



Managing Name Change

Change Is Stressful

Whether your company has been in business for three months, three years, or three decades, the process of changing the corporate name (or any other major brand identity element) is unsettling. Given how much energy, creativity, and personal sacrifice is required to help a business thrive, people can, understandably, become emotionally attached to the identities of their companies. If you have dedicated a significant portion of your life building a company called ABC, it is often difficult to imagine that you can be happy and successful working for the same company called XYZ. Even when you completely support the strategic business purpose being addressed by a corporate name change and are excited by the opportunities the change represents, it can be a stressful and emotionally charged time for you and your fellow employees.

Change can be stressful. It requires action and reorganization. Any time you make a major life change, you need to rearrange how you operate, how you respond, and in some circumstances, even how you identify who you are. We've all had experience with major changes – getting married, getting divorced, having or adopting a baby, buying a home, moving to a new city, taking a new job, or changing career directions. Changes like that, no matter how positive, involve a concerted effort on our part to adapt to the new identity context, situation, or environment. And making this effort is often as stressful as it is constructive.

This Is a Time for Leadership

When you undertake the adoption of a new corporate name, it's a good idea to anticipate how unsettling the change may be, and not let the associated stress throw you off course. This is a time for leadership, for marshalling the resources required to adjust to the re-identification of your company, and to make the most of the opportunities presented by the name change.

By taking a proactive approach to the management of change, you can convert anxious skeptics in your organization into supportive and enthusiastic advocates for the new corporate name. Involve the entire management team in the naming process, and help them understand how important their response to the name change will be to rank and file employee acceptance of the new name.

Champion the Message

It's imperative to champion the message. Take the time to articulate exactly what the new name is meant to accomplish for your organization. Two or three lines are sufficient. Simply state what the strategic goals of the naming program were, how the name that's been selected will help the company accomplish those strategic goals, and what opportunities the new name presents for creating a distinctive and compelling brand. Then become the new name's corporate evangelist.

Take every opportunity to promote the new name's message personally, and enlist every member of the organization to support the new name. Provide sound bites for employees so they can clearly, consistently, and meaningfully answer the question, "Why did you name it that?"



This is, of course, especially important for CEOs and other executives who will be speaking with the press. Rehearse their responses until the message is internalized and can be delivered with confidence and enthusiasm.

But don't forget the receptionists. They are your corporate frontline, and the people most frequently asked why a name has been adopted or changed. Provide them with a simple script and take the time to educate them about the strategic goals of the name development program. Their educated and confident answers will generate understanding and promote name acceptance and goodwill.

A Public Relations Opportunity

Involve your PR agency early on in the name development process so they have a deep understanding of the branding, marketing, positioning, and competitive issues that informed the selection of your new name.

No matter what prompted the name change – whether it was a trademark dispute, a change in strategic focus – the need to expand the company's positioning, or the introduction of new services and capabilities, remember that from a public relations perspective, the introduction of a new name is always an opportunity.

New names attract attention, so celebrate your moment in the spotlight, and seize the opportunity to broadcast the company's vision, achievements, changes, or redirection. The announcement of a new name is an excellent time to reopen discussions with industry press and analysts, introduce the company to new customers and partners, and to initiate a new dialogue with old friends.

Communicate the Reason for Change

It's a good idea to introduce the new name to your employees immediately before the public announcement. Informing your employees first is an important courtesy, because they have a vested interest in the name change and what it represents.

Typically, the further removed the employee is from the name change decision process, the less information he or she has had about why the change is taking place, and what the implications of the change are for their situation. This lack of information often creates anxiety, causing employees to worry unnecessarily about the future of the company.

Respect your employees' concerns, and take the time to communicate both the reasons for the name change and the opportunities the change creates. Prepare a written statement containing information consistent with the press releases, and distribute it throughout the organization. Assume all employees will want to be informed, no matter what their position in the organization.

Generate enthusiasm for the change. Let your employees know that this change represents a move in a new and positive direction. Make the introduction of the new name to employees an event to be celebrated. Have the CEO make a speech that outlines why the change was made, and what kind of opportunities the new name creates. Make the change real and tangible by distributing T-shirts, caps, mugs, or other items displaying the new name. But remember to keep the level of celebration in keeping with the circumstances of the company. If the company is thriving, a big bash might be appropriate, but if budgets have been squeezed across the board, a modest event would be more suitable.



Honor the Past, Look to the Future

Sometimes, despite all rational arguments for the change and even their willing participation in and contribution to the name development process, management will still have a hard time letting go of the old name and all that it represents. If you sense deep-rooted resistance at any stage of the process, it is wise to address it honestly before it derails the name change program.

One method that has proven successful in overcoming any reluctance to embrace the new is to honor the past. In a public forum, openly acknowledge the heritage and significance of the old name and emphasize how well it has served the company. Then discuss how the corporate situation has changed and how important it is to change the name to respond to the new demands of the times. When you honor the past in this way, more often than not, people will feel that their attachment to the old name has been acknowledged and validated. Consequently they will be more readily able to appreciate and support the new name, and enthusiastic about working hard to make it succeed.

Create Change-Makers

Educate your employees about the importance of the name change, encourage them to embrace the new identity, then actively enlist their support in its speedy implementation. Motivate every employee to be an agent for change by helping them to understand how the best interests of the company, and consequently, their own best interest, will be served by the successful acceptance of the new name.

Give your employees all the information and tools they need to be change-makers. Help them navigate successfully through the change. Respect their concerns and doubts. Honor their attachments to what came before. Enlist their assistance to promote the new. Do all that, and you will be amazed at what effective champions of the new name they will become. And by how smooth the company's transition to the new name will be.

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