

## Branding through culture; culture through language

**Gill Ereaut, Founding Partner**

An internal culture that supports your brand, especially when that brand needs radical change, is easier to wish for than to achieve. Using a recent brand renovation as illustration, **Gill Ereaut** shows how reversing common assumptions, and looking closely at your company's internal language, gives a practical way to get there.

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A 'customer-focused' internal culture is aspirational, even necessary, to support a healthy brand in many sectors. But how can you achieve it? The language of what is sometimes called 'inside-out marketing' is telling. Something is generally done *unto* staff; they are positioned firmly as another target group or audience. 'Internal marketing' is 'rolled out' to the 'internal consumer'; you need 'staff communications' and a 'staff engagement' programme. Staff are clearly on the receiving end of something created elsewhere.

Internal culture, recognised as crucial to the success or failure of such efforts, is the same. Leaders are urged to 'build' or 'create' a culture to support a new strategy, then 'communicate' it internally and help people 'buy in' to it. Again, the expectation built into language is that people need persuading to adopt a new culture, and need separating by force or guile from their old unhelpful ways.

There is a different road to take: approaching branding via internal culture, and internal culture via analysis of internal language. This means reversing some basic assumptions that have governed the 'inside-out' idea to date. If you are trying to renovate a brand, or protect a brand in today's swiftly changing market environment, here are some choices I'd invite you to consider:

- You *could* think of everyone in your organisation as stubbornly defending a now-unhelpful culture - but you *can* treat them as unconsciously active in holding cultural habits in place and thus equally capable, with insight, of changing those habits
- You *could* design your new or renewed brand and push it through internally against the grain – but you *can* help everyone see for themselves what’s good and worth preserving in the current culture, and what’s not helpful and needs to change
- You *could* position everyone internally as customers (persuading them to ‘buy into’ a new vision, culture or brand) - but you *can* involve them as active and enthusiastic participants in shaping and implementing brand strategy.

If you make different choices, it opens up different and exciting opportunities for ‘inside-out’ branding.

### **Culture matters to brands – but it’s hard to change**

Commonly defined as ‘the way we do things around here’, culture is widely seen as crucial to business success. We also know that while culture change is essential for strategic change, it’s slow and difficult to achieve.

Our own work shows repeatedly that a powerful route into culture is through analysing an organisation’s ‘discourse’. By this we mean its embedded habits of speech and writing: styles of expression, accepted slang and shorthand, and common terms for things, people and processes. It’s the idiosyncratic language soup that characterises an organisation and which is invisible to those inside. (For the first few weeks working in a new place you can hear this language – after that you become acculturated and your ability to grasp its idiosyncrasy is gone.)

Habits of language in an organisation matter, because they sustain certain ways of thinking, especially basic ideas like *who we are; what we do; who ‘those people out there’ are (customers, stakeholders)* and - crucially - *what the*

*relationship is between 'us' and 'them'*. Are 'we' knowledgeable experts and 'they' a somewhat ignorant nuisance? Are 'we' so polite we cannot possibly challenge 'them', even when we should? Are 'we' the guardians of a moral high ground and 'they' always out to cheat us? I have not invented these examples; we have found them lurking – unspoken, but acknowledged and accepted when surfaced – in client organisations. They lurk precisely because they are *unspoken*; buried under years of habit, they shape behaviour of all kinds and are fossilised within language that's so familiar no-one can 'hear' it any more.

The unspokens also matter because they leak out as implicit attitudes, finding their way subtly into everything from company reports to customer letters to decisions about priorities. The internal taken-for-granted – the 'culture' – even affects controlled communications like advertising, and even when good agencies are engaged. Agencies absorb the client's own discourse and over time start to speak and think like them. Or if they don't, and they build an idea based on a different brand-customer model, your organisation is not comfortable and rejects the idea wholesale, or dilutes and drags it back to something closer to the familiar.

How can you turn internal language into a tool for insight and change, not a prison for your brand?

### **First hold up the mirror**

Your internal culture is the organisational limbic system, operating below the level of consciousness, but hugely influential on behaviour. It determines automatic, reflex behaviour, which is later rationalised; organisations, like people, are deeply committed to rationalising. So to change culture, we need to bring below-conscious behaviour to the metaphorical frontal cortex, to allow debate, consideration and judgement. And the tools of discourse analysis offer a great way to do this.

Discourse analysis provides an academically grounded way to look forensically at language - familiar, unthinking choices of words, grammar, and form. It's a sharp

set of tools to show what is implied by these linguistic choices and thus how shared internal language reflects and sustains a world view. It shows what's treated as true and right; what's seen as normal and natural; what's regarded as odd and threatening. Looking at 'the way you talk around here' we offer a view of what seems to drive you - what you *appear* to believe about yourselves, your market, customers, products, competitors. Then we invite you – and as many of your people as you care to include – to consider this world view in the light of today's business challenges. What's valuable there that needs pulling to the surface again? What's getting in your way without you even seeing it?

### **Prostate Cancer UK: renovating a brand from within**

In late 2011 The Prostate Cancer Charity was set in its ways and, although respected, was punching below its weight in terms of effectiveness. It knew it needed radical change and had appointed a new CEO and its first ever Director of Communications. It had ambitious targets both for growth and a much higher public profile; especially, it wanted to reach a more diverse set of men. The board committed to a project led by Seamus O'Farrell, Director of Marketing and Communications, labelled 'We, the Brand'; the brand was ostensibly the focus but many knew this also meant serious organisational and cultural change.

Paul Feldwick was working with Seamus as brand and organisational consultant; he brought us into the team early in the brand redevelopment and we kicked the process off by examining forensically the language the charity used every day, both internally and externally. We dissected documents, spoke to people as they worked, listened to helpline calls, lurked in meetings and peered at notices on walls. We put all this language through rigorous analysis, looking for patterns and clues. The charity is deeply committed to science, knowledge and evidence, and this systematic approach made sense to them.

When we had, as one of them put it, 'fed us through the x-ray machine', we shared the results initially with a large group – fifty or so people in one room, from all areas and levels, and including the charity's agencies and everyone helping with the rebranding process.

## **Muffled paternalism**

The charity's language showed some subtle but persistent features. Here are just some of them. There was habitual indirectness and distancing in language, and marked use of euphemism and hyper-politeness. The density of text – enormously long reports, minutes, even newsletters and information sheets – was striking. There was medical and NHS language where you would expect it, but also often where you wouldn't.

While there were occasional bursts of outrage (at the plight of men with the disease) and fighting talk, especially by individuals in conversation, this was submerged; we characterised it as a 'muffled' discourse – soft, quiet, civilised and caring – but muffled. In fact, the office interior and brand identity (inasmuch as one existed) echoed this – nursing blue and white, rather bland and eerily calm. From micro examination of verb forms, we could see the charity tended always to position itself as acting outwards, on other people or things, while not (at least linguistically) allowing the possibility of other parties acting on it from the outside. This observation, as for others, produced a ripple of recognition – it articulated a habit or attitude that felt familiar. Theirs was, they recognised, a very British, middle class, educated, expert and somewhat paternalistic discourse.

Let's be clear: your organisation's current culture, the one that's holding you back, was once fully adapted to the strategic and market conditions of the time, and to the leadership that shaped it. It must have been, or you wouldn't have survived or been successful. Some elements may still be valuable. But your culture now contains attitudes, implied relationships and world views that are outgrown or outdated - and this had happened to The Prostate Cancer Charity. Things that had helped them succeed in the past had outlived their usefulness but were now baked in to the culture, perpetuated through habits of language and, because invisible, very hard for them to change.

## **No blame, no shame**

What was the response of staff and leadership? We reminded them that everyone had learned this language, and the world view embedded in it, when they joined. Everyone had come to see this as natural and normal – it was no-one's fault. No-blame insight into culture, evidenced by examples from their own familiar language, commonly allows people suddenly to see afresh what they are doing every day, habitually, without even knowing. And it restores the possibility of choice and of change. A rush of energy usually accompanies this realisation, right across the hierarchy and across business areas. As Seamus O'Farrell puts it:

*“It was incredibly energising for the organisation. It was lovely to see people go ‘Oh, yeah!’ in a totally non-defensive way: ‘Oh, we are like that, aren’t we!’ It’s how the Americans describe insight – ‘hidden in plain view’. It felt like there was a load coming off people’s shoulders as they realised ‘Well, we can actually be a bit flexible, and we can do this, you know, not just that’. It was palpable in the room at the time, and we continue to feel that energy now, months later.”*

Beyond that first ‘aha’ moment, word spread and much of the organisation soon understood what the original group had seen. More or less immediately they decided together they didn’t want to be ‘muffled’ and hyper-polite any more – they understood historically where it had come from, but they no longer had to be like this. They wanted to be more assertive in standing up for men with prostate cancer. And they started to have an honest debate about how to preserve their serious, evidence-based authority and credibility, while becoming more accessible to a wider range of people.

Vivienne Francis, Deputy Director of Communications wrote recently: *“As the unconscious layers of what we had come to accept as the ‘norm’ were peeled away, there were some genuine - and collective – penny-dropping moments.”*

## **Brand building after the 'aha'**

The resolution to move from polite and muffled to a powerful new intent was reflected in brand development from that point onwards. The charity – now Prostate Cancer UK – has a striking new brand identity. There is visible internal change; the new identity lives proudly on the walls, but more importantly there is tangible energy, purpose and confidence. There are frank conversations going on; not always comfortable, but important things are now being said, challenged and openly debated.

We continue to work with Prostate Cancer UK as they develop the brand and change the organisation. We created, with them, a set of Working Principles based on the cultural analysis to help guide language, decisions, and internal relationships. This is a 'tone of organisation' growing organically from within, rather than a conventional 'brand tone of voice' bolted on from without, or a set of abstract 'values' hanging on a wall. There is a striking appetite from teams across the business for working sessions on applying the Principles - genuine 'pull' not 'push'.

Powerful effects are possible. It's a little early to see the full effect of the rebranding and culture shift with Prostate Cancer UK, though they've had recent successes in winning significant corporate partnerships, possibly helped by their more direct, assertive and energetic approach. In other projects for commercial brands we've seen satisfying gains in standard metrics like Net Promoter Scores and reduced attrition rates. And the interest and energy amongst staff in changing their practices and processes seems to thrive even beyond the first couple of years.

## **Branding through culture; culture through language**

Here's why approaching branding via internal culture, and internal culture via language, can align the inside and outside of your organisation:

- ‘Internal marketing’ and ‘staff engagement’ position staff as passive putty to be cajoled, convinced, persuaded. But we no longer see consumers of brands and ads this way. Pull wins over push every time – active, willing co-operation between brands and consumers, or between senior and brand management and internal staff
- People will act differently not because they have ‘bought in’ but because they understand why and how they need to
- Analysing everyday internal language surfaces the shared unconscious of your organisation - your existing culture – so everyone can consider it consciously and check its continued relevance. This insight is intriguing, meaningful and compelling for people at all levels; change usually starts as soon as people have access to it.

This seems a lot simpler and less wasteful than ‘pushing’ a brand idea from the outside in. I’ll give the last word to Prostate Cancer UK’s Deputy Director of Communications:

*“However striking and visually pleasing the new identity for Prostate Cancer UK is, it was never about aesthetics alone. Together we committed to become more open, direct and confident, and to present the cause in a more urgent way. There were no surprises, or awkward attempts to bolt a ‘culture’ onto a visual identity. We made a shared and organic vision of ‘how we want to do things here’ the foundation of our Working Principles, and of our Brand.”*

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