

'Go Further' Brand Message Is Aimed at Ford's Employees, Too

by Dale Buss, Contributor



Go Further

Ford's new branding effort has two important audiences: the world of car buyers — and Ford employees. So when the company urges all within hearing to “Go Further,” it's not just appealing to consumers in America or China to take that extra step and check out a Ford vehicle; and it's not just promising that new Ford models will exceed their expectations.

The company is exhorting its 166,000 worldwide employees to “Go Further,” too, because executives believe that making Ford's “internal brand” consistent with its new external messaging can create profound synergies that benefit the company in significant ways.

“What we aim to do is inspire behavior,” Matt VanDyke, Ford's director of global communications, told me. “Go Further” is “more than an advertising tagline. We want to institutionalize it as part of our culture. But we talk with employees about why this language is rooted in what we already were” rather than what Ford hopes the company becomes.

That kind of talk may seem reminiscent of meaningless “mission statements” and other labels that companies apply to their employees' behaviors and motivations without any real anchoring in a consistent and effective corporate culture. Does anyone really believe that a single Ford employee is going to work harder or smarter or more because the marketing brass have come up with a clever new slogan to cover their efforts?

Well actually, yes — but not just because someone came up with “Go Further.” Branding consultants as well as Ford executives insist that internal branding can actually be a powerful force for molding employee behavior into a more effective collective force, and one that redounds far beyond the water cooler.

Who at Apple, for instance, doesn't believe that the company is changing the world with its technology? And could McDonald's continue to lead the fast-food business for decades without an essentially company-wide devotion to providing consumers all over the world with affordable food that they enjoy?

“Today, the most important audience for a brand is the internal one,” insisted John Grace, president of BrandTaxi, a New York-based brand-consulting firm. “Employees need to live the brand and the values of the brand. If they're not aligned and not all acting in the same way, and have the same convictions, the brand looks scattershot. And it's employees who actually deliver the brand.”

Karl Heiselman, CEO of New York-based Wolff Olins, a brand consultancy, said that the key to success for internal-branding campaigns “is that it has to be sincere and not just a communications platform. It has to be based on truth and reality.”

Arguably, Ford employees have shown the ability before to rally around strong messages that were, in effect, internal as well as external brands.

One time was during the early Nineties, when Ford came up with what at the time arguably was the first major, effective branding campaign for an auto company that bore a strong internal element: “Quality Is Job One.” At the time, each of the U.S. Big Three auto makers was struggling to close an immense gap in product quality that was helping their Japanese rivals gobble up share in the American market.

“It created common ground and a sense of pride,” said Allan Steinmetz, a leading internal-branding consultant who, back then, was working on Ford campaigns for an ad agency. “Dealers made sure that when cars were repaired, they were repaired right. Unions wanted to have the pride of building cars with quality just as good as the imports. And,” said the CEO and founder of Boston-based Inward Strategic Consulting, “management compensation was tied to quality rankings because Ford needed to overcome the image and the reality that its cars were inferior.”

The next time Ford management and employees rallied around a sort of internal brand wasn’t tied to a marketing campaign per se — it was how they supported CEO Alan Mulally after his arrival in 2006, in his determination to chart a tough turnaround course for the company. He hatched a “One Ford” business plan for the company that employees still carry around on a wallet-sized card. It talks about “One Team” executing “One Plan” toward “One Goal: An exciting viable Ford delivering profitable growth for all.”

And once Mulally decided to borrow heavily from private capital and disdained the offer of a U.S.-government bailout in 2009, Ford employees embraced “One Ford” even more, and their devotion to it no doubt has played an instrumental role in the success that Ford began to enjoy a few years ago — and has extended to today.

But “Go Further” may actually be a harder proposition from which to squeeze real value. For one thing, Ford and its employees no longer are in the relatively desperate situation that confronted them three years ago — the kind of desperation that can be a great motivator regardless of slogan.

But VanDyke insisted that Ford’s efforts to rally around “Go Further” really will help the company to — well, go further. “It’s absolutely clear that a cohesive brand strategy, internally, plays a role” in winning as a company. “Understanding the culture and how we should behave is a key to making a world-class company.”

VanDyke cited a number of instances where Ford employees already have “gone further” lately, in areas such as safety design and keeping a Ford supply depot going during an ice storm. But more substantively, he and Ford CMO Jim Farley recently shared three areas where the company will concentrate its internal-branding efforts: “People serving people,” promoting the values of teamwork, ‘family,’ inclusiveness, improving lives and tapping into the potential of humanity; “Ingenuity” in ways big and small from design through products and services; and striving for the “Attainable” in “character, appeal, value.”

“Those three ideas make Ford different,” Farley said. “We’re just documenting what the company already is. That’s what Nike and [CEO and founder] Phil Knight did” with that company’s widely admired internal-branding effort based on the idea, “Just do it.”

Farley continued: “We’re not trying to invent a new reality for Ford” but emphasizing and communicating internally “what Ford feels like on a good day.”

Sarah Tatchio, manager of global integrated communications for Ford, explained that the goal is to make “Go Further” important to Ford employees — “not ‘something else I have to do’ but really who we are, and giving a voice to it. Like, ‘I’m going further when I make a certain decision’ or ‘do something for this customer.’ It’s a slightly different framework for thinking about things.”

Steinmetz said that to effect a significant return on investment and boost profitability, internal-branding programs “can’t just be a re-launch of an advertising initiative inside the company.

To succeed, he said, programs such as “Go Further” must begin by making sure every constituency in the company is fully apprised of the common platform and expectations about it; then break it down to help individual employees understand what it means for them in their roles; then obtain commitments from employees and begin measuring behaviors that will indicate the internal branding effort is taking hold; and, finally, seriously recognize and reward the desired behaviors.

Tatchio said Ford is following a game plan similar to this. An added important element for Ford is that “Go Further” has become its global rallying cry, so the internal-branding campaign has to be translatable across the company’s operations worldwide.

In Ford’s case, Tatchio said that “after three months, we have numbers [demonstrating effectiveness] that are stronger than the same period after which we introduced ‘One Ford.’

“Our culture has changed so dramatically over the last five years,” she said, “that it really laid the groundwork to introduced something like this more quickly. This wouldn’t work at a lot of companies.”