

## 4 Reasons Learning Should Embrace Branding (Sep 15)

Learning is like any product or service delivered by a company, so why not brand it that way?

Chris Wirthwein, September 17, 2015



**Beer companies like Miller Brewing Company develop their own brands to attract customers. Have you done the same with your programs to attract learners? (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)**

As companies adjust to the new reality of a slow-growth business environment, leaders want to maximize results derived from learning and development dollars. This focus on results is driving dialogue about the virtues of onsite vs. virtual learning, internally developed vs. outsourced learning platforms and the proper balance of technical training and soft skills education.

But learning discussions often overlook a critical touchpoint that connects every member of the organization across departments, divisions and geographies and connects the company with all of its external stakeholders including customers, shareholders and suppliers. This powerful asset is the corporate brand, the idea standing behind every product and service produced and every employee within the enterprise.

A strong corporate brand can distinguish a company and speak for the way an organization and all of its people do business. As employees internalize the corporate brand, their words and behaviors deliver the brand externally. [A Harvard Business Review article](#) quoted an employee of the popular brewing company saying, "I make Miller time." Clearly this employee viewed his job as more than brewing beer.

Embracing the corporate brand can complement senior leaders' workforce development efforts. Here are a few ways aligning people with the brand supports broader learning strategy:

**1. Corporate brands have reach and influence.** The corporate brand spans all departments, divisions and geographies, influencing a company's perception in the external marketplace. Similarly, internal

alignment with the corporate brand establishes a shared understanding and a common ground on which to base learning and development across the enterprise.

**2. Corporate brands endure.** Although products receive hyper emphasis, it is the corporate brand that frequently outlasts a company's products. The typewriters IBM once manufactured are now the province of antique collectors, as the company develops and markets new generations of products and services. But the values the company stands for continue to be reflected through the behaviors of employees representing the brand.

**3. Corporate brands defy duplication.** From transportation services to novel food items and patented pharma products, every innovation will ultimately be subject to replication. But while a competitor can challenge a company's claim on product or service exclusivity, it can't capture another company's culture. Learning and development leaders can leverage the brand to help cultivate an inimitable culture.

**4. Corporate brand may define the company.** Consider accounting firms and architects, engineering and law firms as well as consultants and advisory services. In these businesses, no goods change hands between buyer and seller. Instead, it is the employees who communicate the corporate brand through their behaviors. By fostering dialog about the company brand, learning leaders can help employees develop a more rich understanding of the company, beyond products or services to higher issues that resonate with the company's purpose.

Each company brand has unique elements that can be integrated into its learning and development. Some questions to help identify such points of distinction include:

- How do people feel about our company brand today? How would they like to feel? What could make them feel differently?
- How do people describe our brand today?
- What makes people interested — or suspicious or bored — in the brand?

When leaders integrate the company brand into learning and development efforts, people begin to live the brand in their day to day behaviors inside and outside the company. When that happens, the corporate brand becomes "people powered."

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