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# **How Brand Coherence Wins in Hyper- Competitive and Distracted Markets**

**From Logo to Operating System**

By David Kessler

# Why leading companies are using brand experience to align strategy, experience, and culture.

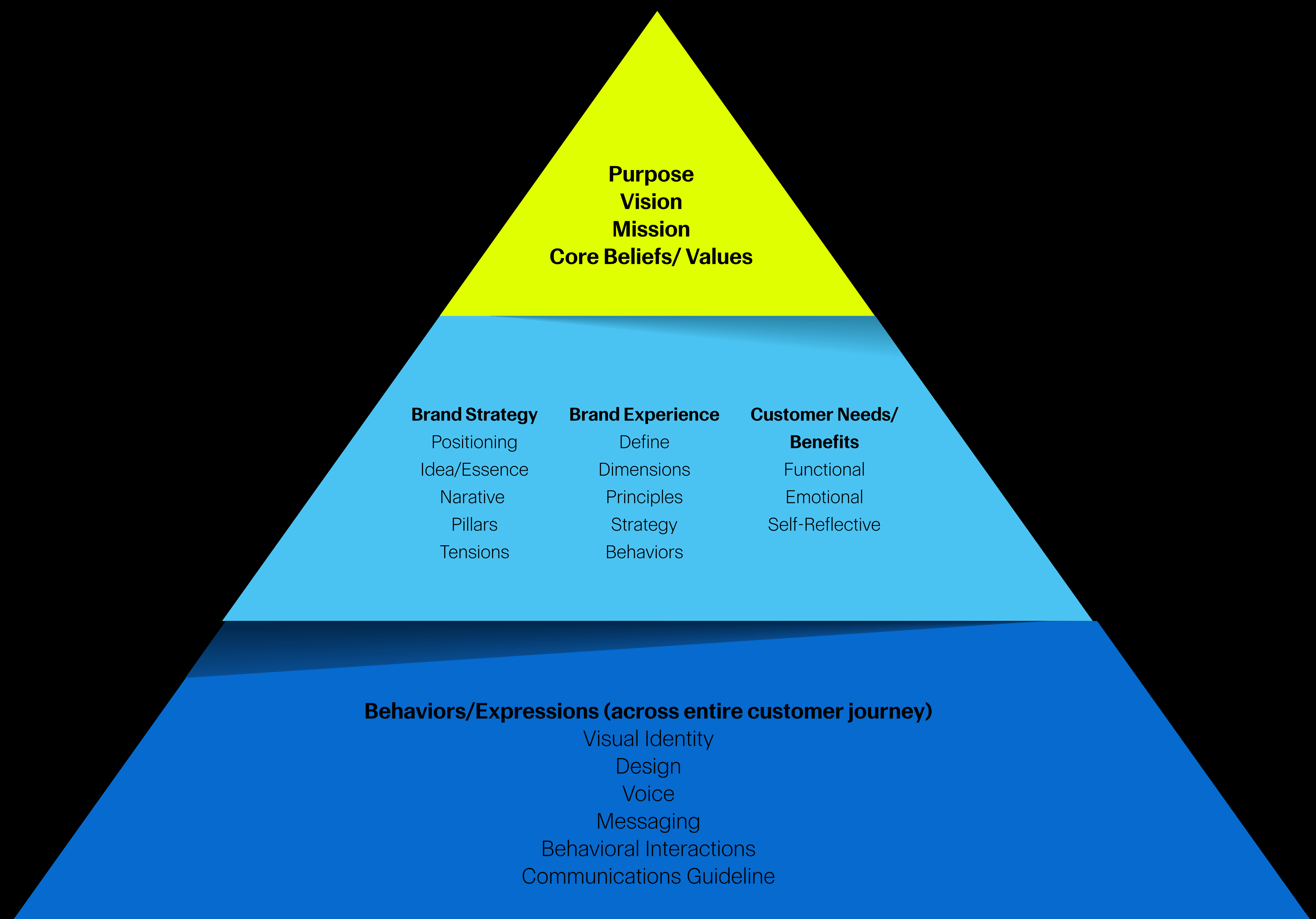
For decades, most organizations treated brand as surface area; logos, messaging, advertising campaigns, and visual identity layered onto the business. Marketing owned the brand. Operations ran the company. Product teams built the offerings. Sales sold the offerings. Customer service managed the experience.

Brand was something organizations simply used to guide their marketing and communications. Today, that model is thankfully being rethought as the tools and mediums of our trade have changed. Customers have the power to experience brands through a complex network of interactions: products, digital interfaces, customer service conversations, chatbots, AI service interactions, retail environments, logistics, and employee interactions. Every one of these reinforces or contradicts what a brand stands for.

In this environment, brand is no longer defined primarily by messaging. But rather, experience. And if experience defines the brand, the only way to deliver a coherent brand across hundreds, or even thousands, of interactions is to treat the brand not as a marketing output but as the company's operating system.

Brand, a living, breathing entity, is the framework that organizes how the company behaves, makes decisions, designs experiences, and delivers value. In other words, the filter through which everything it does is evaluated. In short, a company's brand becomes a set of principles that is embraced by the C-Suite.

## Starfish Brand Experience Framework™



Despite the abundance of tools at their disposal, many organizations still treat brand primarily as a communications discipline. Yet research continues to show that brand perception is shaped far more by experience than by messaging. McKinsey notes that organizations must ensure the brand promise is delivered consistently at every customer touchpoint—both online and offline.

At the same time, experience itself has become one of the most powerful drivers of growth. Research on experience-led growth found that companies leading in customer experience achieved more than twice the revenue growth of laggards between 2016 and 2021.

Harvard Business School similarly defines customer experience as the sum of every interaction a customer has with a brand, from marketing and product design to service and support.

The implication is clear: a brand cannot be managed solely through communications. It must be embedded into how the organization actually operates.

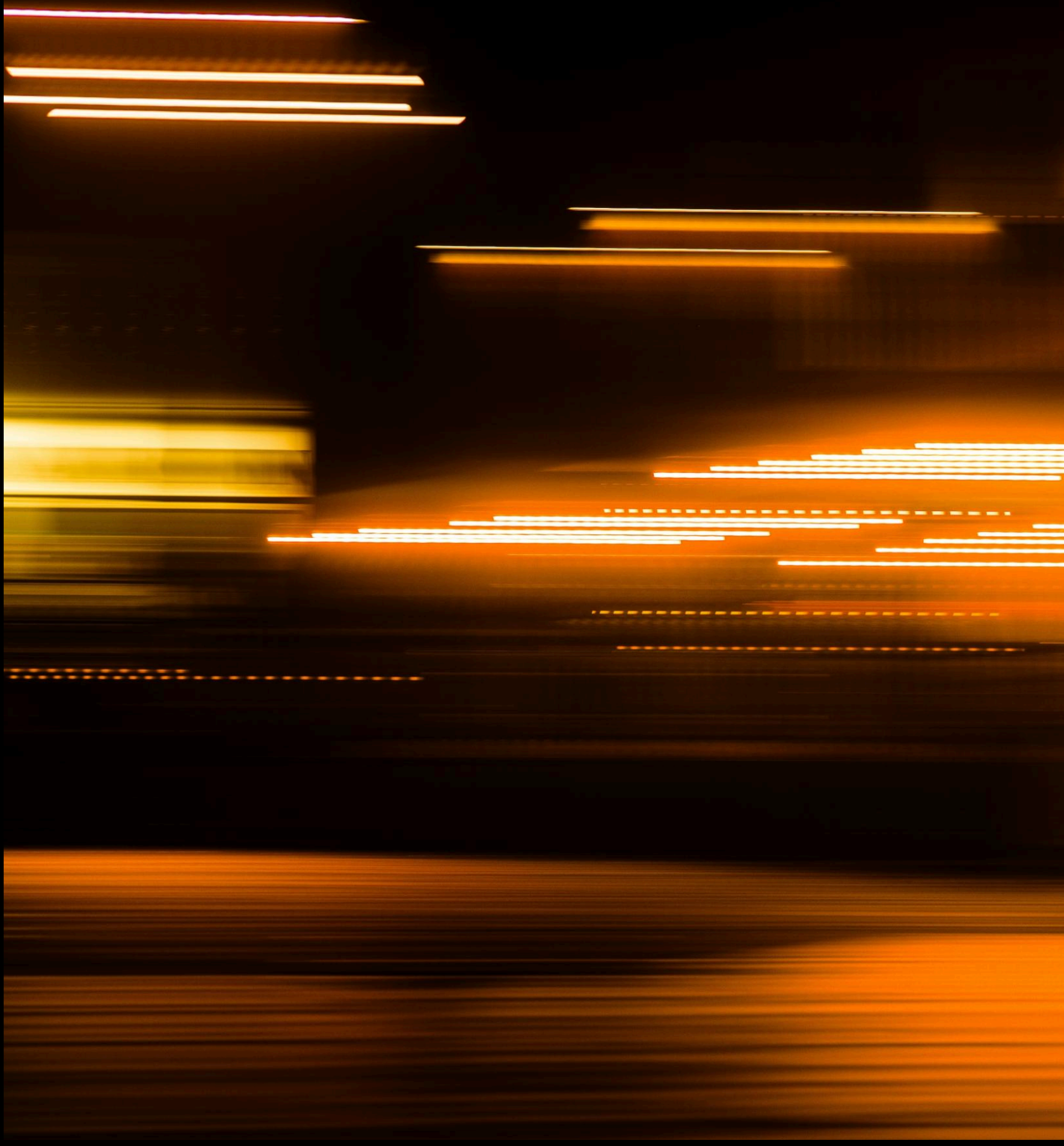
Even with powerful, expert points of view, many companies still struggle to align brand with the broader business. Harvard Business Review also notes that organizations frequently treat marketing and brand as peripheral functions rather than integrating them into core business strategy. This disconnect is one of the primary reasons brands often feel fragmented.

# Why Brand Must Extend Beyond Marketing

## Brand as the Organization's Operating System

To address this challenge and solve it once and for all, companies must rethink what brand actually is.

Brand should be viewed as the system that organizes the business, not as a story layered onto the business. But, an operating system that coordinates the components of a complex machine. It establishes rules, priorities, and decision logic so that many independent parts can function as a coherent whole.



**When brand functions as an operating system, it provides a shared framework that guides decisions across:**

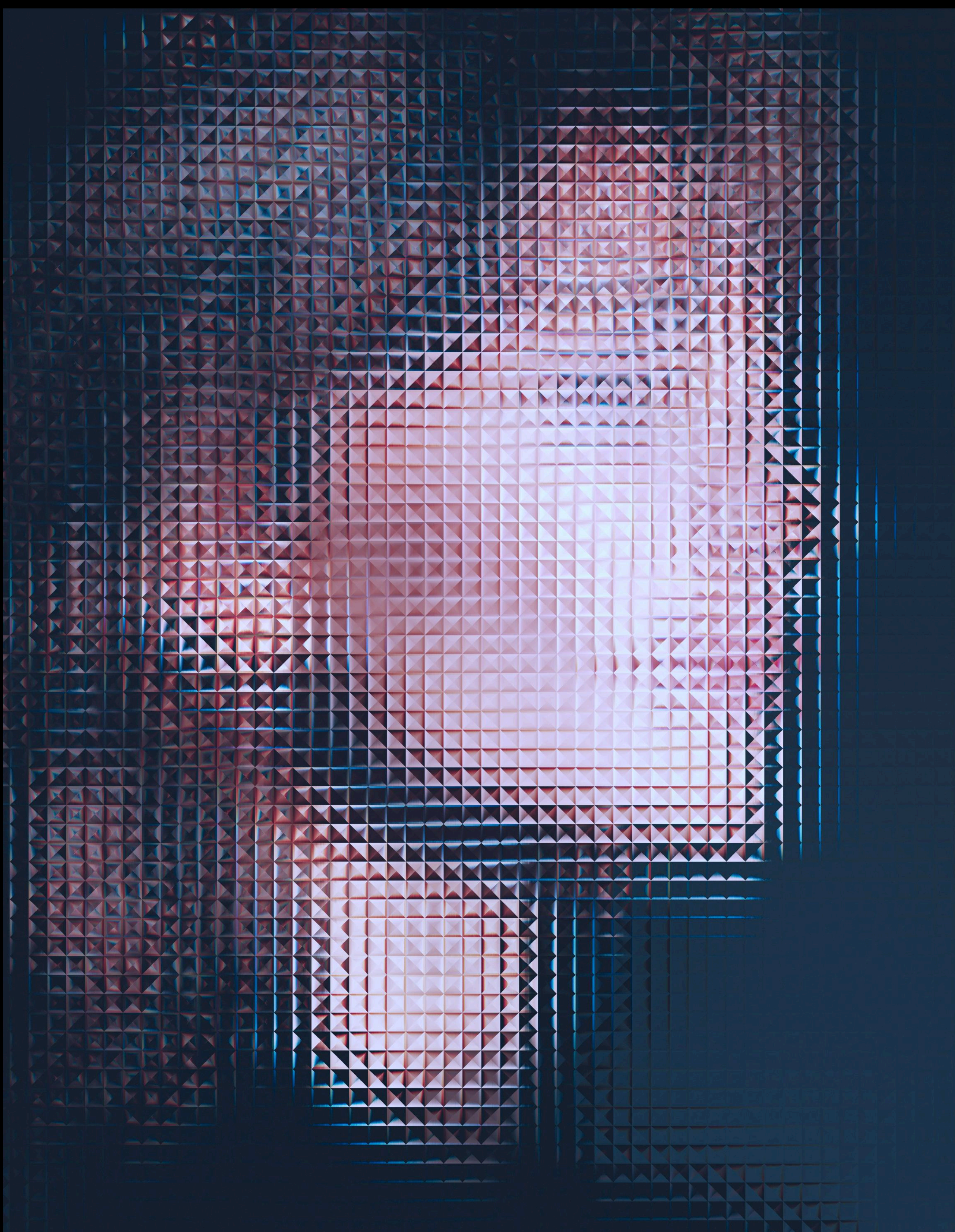
- strategy
- product development
- marketing
- sales
- communications (internal & external)
- experience design
- customer service
- employee experience (culture and talent)



Deloitte has emphasized that organizations increasingly need integrated operating models that connect brand, experience, and organizational behavior in order to deliver consistent customer value.

Similarly, PwC's Global Consumer Insights research shows that customers increasingly expect consistent brand experiences across channels, making operational alignment essential.

When brand functions as organizational infrastructure rather than marketing output, alignment becomes dramatically easier.





# The Power of a Clear Brand Idea

The companies that demonstrate this principle most clearly share one common characteristic: a powerful organizing idea that shapes decisions across the entire organization.

Apple is one of the most famous examples. Everything Apple creates, hardware and software, packaging, retail environments, is grounded in a philosophy of creativity enabled through simplicity and elegant design.

That philosophy influences product engineering, interface design, retail store architecture, and even how employees present devices in-store. The result is extraordinary coherence. The experience always feels unmistakably Apple.

REI provides another powerful example. REI's brand centers on the belief that a life outdoors is a life well lived. This idea influences not only messaging but also real operational decisions. In 2015, the company famously closed its stores on the busiest shopping day of the year, Black Friday, encouraging, if not demanding, employees and customers to spend the day outside. The initiative, called #OptOutside, sacrificed short-term sales in order to reinforce the brand's values.

Few marketing campaigns could communicate brand purpose more authentically. Target offers another illustration of brand as an operating system. For decades, the company has differentiated itself through the democratization of design, bringing well-designed products to everyday consumers at accessible prices. This principle shapes everything from designer collaborations to private-label product development and store design.

**In each case, brand is not simply expressed through communications. It guides how the business operates.**

## Employees Are the Operating System's Users

If brand functions as an operating system, employees are its primary users. That means brand cannot live only in the marketing department.

It must live in employees' minds and behaviors across the organization, including those who never interact directly with customers.

A product designer expresses the brand through every design decision. A supply chain leader reinforces or undermines the brand through how efficiently products reach customers.

A professional services client manager embodies the brand based on how they guide clients through complex challenges. Every decision shapes the experience customers ultimately perceive.



Yet many organizations struggle to align employees around brand principles. [Harvard Business Review Analytic Services](#) found that while 73% of organizations say improving customer experience is a top strategic priority, most still struggle to coordinate CX across departments.

Similarly, [Gartner](#) shows that companies increasingly view customer experience as a primary driver of brand loyalty, yet many lack the operational alignment required to deliver consistent experiences.

Brand as operating system helps solve this challenge by providing a shared framework that guides decision-making across teams.

# Brand as the Organizational Decision Filter

**When brand functions as an operating system, it becomes the filter through which decisions pass.**

Instead of asking whether an initiative supports the marketing message, organizations assess decisions against a simple, durable set of questions that should anchor day-to-day choices in a single, coherent framework. This practical filter coordinates across strategy, product and service design, customer experience, culture and talent, and external communications. When these dimensions align, organizations become dramatically more coherent.

What is the Organizational Decision Filter? When brand operates as an OS, it is a governance mechanism grounded in the brand's core idea and promises. The guiding questions are simple, enduring, and universally applicable across functions:

- Does this reinforce what our brand stands for?
- Does this experience feel unmistakably like us?
- Does this decision strengthen or dilute our promise to customers?

These questions anchor day-to-day choices in a single framework, enabling cross-functional alignment and reducing fragmentation.

**The Five Decision Domains: When the OS filter is aligned across core domains, coherence emerges at scale:**

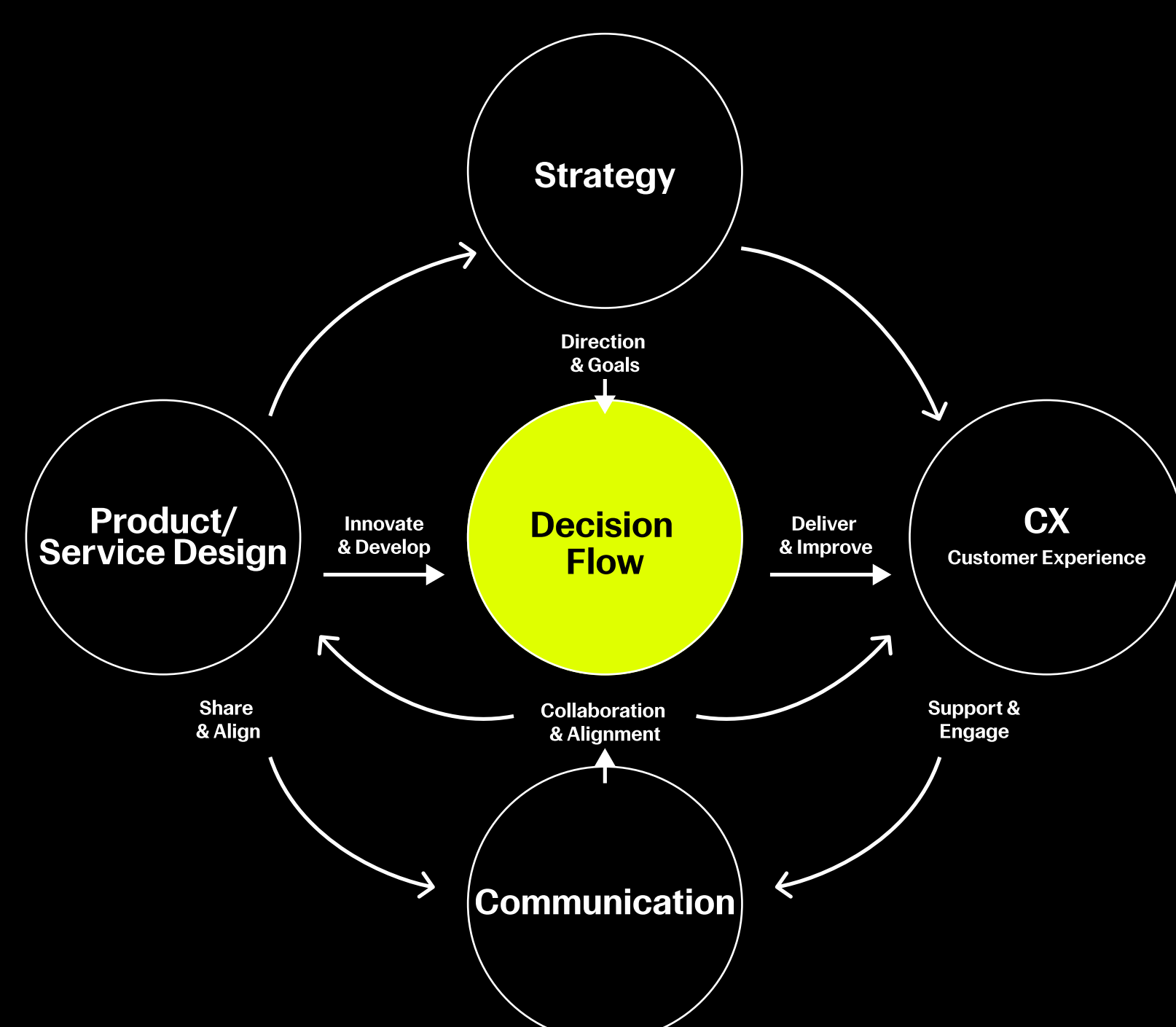
- **Strategy:** Which markets to enter and how to differentiate.
- **Product and Service Design:** How offerings behave and what experiences they deliver.
- **Customer Experience:** How interactions feel across the entire journey.
- **Culture and Talent:** How employees behave and what the organization rewards.
- **Communications:** How the brand's story is expressed internally and externally.

When these dimensions are aligned, the organization becomes dramatically more coherent. Coherence builds trust, simplifies decision-making, and ensures that every action, product, and interaction reinforces the same organizing idea.



# Practical Implementation Checklist

1. Define the core brand idea with cross-functional buy-in
  - a. Purpose: Seal the OS concept with a unifying brand idea and an accountable governance model.
  - b. Actions: Create a one-sentence OS definition; secure C-suite endorsement; form a cross-functional brand council (Marketing, Strategy, Product, CX, Culture/Talent); publish a living charter tying OS principles to outcomes.
  - c. Why it matters: Establishes legitimacy and ongoing accountability.
2. Map brand principles to operating decisions in each function
  - a. Purpose: Turn brand experience principles into concrete decision rules.
  - b. Actions: Identify 4-6 core principles; define explicit decision rules/gates for each function; create quick-reference playbooks.
  - c. Why it matters: Moves brand from theory to actionable behavior.
3. Create a unified brand architecture across channels
  - a. Purpose: Prevent fragmentation as the organization scales.
  - b. Actions: Develop a consolidated brand taxonomy/architecture map; establish channel guardrails; audit for fragmentation and remediation.
  - c. Why it matters: Enables coherence at scale.
4. Develop an end-to-end customer journey map (product, service, & employee touch points)
  - a. Purpose: A single, coherent journey from first touch to reinforcement by employees.
  - b. Actions: Map the full journey; align stages with OS principles; assign owners for moments of truth.
  - c. Why it matters: Ensures the OS influences the entire experience, not just marketing moments.
5. Internal training and incentives for brand-aligned behaviors
  - a. Purpose: Embed OS thinking into daily work.
  - b. Actions: Develop onboarding and ongoing training programs that tie brand-aligned metrics to performance reviews.
  - c. Why it matters: Drives organization-wide adoption.
6. Develop formal "Brand as OS" governance forum with C-suite sponsorship
  - a. Purpose: Ensures ongoing executive sponsorship and cross-functional coordination.
  - b. Actions: Schedule regular governance meetings; appoint an OS sponsor; establish escalation paths for cross-department issues.
  - c. Why it matters: Sustains momentum and cross-functional alignment.
7. Link brand metrics to customer outcomes
  - a. Purpose: A concise dashboard ties OS to customer value.
  - b. Actions: Define 3-5 KPIs (perception, trust, loyalty, cross-channel consistency); set cadence; integrate with existing dashboards; include leading indicators (alignment scores, gate completions).
  - c. Why it matters: Demonstrates progress and informs OS refinements.
8. Create a visual diagram of Brand as OS (decision flow)
  - a. Purpose: A tangible reference for teams and leadership.
  - b. Actions: Create a schematic that illustrates decision flow and feedback loops and outcome objectives.
  - c. Why it matters: Supports training, communication, and rapid alignment.



## 9. Pilot & enterprise rollout

- a. Purpose: Validate OS concepts in a controlled setting before broader adoption.
- b. Actions: Select a critical business unit; define success criteria; capture learnings; iterate; scale progressively.
- c. Why it matters: Reduces risk and demonstrates tangible benefits before enterprise-wide deployment.

# The Competitive Advantage of Coherence

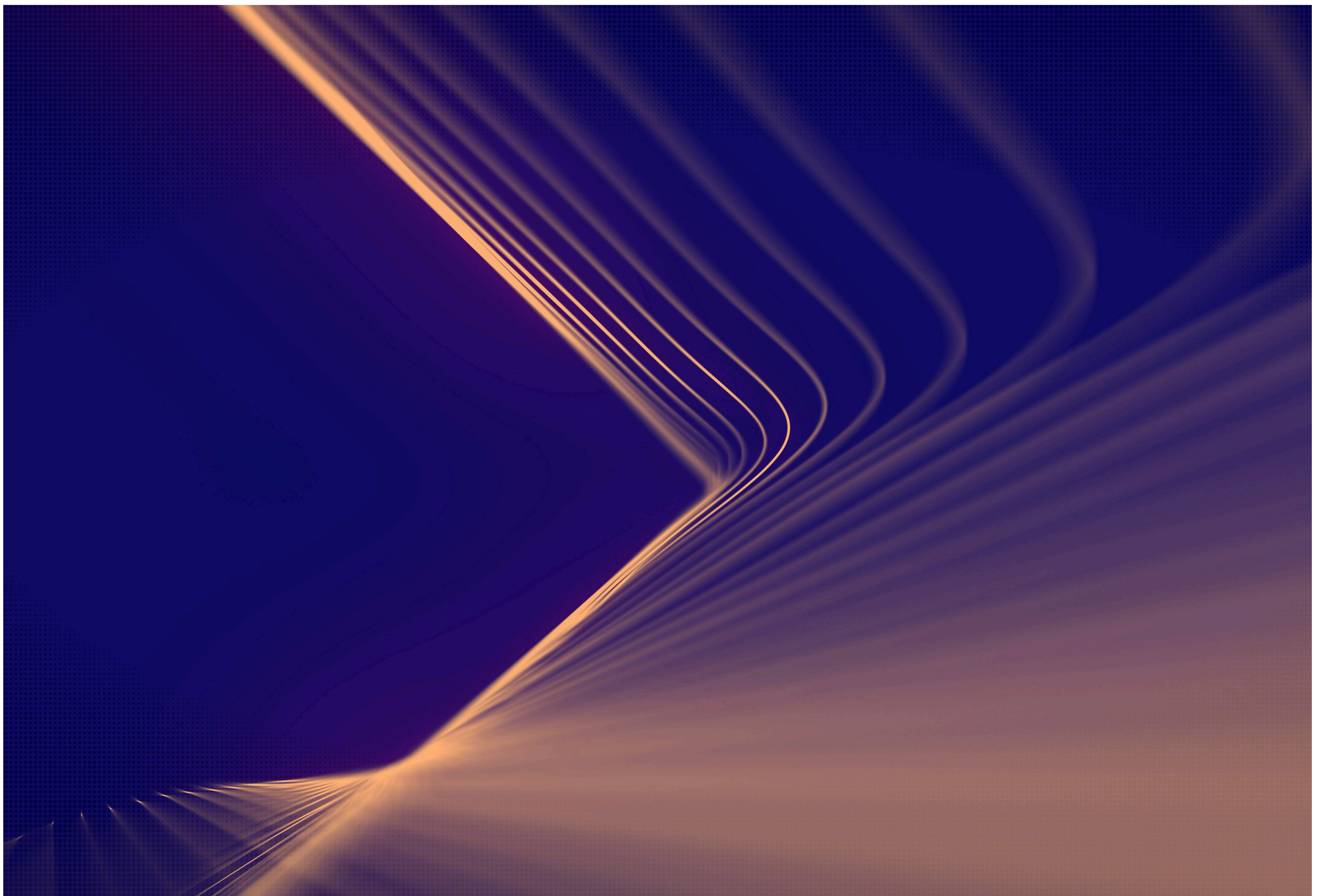
Companies that operationalize brand achieve something competitors struggle to replicate: coherence. Their strategy, products, culture, and experiences reinforce one another. **This coherence builds trust. In an environment defined by information overload and endless choice, trust has become one of the most valuable assets a brand can possess.**

Boston Consulting Group has highlighted that strong brands function as signals of reliability and meaning, helping customers navigate complexity and make decisions with greater confidence.

Trust compounds over time, driving loyalty, advocacy, and pricing power. But that trust can only emerge when the experience consistently reflects the brand's core idea. When all these elements emerge from a single organizing idea, people perceive a brand as coherent, even when its expressions vary.

In fact, the most sophisticated brands often exhibit variation without fragmentation. Their identity adapts across contexts while still feeling unmistakably authentic. That is coherence. And it is not achieved solely through guidelines. It is achieved through architecture, discipline, and complete organizational buy-in.

No amount of marketing can compensate for a fragmented experience.



# The Future of Brand Leadership

As organizations become more digital, distributed, and experience-driven, the role of brand will continue to expand. The companies that succeed will not treat brand as a marketing asset but as an organizational infrastructure.

Brand will guide how the company thinks, designs, acts, and serves. It will inform strategy, shape culture, and align experiences across every touchpoint.

Because ultimately:

The brand is not the campaign.

The brand is not the logo.

The brand is not the message

**The brand is the system that makes every experience make sense.**

# STAR FISH

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Starfish is a NYC-based branding and creative communications agency that ignites powerful and sustainable customer connections through the unique discipline of brand experience.

