

Branding Firm Helps Companies Align Their Brand Promise And Corporate Culture



Ward Alles
President &
Brand Consultant

CEO/CFO: Mr. Alles, what is the concept behind Core Creative?

Mr. Alles: We are a branding firm located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We have been in business for 20 years, with 50 employees, and primarily serve B2B clients in the Midwest as well as healthcare providers around the country. Core Creative believes in something called brand alignment. We help our clients align their external branding with their corporate culture. We have a mantra called, “say it, live it.” We help clients define their “it”, the company’s brand promise or their unique value proposition, and then we try to align all of their messages around that one central idea. That seems to be a winning formula – for our clients – and for us as an agency.

CEO/CFO: Why would a corporate culture reflect itself in the brand?

Mr. Alles: Many times you will hear a CEO say, “Our people are our greatest asset.” That should be more than just PC word-smithing from leadership. That should be a real belief and truism – especially in the service industries, where the people are the product. Your employees are the ones that deliver on the brand promise every day. What you surround your employees with from a cultural standpoint, in terms of messaging, feedback, and communication, is ultimately going to reflect in how they do their jobs and serve customers. It is extremely important for a CEO to establish a strong culture if he wants his employees to live the brand every day. It has to be made clear what the brand promise is and what “on-brand behavior” is.

CEO/CFO: Are companies coming to you because they know your approach and they understand the value or do they find that out during the development of your relationship?

Mr. Alles: It is a mix of both. I believe that our philosophy is clear on our website and from what we speak and blog about. Many prospective clients shop for agencies online or follow industry experts, so they are going to see how you think and feel, and what your approach to marketing is. If they have not paid a great deal of attention, they will certainly find out about our approach in that first capabilities meeting.

Core’s “say it. live it.” philosophy is not something too many clients are going to disagree with, but they have to decide whether or not this is an approach that they want to take in building their business. It is a really big topic and undertaking; it is not just a one-time initiative or an ad campaign. This is how you live, breath, behave and work every day, so that your brand promise is clear and communicated consistently moving forward by everyone on your team. As a CEO, you either want this for your organization or you do not. It is pretty clear right away whether or not this is something that you value and are willing to take on.

CEO/CFO: You mentioned that people often find you through doing an online search. What are the terms that they would key in to find Core Creative?

Mr. Alles: They could search under “employer brand” or “internal branding.” What is interesting about our firm is that we can be hired by either a client’s branding or marketing department or by their HR team. You may scratch your head on that and ask, “What is an HR department doing hiring a branding firm?” It’s because they understand the value of culture building and they want the creative firepower of a branding firm to help package up their employer value proposition. It can help with recruiting, engagement or retention issues. So HR folks see internal branding as a winning strategy.

CEO/CFO: Customer services are poor in so many companies. How might you help a company that wants to put an image out of really great customer service, but does not want to invest on the inside to make that happen? Can you help them bridge that gap?

Mr. Alles: Core Creative can package up anything and make it look and sound great, but it has to be real from an operations standpoint. As a branding firm, we don’t want you to over-promise and under-deliver if customer service is a

big issue at your company. By the same token, addressing the topic of brand promise and your culture is a way of addressing customer service. Our process gets your employees to own the topic and not just go through the motions of servicing customers; it helps them *want* to serve customers. Why do they want to service customers? Because the company has provided the meaning and purpose behind the work. They have engaged the employees and asked them to own the topic and provide their ideas. Now you are starting to see customer service get built from the ground up, not just demanded from the top down.

CEO CFO: *How do you help a company engage its employees in the change and understand that this is something good that they are doing?*

Mr. Alles: Great question. The key is engaging middle management. The rank and file employee is not necessarily going to believe the corporate speak of the C-suite, but they will believe their direct supervisors and middle managers. Therefore, the branding firm needs to do a great job of engaging and training the middle managers to help that organization understand what it means to fulfill the brand promise at every touch point for the customer and for the employee as well. In this way, you allow the different structures within an organization to own the brand promise and to define it at a pretty granular level, right down to the custodian.

What is neat is that prospective employees are starting to seek out these types of employers. As Millennials move into the workforce – and now they are well over 50% of the workforce, the research shows this younger generation is looking for meaningful and purposeful employment. They want to be part of something bigger. If you start talking about your internal brand, your purpose and how everyone matters in delivering the brand promise, you are definitely speaking the Millennial's language. This type of inclusion and culture building can be very well received.

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CEO CFO: *Would you give us an example of where there was a real need and how Core Creative made a change in one or two of the areas?*

Mr. Alles: We seem to be hired by clients at either end of the spectrum. Either they already are experiencing a pretty healthy culture and want to do more of it and tell their internal brand story, or they are suffering a little bit and feel broken.

On the broken end, there is a company that we have served that is a mix of white collar and blue collar. They are in the construction industry and they had gone through the ups and downs of the great recession as well as a change in family ownership, so this provided a recipe for a great deal of strife internally. A branding company like Core Creative comes in and focuses on recapturing the company's greatness; what they did well in the past and what they want to continue to do well in the future. We do focus groups with the management, the C-Suite, the employees and we get them talking again. Core Creative does not come in and tell you who you are. We ask you who you are, who you aspire to be, and you tell us. We package that up through a process and reflect it back to you. Then we launch that brand promise to the employees internally first before we ever take any of that branding externally to your customers. By doing it that way we have just engaged the employee base because people buy into what they help build. We are helping turn that company around culturally and organizationally because they are rallying around the idea of being a team again.

CEO CFO: *What have you learned as the company has evolved that allows you to do a better job today?*

Mr. Alles: No company can exist without sales, so you always have to start with a “say it” message. Core Creative was that way as well. We had to go out and tell people that we were a different kind of branding firm and why that was relevant. Then we realized that we needed to practice what we preached. We needed to get our own culture and people behind our sales message. So our attention turned towards “live it” messaging to our own employees. Once we evolved and our culture was aligned, we asked ourselves “What’s next?” That’s why we have now added a third level to our services called “share it.” This is the concept of corporate social responsibility, and cause-related marketing. Especially getting behind causes that relate directly to the company’s brand promise.

CEO CFO: *Core Creative has been recognized again on the Inc. 5000 list; would you address this recognition?*

Mr. Alles: This happens to be the third time that we have been recognized on the Inc. 5000 list. It is a great honor and we take great pride in explaining to our clients, as well as our prospects, that we have been recognized for this growth. However, the growth is not just because we are a hot agency, it is because we are working with some hot clients, who are

trying to get better and do better. We are just proud to be serving those clients and helping them grow, and when we help them grow, we grow. It is not a tricky formula.

CEOCFO: *Put it together for our readers. Why is Core Creative different and outstanding?*

Mr. Alles: We are growing steadily and incrementally based on our plan and we are taking our branding philosophy to our clients who are hungry for this approach, so we do not have to strong-arm them. We are taking a leadership role as a branding firm. We are not following our clients around or just taking orders. We are consulting them to help them grow their businesses and make them better.



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