

Controlling the narrative from the glass box

 By [Leon Ayo](#)

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The bottom-line impact when brands come under reputational fire can result in a serious loss of revenue - auditing firm KPMG's Gupta and SARS scandals cost it numerous multi-million-rand clients this year, including Sasfin and Sygnia. In the glass box, everything brands do is noticed and reputational management depends on authentic narratives that champion accountability.



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Today's brands are under more scrutiny than ever before as the rise of radical transparency has catalysed an irreversible move from an inscrutable black box to an all-revealing glass box model. An analogy from David Mattin, global head of trends and insights at Trendwatching, the 'glass box' means that everything about a brand is on display – it's people, processes, values and internal culture. This change means that a brand is effectively its culture.

This presents unprecedented opportunity for brands to utilise their internal culture and values as powerful marketing tools in a world dominated by tech and social media. We have made the move to meaningful consumerism. Millennials will spend 70% more with brands they care about according to Trendwatching. This means companies have to take control of their narratives and harness the power of marketing to share positive stories that actively demonstrate their commitment to a higher purpose.

Brands should use the glass box to their advantage – some advice:

1. The CEO as master storyteller

The CEO must conceptualise a compelling overarching narrative for the brand to follow. It's about using storytelling to foster a culture of excellence and innovation – ultimately, the narrative needs to be so attractive that employees and customers want to own and be part of it. As a potentially high-profile leader, this individual has to embody the company values, both privately and professionally – think Elon Musk and Phuti Mahanyele.



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2. There's no place for complacency

Elon Musk's goals are never small – he currently aims to make humans an interplanetary species, combine natural intelligence with artificial intelligence and reimagine clean transportation – but this is what makes him our age's 'Renaissance man'. Millennials want to work with companies that have strong values and aim to make a lasting difference in the world. People sit up and take notice of companies willing to set goals that are so big they sometimes border on the absurd. As humans, that inspires us.

3. Company culture with purpose

At Nasa in the 1960s, you could ask the company janitor what he did for a living and he'd say he was helping to put a man on the moon. If you can link a higher purpose to people's day-to-day work life and truly make them believe they're meaningfully contributing to a greater goal, then you have all the foundations in place to build something lasting and original. A business's leadership team has to ensure that everyone comes along on this journey – every line manager and employee has to agree with, add to and own this vision for it to cascade through the company.



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4. Back to basics

A global organisational value movement sees consumers demanding that brands become actively involved in building a better future amidst a world threatened by automation, inequality and social ruptures. People use ethical consumerism to socially signal what they stand for and who they are. The glass box means that 'progress as a process' is a philosophy to be extolled. Brands that share their journey of moving in a more socially constructive, CSI-oriented direction often experience a positive public reception.

5. Small changes matter

RCL – parent company to Rainbow Chicken – may not sound like the most glamorous brand, but it offers an enticingly progressive employee experience of the calibre I seek for candidates. Companies with flexible benefits, mentorship and development programmes, good maternity and paternity leave practices, and upward feedback loops will often be most successful in attracting talent and projecting a positive image through the glass box.

6. Smartly navigating social platforms

It's important to give guidelines on using social channels responsibly and to show employees how their personal brand is an extension of their professional one.



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7. Act decisively

The glass box demands that brands become leaders, who take a strong, proactive stance. Transparency means

accountability, which also means taking ownership of mistakes and learning from these. A brand's reputation is pivotal to its success, so must be closely managed. Marketing can play a role in getting positive stories out, but at the end of the day, these have to be authentic.

ABOUT LEON AYO

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