

How language reveals barriers to success

When a corporate brand needs radical change, there are typically barriers in the organisation's internal culture that make change difficult to achieve. Using a recent brand renovation project as illustration, **Gill Ereaut** shows how closely analysing the company's internal language reveals these barriers and provides an effective way to make changes

A 'CUSTOMER-FOCUSED' internal culture is necessary to support a healthy brand. But how do we achieve this? The language used to describe what is sometimes called inside-out or internal marketing is revealing. Typically, something is done to staff; they are positioned firmly as another target group. 'Internal marketing' is 'rolled out' to the 'internal consumer'; 'staff communications' and 'staff engagement' programmes are required. Employees are clearly on the receiving end of something created elsewhere.

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 to be separated by force or guile from their old, unhelpful ways.

CULTURE MATTERS TO BRANDS – BUT IT'S HARD TO CHANGE

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

However, instead of the typical internal marketing approach described above, there is a different road to take – to reveal and change the internal culture through an analysis of internal language. This means reversing some basic assumptions that have governed how the internal marketing process is typically conceived and conducted.

This article uses a case history of a brand rejuvenation, the Prostate Cancer Charity, to illustrate how the process works. Our

own work shows that a powerful route into culture is found 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 of working in a new company 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 such as who we are, what we do, who 'those people out there' (customers and stakeholders) are and – crucially – what the relationship is between 'us' and 'them'. Are 'we' knowledgeable experts and 'they' a somewhat ignorant nuisance? Are 'we' so polite that 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 unspoken also matter because they leak out as implicit attitudes, finding their way subtly into everything from company reports and customer letters to decisions about priorities. The internal taken-for-granted – the 'culture' – even

affects controlled communications such as 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 build an idea based on a different brand-customer model, the organisation is likely to reject the idea wholesale, or dilute and drag 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

A company's 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 surface in order to allow debate, consideration and judgement.

Discourse analysis provides a way to look forensically at language – familiar, unthinking choices of words, grammar and form. It's a sharp set of tools to reveal what is implied by these linguistic choices and how shared internal language reflects and sustains a world view. It shows what is treated as true and right; what is seen as normal and natural; what is regarded as odd and threatening.

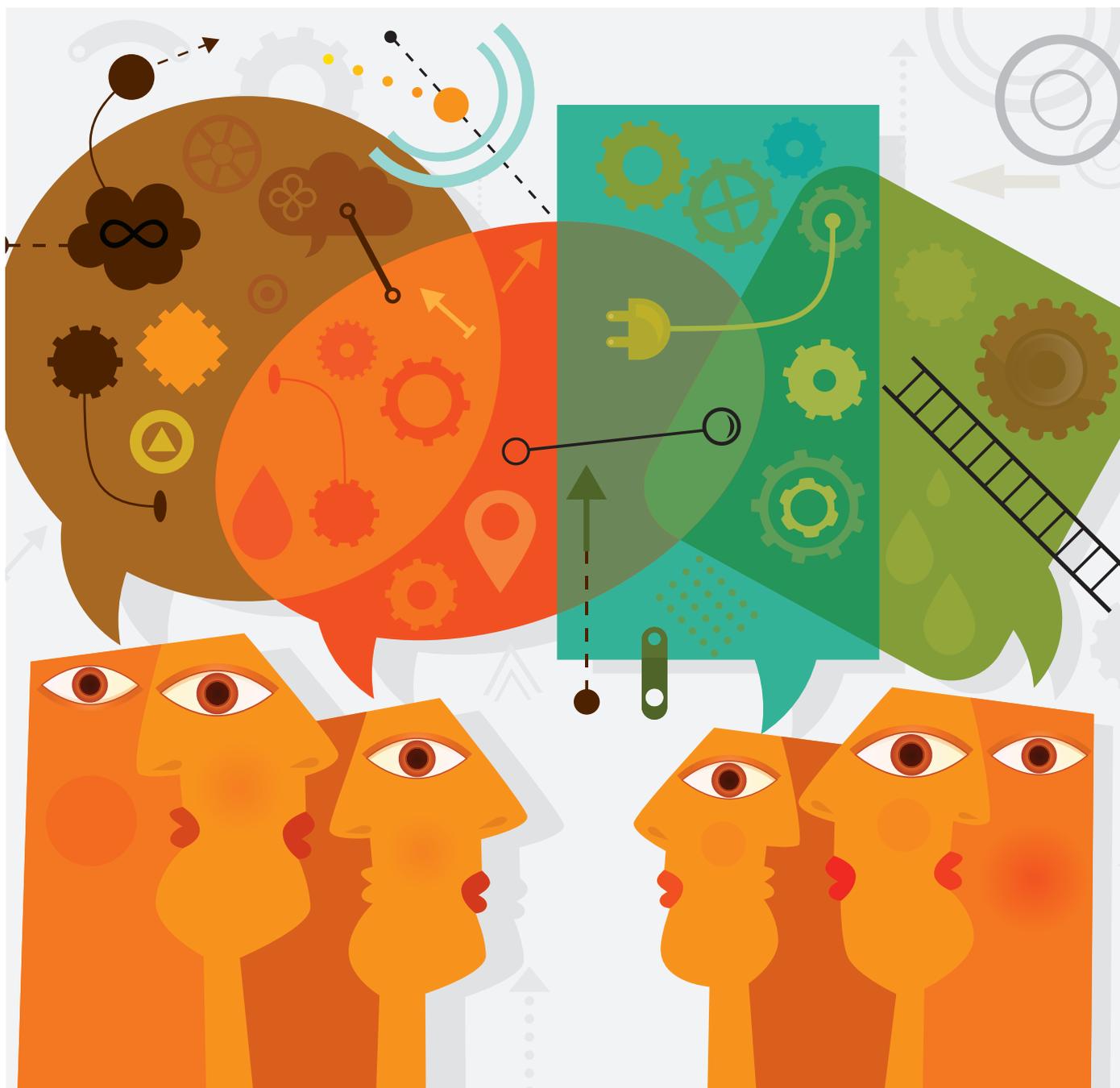
Looking at the way a company talks to itself gives a clear view of its shared and unquestioned ideas about its market and customers, products and competitors. Examining this closely enables us to explore what is valuable and what's getting in the way – as the following case history illustrates.

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. The charity knew it needed radical change and had appointed a new CEO and its first director of communications. It had ambitious targets for growth and a much higher public profile. In particular, it wanted to reach a more diverse range of men.

The board committed to a project led by Seamus O'Farrell, the charity's director of marketing and communications, titled '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 off the process 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 – 50 or so people in one room, from all areas and levels, including the charity's

agencies and everyone helping with the rebranding process.

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 a 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 would not.

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: an organisation's current culture, the one that's holding it 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 the organisation wouldn't have survived or been successful. Some elements may still be valuable. But the culture now contains attitudes, implied relationships and world views that are outgrown or outdated.

And this is what had happened to the Prostate Cancer Charity. Things that had helped it succeed in the past had outlived their usefulness but were now baked into 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 to this analysis? 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.

Presenting these insights, illustrated by examples from their own familiar language, commonly allows people to see afresh what they are doing unconsciously every day, without blame being attached. Importantly, it restores the possibility of choice and of change. A rush of energy right across the hierarchy and across business areas typically follows this realisation.

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.



BRAND BUILDING AFTER THE 'AHA!'

The resolution to move from polite and muffled communication 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 it develops the brand and changes the organisation. Together we created a set of working principles based on the cultural analysis to help guide language, decisions and internal relationships.

There is a distinctive tone of voice growing organically from within, rather than a platitudinous or jargon-ridden set of abstract values bolted on from outside. 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

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early to see the full effect of the rebranding and culture shift with Prostate Cancer UK, though the charity has had recent successes in winning significant corporate partnerships, possibly helped by its more direct, assertive and energetic approach.

In other projects for commercial brands, we have seen satisfying gains in standard metrics such as net promoter scores and reduced attrition rates. And the interest and energy among staff in changing their practices and processes seems to thrive even beyond the first couple of years.

ANALYSING CULTURE THROUGH LANGUAGE: A POWERFUL TOOL

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

- Conventional approaches to 'internal marketing' and staff engagement position staff as passive putty to be cajoled, convinced and persuaded. Why should they be treated in this way? Pull wins over push every time – active, willing co-operation – whether between brands and consumers, or between senior and brand management and internal staff.
- Revealing what everyone in the company believes, reflected in shared behaviour and language, helps everyone act differently, not because they have 'bought in' but because they understand how to change, and why.
- Analysing everyday internal language surfaces the shared unconscious of the organisation's 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 leave the last word to Vivienne Francis, 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' on to 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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