FROM PURPOSE STATEMENT TO BRAND PURPOSE

AUTHORS: ENYA HENNING, HHL LEIPZIG GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT; MANFRED KIRCHGEORG, HHL LEIPZIG GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

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Corporate communication professionals invest considerable time in formulating their company's purpose statement. A purpose statement, however, is only an initial step toward a strategy that embeds purpose in corporate management and translates it into strategic action. This article offers a practice-oriented approach to moving brand purpose beyond a statement and into practice, drawing on insights from brand identity, brand distinctiveness, and marketing management. Practical recommendations outline the key steps for developing, anchoring, and living brand purpose.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, companies and brands across a range of product categories have used purpose statements to communicate their positions on environmental and societal issues. However, having a purpose statement is merely the starting point for developing a purpose-driven brand strategy. Many companies face challenges when implementing purpose into authentic and effective strategies at the corporate and brand level. Developing such strategies can be particularly complex for multi-brand companies, where the corporate purpose must be coherently translated across the corporate brand and individual brand levels while remaining consistent with the respective brand identities (Bhargava & Bedi, 2022; Henning & Kirchgeorg, 2026). Corporate brands therefore play a crucial role in establishing a clear overarching purpose that can provide direction and coherence across the individual brands (Greyser & Urde, 2019).

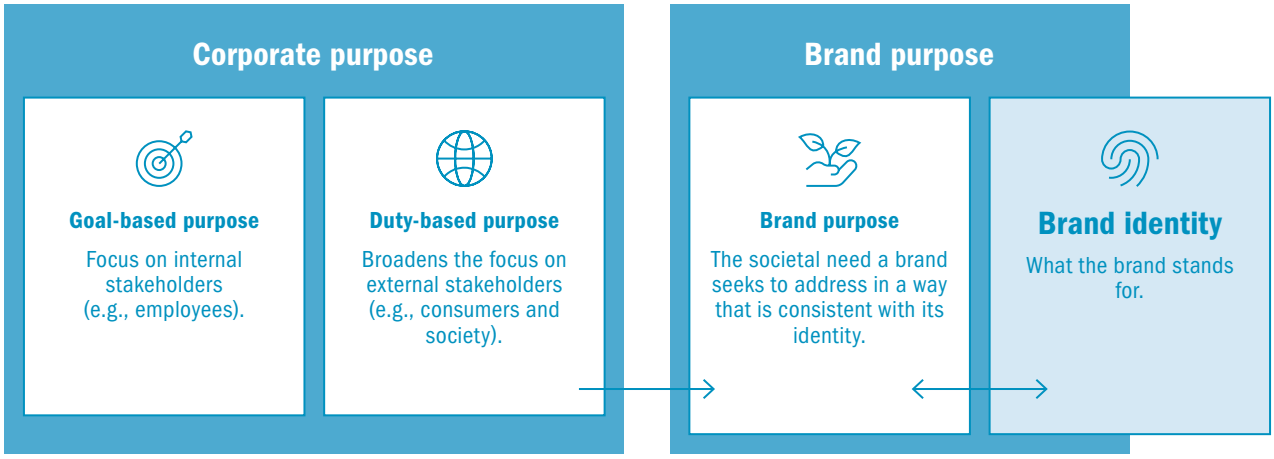
George et al. (2023) define corporate purpose in for-profit companies as capturing "the essence of an organization's existence by explaining what value it seeks to create for its stakeholders" (p. 1847). They also distinguish between goal- and duty-based purpose:

- **Goal-based purpose** is described as an organizational objective with strategic intent, and focuses on values that are particularly important to internal stakeholders, such as employees (see also Nussbaum et al., 2025).

- **Duty-based purpose** is characterized as encompassing societal and environmental responsibilities and also focuses on values that transcend organizational borders. This includes taking ethical and moral stands.

As duty-based purpose may be particularly relevant for external stakeholders such as consumers (Jasinenko & Steuber, 2023), it appears to provide an important foundation for brand purpose, which seeks to address societal needs and engage with societal issues beyond the pursuit of profit. However, brand purpose, in turn, needs to be connected to brand identity and strategy (Fernandes et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2022). The strategic intent inherent in goal-based purpose can support this connection and, for example, in combination with (conscientious) corporate branding, enable the organization-wide execution of brand purpose (France et al., 2024). With this in mind, the following section draws on two studies to examine how brand purpose can be put into practice and with what implications for brand outcomes.

From corporate to brand purpose



Source: Enya Henning & Manfred Kirchgeorg

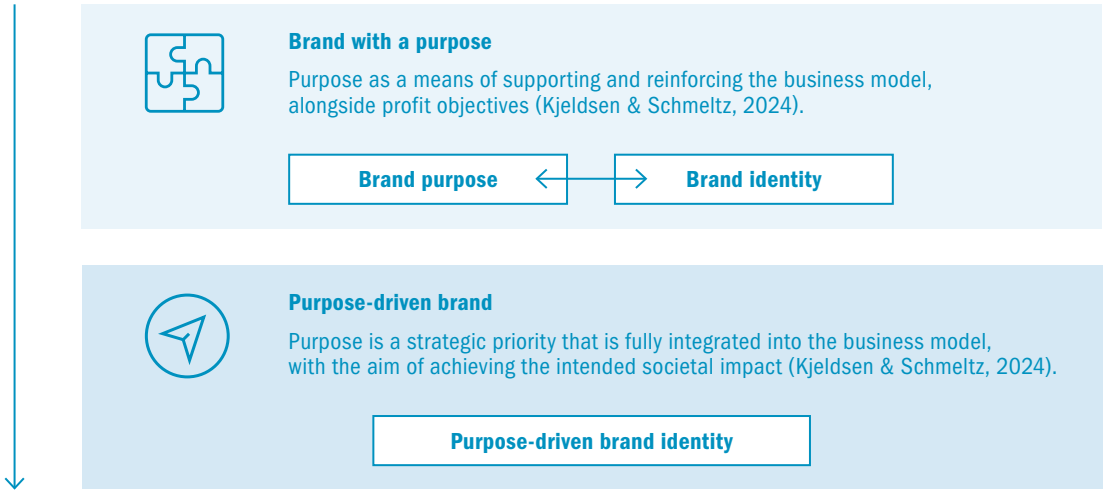
KEY INSIGHTS FOR DEVELOPING AN IDENTITY-BASED APPROACH TO BRAND PURPOSE

The first study examined the relationship between brand purpose and brand identity, drawing on a systematic literature review (see Henning & Kirchgeorg, 2026). The study suggested that a lack of clarity around this relationship has resulted in inconsistencies between the internal and external activities of brands. Such misalignment might ultimately lead to undesirable consequences, such as purpose-washing. This area of tension echoes the tension outlined in the introduction: brand purpose primarily communicates societal and environmental motivations (duty-based) to external stakeholders, yet it also requires a strategic intent and foundation (goal-based) anchored in the brand identity – itself a strategic brand management tool (Kapferer, 1997). Hence, Henning and Kirchgeorg (2026) proposed that an identity-based approach to brand purpose may offer a way to overcome such challenges by combining inside-out and outside-in branding approaches (see also Burmann et al., 2023). As a result of their literature review, the authors developed seven premises that describe the relationship between brand purpose and brand identity in existing literature. The following section focuses on the first three premises:

1. **Brand purpose should become, or already is, part of the brand identity.** This means that there must be an overlap between brand purpose and brand identity. The intersection of the constructs is referred to as "brand–purpose proximity," which is defined as "the fit between the brand's identity and its purpose" (Williams et al., 2022, p. 718). Therefore, due to the identity components inherent in the definition of brand purpose, genuine brand purpose requires an overlap with brand identity. This overlap is a prerequisite for genuine perceptions of fit, for example by consumers.
2. **Brand purpose also influences brand identity.** The relationship between brand purpose and brand identity is not one-sided. Brand purpose can help create a unique brand identity that appeals to customers (Gray et al., 2024). Contributing to the formation of brand identity through brand purpose ensures that the brand remains relevant to the needs and expectations of stakeholders (outside-in). Conversely, the brand identity ensures that the communicated purpose is anchored within the brand strategy, thus lending it authenticity (inside-out).
3. **Purpose-washing may be the result of a lack of brand–purpose proximity.** In other words, if brand purpose is not anchored in brand identity, its societal aspirations may be perceived as inauthentic and commercially motivated. Such misrepresentation can create dissonance and damage the brand and its reputation.

As explained, there must be an overlap between the brand's purpose and its identity (i.e., brand–purpose proximity). But how much should brand purpose overlap with brand identity? In this regard, the study further proposes a gradation of the degree to which brand purpose is integrated into brand identity. It argues that the greater the brand–purpose proximity, the more integrated brand purpose is into the brand's core identity. This may lead to a purpose-driven brand identity.

Levels of purpose integration



Purpose-driven brand identity

Legitimizes the brand's existence based on what the brand stands for. It provides a basis for high levels of authenticity in brand purpose communication with purpose as a guiding principle for strategic decision-making and long-term brand development (Henning & Kirchgeorg, 2026)

Source: Enya Henning & Manfred Kirchgeorg

The extent to which brands integrate their purpose into their identity depends on their individual strategy and objectives. Nevertheless, there must at least be a certain degree of brand–purpose proximity (Williams et al., 2022) and brands should aim for long-term and identity-based implementation of brand purpose. After all, a clear brand purpose and its strategic integration into brand identity can help a brand remain relevant and authentic in a rapidly changing environment and may contribute to positive brand outcomes.

How might brand purpose actually translate into positive brand outcomes?

The second study provides insights into this question by examining how brand purpose affects brand loyalty in the fast-moving consumer goods sector (see Henning & Nussbaum, 2026). By analyzing online survey data from 400 consumers in the UK, Henning and Nussbaum (2026) found that brand purpose does not directly affect brand loyalty. Instead, the relationship between brand purpose and brand loyalty was mediated by brand distinctiveness (i.e., indirect-only mediation).

Brand distinctiveness is defined as "the perceived uniqueness of a brand's identity in relation to its competitors" (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012, p. 408), highlighting the relevance of brand identity in explaining how brand purpose can contribute to positive brand outcomes, such as brand loyalty. Furthermore, the finding that brand purpose positively contributes to brand distinctiveness aligns with Gray et al.'s notion (2024) that brand purpose supports a unique brand identity. Thus, the findings empirically underline the importance of considering brand identity when developing and implementing purpose-driven branding strategies (Henning & Nussbaum, 2026).

Taken together, these research insights suggest that aligning brand purpose with brand identity can contribute not only to authenticity, but also to positive brand outcomes, such as brand loyalty.

PUTTING PURPOSE INTO PRACTICE

The insights presented above highlight a central challenge of purpose-driven branding that was already raised in the introduction: Having a brand purpose is not enough. For brand purpose to be perceived as authentic and generate positive brand outcomes, it needs to be strategically anchored in the brand's identity, which expresses what the brand stands for (see Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009). Based on these insights, a set of recommendations for corporate communication practitioners and brand managers is proposed. The recommendations address six key areas: Know, Start, Anchor, Live, Differentiate, and Avoid, outlining how to move from defining a brand purpose statement to strategically anchoring and living it.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- ***Know* what your brand stands for:** A clear understanding of brand identity is needed to develop an authentic brand purpose with a sufficient degree of brand–purpose proximity.
- ***Start* from within:** Existing brands seeking to develop a brand purpose should build on their established brand identity rather than opportunistically adopting social issues or trends that lack a meaningful connection to their brand identity.
- ***Anchor* purpose in brand identity:** Brand purpose should not remain a statement or stand-alone communication initiative. Instead, managers should aim for strong, long-term, and identity-based implementation of brand purpose.
- ***Live* the purpose:** Brand purpose should be consistently reflected in the brand's actions, experiences, and communications, becoming part of ongoing co-creation with stakeholders.
- ***Differentiate:*** Brand purpose can strengthen brand distinctiveness and, through this mechanism, ultimately contribute to stronger brand loyalty.
- ***Avoid* purpose-washing:** Not every social or environmental initiative needs to become part of a brand's purpose. Where a societal cause is not compatible with the brand identity, it may be more credible to address it through other forms of corporate engagement.

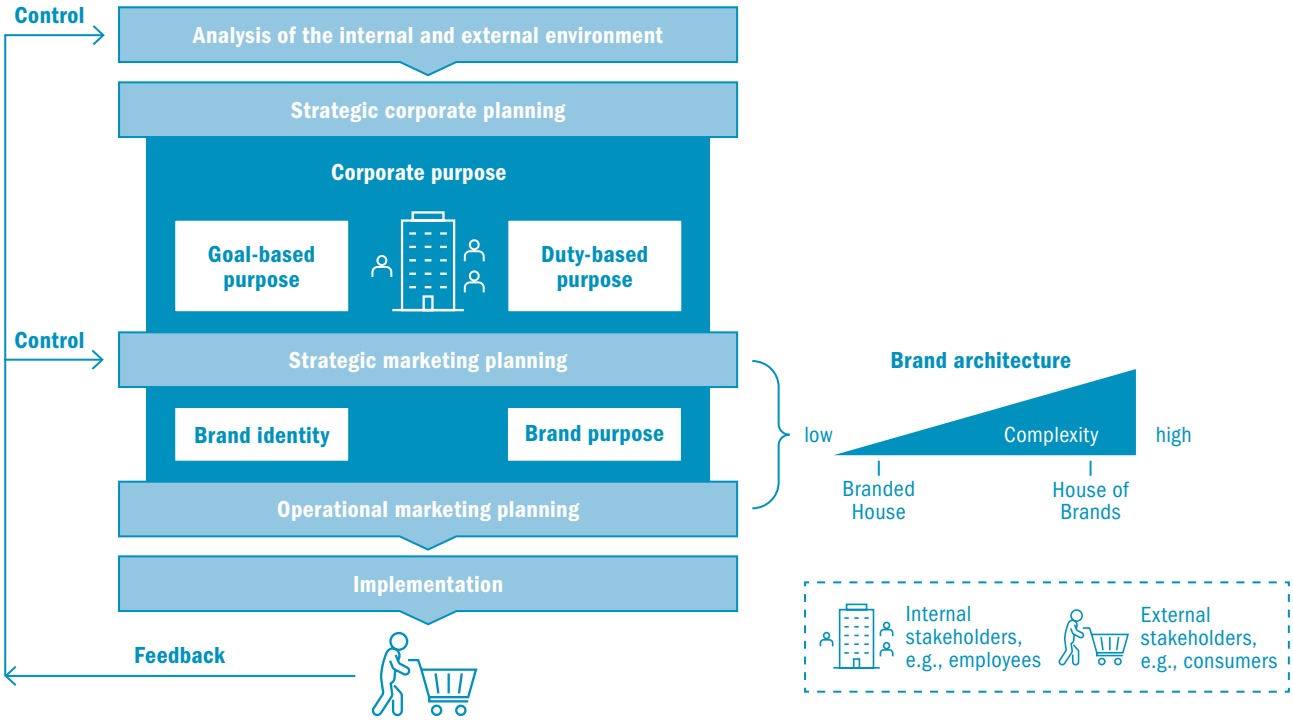
Synthesis: from corporate to brand purpose – and back again

In the brand universe, a strong and clear corporate brand identity can serve as a "north star" for purpose-driven strategies, providing direction and coherence across individual brands (Greyser & Urde, 2019). Accordingly, purpose should not be considered in isolation at the brand level but embedded in the broader strategic management process. This perspective is reflected in the dual management concept of marketing, which views marketing not only as a dedicated organizational function but also as a cross-functional guiding philosophy of corporate management (Meffert et al., 2024). Thus, the brand purpose should be embedded in a market-oriented corporate culture and be tied to strategic corporate planning through an overarching corporate purpose that is translated to the brand level – and back again.

The figure below shows how brand purpose can be embedded in the strategic management process. The complexity of this integration depends in part on the company's brand architecture. In a branded house, products and services share the corporate brand and identity. Hence, the development and integration of the brand purpose are closely linked to the company as a whole and its corporate purpose. In a House of Brands, distinct product brands have their own identities, making it necessary to consider how the overarching corporate purpose can be integrated into each brand without causing conflicts (see also Bhargava & Bedi, 2022). Existing brands may also conflict with a defined corporate purpose. In this case, it must be determined to what extent the brand's positioning can be adjusted or whether the brand should be eliminated from the portfolio.

By translating relevant aspects of corporate purpose – which contains goal- and duty-based elements – into a brand-specific context, brand purpose can help make these aspects accessible to external stakeholders, such as consumers, whose feedback can inform its further development and alignment with the overarching corporate strategy. Accordingly, organizations should periodically review whether their corporate and brand purposes remain relevant in changing market and societal contexts.

Systematic integration of corporate purpose and brand purpose into the management process



Source: Henning & Kirchgeorg, 2026, based on Meffert et al., 2024

CONCLUSION

Corporate and brand purpose are often viewed in isolation, particularly in companies with a brand architecture that can be characterized as a House of Brands. This article, however, makes it clear that the corporate and brand purpose are closely intertwined: purpose-driven branding does not begin and end within the brand management department. Rather, brand purpose connects the entire company with its external environment by incorporating feedback from consumers and markets and fostering processes of collaborative brand development. The close relationship between corporate and brand purpose also highlights why formulating a purpose statement, as outlined in the beginning, is only one step in developing a purpose-driven brand strategy: its strategic value depends on how purpose is embedded in corporate management and translated into practice across corporate and brand levels.

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AUTHORS



DR. ENYA HENNING completed her doctorate at HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management and currently works as customer experience manager in Düsseldorf, Germany. Her research focuses on purpose-driven strategies. Email: enya.henning@hhl.de



DR. MANFRED KIRCHGEORG is Professor of Marketing Management and Director of the Center for Competitiveness & Sustainability at HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management, Germany. His research competencies are related to sustainability marketing, holistic branding, and cross-media management. Email: manfred.kirchgeorg@hhl.de

MORE INFORMATION

This research is based on recent empirical and conceptual articles about brand purpose that have been published in academic journals (for readers interested in further details, see Henning & Kirchgeorg, 2026 and Henning & Nussbaum, 2026).

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