

# **Employer branding in the age of transparency**

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**(and quite a bit  
about cup cakes)**



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# Foreword

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## A little while ago...

...I conducted a rather impromptu workshop on employer branding with a group of senior HR professionals.

Now, this was a group of incredibly experienced, erudite, sophisticated HR professionals – but, what quickly occurred to me, was how little clarity they had about terms we bandy about all the time.

Purpose. Values. Vision. Mission. EVP. Behaviours. Brand promises and essences. There was uncertainty about pretty much all of them...

**“So what’s the difference between our vision and mission?”**

**“We have values – I can’t remember them but we do have them. They’re on the walls. No one ever refers to them.”**

**“We have competencies – are these the same as behaviours?”**

**“Our purpose is to make money, isn’t it?”**

It was a real wake up call. The people really responsible for creating a living employer brand – the people, ultimately, responsible for people – didn’t have the tools to do this, or the reasons for doing this (just a vague sense that they should, and that, in some way, they were failing because they didn’t know how to translate the jargon).

It was actually a great session, with a lot of honesty and a lot of laughter. And, you could see, once you talked through it, it did all make sense (of course it does, it’s all perfectly logical).

But not always simple. And that’s what spurred me to spring into action and write this little story – a 1.01 guide to everything you need to know about employer branding (but might be afraid to ask).



**Matthew Sinclair**  
Spring 2015

# What's our purpose?

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It's the biggest question of all:  
why are we here?

And, when it comes to why am I here at work, in this organisation, doing this job, it can be no easier to answer than the bigger question of why am I here on this planet?!

But every organisation exists for a reason. Though for many commercial organisations the most pragmatic response would be 'we exist to make money', dig a little deeper and you can always find something more meaningful.

It can still be simple. For example, say I own a cup cake shop. So, I exist to make money, and chose cup cakes because they're a hot commodity right now.

That's pragmatic.

But I also want to make nice cup cakes. I want my customers to love my cup cakes – so I could say I exist to make nice food that puts a smile on people's faces.

I'm not saving the world. I'm not even making particularly healthy food – but I'm giving the world a little moment of joy – and, on a bad day, when I'm having a complete existential crisis (what have I done with my life?!), I can remind myself of that very simple and positive purpose, and that can help me get through the day!




# Why it matters

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We all need meaning  
in our lives.

We all need to feel  
a part of something.

We all need to feel our work,  
in whatever small way,  
matters.



An overarching  
organisational purpose or  
philosophy that provides people  
with a sense of meaning is a great  
way to unite people, showing  
how everyone can play a role  
in fulfilling the purpose or  
living that philosophy.

# What do I hold dear?

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## Identifying a value system

So, back at my cup cake shop, I've identified that I'm not just in business to make money, but to give people a product that gives them a little joy.

But I know it's not just my cakes that give people joy. If I'm grumpy and serve them poorly, or if they have to wait forever for one, it kind of takes the joy of my cup cakes away (and the customers don't come back!).

As a result, I've recognised the need to remind myself on a daily basis of the components of customer joy I've identified from experience.

I need to keep these things front of mind at all times as they're really valuable to me because they matter to my customers. I don't want to ever forget them – and that's why I need to keep them simple too.

So, I value:

- **Great taste** (because that's ultimately the product on sale)
- **Speedy service** (because convenience is king – and no one wants to wait for a little treat)
- **Making people feel special** (because a cup cake is a treat, the experience should be too)

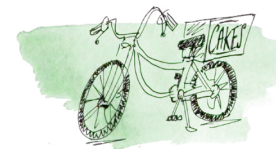
## The values in action

My value system helps me think about how my business is run, both from an operational point of view, and from a cultural point of view too.

My values mean, operationally:



To provide **great taste**, I have to use the best ingredients. That affects what I source and purchase (and my margins). I have to sell my cupcakes at the top end of the range, and prove they are worth it by telling customers about the great ingredients I use. I also need to offer plenty of choice, as great taste means different things to different people.



To provide **speedy service**, I have to make sure I have enough people in the shop to serve my customers; I also need to be prepared for busy periods and forecast how many cupcakes I need to make on any given day. I should really have a target in terms of how long I think it is acceptable for a customer to wait, based on their order.



To **make people feel special**, I need to employ certain types of people who have proven customer service skills and 'get' what I'm trying to achieve. I also need people who can read the customer, as there isn't just one way to make someone feel special.

# Just do it my way!

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As the owner and creator of my cup cake shop, I'm pretty certain I embody my company values – I created them after all!

I make great tasting cup cakes, I'm really quick, and I've made a lot of friends in my shop thanks to my ability to make people feel special.

Trouble is, I can't be on customer-facing duty the whole time – I've got paperwork to do! And I've found out from painful

experience that even when I've recruited people who tell me they really buy into my values, their interpretation of how to live them has been a long way off from my expectations.

I can't clone myself – so what am I to do?



## Defining Behaviours that live your Values

I think I need to be clearer and more prescriptive about what I expect so I've created the following behaviours to support my values:

### **Great taste means:**

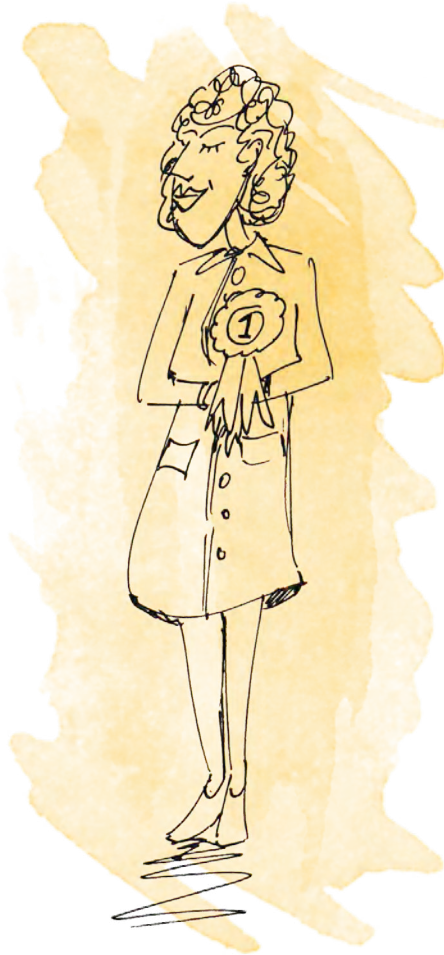
*Always sourcing the best quality ingredients  
Never serving anything less than perfection  
Offering customers a greater choice of flavours*

### **Speedy service means:**

*Managing supply and demand and making sure we have enough stock  
Making sure everyone knows how to operate the till, that PDQ machines are working, and that we have the right cover for our busiest periods; it also means the phone should be answered within 3 rings in the back office for customer orders*

### **Making people feel special means:**

*Lots of smiling  
Making time to chat if the store is quiet  
Recognising regular customers and getting to know their names and likes  
Offering free cup cakes to loyal customers/for big orders*



**It worked!**  
**I recruited a brilliant Assistant Manager.**  
**She's been amazing.**  
**She's exactly what I've been looking for.**



**So why has she left after only six months?**



# Let's make a deal

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I was so busy thinking about what I needed from someone...

... I forgot to think about the WIFM (What's in it for me?) factor for my Assistant Manager.

She lived my behaviours really well – but I didn't give her any promise of anything for doing so – neither more money, responsibility, flexibility, more support, a bigger team – nothing!

The lesson – I didn't create a **balanced deal (aka an EVP or Employee Value Proposition)**. I took her for granted, and she, well, took off.

And now I'm looking at expanding my empire, I need to get a lot clearer on what people get for living my brand and growing my business – particularly as I'm going to have to recruit a lot more people (and everyone tells me the competition out there is fierce).



# Promises, promises

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I've got to be careful here.

There's no point me promising things I can't deliver. I've got to get the basics right, I've got to talk to the head, but I can't forget to factor in the heart too.

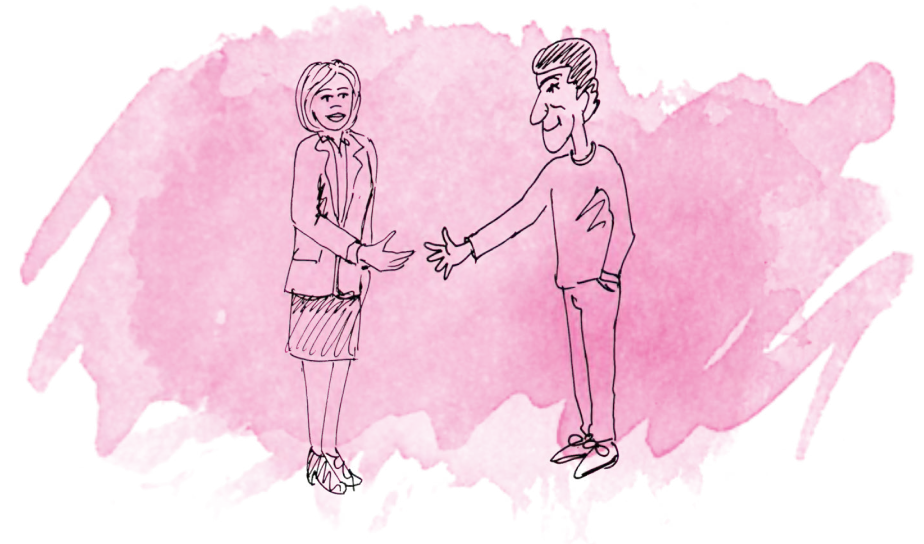
I've done a really big list of the things I can guarantee. Things like I'll pay you on time, more than the minimum wage, you'll get paid holiday, sick leave, bereavement leave.

It's sort of my people policy I suppose, my **HR policy**.

Thing is, though they're actually really big commitments, there's nothing very different about them. Almost all employers offer the same. What's different about my offer?

I want to give people a place to work that makes them feel productive, positive and part of something really rewarding.

I've got to define what kind of culture I want to create – and how we need to be with each other to achieve it.



A big part of my EVP is the way we are – not just what we offer.

I've also got to show how that culture will bring out the best in people, and what happens when you put in your best performance.

Am I a proving drawer for talent? Am I prepared to give people training and development, even if that means they might be better qualified to seek out opportunities elsewhere?

Absolutely. I've always believed good things go around, that's a fundamental part of my philosophy. It's good karma. I want my business to play to that too, so I guess that's the founding principle of the **collective philosophy** I want my business – my brand – to represent.

Something people working here can really buy into and believe in.

# Looking ahead

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## Visions and Missions

The Cup Cake shop has done so well I feel confident I can grow the business. I think there are big possibilities for the business, and that's what a VISION is – it's the big picture, the potential, the ultimate plan.

My Vision is to be the country's leading independent cup cake chain – I'd like a Cup Cake shop in every town, with each feeling as unique, customer-focused and intimate as my first little shop.

So how is this any different from the Mission – is it not the same thing?

Your VISION is about your organisational aspirations; it's about the possibilities for the business. This can be very tangible or

relatively abstract – e.g. our VISION is to be the country's favourite cup cake store.

Your MISSION should be a far more tangible plan rooted in what you are going to do to continue to fulfil your purpose or achieve your vision – e.g. our Mission is to have 20 stores across the country by 2020.

The Mission should help define the how – how are we going to grow this business, in this timeframe, and maintain the same quality standards?

The Vision inspires; the Mission informs.



## Job done then?

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### So, I've got real clarity around my business

I know our purpose, our values, the behaviours I need to recruit to; I've created an EVP so I now know the promise I can offer to people I want to join me; I can also inspire them with our vision – and give them clear direction around the mission we are on to support how we get there.

I have a consumer brand.  
I have an employer brand.  
They clearly relate to, and support, each other.  
And business is booming.

Now I can just get on with doing the work, can't I?



# Adaptation is the key to survival

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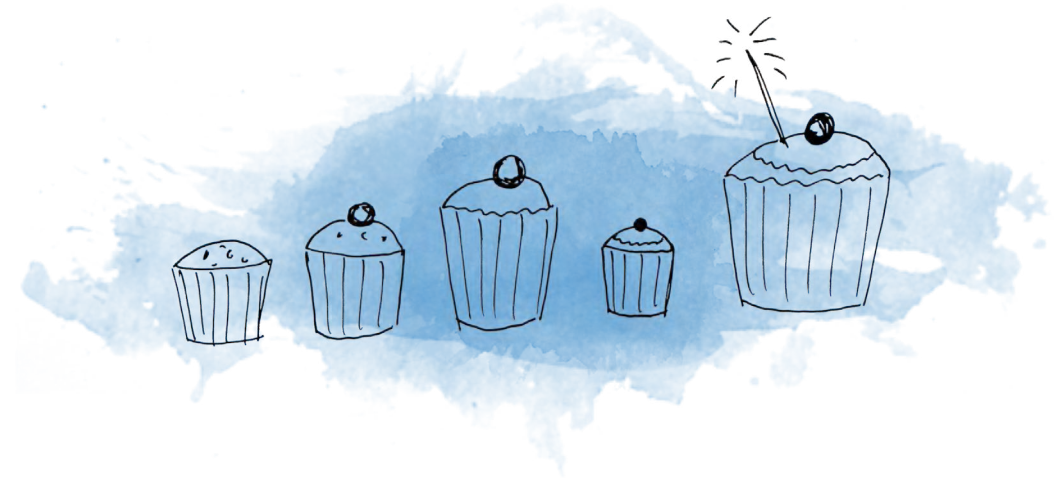
Consumer brands are more likely to incrementally evolve than radically change – and, in fact, a total rebrand is usually prefaced by a major crisis such as reputation damage or financial loss.

Employer brands, however, have to be a lot more elastic.

For starters, most organisations need lots of different types of people to operate – and, if you're the financial director of the

Cup Cake Company, a love of cup cakes needn't be a prerequisite, so they need to be flexible enough to be nuanced to very different audiences (the reason an organisation might create related but distinct EVPs for different functional areas or even roles).

But there's another very good reason an employer brand shouldn't be set in stone – things change.



When an employer brand is created – through insight, definition and activation – it captures a moment in time (and, if done well, also factors in the heritage of the business and captures its forward direction of travel).

What it doesn't do, however, is factor in the fact that, at some point in the future, the business might need to attract very

different people to the business – and it might need to teach existing employees to behave differently – or even to value different things.

To illustrate this, let's go back to our Cup Cake Company – now a nationwide Cup Cake Empire...

# Cup cakes in crisis!

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Over the last couple of years my cup cake company has been doing really well. I've been recruiting people with the right values and behaviours, this has grown the business and I've grown from one store to twenty nationwide.

People recognise our consumer brand, and we've been getting lots of great media attention.

But my venture into an online cup cake store hasn't been so successful.

I've had really bad staff turnover (and have had some under-performing staff in this area), the technology has constantly hiccupped and the supply chain hasn't been agile enough to meet demand – resulting in negative customer feedback.

Right now, I need some real digital big hitters who can get us back on track in this space – and grow what I can see is a really viable commercial opportunity for us.



# Working with a different set of cookie cutters

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Up until now, the people I've recruited have all been real 'people' people...

... and that's been great and just what I need out on the shop floor.

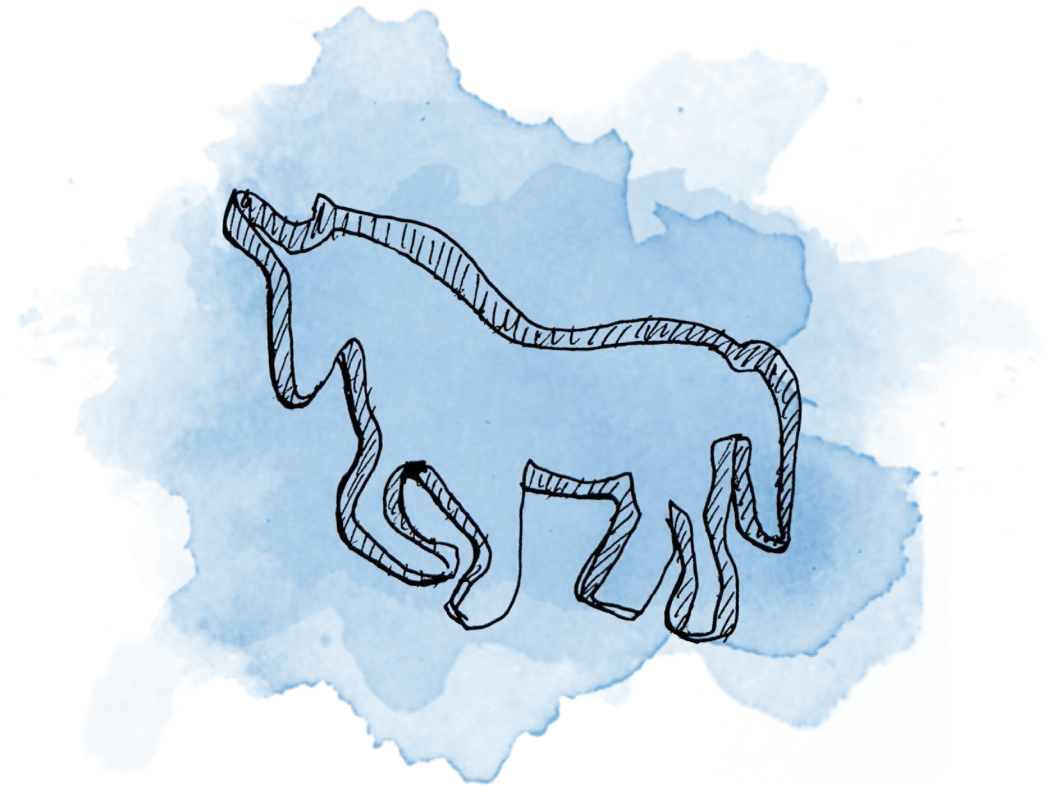
But I think I made a mistake in hiring digital people with the same value system – they just haven't been commercial or dynamic enough.

I need an injection of a different kind of person, with possibly a different value system and DNA.

The thing is though, what impact will this have on our culture?

I don't want to lose what we've built, and once I've got this side of the operation up and running, I'll need the same people-focused people back to run it.

How am I going to bridge these gaps without damaging my brand? It all feels like a leap into the unknown and I worry I could find myself at the point of no return and will become a business unrecognisable from the one I created...



# Afterword

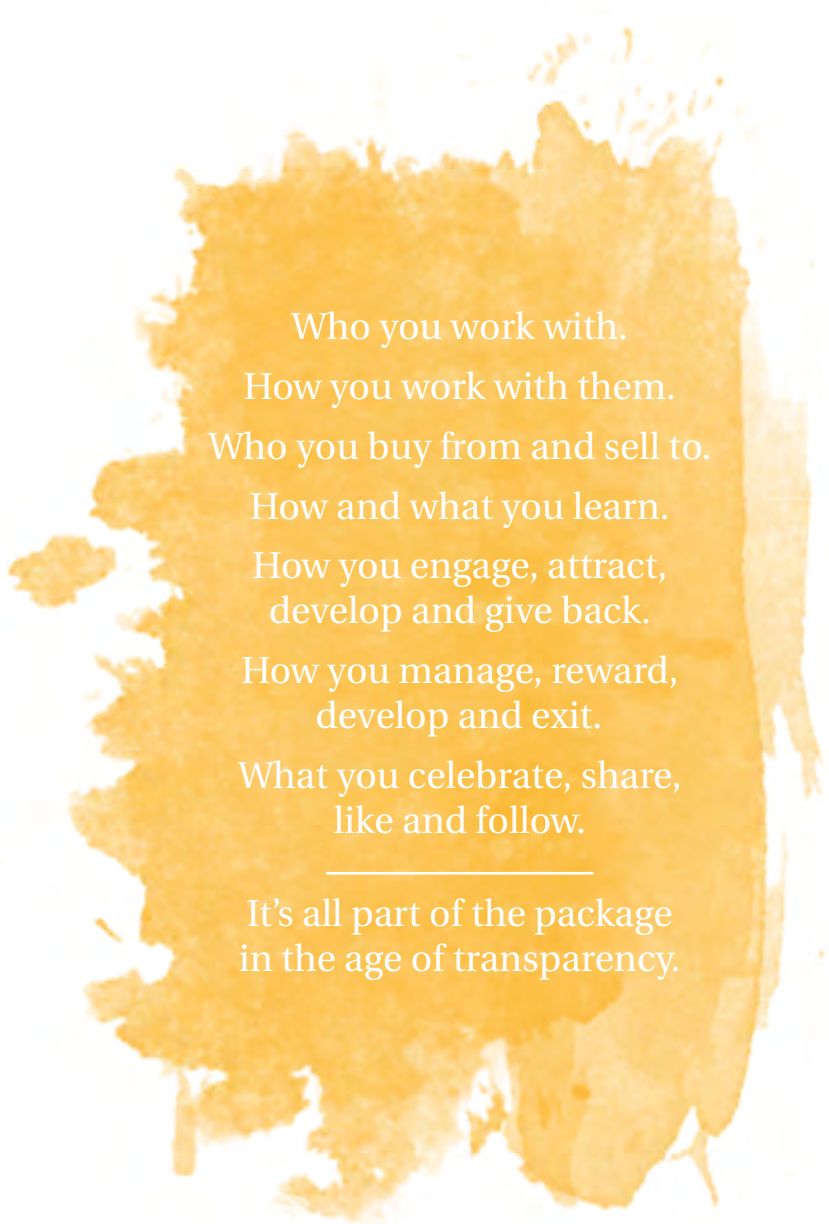
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A lot of organisations are finding themselves in the same place as our fictional cup cake creators. Even if they've established a strong narrative about what it's like to work there, that seems to be changing every day.

The clue might be in the title of this section.

**We have to move the employer brand on into a space *after words*.**

We need to find the right words in the first place, for sure, but they can't just exist on a page in the hands of HR or marketing. They need to inform every living thing about the organisation – its organisational design, operational requirements and cultural alignments.



Who you work with.  
How you work with them.  
Who you buy from and sell to.  
How and what you learn.  
How you engage, attract, develop and give back.  
How you manage, reward, develop and exit.  
What you celebrate, share, like and follow.

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It's all part of the package in the age of transparency.



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