

# Living the

## How to Turn Frontline Employees

by **ANDERS GRONSTEDT**

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**B**illions of dollars are invested in brand-oriented marketing communication every year, but much of the momentum generated by these expenditures is squandered by well-intentioned frontline employees who aren't delivering on the brand promise.

Senior executives now face a daunting, yet essential, challenge: transforming frontline employees into proud, effective brand ambassadors and communicating the brand across "the last three feet" of customer contact. World-class organizations like Avaya, Volvo Cars and Sprint are turning to the four "S's"—storytelling, simulating, selecting and surveying employees—to help everyone in their organizations "live the brand."

Surprisingly few companies manage the messages that sales and service employees deliver at the point of customer contact. That explains why most frontline representatives are so notoriously off brand message. Store clerks too often don't understand that the customer-retention process begins before the new customer leaves the store. Sales reps don't recognize that

they're serving a client who might be worth US\$100,000 in revenue during the coming five years. Field techs rarely appreciate that they're more important in shaping public perception of the company's brand than the people who crafted the brand message, logo and ad campaigns in the first place.

Every day this oversight translates into thousands of lost opportunities to cross-sell products, improve satisfaction and retention, and build brands.

Although the value of evangelical employees is rarely disputed, there's a general lack of commitment behind the rhetoric. Measuring and managing brand communication at the front lines requires orchestration of the four S's. Some of the best, most forward-thinking communication programs use stories and *storytelling* techniques to engage employees and increase retention, and they use *simulations* to provide a space for them to practice what they've learned. They *select* top-performing brand ambassadors



# Brand

## nto Brand Ambassadors

and, as a checkup, they *survey* employees as rigorously as their customers.

### TELLING THE STORY

The age-old art of storytelling is as universal as it is effective at energizing the troops. During telecom equipment-maker Avaya's annual sales powwow in Las Vegas last November, the sales force was treated to short movies chronicling highly successful sales stories. One of the stories started with an account rep recounting how the team was brought into an account and told on the first day that it would be out in four years; the client had decided to hand all of its business to a competitor. The movie was interrupted at various points to let the audience of 2,400 field reps, using handheld remote devices, vote on what they would do next. For instance, would they go directly to the executive suites, schedule more middle management meetings, set up a product test or roll over and play dead? The next segment of the film followed the heroic actions of the sales

team as it battled to win over the client. The audience burst into applause when the sales team eventually reclaimed the client's business.

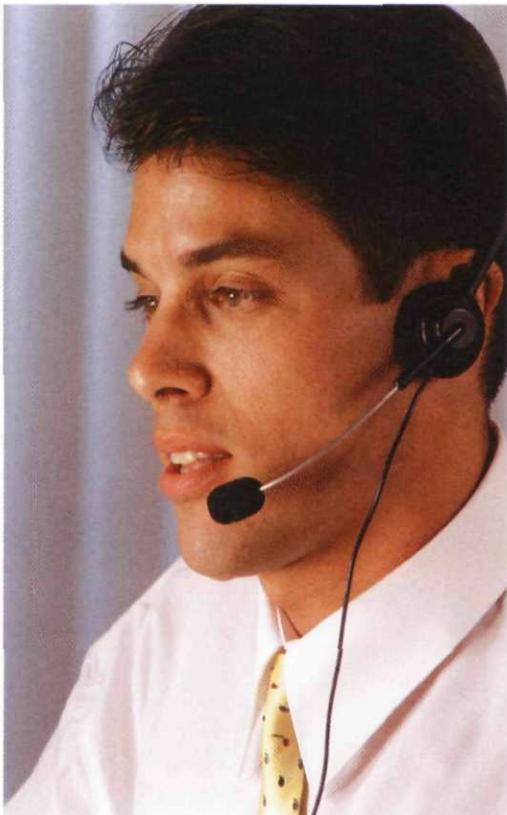
These stories breathed life into Avaya's brand message of selling strategic solutions that address client business needs and help customers reach "a higher plane of communication."

A second fictitious sales case presented on the big screen allowed audience members to participate in the development of a virtual success story by voting on actions that should be taken at critical stages in the sales process. Such stories are not only moving, but they also move people to action.

### SIMULATING EMPLOYEE-CUSTOMER INTERACTION

Active, engaging simulations take storytelling to new levels, allowing the audience to actively participate in constructing the story. Employees can create their own individual stories, and innovative technologies help illustrate the brand credo and inspire productive action.

People often learn best by doing. Simulations allow them to use their knowledge over and over before trying it out on customers and before they forget what they've learned. The best way to learn



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## THE FOUR S's OF LIVING THE BRAND

**Storytelling.** If you want to capture the imagination of frontline employees, tell them a story. Companies that are "living the brand" use the age-old art of storytelling to energize their troops.

**Simulating.** Put frontline employees "in the cockpit" of a virtual customer service simulator, letting them practice the tasks they'll be executing in their daily work—before they start practicing on real customers.

**Selecting.** Hire top performers by assessing their attitudes and observing their behavior in simulated customer interaction scenarios.

**Surveying.** Shift a small percentage of the dollars spent on external consumer marketing research to study your own employees who are supposed to deliver on the external marketing promises.

response, a lame excuse or a canned pitch helps them understand their jobs from the customer's point of view. If they have trained for their jobs in a simulated environment, sales and service employees will have already faced situations that usually would take months of customer calls, coaching and training to master—all before they leave the training environment and without the revenue-draining process of using real customers as guinea pigs. Frontline employees are no longer asked to memorize abstract concepts and formulate their own conclusions as to how to apply brand concepts. They get experience by doing. The future holds huge opportunities for companies that use simulations to manage the message that their field force delivers at the point of customer contact, enabling them to create a unique and differentiated customer experience.

Simulations can be used to train and leverage field managers as well. Volvo Cars of North America is using online simulations to teach retail managers how to stretch their publicity budgets and boost brand awareness and sales. The web-based program offers hands-on learning for retailers, who can immediately begin using techniques to engage local reporters and editors in



how to represent the brand is to actually practice representing the brand. In a landmark study, the National Training Laboratory found that call center agents retain 90 percent of what they have learned when they're able to work with a simulated real-world experience.

The goal of all simulation-based training is to create an environment that's as close to the real work as possible. Allowing employees to see what happens when they give the customer a rushed

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The new member must identify you as the referring member in one of the following ways:

> For mailed, faxed and online enrollments: the new member must write your first and last name and chapter (or district/region member-at-large) on the application form.

> For phoned enrollments: must mention your first and last name and chapter (or district/region member-at-large).

*\*In other words, your name must be provided at the time the check or credit card number is received in order to qualify for free membership.*

#### 02

The new member must not have been an IABC member since 1 January 2004.

#### 03

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the Volvo story, as well as develop proactive programs that build the Volvo and retailer brands.

### SELECTING TOP PERFORMERS

An organization's commitment to "living the brand" starts with hiring the right people. What better way to test job hopefuls than to place them in a real customer interaction scenario? Forrest Lake Ford asks all applicants to complete an online simulation as an initial stage of the hiring process. The Minnesota-based auto dealer puts candidates into the shoes of an actual sales rep and scores their performance. The web-based tool has been scientifically proven to identify top performers before they set a foot on the showroom floor, scoring them on the seven most important traits of successful auto salespeople. With annual employee turnover somewhere north of 40 percent in the automotive retail industry, and the cost of hiring a bad candidate at around US\$30,000, the return on investment proposition for the simulation-based screening tool is straightforward. The value to the auto retailer's brand is hard to quantify but even harder to discount.

Once top performers have been selected, they need to be transformed into raving brand ambassadors. Swedish hospitality conglomerate Strömman Turism & Sjöfart AB was faced with the challenge of leveraging cross-selling opportunities and projecting a consistent brand across its diverse hospitality operations. It was a tall order, considering that thousands of seasonal employees are hired each year to work in numerous divisions, from cruise ships in the Stockholm archipelago to ski resorts in Lapland.

To orient new employees before their first day on the job, Strömman launched an online employee-training program. In simulated interactions with customers on the computer screen, new hires are challenged to practice cross promoting the company's various services, and live up to the service qualities of the Strömman brand. Requiring new employees to access web-based training from home is no problem in a country that leads the world in Internet penetration. To motivate trainees, the company awards each employee who successfully completes the training a free pass to all Strömman's recreational activities, an incentive that also fosters the employee's knowledge of other Strömman operations.

### SURVEYING THE TROOPS

Most frontline employees spend more time with customers in one morning than brand managers do in a month, or possibly a year. Why not solicit their input on how products and services are designed, priced and promoted? Surveying frontline personnel and transferring their opinions, feelings and ideas up the ranks of the organization are essential to creating an organization that lives the brand.

Sprint's PCS cellular phone division conducted an

internal audit of its brand messages that included in-depth interviews with some 40 senior executives and frontline workers to explore how the brand message could be better internalized by the entire organization and delivered at every point of customer contact. The purpose of the study was to assess which customer-engagement functions were "living and breathing the brand" and, correspondingly, to identify touch points where Sprint could improve the delivery of its brand message.

Nonintegrated information systems, for instance, made it hard for frontline employees to quickly access information they need to provide a clear interaction with the customer. Based on its survey, Sprint PCS concluded that a series of fairly uncomplicated correctives could be applied to these operational issues in the short term, and in the long term initiated a strategic program to address the deeper corporate and structural issues from which most of the operational problems derived.

Internal surveys like these are still the exception. Marketing departments frequently spend millions conducting focus groups and telephone interviews, crunching numbers and segmenting customers, yet neglect to get into the minds of the call center agents, delivery people and sales force that embody the brand in the mind of the customer.

As Avaya, Sprint, Volvo Cars, Strömman and Forrest Lake Ford will confirm, the only source of sustainable competitive advantage in the 21st century marketplace lies in strong customer relationships, which are built by employees on the frontline. They are the face of the brand, the "last three feet" of customer communication. Frontline employees and local managers need to be trained, empowered and supported to consistently delight customers and integrate communication at every brand contact point. **CW**

## RESOURCES

#### Online demos of learning simulations:

> [www.hirethewinners.com](http://www.hirethewinners.com)  
(the car sales simulator referenced in main article)

> [www.elearning.hbsp.org](http://www.elearning.hbsp.org)  
Harvard Business School publishing

#### Suggested books on simulation-based learning:

> "Designing World-Class E-Learning: How IBM, GE, Harvard Business School, and Columbia University Are Succeeding At E-Learning"  
by Roger Schank

> "Simulations and the Future of Learning: An Innovative (and Perhaps Revolutionary) Approach to e-Learning" by Clark Aldrich

> "Digital Game-Based Learning" by Marc Prensky



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