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Corporate brands are shaped across organizational boundaries. Brand, communications, marketing, HR, and other functions all contribute to how an organization is perceived and experienced. But how can these different perspectives and responsibilities be brought together? Global Communications Manager Tina Kardum Funnemark (Inter IKEA Group), Chief Communications Officer Sujit Patil (Godrej Industries Group), and Vice President Global Brand Stefan Schneider (E.ON) share how they approach corporate brand leadership, collaborate across functions, and connect branding and communications within their organizations.

WHERE CORPORATE BRAND MEETS CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

A corporate brand is shaped by the company's vision, business idea, culture, and values, as well as by the company's actions, products, people, and relationships. It answers several fundamental questions: Why do we exist? What do we stand for? What do we want to be known for? And, importantly, does the experience of our employees, customers, and other stakeholders bear this out?

"I think it's crucial that the corporate brand doesn't become a bubble of its own, disconnected from the business," Schneider notes. He heads brand management at E.ON, one of Europe's largest energy companies. "It needs to be closely linked to the company's strategy and its internal culture." At its strongest, the corporate brand brings together purpose, strategy, culture, reputation, and experience, while fostering trust and engagement, Kardum Funnemark and Patil add.

For Patil, the corporate brand also performs another important role: it creates coherence. He leads communications at Godrej Industries Group, a leading Indian conglomerate operating across very different businesses, from consumer products and real estate to agriculture, financial services, and chemicals. Patil underscores that the corporate brand must make clear what connects these businesses without making them all look or sound identical. In this context, the value of the corporate brand is not simply consistency. It helps create shared direction, strengthens reputation across the portfolio, enables businesses to draw on one another's equity, and gives employees a clearer sense of what the organization collectively stands for.

"The corporate brand is the sum of what we say, what we do, and how people experience us."
Kardum Funnemark

"Corporate brand management is a shared responsibility. Brand and marketing, corporate communication, public affairs, people and culture, sustainability, and the different business units all contribute," describes Kardum Funnemark. With more than 14 years at IKEA, she has seen how different functions contribute to the brand. As Global Communications Manager of the Inter IKEA Group, she is now part of the team shaping the brand across the global IKEA business. Inter IKEA Systems B.V., part of Inter IKEA Group, is the owner of the IKEA Concept and the worldwide IKEA franchisor. Inter IKEA Group brings together the development of the IKEA Concept, product range, supply and certain production activities. Over the years, the corporate brand has moved from being seen mainly as a reputation topic to becoming an important business and growth topic. "People expect greater transparency, consistency, and proof from companies," Kardum Funnemark notes. "At the same time, competition has increased and people have more choices. A clear corporate brand helps build trust, emotional connection, and relevance, making it easier for stakeholders to understand what IKEA stands for and why it matters."



"A strong corporate brand builds trust and engagement and makes it easier for people to choose IKEA. One example is how we connect low price with meaning with Democratic Design, bringing together form, function, quality and sustainability at a low price, supported by proof from across the IKEA value chain. This strengthens understanding of both the IKEA offer and the company behind it."
Tina Kardum Funnemark, Global Communications Manager, Inter IKEA Group

INTER IKEA GROUP is the company behind the IKEA concept and the global IKEA franchise system. Headquartered in the Netherlands, the group brings together the development of the IKEA product range, sourcing and supply, manufacturing, and franchise operations. It works with 13 franchisee groups worldwide to develop the IKEA offer and maintain a shared strategic direction across the business.

The corporate brand in a changing environment

Patil explains that, historically, organizations could afford to have a relatively distant corporate brand while their individual products and businesses did most of the talking. That distinction is becoming much harder to maintain. Employees want to understand the organization behind the job. Investors increasingly look at leadership, governance, culture, and reputation alongside financial performance. Customers can move instantly between a product experience, a corporate website, a leader's social media post, and an employee review. In that environment, the corporate brand becomes much more visible, whether or not the company actively manages it. Both E.ON and Godrej Industries Group have thus revisited their approaches to corporate brand management in response to the changing demands.

Schneider describes how research revealed a gap between how E.ON saw itself and how the public perceived the company: many people still associated the brand with energy production, although the business had shifted toward energy networks, sales, and customer solutions. Meanwhile, the changing energy landscape and the growing complexity of customer decisions made trust in the brand more important than ever. For many years, the brand had been part of the sales function, but in the run-up to a repositioning, the decision was made to move it to the CEO's area, where it now sits within communications. "I think it was an important step in enabling us to use the brand more broadly as a corporate asset. This gives us a group-wide perspective on brand strategy, while marketing remains responsible for activating the brand in the market." Schneider adds, "The key is to make sure these two perspectives work hand in hand.

Although brand and marketing sit in different parts of the organization, we work very closely together, with regular meetings and joint formats involving both brand and marketing leaders. My role is more focused on strategy and governance, while marketing focuses on commercial activation. We also maintain close contact between my team and the operational marketing units to ensure that we work toward the same goals rather than creating silos."

"Being brave doesn't mean acting recklessly. It means keeping the bigger picture in mind while being willing to take risks when the moment calls for it." Schneider

In a similar vein, Patil explains that corporate brand management at Godrej Industries Group is centrally coordinated by corporate brand and communications. "We are a 129-year-old organization with businesses at very different stages of growth, operating in categories that did not all exist when the Godrej brand was created. We therefore needed the corporate brand to do more than signify heritage or endorsement. It had to explain what connects this portfolio today and what collectively we are building for tomorrow." During the transformation, they deliberately created a cross-functional governance model involving senior leadership, business leadership, corporate brand and communications, HR, design, and marketing teams, and representatives from the different businesses. At different stages, they used steering, core, and working groups so that strategic decisions could remain focused while a much wider group could contribute to how the brand would work in practice.

"That distinction is important. Brand stewardship benefits from a strong center, but brand ownership has to be distributed," Patil underlines. In his view, the central team needs to protect the intent of the corporate brand, its architecture, identity, and core narrative. Business teams need enough freedom to translate that into something meaningful for their own categories and stakeholders. HR, he argues, has an equally important role because purpose and values eventually have to show up in leadership behavior, talent practices, and the employee experience.

Patil also highlights how they further institutionalized this approach through a Brand Council and ongoing governance mechanisms: "For us, governance is not about approving every piece of communication. It's about establishing clear principles and decision rights so that people across the organization can make better brand decisions themselves. In a diversified organization, absolute uniformity would be neither realistic nor desirable." This works best when collaboration happens upstream, he argues. If corporate communication only becomes involved at the point of approving an advertisement or a website, governance has already become too tactical. The more important conversations, he suggests, concern business strategy, culture, stakeholder expectations, and what the brand should mean in a particular context.



"An example of how we balance a shared corporate brand with business-specific identities is the way we have translated our Group purpose into individual expressions. 'Crafting tomorrow since 1897' provides the common idea, while businesses express their particular contribution through purposes such as Crafting Goodness, Crafting Joy, Crafting Innovation, and Crafting Abundance. The connection is evident, but each remains relevant to the business it represents." Sujit Patil, CCO, Godrej Industries Group

GODREJ INDUSTRIES GROUP was founded in 1897 to support economic independence in India. Serving over 1.1 billion consumers globally, the Godrej Industries Group employs thousands of people across a wide range of industries, including consumer goods, real estate, financial services, oleochemicals, agriculture, and facilities management. Its businesses operate under several listed companies, including Godrej Industries, Godrej Consumer Products, Godrej Properties, Godrej Agrovet, and Astec Lifesciences.

CHALLENGES IN CORPORATE BRAND MANAGEMENT

Businesses understandably want the freedom to move quickly and respond to their markets. At the same time, a corporate brand loses value if every part of the organization interprets it completely differently. Patil describes the temptation either to overcentralize, which creates resistance and slows people down, or to decentralize so far that the brand becomes fragmented. "One important learning is that governance should provide clarity and enable good decisions. It should not create unnecessary control or slow the organization down," underlines Kardum Funnemark. The biggest challenge for her is balancing global consistency with local relevance, while avoiding too many layers and decision points. "We have addressed this through a common positioning framework, shared objectives, clearer roles, and cross-functional governance." Yet, having a common framework in place does not necessarily mean that everyone interprets the brand in the same way. In a large organization, keeping the brand alive and ensuring a shared understanding requires ongoing effort, Schneider adds. People move into new roles, new colleagues join, and established employees also need regular reminders of what the brand stands for. He emphasizes: "You have to be willing to explain the brand principles repeatedly and, when necessary, act as a brand guardian and draw a clear line. As blunt as it may sound, I don't think a brand can be a democracy. If too many people have the power to redefine it, you risk losing the consistency and clarity that make it distinctive."

"Culture does not change on the day a new purpose is announced." Patil

Maintaining this consistency also means balancing the long-term nature of brand building with the business's short-term, sales-driven priorities, which is another challenge that Schneider points to: "Brand awareness and consideration don't change overnight, but there is constant pressure to deliver immediate results. Sometimes, an initiative may make sense from a sales perspective but isn't right for the brand. Even if changing a message or a design might help drive sales in the short term, we have to ask whether it stays true to what the brand stands for."

Bridging brand promise and employee experience

These challenges of maintaining brand consistency make it all the more important to bring employees on board. At Inter IKEA Group, Kardum Funnemark explains that business priorities, leadership communication, and employee engagement are closely linked to the stories the company tells externally. "When coworkers understand the direction, see the proof, and feel able to contribute, they become our most credible brand ambassadors," she explains. This is probably one of the most important tests of a corporate brand, agrees Patil. If the promise is only visible externally, it is advertising. If employees recognize it in the way the organization actually behaves, it has the potential to become a brand. "We are deliberately moving from articulation to activation through leadership conversations, employee cascades, business-level interpretation, and ultimately integration into people systems," he adds. "There is also a useful discipline in listening to employees. Internal experience is one of the best reality checks on any external corporate narrative. If there's a gap between the two, the answer is rarely to improve the messaging. The answer is usually to address the experience."

According to Patil, organizations often underestimate how much a brand transformation asks people to change. A new visual identity may be visible overnight; changing vocabulary, behaviors, templates, websites, employee practices, and hundreds of everyday decisions takes much longer. Particularly in an organization with a long legacy, there is also an understandable emotional attachment to what came before. "Our approach at Godrej was to involve people early rather than introduce the brand as a finished answer," Patil explains, and Schneider underlines: "Looking back, I'm convinced that the involvement of the entire Executive Board was one of the main reasons the repositioning gained such momentum internally."

The new positioning at E.ON was developed jointly with the Board in a series of working sessions, with its members actively contributing to the discussions and shaping the outcome. "This was quite different from approaches I'd experienced in the past, where an agency would present several options and the Board would simply approve or reject one of them. Here, the Board was genuinely involved, which also meant its members could communicate and champion the new direction within their own areas of the business."

Moving the brand function into the CEO's remit gave additional momentum. After the launch, the CEO traveled across regions to explain the new positioning in person. At the same time, Schneider's team organized two-day workshops across the regions, bringing together the people working with the brand every day, including colleagues from brand, marketing, HR, and digital. These sessions covered everything from the strategy to its translation into design, with practical exercises along the way. Rather than simply presenting the new positioning, the sessions gave people the opportunity to understand it in depth and learn how to communicate the story themselves. And the repositioning also had an unexpected impact internally: it became a catalyst for bringing the organization closer together. "Colleagues told us that it felt as though a new, more unified E.ON was emerging," describes Schneider. Since then, he has seen a significant increase in demand for brand assets, from simple things like Teams backgrounds and PowerPoint templates to guidelines for social media and UX, and demand remains at a very high level. "The more consistently people use these assets and guidelines, the more coherent the brand experience becomes, which we hope will ultimately contribute to the company's overall success."



"We've developed a format in Berlin called the House of New Energy. It's a physical space that serves as both a representative venue and a showroom, with a much stronger focus on the brand itself than on sales. The idea is to explain who we are and what we stand for through a curated experience. We're still experimenting with the format, but I think that's an important part of bringing the brand to life." Stefan Schneider, Vice President Global Brand, E.ON

E.ON is a leading European energy company headquartered in Essen, Germany. With approximately 76,600 employees and 50 million customers, the group focuses on energy networks, energy infrastructure, and customer solutions, playing a key role in Europe's energy transition.

Adapting to AI and digital ecosystems

Beyond internal alignment, corporate brand leaders face another challenge: adapting to an increasingly digital environment in which AI and digital platforms are changing how stakeholders encounter, interpret, and evaluate companies. As Patil puts it, these developments are fundamentally changing the idea of brand control. For many years, organizations could think in terms of relatively defined communication channels: advertising, media relations, corporate websites, and internal communication. Today, a brand is being interpreted continuously across search, social media, employee platforms, review sites, AI-generated answers, and thousands of individual interactions. That means corporate brand stewardship is becoming less about controlling every message and more about creating clarity, consistency, and organizational judgment at scale. Kardum Funnemark, Patil, and Schneider all point to AI as intensifying this shift away from controlling every message. AI can make high-quality communication dramatically faster and can help organizations scale brand knowledge, analyze reputation, and make tools more accessible to employees. One example is E.ON's Visual Engine, an internal tool that allows employees to generate everything from illustrations to photorealistic images in line with the company's brand identity. As Schneider explains, the aim is not only to improve efficiency but also to help employees create on-brand visuals themselves. This can make visual communication more consistent while reducing the need for central brand teams to monitor compliance.

However, AI can just as easily scale inconsistency, inaccuracy, or generic content. The need for strong source material, clear brand principles, and human accountability

therefore increases rather than decreases. "Brand-critical communication must remain guided by human judgment, clear principles, and careful fact-checking," stresses Kardum Funnemark.

"The declining ability to control a brand in the changing digital environment makes a clear strategic direction and consistent messaging even more important." Patil

Transparency has a similar effect. The distance between what a company says and what people experience has become very small. Employees, customers, and other stakeholders can challenge contradictions immediately. In Patil's view, this is healthy for brands in many ways because it shifts the emphasis from image to behavior: "I think the strongest brands in this environment will be those with a sufficiently clear center that thousands of decentralized expressions still feel coherent. Technology can support that, but it cannot substitute for judgment."

DESIGNING BRAND GOVERNANCE FOR THE FUTURE

The ultimate measure of good brand governance, Patil argues, lies in what it enables the organization to do. The best governance model is not the one that gives the corporate team the most control. It is the one that enables the organization to make the greatest number of good brand decisions without needing the corporate team in the room. Drawing on their experience, Kardum Funnemark, Patil, and Schneider highlight principles for effective corporate brand governance:

1. **Corporate brand management needs to be firmly anchored at the top of the organization.** Securing the involvement of the CEO, the executive board, and key stakeholders, particularly during a strategic repositioning, helps establish the brand as a management priority rather than a task delegated to communications. At the same time, responsibility for bringing the brand to life needs to be shared across functions and business units.
2. **Shared ownership requires clear decision rights.** Broad consultation helps incorporate different perspectives, but it should not leave the organization without a clear basis for making decisions. The aim is to combine participation with clear accountability, supported by a central function that safeguards the brand's core while enabling others to apply it in their own contexts.
3. **Governance should provide a clear, long-term direction without becoming overly prescriptive.** This means defining what the brand stands for, which principles are non-negotiable, and where there is room for local or functional adaptation. It also requires regular reassessment as business priorities, stakeholder expectations, and the operating environment evolve. Good governance should create alignment and momentum, not more bureaucracy.

Communicators are not simply the people who create the narrative after decisions have been made. Rather, they can be conveners across functions, interpreters of stakeholder expectations, and custodians of the connection between what the organization wants to become and how it is experienced today. That influence is earned through business understanding and trust, not through ownership of a communications channel.

CONTRIBUTORS



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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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