



## Build a sustainable brand

Larry Ackerman

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### The Identity Circle

**Brands that thrive over the long term are built on five core principles of Identity, Purpose, Culture, Operations and Voice. Larry Ackerman of The Identity Circle explains what these principles mean and how to create them in a brand, using a multibillion-dollar US B2B brand, Aleris, as illustration.**

If companies were ships sailing the high seas, vital questions would include: how do we navigate unfamiliar waters? Is our keel strong enough to keep us steady in stormy weather? Does our crew have the skills to turn on a dime - yet avoid the backswing of a loose boom? Will our rudder keep us on course?

Like its nautical counterparts, no company today is immune to the pressures that attend unpredictable conditions. In the business world, such conditions come in the form of the irrepressible march of technology, demanding customers, fickle investors, and often unsettled, if not unhappy, employees. The combined effect of these forces can be withering. At times, basic survival may seem like the immediate challenge. It shouldn't be. It never should be. Not if your organisation builds a brand that is truly sustainable.

### What is a sustainable brand?

The notion of a brand is one that continues to elude a shared definition. For some managers and communications professionals, it's what goes on in the mind of your customer when he or she thinks about your company. For others, it's as simple as your name, logo, and tagline. And for still others, it's the big idea behind your business that establishes its market relevance - something that necessarily needs to change, over time.

Having worked to develop corporate brand strategies for some of the world's most influential organisations, I've come to see that these definitions all contribute something to what a brand is all about. But, even together, they don't go far enough; they don't recognise and respond to what it takes to keep a company alive and well over the long term. If that's your goal, it's useful to link the idea of brand with the idea of sustainability.

Sustainability today sparks associations with the environment, with 'green' business practices, and with corporate social responsibility. All of these associations are correct. And while they may well be the result of building a sustainable brand, they are not what I am referring to here. I am referring to the fundamental capacity of an organisation to grow and thrive overtime; in short, to endure.

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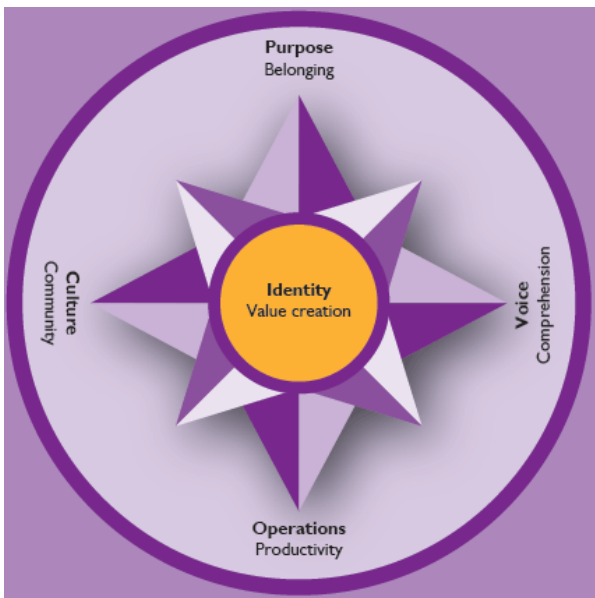
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Over the course of 30 years, I've witnessed seemingly successful companies perish, or at best, become shadows of their former selves. Upjohn and Westinghouse come to mind. I've also seen great organisations renew themselves vigorously, staying relevant despite tough odds -think IBM and Ford. Each of these concerns has managed to create a brand that is far more than skin deep. Their brands are powerful combinations of rudder and keel, which act as magnets that attract and hold the right people, influence business processes, shape all communications, and provide leaders with an internal guidance system - a management GPS - that keeps the 'ship' steady and on course over the long haul.

### Building a sustainable brand

The sustainable brand is best understood as a compass with four distinct and equally important points, organised around a vital - indeed, a golden - centre. Beginning at its centre, here are the five operating principles of the sustainable brand (Figure 1):

**Figure 1: The sustainable brand compass**



- The sustainable brand starts at the core.
- The sustainable brand clarifies purpose.
- The sustainable brand connects with culture.
- The sustainable brand makes the most of operations.
- The sustainable brand speaks with one voice.



Not long ago, I had the opportunity to work with Aleris, a multibillion-dollar aluminium company that had set its sights on expanding, globally. According to Fortune, Aleris is one of the largest privately held companies in America. My mission was to help it build a brand that would support its strategy, positioning the company for the long term. Here is how the principles of the sustainable brand influenced how we tackled Aleris's challenge.

- **Start at the core:** The power of the sustainable brand begins with cracking the code on the essential identity of the enterprise—the unique combination of characteristics that reveals the company's potential for creating long-term value. By 'value', I mean the proprietary contribution the organisation is capable of making in the marketplace and the world.

In short, Aleris was all about enhancing the freedom to create in ways that enabled business and society to thrive. That is how this growing concern created value today and, by all rights, would continue to do so in the future. The freedom to create was Aleris's 'golden centre' and the foundation of its brand.

- **Clarify purpose:** I am often asked what the difference is between identity and purpose. My answer is simple: if you know who you are, then you know why you're here; you know your purpose. For Aleris, it was a natural step to adopt its core identity as a statement of purpose, which at once addressed customer needs as well as the company's need to make a profit. What is our purpose? It is to enhance the freedom to create for companies and for people, so they can thrive. That's value creation.

- **Connect with culture:** Through the lens of the sustainable brand, a useful way to understand the relationship between identity and culture is to regard the former as motivation and the latter as behaviour. Because identity explains value creation, it sheds light on what fundamentally drives the enterprise. Culture, on the other hand, explains how the organisation will put this drive into gear.

For the company's brand to be sustainable, its identity and its culture must be consciously and conscientiously aligned. Aleris's culture could best be described as 'disciplined freedom'. This culture had grown out of a set of values that had been there all along but needed to be articulated and affirmed. The idea of 'disciplined' was underpinned by the company's irrepensible financial rigour, its speed and nimbleness in how it responded to customers, and a keen sense of personal accountability that was palpable from the top of the organisation down.

The idea of 'freedom' was revealed in the openness and candour that marked formal meetings and casual hallway conversations; in the company's relatively flat structure, which encouraged interactions among employees and managers, no

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matter where one stood in the organisation; and in an entrepreneurial attitude that enabled people to propose and lead projects of their own making, which promised solid business results, while advancing the purpose of the enterprise.

• **Make the most of operations:** For all the talk about how important the brand is - some marketing professionals assert that the brand is the business - I continue to be struck by how little attention is paid to tying the brand directly to operations. By operations, I'm referring to those processes which, when combined, influence how the company goes to market, delivering value overtime. These processes include product development and/or R&D, human resources (think training in all areas), manufacturing, sales, and customer service. In fact, any process or function regarded as vital to running a healthy organisation.

One of the most striking insights that framed brand development for Aleris was discerning what we termed the seven freedoms of aluminium - specifically, the freedom to: 1. design (aesthetics and material malleability), 2. build (flexibility and strength), 3. accelerate (advantages in terms of speed), 4. save (cost reduction), 5. sustain (in the 'green' sense), 6. maximise resources (recyclability), and 7. improve people's lives (the collective benefits we all gain, which flow from the six freedoms above).

Making the most of operations meant making sure Aleris could support these seven freedoms. Here are examples of how the company met this challenge in ways that created value in the industries it served. In automotive, for instance, Aleris designed pliable, bendable, flexible materials. In building and construction, the company saved customers money through reduced energy and lower-cost shipping programmes. In packaging, Aleris built corrosion-resistant containers for food service, baking and pharmaceutical companies. Taken together, Aleris was able to deliver on the seven freedoms of aluminium across all of the eight industries in which it was involved.

A common mistake of organisational life is thinking that culture is all about people, and operations is all about processes. That's a false distinction. Operations - in the form of jobs - is where people come alive in the workplace, or don't. Operations is culture in action. The sustainable brand recognises this fact and takes full advantage of it.

• **Speak with one voice:** One of the biggest challenges for any organisation is making sure you tell one story to the world -to employees, to customers, to investors, to suppliers, to community leaders, and on and on. While tailoring the message to different audiences makes sense, consistency in your story is crucial. It's easy to slip up when you're 5,000 miles from headquarters. Or local needs dominate messaging at the expense of everything else. Or you make acquisitions, which are allowed to retain their names, logos and brand positionings (to say nothing of cultures) with little or no connection to the parent.

Speaking with one voice is hard enough for any company; it can be really hard for large institutions with countless 'moving parts' operating around the world. As hard as it is, however, speaking with one voice is necessary if you're going to avoid mixed messages, confusion, and, ultimately, frustration among your stakeholders. This is a central tenet of the sustainable brand. The further you move away from it, the more you risk suboptimising all of the other elements that make your brand sustainable: the company's purpose, its culture, and its operations. Aleris succeeded in crafting one voice, worldwide – visually, in the form of a refined logo and new design system, and verbally, in terms of core messages that underpin the freedom to create theme.

Importantly, speaking with one voice isn't a call for homogenised messaging. No brand can be sustainable if it doesn't draw on the power of diversity that comes with different kinds of people, different national cultures, and different audience needs at different times. The communications mantra should be simple: it should be 'One voice, different accents'.

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## A compass for our times

If there is any magic that makes the sustainable brand especially relevant in this age of far-flung, global organisations, it's that the sustainable brand is comprehensive in scope, organising a company's most powerful management levers into what I referred to earlier as an internal guidance system - in short, a compass for our times.

Here is a recap of the operating principles we've just discussed, which make up the sustainable brand compass, and the strategic significance of each of its points:

- Identity reveals value-creating potential, clarifying the unique contribution the company is capable of making in the marketplace and the world.
- Purpose drives belonging, becoming a magnet for attracting and retaining talent.
- Culture drives community, establishing the values that guide behaviour.
- Operations drive productivity, leading to the precise alignment between people and profits.
- Voice drives comprehension, setting the visual and verbal framework for telling the company's story.

A keen understanding of value creation, a true sense of belonging, a dynamic and healthy community, robust productivity, and stakeholders who clearly comprehend what the organisation stands for – these are the pillars of long-term success. For leaders who want to create a sustainable enterprise, building a sustainable brand is the place to begin.

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## About the author

Larry Ackerman is founder of The Identity Circle, a consulting and coaching firm in Westport, CT. He is the author of two groundbreaking books on identity: *Identity Is Destiny: Leadership and the Roots of Value Creation* and *The Identity Code: The 8 Essential Questions for Finding Your Purpose and Place in the World*. [lackerman@theidentitycircle.com](mailto:lackerman@theidentitycircle.com)

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85 Newman Street, London, United Kingdom, W1T 3EU  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7467 8100, Fax: +(0)20 7467 8101

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