expect our customers to? A brand needs to send a clear signal to your prospective customers about what you are asking them to make a commitment to and the qualities and values of your organisation. But it was becoming obvious that we weren't even sure ourselves.

It was true that the Barbican could claim to have 'gone through' a

branding process, but in reality there was no meaning behind what had happened, there were no values behind what had been agreed and, most importantly, no one really believed, deep down, that all this meant anything. This was because the next step of any branding project must ask the questions: 'What does it actually mean? What are we going to do to bring this brand to life? If we claim to have X, Y or Z brand values, how are we going to demonstrate this via our artistic events, our marketing communications, the way we greet visitors, the food we serve, the way we recruit staff?' and so on.

Engaging all staff in this process is no mean feat. We have over 350 of them at the Barbican and they all have a critical role to play in bringing our brand to life. But the single most



important person to win over is the person at the very top. Without the buy-in of the CEO, you face a mountain to climb. After all, they often act as the most public ambassador for your brand so it is only right they should encourage everyone else to follow in their stead. What your CEO says about your organisation should embody the values of your brand.

Then, getting buy-in from senior managers ensures a cascade effect permeates the organisation. For those who may be skeptical, it is sometimes better to approach brand definition by stealth. Talk instead about future direction. Talk about where you are as an organisation and where you want to be. Talk about whether customers would actually agree with your assessment of how wonderful you are. If we are honest, we are all guilty of a little navel-gazing at times and we can sometimes be so wrapped up in the enjoyment of what we do that we can

easily lose sight of the views of those for whom we do it. Any discussion about brand, however framed, must include an assessment of the difference between where you think your brand sits in the marketplace and where your customers think it sits. Believe me, it will always be different.

So having won the hearts and minds of your senior staff, you need to focus on arguably some of your most important brand assets – the people who bring the brand to life. Everyone in your organisation has a role to play in creating and maintaining a brand. From the person who looks after the loading bay, to the artistic director, to the person responsible for cleaning foyers, to the front-of-house staff. All will help shape the public perception about your organisation and can, through their actions, either re-inforce or damage your brand. Don't forget that the customers of your brand are more than the paying ticket buyer. They are artists, suppliers, the press,

contractors, staff and so on. All will form an opinion about what you stand for. All interact with your organisation at some level.

So to help address the delivery of our brand values across the organisation, the Barbican developed Barbican Experience. This was a project led by HR, customer services and marketing departments and a management team containing key ambassadors across every area of the business. Staff were engaged in the process through empowerment, which was best demonstrated by the fact that the training sessions were given by the staff themselves to their peers. The sessions were mandatory and attended by all permanent, temporary and contract staff.

In these sessions, every member of staff was invited to discuss and consider what makes good customer service and how we could bring the brand values, as defined in a special 'internal' version of our logo (below left) to life. What one thing could they do differently that would help create a better impression of the Barbican? These were all to be captured via personal action plans.

The cumulative successes of our work to bring deeper meaning and wider internal understanding to what it means to 'be Barbican', coupled with a CRM programme to better deliver our brand messages to the right people at the right time, have helped bring some real benefits to the business, whether it be from a much more clearly defined visual brand identity across on- and off-line material and onsite, to the way in which we develop our front-of-house training programme, or from the way



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in which our induction programme for new starters includes definition of the Barbican brand to the way that our appraisal process monitors how Barbican Experience is working. These and many more initiatives have helped to deliver results that more than justify the investment of staff time:

- 26% increase in bookings overall in 2006
- 31% increase in those customers coming more than once between 2004 and 2006, generating an additional £1.2 million increase in revenue
- 45% increase in positive feedback and 14% decrease in complaints via formal channels last year
- those receiving welcome packs are 16% more likely to revisit within one month
- increases in secondary spend across the centre as a result of customer-focused changes to service delivery.

All in all, we are proud of what we have achieved so far at the Barbican. There is more to be done and there always will be and what has been achieved is not just the work of the marketing department. But, underpinning everything is the clarity of what we want our brand to stand for, the recognition that everyone has a role to play in delivering a good brand experience and the collective willingness to make a positive difference. ■

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