

marketing tactics

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TRAINING

Absolut has been running brand personality training since 1991. It says its global reach and the fact that it sells on emotion not function makes it essential

VIRTUES IN THE CULT OF BRAND PERSONALITY

INNOCENT, QVC, VIRGIN MEDIA AND ABSOLUT, AMONG OTHERS, CLAIM BRAND PERSONALITY TRAINING BOOSTS SALES, CUTS STAFF TURNOVER AND IMPROVES SERVICE

LUCY FISHER

As a company grows, it can become difficult to ensure that all employees are engaged in its brand and what it stands for. Ensuring that a large workforce buys into the brand promise, however, brings its rewards – even if these are difficult to measure financially.

Innocent Drinks people team leader Tom Fraine says the company has invested in brand personality training for its staff – known internally as ‘innocentification’ – since the beginning. “It’s about the Innocent tone of voice,” he says, claiming that the brand’s clear, bold and accessible personality is one of the key drivers of its success.

The training is not costly, he adds, given that it is generally delivered by Dan Germain, who was the first Innocent employee. “It’s a week-long session about our company and our brand tone of voice, and everybody attends in the first few months of joining,” he explains.

“It works because it’s clear, simple and natural. It’s about everyone sharing the same principles but not sounding the same.”

Fraine also believes having a clearly defined brand leads to greater employee engagement.

Sandra Nixon, development and training manager at shopping channel QVC believes it is important that every employee recognises their role in reinforcing the brand.

“At QVC, we have an operations centre, a contact centre, a distribution centre, and support staff such as HR, learning and development, finance and tech. With so many functions, the brand promise is at risk of falling down – for instance, when the parcel gets delivered.”

She believes that while it is important to ensure that a company involves its partners, such as delivery workers, in the brand definition and aims, the key to success lies in the recruitment process. “The brand journey starts with our employees,” she says. “In our ads, in our assessments and in our training, it’s all branded. We can teach the skills but we want to see certain behaviours.”

That said, many organisations are unclear how investing in brand personality training initiatives will demonstrate results or return on investment. That can make it difficult, of course, to make the case for such schemes before the board.

Karen Ingham, customer service director



case study

BEST WESTERN HOTELS

Keen to be the top mid-market hotel group in Great Britain, Best Western launched a new strapline: 'Hotels with personality'. The structure of the organisation, where independent hotels operate within a membership agreement, meant it was vital for staff, who are not employed by the brand, to feel engaged with its new positioning.

A TV campaign aimed to galvanise enthusiasm among almost 300 hoteliers. "We needed them to buy into it," says Tim Wade, who was director of marketing at the chain and is now partner at Smith+Co, the consultancy that delivers the scheme. The idea was to give the individual hoteliers the freedom to bring their own personalities to the brand, whether they owned a city centre hotel or a 12th century castle.

Data on booking and spending patterns and information from post-stay questionnaires was used to define 'hallmark moments' of staying at a Best Western hotel. Wade says the research found the brand was perceived as 'middle of the road', both internally and externally. The modular training was designed to fit easily into day-to-day work.

The hotel group's head of marketing Sarah Fussey notes that the pilot resulted in clear improvements in the brand's net promoter score, which she says has been one of the programme's main metrics.

She adds: "This programme has helped to cement a link between customer experience and the marketing team or brand – whereas before it was seen as a reservations or an operations issue at the individual hotel."



at Virgin Media, says that a project she worked on with agency Engine Service Design did lead to financial benefits.

"We wanted to work out whether changing the nature of our conversations had an effect on profitability and the customer experience," she explains. Ingham claims that Virgin Media uncovered a correlation between a 1 per cent improvement in its net promoter score and an improvement in revenue across a variety of measures depending on the tenure of the customer, which she says ranged from £750,000 to £1.5m a year.

Ingham explains that initially the 'tone of voice' project was focused on how brand personality was being conveyed at Virgin Media call centres but it proved so successful that it has been implemented company-wide. "We changed everything and went through our entire training catalogue for our frontline teams. We now use a new brand language everywhere," she adds.

Focus groups with engaged customers had pointed to them expecting Virgin Media's service standards to reflect the personality and confidence of Virgin Group founder Richard Branson.

"It was about changing conversations to bring out this personality," says Ingham, who warns that the real challenge in behavioural change lies in engaging and empowering staff, while keeping the initiatives fresh and updated.

Brand language

The starting point for a brand personality training project differs between companies. For Waterstones retail director Rik McShane it is about the language the company uses, both internally and externally, to provide a platform from which to improve its communications.

Waterstones wanted to move away from an overly 'corporate' tone and unnecessary jargon while allowing individual booksellers and stores to convey their own personalities, he says.

Waterstones is working with language consultancy The Writer to encourage employees to communicate honestly and clearly, following years of upheaval. McShane says: "We've been on a journey of change in the past three years. We were a large, faceless, corporate brand. Now we have given more power to the individual shops."

Waterstones' website is also being overhauled and will be designed to reflect the personalities of the local branches. McShane points out that the 'recommend' stickers, for instance, are "more powerful if they come from the local booksellers than if they look like a corporate sticker".

He says: "A big one-size-fits-all brand doesn't fit bookselling as an industry and something had to change to make people fall in love with Waterstones again."

For service industry brands, it is particularly important that a consistent brand personality is conveyed at every customer touchpoint.

Christian Poole, marketing director at restaurant chain Prezzo, believes that this is impossible unless the brand personality is 'lived' internally. He has been working with agency Brand Vista to identify critical moments for the brand, and says that working with an external partner helps to give an objective, granular assessment of the overall brand experience.

Poole points out that the first 10 seconds in a restaurant, for instance, are important for customers' perception of a brand. He says that



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KAREN INGHAM
VIRGIN MEDIA

Monarch Airlines sees training on brand personality as an opportunity to bring consistency, while Best Western (left) encourages its member hoteliers to add their own personality to the mix

since Prezzo focused on brand personality, training initiatives, staff turnover has declined and market tracking scores have improved.

"It's difficult to give a definite figure for every pound invested. But we do qualitative and quantitative surveys every year and track attitudes."

There are organisations that are fortunate in that they do not feel the need to question the investment into brand personality training schemes. Absolut global marketing manager for brand education Sara Petrini Vincenti says that these types of educational experiences are nothing new for the Pernod Ricard vodka brand.

"Absolut has been around since 1979 and we've been doing this since 1991 so it's not new for us," she says. "It's a long-term commitment. And it's because of the scale of the business – we operate across 150 countries – that we work to ensure consistency. You sell our type of product on emotion, not on functionality." She points out that once a brand achieves significant scale, the challenge is both greater and more pressing.

Richie Jones, who recently joined EWM Group as digital director, which includes brands such

as Jane Norman, Edinburgh Woollen Mill and Peacocks, agrees that having a harmonised, consistent tone of voice across all the consumer touchpoints is no mean feat. But he says that doing so allows a brand to 'tease out some fun'.

"A consistent customer service team is something I'll be looking to set up in my new role," says Jones. "It allows you to add value, particularly if you can be open after hours."

He says that he is looking at out-of-office live chat functions, and having more out-of-hours customer service. "The customer now is very aware that he or she is empowered," he adds.

Technology trends

While new technologies and communications channels are making a unified brand voice in some ways more difficult to achieve, these same technologies are also making the required training easier for companies to manage.

James Lawton-Hill, head of marketing at Brother UK, points to a mobile app created in-house by the manufacturer that helps its sales teams to communicate the brand story more effectively.

Tim Williamson

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Marketing and customer
experience director
Monarch Airlines



Marketing Week (MW): Why does Monarch train its staff in the brand's personality?

Tim Williamson (TW): Brand personality is an opportunity. We have 42 aircraft and 1,600 cabin crew, so compared to some of our competitors that's a manageable number. In any service business, particularly travel, you need consistency, so we focus on training. We recently did a WorldHost training programme, which was the company behind the training for the 'Games Makers' at the 2012 London Olympics.

MW: How have you trained people?

TW: We all did the training, from the chairman down, which is over 5,000 people. We took a 'train the trainer' approach as we were training large volumes. It was a traditional classroom-based approach but with multimedia elements, and examples of good and bad customer service.

We focused on the basic principles of customer service: eye contact, welcoming people, making customers feel valued. We finished the programme in spring and I can see us doing more.

MW: Were you pleased with the results?

TW: I'm already seeing the impact in the net promoter scores. Our onboard questionnaires are showing significant improvements, too.

MW: How will you keep up momentum?

TW: We're now thinking about what phase two and three might look like. This was about creating a baseline. Our staff can't say they don't know what we mean by customer service now. But these things are never a one hit wonder, especially with large workforces. And you have to allow for the fact you have attrition.

It is a big improvement on the PowerPoint presentations that were used previously in meetings with the brand's partners, he says.

These partners, which include John Lewis, Staples and PC World, are responsible for 95 per cent of sales at the company. Lawton-Hill says that Brother saw a 600 per cent increase in the number of training courses undertaken by its partners within a couple of months of the app's release.

That said, nothing can replace having a genuine story behind your brand or company. This is something that John Brennan, chief executive at broadcast hire company Procam, recognises. His organisation's business model is built on hiring young apprentices, regardless of qualifications or experience, and training them, until they leave two to five years later, as freelancers in the competitive TV industry.

Although this is an unusual business model, marketing manager Andrew Black admits that the motive is not entirely altruistic. "It's a win-win arrangement. Later on in their careers, we hope they will use us when hiring equipment," he says.

