

# **Using Thought Partnerships to Build Your Brand: Particularly in smaller and mid-sized companies**

By

**Daniel D. Elash, PhD. And James R. Long, PhD.**

Your brand is the identity of your enterprise. Ideally, your brand defines the value proposition offering to your customers. When consumers use your product or service, it's your identity that becomes linked with their positive or negative experience. However, unless the brand is tended, an otherwise effective product or service will have limited value.

The challenge falls to a diverse range of executives, professional managers, the company workforce, strategic allies, other stakeholders, and even customers to define the brand. This is a complicated sequence of investigation, decision-making and prioritizing based upon information from multiple sources, within the constant motion of the business environment. An effective, coordinated performance will insure that your pursuit will be successful. This paper suggests that thought partnerships are the foundation that forms the organizational capability for achieving brand promise.

## **What are thought partnerships?**

"...Collaborative relationships create the connections inside the organization required to operationalize its strategic intent. We refer to these relationship interconnections as thought partnerships. More specifically, a thought partnership is a relationship formed among two or more people, in a value creating enterprise for the purpose of generating social or intellectual value." (Long and Elash, 2002) Although executives may tend to equate thought partnerships with an action plan, these partnerships are formed to facilitate and further our *combined thinking*. The lack of executive enthusiasm is understandable in organizations where the thinking skills of the organization are not well developed. Some executives confuse rumination with thinking and so, do not consider thinking to be an "activity." These same people are often perplexed at how difficult it can be to reach a mutually acceptable decision within the executive team. They ask rhetorically how so many bright people can be mistaken. They don't realize that with effort, the thinking skills of the organization as a whole can be improved. Also, shared thinking is an essential activity in creating brand equity, and it must occur at all organizational levels and stretch across organizational boundaries. Individual thinking is important, but insufficient for optimal corporate performance. Thought partnering allows the whole to think more productively than the sum of its parts.

## Thought Partnering:

In 1996, Neal Rackham et al wrote about strategic partnerships between corporations. They were looking at changing supplier-purchaser-customer relationships and they sought to identify the elements of a successful partnership. They identified three ingredients that apply with equal validity to our discussion of thought partnerships. They are:

Vision – a compelling picture of the possibilities.

Impact – adding real productivity and value.

Intimacy – closeness, sharing and mutual trust.

Thought partners come together within a shared *vision*. They understand their need to cooperate arises from a shared compelling purpose. The partnership blossoms because the participants *see* an opportunity in collaboration that they cannot realize while working independently. This seeing happens informally, usually in the context of a conversation among people about what occurs at the interface of their work. More typically, a leader motivates people to look for ways to work together to fulfill the vision. There is a distinction between telling people that they have a common purpose and creating a shared vision. A “shared vision” means that the people involved have a sense of ownership for that vision. Their commitment means that the vision is incorporated into their personal agendas as a worthy pursuit. They can see themselves playing a role in bringing the vision to fruition. They feel a discomfort when recognizing a gap between current reality and the desired end state. The strength of the partnership is directly proportional to the genuine (not mandated) commitment to the vision. The enthusiasm that accompanies a genuine commitment sustains the effort even in times of frustration. Therefore, the commitment must be nurtured.

*Impact* is the second ingredient for a successful partnership. The phrase, “nobody is as good as everybody,” suggests that by collaborating, we seek a desired outcome that is better than what we could achieve by working independently. Without such an impact (desired by the partners), there is no enduring reason to cooperate. People might cooperate out of kindness, or neighborliness, but such motives prove fragile within the bustle of day-to-day business. It is important to note that appropriate leadership is required to nurture the relationships that create the impact sought for the good of the enterprise.

Why is it so important to nurture these thought partnerships and associated commitments? Because, there are times when what is asked of people is counterintuitive. There are unavoidable moments when some thought partners are not going to see the “big picture.” This may mean that collaborating for a communal or enterprise goal may actually mean more work for some workers at their individual stations than might otherwise seem necessary.

It is also true that people in some organizations are given mixed messages about the impact of their contribution in the workplace. These organizations tell people that their prescribed actions are important, only to act in ways which contradict the public words. We hear that this is important work but, no one monitors the work, people don't talk about the work and when there is a fiscal “hiccup,” the game plan quickly changes. There are times when the particular process is highly valued and critical to success. However, the front-line people working the process may be too far removed from the impact to appreciate it or to experience the personal satisfaction that comes from contributing to the valued outcomes.

Organizations are best served when workers have a way(s) to experience the impact created through their shared efforts. Most people come to work each day wanting to make an impact. They want to be important and to make a contribution. Without a clear thinking partnership with managers or supervisors, it is difficult for people to know how to give their best and then know their efforts are noticed and appreciated. When workers can believe that collaboration and personal leadership are vital, they are simply more willing to do it successfully while not knowing the impact. When supervisors and managers can be trusted to “connect the dots” and after-the-fact, explain how the thought partners contributed to the results, it nurtures the partnerships and builds trust for the benefit of the next initiative.

*Intimacy* is the third ingredient identified by Rackham et al. When we are talking about intimacy at work, we are really talking about an unselfconscious, cogent exchange of information. In the workplace, intimacy means that “I know what you need,” “I know when you need it,” “I know your circumstances” and “I know that you know mine.” Communication is authentic and timely. There is a mutual trust and commitment to our *joint* success. When these elements are in place, appropriate collaborative action occurs within the strategic intent. Without this ingredient, there is insufficient information necessary to anticipate needs and trigger flexible responses between the partners. In the first third of the twentieth century, Kurt Lewin (1969) articulated his “Field Theory” of behavior and wrote this equation to explain our behavior:

$$B = f(p, e)$$

Translated into common language, the equation states that behavior is a function of the person in interaction with their environment. The press and demand of the environment, combined with the perceived possibilities available are important contributors to how people behave. If we are to truly partner with others, we must have the intimacy sufficient to appreciate their circumstances in relation to our purpose.

Intimacy also creates a context for learning. When we have the relevant information, we are in a position to validate our assumptions, notice discrepancies and see possibilities for enhancements or innovations. In today's business environment, change is a constant and adaptation to change is an ongoing requirement. When people understand the context of the problem and have the crucial data, they are in a position to create knowledge and then to use that knowledge to generate further value. The more barriers and blind spots that exist between people attempting to collaborate, the more difficult it will be for them to collaborate effectively, adapt to changing conditions and ultimately, succeed.

### **Brand Thinking and Business Success:**

By adopting a thoughtful, deliberate approach, you can manage your reputation and increase the worth of your brand. Creating a strong corporate brand identity provides a vehicle for businesses to craft solutions that address the totality of their business challenges, both day-to-day and strategic. That's easier said than done. Often, when we are confronted by a situation that's quite complex, we err in trying to solve it by addressing the parts of the problem with which we are confident. Simultaneously, we are ignoring or minimizing the elements that we don't want to face, and trying to make a partial solution be sufficient. While there are many strategies for the companies of all sizes to compete in today's business environment, there is only one real posture leading to breakthrough results.

Some companies minimize their efforts to challenge competitors on a brand basis because they feel they don't have the resources that "big brands" have. The people in these companies simply go to work everyday and conduct business on a one-by-one transactional basis. Many people in these companies don't think of themselves as having a brand and they end up competing primarily on cost and living on the edge of ever-shrinking margins. The executive teams in these companies, feeling victimized by market forces, often fall to grouching bitterly about customers and competitors alike. Other companies have their marketing strategy embodied entirely in their advertising budget. These companies focus on the promise. They describe themselves to the marketplace in the best image their ad copy can create and then rely on the hype to attract, and then retain

customers. Like hopeful singles at the community dance, they get all dressed up and hope others will find them attractive.

Still other businesses rely on extra-business, personal relationships to keep customers. They count on the loyalty, friendship, and shared experiences of the past to guarantee continuing business in the future. For these companies, regardless of what they may say in public, business is primarily a personal matter. This has always been more prevalent in the small towns and less urban areas where competition is never as sharp as that on the fast track. They seek security in a mutual sense of community. These companies rely on personal bonds to compensate for other competitive deficiencies. (It was against those players that the Walton family and their Wal-Mart organization gained the traction that led their company to the top of the Fortune 500 list in 2002.) All of these alternatives eventually play out in a way that leaves these organizations reacting to the initiatives of others, hoping to survive what's happening to them, trying to get by or endure in the face of forces that are beyond them. All of these strategies are passive. They predispose the organization to reacting to external events. With any of these strategies, the weaker businesses will die off first, while stronger ones will linger, even thrive at times, but the end game has surely begun even for the fittest.

The best choice for any business is to take the offense. You can build a strategy allowing you to redefine the game. You can develop initiatives that allow you play to your advantages on your own turf, within your realistic capabilities. You are the guardian of your identity. You do control your strategic intent. You can make the brand promises that are the most meaningful to your customers and build an organization capable of delivering what your customers value most of all. Here are the steps:

- Getting Your Bearings
- Using Your Business Idea To Make Sense of Your Markets
- Compellingly Communicating Your Brand Promise
- Leading an Organization Capable of Delivering What's Promised Consistently

### **Getting Your Bearings**

Organizations, just like human beings, tend to look for patterns and operate from the perspective of past experiences. This creates a challenge if you believe that what worked in the past is not necessarily what will work best moving forward. For example, Michael Dertouzos, in his 1998 book, What Will Be, discusses pending technological breakthroughs and explores their impact on how we will conduct business in the future. We all know that more change is coming. With

evolving and even disruptive technologies looming, you'll have to discover many new ways for enacting your strategic intent. Your company will face discontinuous changes as business evolves. Discontinuous changes are not just extrapolations of, or improvements on, the current process. Rather, they are game-changing innovations or variations. The introduction of the CD to compete against audiotape cassettes is an example of such a discontinuous change. Companies must have the skills to adapt and adjust. Working obsolete processes more effectively (or more cheaply) will *not* lead to success in such a competitive arena.

When considering the workforce, Dana Beth Ardi (2002) has captured today's situation nicely. She believes that during the dot-com era, a change occurred. She wrote,

"...talent flexed. Knowledge workers wanted to join communities, not companies. They were members of teams, not organizations. They insisted on managing their own careers, in their best interests. They wanted flexibility in when they worked, how they dressed and what benefits they got. 'Brand' and 'culture' were the battle cries! Cultural imperatives included flat organizations, open and honest communication, development of individual and team capabilities. Building your brand communicated what your company stood for. Brand also represented the individuals who were seen as the company's real assets. Personal brand stood for your contributions to the team effort. It was about building an emotional connection between people and the community/company. It was about voices at the table, shared dreams and aspirations. It was the moment when the seeds of the Human Capital Movement were planted and cultivated. This has forever changed the way Americans work."

Ms. Ardi may be describing the trend in its most robust manifestation, but the evolution she describes is spreading, like a ripple across a pond, to the broad American work force. Significantly, not only are these people becoming an ever greater percentage of the work force, they are also consumers, your new customers.

Who are the people/corporations most predisposed to embrace the new, to eschew the traditional? They are the young, those most predisposed to learning, most comfortable with new technologies and the least bound by a loyalty to the past. Who are the people in charge in most companies? In most cases it is those who have "worked their way up." It is the council of elders, the silverbacks, or those who "have grown up in this business." You can see the clash of paradigms. You can feel the tension. All of the wisdom of the past, that which was earned by hard work over time, certainly isn't irrelevant, but it is often a lot less valuable than many of those who have it think it should be. This is an issue that many of today's businesses fail to resolve successfully.

Contrarian perspectives are beginning to be built into the councils of some publicly held companies by those striving to be agile and shrewd. However, far too many executive egos want their ideas to be adopted not challenged. That being the case, the question arises as to how the business can shake itself out of its habitual patterns of thinking about itself, its markets, and customers. How can you re-orient in a rapidly changing environment? Those who think that they can skip this step are probably those who need it the most.

**Action Steps:** The top executive can begin by assembling a cross-functional, multi-level task force of executives, managers, influential thinkers and the informal opinion leaders in the organization, as well as appropriate outside stakeholders. The goal of this group should be an analysis of your company and your markets as if you were a start-up business looking for a game-changing strategy. One key tactic is to use Red Team/ Blue Team techniques and war-gaming simulations to ensure fresh assessments of familiar perspectives. Furthermore, the work of these teams is best facilitated by an outside agent who has no stake in the status quo, who isn't going to fall in line when the CEO speaks, and who can nurture true challenges to old assumptions.

The work of this enterprise strategy group is to listen (an often-difficult task for the members of executive teams). Their work involves inviting conversations with customers, market watchers and those who come to the market with a different (non-traditional) point of view. Sales reps and others who work in the field should be interviewed to gather hints, hunches and intuitions about what's being said out there. Their work includes brainstorming within the organization to clearly articulate the corporate identity.

One's identity is demonstrated by what one stands for over time. It can be seen in the choices one makes and in the purposes one pursues. These elements of a business are clearly observable and can be deliberately considered from an internal perspective, as well as by observations in the external world. Just as with people, there often is a gap between how we are seen as an enterprise versus how we see ourselves. Considering the ego investment of the executives in their business, you begin to appreciate the fact that these assessments can only be well done through a concentrated effort.

Other multilevel, cross-functional work groups should gather information on changing customer tastes and preferences. They should be able to highlight game-changing ideas that are within the realm of the company. They should identify key business drivers in the marketplace and identify evolving, emerging or disruptive developments that are on the horizon. They should also be able to articulate how they would do business differently if they were a start up company with your current resources. Their feedback around these and other

relevant issues then sets the stage for reaffirming your purpose and clearly expressing it in your business idea. These steps lay the foundation for the formation of a network of thought partnerships across the company (see Elash and Long, 2002). This network will strengthen collaborative efforts in each of the other recommended steps.

**Possible action steps summarized:**

- Red Team/Blue Team
- War games or simulations
- Research – both cursory and deep
- Gathering intelligence from the “street”
- On-going dialogue with customers
- Building a network of thought partnerships

**Using Your Business Idea To Make Sense of Your Markets**

You can use your business idea (your value proposition) as the context for interpreting and absorbing the results of your marketplace assessment. Have you ever walked by several brands of potato chips or deodorants to find your preferred brand? Why? Why not grab the first one you came to? The answer lies in the brand promise of the item that you chose. You expected something different from your chosen brand, more suited to your needs, and at the right cost/benefit ratio, than you expected to get from the others. That something extra is what separated that brand’s product from the other, similar products that you overlooked. It is this added value that is the brand’s promise. At its best, the brand’s promise is an articulation of the company’s business idea.

Take what you have learned from your assessment of the marketplace and interpret it against your fundamental business purpose. Your organization considers what you (as a company) have to offer that you believe will create a favorable value proposition for both you and your customers. This is your business idea---why people should chose to give you money in return for what your company does. It is particularly difficult for companies that have been in business for a generation or more to revisit their business idea and objectively examine it in the current business climate. It is also difficult for companies that have historically been successful because success often breeds a reluctance to move away from a once winning formula. The purpose of step one was to set the stage for a successful step two. Understanding what promises hold tangible value for customers and appreciating how to deliver on those expectations can lead to a significant competitive advantage. The responsibility for analyzing your business idea does not rest with the individual sitting in the captain’s chair, but rather with the complex, interdependent, networked system that is your enterprise.

**Action Steps:** If your whole organization is expected to embrace your idea, to be resourceful about enacting it, and to be able to innovate in an effort to ensure it, then there has to be an ongoing conversation about the business idea across the enterprise. Executive teams in many companies are caught flatfooted because they insist in viewing the future from their own, self-referent point of view. They plan for tomorrow based on what was. They expect that their reputation and/or their good intentions will mitigate uneven execution. Because they had it, they think they've got it! Then they blame the customers' judgment or competitors' tactics as they lose ground.

A highly productive way to start a broad organizational conversation about the business idea is to engage people in the process of *scenario planning*. Companies use scenario planning as an aid in anticipating multiple possible futures (See van der Heijden, 1996). In order to articulate possible future scenarios, one has to have a very clear idea as to the organization's fundamental purpose---its reason for being. Collins and Porras (1996) have elegantly considered this issue. They use examples of firms like 3M and Mary Kay to help illustrate their points. The Mary Kay Company is a marvelous example of a firm, which has shaped itself in such a way as to totally dedicate its resources to supporting its fundamental business idea.

Well done, scenario planning does more than imagine future possibilities. It writes stories about possible futures that connect people across the enterprise. It identifies intermediate signs, occurrences or manifestations of which one of several possible futures that's beginning to emerge. It allows people familiar with the scenarios to anticipate developing events. Scenarios create a shared picture of the implications of future trends and provide a framework for the company to effectively anticipate and adjust to changing conditions. For example, there were several companies located in the twin towers that had in place multiple scenario plans that allowed them to successfully adjust to the tragedy of "911."

Once you and your key people have referenced your business intelligence against your core purpose, you are in a position to translate that into a brand promise and to communicate that promise in stories that capture the imaginations of diverse audiences.

**Possible action steps summarized:**

- Scenario planning initiatives
- Brand Equity workshops
- Articulating and inculcating a "teachable point of view" as a practical frame of reference

## Communicating Your Brand Promise (Compellingly)

In the typical company, the chief executive (or the executive team) gets excited about the implications of an idea or strategy. They plan an initiative, often with drum rolls and fanfare. The chief executive delivers the new perspective and people listen, try to believe in the idea, and make good faith efforts to “get on board.” Soon, the initiative fizzles and everyone reverts to past practices, the way it had been done. The lessons drawn from these experiences are often that things can’t change, or that organizational development initiatives sound good but are not realistic.

Here is an alternative explanation. It’s not enough for you, as the boss, to grasp the key strategic intentions of your company. It’s never sufficient for you to know it and then preach it to others. What is required for organizations to change is a social network built upon shared thinking. People need to understand the implications of key ideas. Being able to recite the manta is not the same as achieving shared-thinking. Too often, great mission statements, clever marketing campaigns, and well considered market initiatives are sabotaged when the organization as a whole does not march in step with those messages. When the people who are interfacing directly with the customers continue operating within their usual patterns, the messages become muddled. When customers arrive with new expectations aroused by your brand promise, and find the people representing the company are not prepared to fulfill those new expectations, the credibility is lost and things go from bad to worse.

This is a gap destined to keep you mired in mediocrity, far from optimized, and safe only if your competition is even more inept or your customers have no viable alternatives (two conditions that are becoming increasingly rare). It generates confusion about your company’s promises, and it breeds skepticism about your ability to deliver any additional value that you wish to have associated with your brand. There are three broad areas where stakeholders in the brand have to make sure that the brand promise is articulately, compellingly presented:

- To your workforce – the people who have to fulfill your promises
- To your customer base – the people who want what you promise
- The broad marketplace – the people you want to attract with your promises

Throughout mankind, people have told stories as a way of communicating ideas and representing the importance of their values. Think of your brand promise as the kernel of your story. How do you put your ideas into a story (or stories) that resonates across your target audiences? A compelling story can stir passions and move people to action. When the story is poorly articulated you run the risk of disappointed customers and losing credibility. In order to capture the power of your message, you need to have people involved in developing the story, and relating it to their situations. This proves to be more effective than having them parrot your story. Collaboration here naturally builds a shared perspective and people begin to claim a share of ownership in the message. It becomes *our* story and can be a powerful connecting vehicle to your audiences.

**Action Steps:** What do you do when you want to be sure that you and your audience communicate? You don't send out a broadcast message, but rather, you talk with them, usually face-to-face. You don't publish an ad, but instead, you dialogue---speak and listen, give and take. It is through straightforward, clear conversation that we can ensure that we have achieved a shared understanding of the sense of the message that we want to send. In short, you strive for an *authentic conversation*.

You must invite these conversations and you must start first at home. Again, it is only through cross-functional, multilevel group conversations that the thinking of the group can become aligned. Telling people what to think doesn't work because people first interpret the words they hear through their own experiences, understandings and agendas. Even when we sit in good faith, the opportunities for subtle misunderstandings are substantial, and we know that even a small misalignment of understanding left unattended over time or distance can create huge discrepancies. If people are going to fulfill your promise accurately, they have to comprehend your intent. If people are expected to work resourcefully to troubleshoot problems and overcome hurdles to satisfy customer expectations, they have to grasp the message deeply and thoroughly.

One option is to establish a series of work teams, meeting to clarify how they understand the brand promise and what they will need to do to fulfill its requirements for them on a day-to-day basis. These discussions define the necessary relationships across internal boundaries, the need for ongoing collaboration to get the job done, and the information needed for timely decision-making at the workstations. The brand story has much in common with Tichy's (1993) "teachable point of view." The reader might also check Shaw et al (1998) or Gabriel (2000) for other ideas.

If a common frame of reference has been achieved, the company is in a position to develop a strategy for taking its brand promise into the market. However, just

as the story developed in the company was made robust through conversations, the same implication holds for the broad marketplace as well. Many companies' strategies stagnate because they preach to, rather than converse with, their markets. They set out to talk customers into wanting what is easy for the company to make rather than keeping abreast of the changing expectations of empowered customers (customers with options). It is insufficient to simply host focus groups. Have you ever left a conversation and later thought of something you wished you had said? A hit and run conversation isn't as effective a vehicle for intimate collaboration and deep understanding as the connectedness that comes from an on-going conversation. The Internet offers one option for continuing the dialogue, as does listening in on public conversations on relevant Usenet newsgroups or other forums for communities of passion. Companies can also train those representatives who speak with the customer to converse with, rather than speak at customers. There is room for wide variations in form, but the substance for communicating your promise must be a series of on-going conversations about your enterprise.

**Possible action steps summarized:**

- Articulating your story
- Deciding on the brand promise
- Creating internal mind share
- Communicating your brand promise
- Hosting customer/consumer conversations

**Leading an Organization Capable of Consistently Delivering What's Promised**

Finally, taking control of your destiny involves creating an organization that is capable of enacting your strategic intent. This requires savvy that must extend beyond executive row to the members of the organization who are smart about the broad marketplace. It has to include an organization whose members are skilled at thinking together. The work force, as a whole, must see that a part of its role is to be thoughtful about their work. It's not enough to show up and "do" your job. The workforce needs to have the information to think intelligently about the business environment, if they are to collaborate with you to fulfill the brand's promise.

Second, workers need to have a clear frame of reference against which to balance conflicting demands and changing priorities. A clear compelling purpose is a fundamental element in any high performance organization. Instead of making decisions from their own point of view, workers need a clear understanding of the business idea, expressed through the brand promise, which can serve as their

guiding star. It is the company's purpose that provides the template necessary for worker to turn data into information and information into knowledge.

A third requirement for an empowered workforce is the expectation of on-going conversations about the work. When processes become sclerotic, innovation dries up. When the way it has been becomes the way it must be, people have no need to talk about the work. In a continuously changing environment, workers must be expected to talk about their perceptions and their observations. Decisions need to be made at every level within the framework of the business idea.

Finally, people need to operate within a culture of trust (see Ciancutti and Steding, 2000). It has to be safe to think, to talk, and to act in good faith. It is in these ways that true thought partnerships are sustained throughout the enterprise. It is these thought partnerships that serve as the foundation for the ongoing collaboration critical to the organization's capability to repeatedly deliver that which is promised.

**Action Steps:** There is not a single method for structuring people in organizations to act in a focused fashion. The answer lies in the definition of the organization's day-to-day collaboration across boundaries to fulfill its promises. These collaborative patterns are unique to your enterprise, and referenced against your company's strategic intent. This level of collaboration, or synchronized performance, cannot occur unless people at every level in the organization demonstrate individual leadership capability. For example, the line leaders hold routine conversations that maintain a focus upon the way the work is delivered. This is *not* to say that the workforce is constantly sitting in meetings, wrangling about who does what or who's to blame. That is not part of a formula for high performance. Rather, it is a mindset of collaboration and the option for informal conversations that are recommended. Everywhere where there are handoffs---of work products or intellectual products---from one person or group to another, there must be an openness and flexibility to discuss collaboration. Outside facilitation can be helpful in teaching line leaders how to be socially innovative and to lead others in acting to innovate.

Many organizations are fostering informal communities of practice to encourage people with shared purpose or shared passion to communicate across boundaries and silos. They are using their Intranets to facilitate these conversations. Cohen and Prusak (2001), talk about the importance creating and then using social capital---the relationships and connections that enable people to think together---in an effort to create value. The central idea here is that thought partnerships are multidimensional. They don't just operate downward---with the workforce being expected to "get" the boss's idea. People don't work that

way. It must also include opportunities for workers to connect with other workers, for workers to connect with customers and even for worker ideas to actually excite and ignite thinking on executive row.

Whatever the form that thought partnerships take or the infrastructure designed to nourish and support them, the fact of a thoughtful, focused and coordinated workforce all concentrating upon delivering your brand's promise is a necessary ingredient for tending the value of your brand.

**Possible action steps summarized:**

- Encouraging and developing leaders at every level
- Establishing venues for conversation
- Nurturing thought partnerships
- After action reviews

**In Summary**

Businesses can perform with more power and influence in the marketplace. Building any company's brand equity can serve as a way to improve corporate thinking, forge stronger connections with the marketplace, and to align your organization to better deliver on your strategic intent. There are four basic steps required to create this competitive advantage. These steps include: 1) reframing your markets with an eye toward new possibilities, 2) using your business idea as the touchstone for organizing collaboration and enabling clear priorities, 3) presenting your brand promise in a story capable of creating a shared vision among your workforce, customers and the greater market environment, and 4) leading an organization capable of consistently delivering what's promised.

Working the steps in a thoughtful, considerate way generates a process that allows people throughout the organization to align their efforts. It doesn't require a huge deployment of resources. What it does require is the leadership vision for supporting new ways to involve everyone in the pursuit of shared goals. An interdependent network of thought partnerships is the essential foundation for these efforts.

**Attention Readers:** The authors are asking the readers of this article for help. Please send stories of building brand equity through "thought partnerships" in your company; generating value in today's workplace. We think that it's happening, that people are self-organizing in ways that aren't appreciated. We'd like to hear tales from the trenches. We will use some of your stories in our future work. Please send stories to Dan Elash at [delash@syntient.biz](mailto:delash@syntient.biz) .

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