

Running successful brand workshops

By Colin Bates

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Here are some key points to consider, based on over 10 years of running brand management workshops:

When to use a workshop

A workshop is ideal when the topic you are addressing meets three criteria:

1. There is a need for new and creative thinking
2. A team of people are involved
3. Rapid consensus is required

Within the brand management process this often means that workshops are used to reach an understanding about your current brand, to define your 'desired' brand, or to explore the type of behavior required to 'live' the desired brand.

The preparatory work

Most of the work needs to be done before the workshop. That's not to decide the outcomes, but rather to provide the stimulus that will make the workshop an involving and interactive success.

The exact nature of the material will vary, depending on the focus of the workshop, but it is likely to include extracts from existing published materials, quotes from interviews and focus groups, photos of retail outlets (or other brand 'contact points') and other audio/visual material. All this needs to be gathered in advance, with the workshop objectives in mind.

Longer reports should be circulated in advance of the workshop, as background reading. Stimulus for the workshop itself should be more dynamic and involving: short audio/visual presentations (max 10 mins), material that can 'decorate' the room, or 'props' that can be handed around.

Involving the right participants

The ideal number is 6-8 participants. Less than 6, and the 'momentum and buzz' is difficult to build. Beyond 8 and each new participant seems to make it doubly difficult to reach a consensus!

In a company that has an open and egalitarian culture the participants can be drawn from any level in the company. However, if your company is more hierarchical in nature you will need to give thought to the impact of this on who should be selected. Involving a senior manager, his/her direct

reports, and their direct reports may not work well if the more junior members of the team feel unable to play a role. (These problems can be overcome through effective facilitation, more on that below).

Selecting the venue

Ideally the venue will be 'off-site' as this is another strong signal that encourages a different way of working. Other than that, the ideal venue should have:

- 1 Plenty of natural light
- 2 Space to work, plus a 'comfy' area to relax in
- 3 Plenty of refreshments, flipcharts, pens, pins etc

(These may seem small points, but selecting the correct venue and ensuring it is fully prepared will have a significant impact on the success of the workshop.)

Setting the agenda and running the workshop

Keeping people involved and active during the workshop depends on a well thought through agenda and good facilitation.

The agenda itself should consist of a combination of short participant presentations (either as stimulus, or summarizing the outcomes of a group activity), brainstorming sessions, 'break out' groups and evaluation sessions.

Keeping the whole thing under control is the role of the facilitator. (It is worth remembering, when selecting someone to fulfill this role, that the dictionary definition of a 'facilitator' is someone who 'makes progress easier!'). In the context of a workshop some of the key skills involved in achieving this are:

- 1 Ensuring everyone is involved, (through prompting)
- 2 Recording the results (initially on flipcharts, which can go up around the room as additional stimulus)
- 3 Maintaining the appropriate 'pace' and changing the focus when participants begin to tire of an activity
- 4 Encouraging creativity and ideas through their own enthusiasm, plus short 'creative thinking' exercises

Outputs and follow up

At the end of the workshop everyone should be exhausted, the room should be a mess and the walls will probably be thick with flipcharts. The next steps are:

1. Write up and circulation of the outcomes of the workshop, in the form of a workshop report
2. Further input from the participant group, with any suggested amendments or refinements
3. Production of the final report, and the plan of action required to take the initiatives forward

It is usually the team leader that takes on these follow-up activities and drives them forward (allocating individual responsibilities as necessary) with the team moving back into the conventional way of working, with individual responsibilities, objectives and timelines to their work.

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