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Create Your Three Keys

Profit is not a purpose, it is a result. To have purpose means the things we do are of real value to others.

—Simon Sinek, *Start with Why*

It is very easy to tell someone what you do. It is far more complex to clearly articulate why you do what you do and, most importantly, why you believe in what you do.

What you will learn in this chapter drives at the core of how to build a successful business. Purpose is the first of the Three Keys that support your brand. Your purpose is why you do what you do, and you must uncover it before you can articulate the values you believe in and the story of who you are. Before you declare what you have to offer the world, explain why it matters.

Correctly defined, purpose captures the essence of your business existence, ultimately driving deep emotional connections with your clients and employees. When both of these synergies occur, as a leader you have a 360-degree feedback loop for any decision you

want to make. More tangibly, it is a litmus test for streamlining the entire operation of your company, whether you are a startup venture or an established multinational corporation. Correctly defined purpose ensures that your operations—from the services you offer to the clients you target and accept, the employees you hire, and even the vendors you choose—all match a particular standard and ethos.

At the same time, purpose alone does not form the foundation of your brand. It is only the beginning of the journey. To build a rock-solid foundation, purpose must be combined with comprehensive values and a cohesive story. In this chapter, we'll explore all Three Keys: purpose, values, and story.

Before getting into the Three Keys, let's understand more about what your brand actually is to begin with.

Understand Your Brand Foundation

Every company requires a foundation for all of its communications, both internal and external. If not, communications are ad hoc, uncoordinated, risk confusing the market at large, and immediately commoditize your product or service. This is why the communications foundation must come from the *brand foundation*. Without it, you are just a ship adrift in the middle of the ocean without a compass.

A well-defined brand has two parts:

- Verbal: sets the meaning and messaging for all communications
- Visual: represents the brand visually with logo, color, typefaces, and the like

Companies need to establish the verbal part of the brand before they can begin to design the visual representation. The verbal brand informs the logo. If a business hasn't fully defined and developed their verbal part first, they are planting the seeds of failure. The business might end up with a beautiful design but it will lack meaning. This is

one of the reasons why organizations change their logo so often, especially in the early years: a complete lack of strategic clarity.

Don on Fran's Process: “This is why Fran asks her clients deep, fundamental questions about their purpose and values before beginning any visual design work—and ultimately, this is why her logo design and global rebranding for Investis Digital was spot on. The logo was not just a pretty design; it had meaning, and context connected to our purpose, which made it the obvious choice.”

Conventional wisdom believes a brand foundation is for external use, mainly marketing (covered in Chapter 6). Many believe the brand foundation is the corporate logo and style guide, with rules about fonts and color. This is only partially right—those things are all parts of branding. But what we are talking about here is comprehensively different. A business does not transform itself from inside out because of a pretty logo and style guide; it takes investment in countless deep conversations, strategic decisions, and the ability of leadership to embrace change for themselves and their business. This is what purpose does: catapult strategic change in order to align all aspects of the business, creating new profitable relationships and collaborations.

For instance, if you got out from behind your desk right this second and asked each employee, “What does our organization mean to you?” the responses would be robotic at best. They would most likely be unable to recite any part of what the company supposedly believes: the vision, mission, purpose, and values. If this is the case in your company, you have some critical strategic work to do. Sure, you may have a guide that articulates your vision, mission, purpose, and values. Most likely if you do, these are all described inside a brand book of sorts. The real question is: “Are you and the rest of your team living them every single day, and using them to inform every single decision?”

The answer: of course not.

Understand the Three Keys

The brand foundation every services business requires to compete in a 21st-century hypercompetitive world is composed of the Three Keys—purpose, values, and story. Done right, these provide the basis of everything you do in your business, and are infused in every communication, process, and internal and external interaction. In order to be strategic, you must place the brand foundation at the center of your business. To begin the process, you have to understand what your firm is all about and why you are even in business. You cannot properly lead an organization, design its structure, execute sales and marketing, or hire the right people without a brand foundation. Literally, you cannot. You might get lucky once or twice, but eventually, your luck will run out and the house of cards will collapse.

With a brand foundation strategically implemented across all aspects of the organization, you can start leading your organization in ways that bring increased productivity and communication, which in turn translate into greater profits. Throughout this book, we show you how the Three Keys eventually emerge in every successful business and provide insight into why and how you should be implementing them into your business, too. The appendix walks you through the process of identifying and defining your purpose, values, and story.

Purpose: The First Key

Purpose is the starting point for an organization, regardless of size. Purpose acts as an anchor that guides everyday decisions and behaviors. You start your brand foundation with your purpose: it becomes the magnet that attracts the right people, partners, and profits while repelling all the wrong ones. A clearly defined purpose improves communication, which ensures increasingly strategic sales and, ultimately, faster closing rates. Purpose is the key to elevating your B-players into A-players, and A-players into the few superstars who drive 80 percent of the business.

Your purpose is the fundamental linchpin for driving the massive change or exponential impact you seek in this world. In “The Business Case for Purpose,” the *Harvard Business Review* defined organizational purpose as “an aspirational reason for being which inspires and provides a call to action for an organization and its partners and stakeholders and provides benefit to local and global society.”¹ Purpose redefines and focuses the things you do every day to achieve a strategic end result that speaks to your core beliefs. To compete as a professional service company in the 21st century, you need to be able to clearly articulate your purpose. When you do that, the business gains strategic clarity about what it does and whom it is done for, and the end result the leadership expects.

Purpose has three elements:

- Your Why
- A bold vision
- A compelling mission

Why

Looking at the way businesses communicate, we see a clear pattern. Most companies first talk about what they do—the product or service they offer. Next, to some extent, they talk about their How—the differentiators. What they believe makes them different from their competitors. And finally, very few ever get to their Why—their belief, cause, or overall purpose. In his seminal work, *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek identified this as the critical missing piece for building successful companies with compelling offerings.

Great companies start with their purpose, or Why, then move to the How, and finally explain the What. Conventional wisdom is the diametric opposite. Yet, how human beings are hardwired is exactly WHY-HOW-WHAT, not WHAT-HOW-WHY. Since your Why, or purpose, is so critical to your brand foundation and takes the primary role in your communication, it is critical to dig deep to uncover your authentic purpose.

Vision and Mission

Vision and mission are by far two of the most frequently misunderstood business terms. Let's get some quick clarity on the fundamental difference between vision and mission before we dive into how they apply in your business:

- A vision articulates the wide-ranging impact the business will achieve if you and your employees are living your mission well.
- A mission is the rallying cry around what you do consistently, every day, which ultimately achieves your vision.

Said another way:

- A mission is what we execute on every day. As a result, when defining your brand foundation, it is imperative to write your mission in the present tense. A mission identifies your best customers, so keep them in mind when writing. The goal is to identify directly and succinctly what your business does for your best customers, framing the value proposition in a way that shows a valuable contribution.
- On the other hand, a vision is an aspiration that is bigger than the company itself, one that it constantly seeks to live up to. Therefore, when defining your vision, focus on writing in the future tense. For instance, what will the world look like when the business directly impacts every stakeholder you can think of? Think ahead. Dream big. Go beyond the transactional aspects of money.

Here is a perfect example:

- Don's mission and vision for Investis Digital:
 - Mission: To create, amplify, and optimize meaningful communications with audiences across all digital channels
 - Vision: A world where businesses have trusting, meaningful, and enduring relationships with their communities

Your mission and vision are actually two sides of the same leadership coin you hold within yourself. As the leader in your

company, the formula could read: If mission, then vision. If HOW, then WHY.

Once you know your company's purpose—why you do what you do—it is time to explore how you will do it.

Values: The Second Key

Values emerge from a completely different place than your purpose. Purpose is limbic and visceral. Values are based on data and psychology. In this ever-changing world, values are constant. They are the immovable object in your life and your business. Values must be unshakeable and unbreakable, under any circumstance, because they drive the moral and ethical compass of the people, places, and profits you will or will not entertain.

Only in the last fifty years or so have businesses begun thinking about intentionally designing their cultures and how the moral and ethical compass of leadership ultimately drives the organization. Values-based organizations are truly purpose-driven, talking about what they believe in, what is important to their stakeholders, and how they perceive the world. Unbreakable values underpin every century-old organization because they provide an actionable framework for operating the company. They act as a filter for strategic decision-making and form a simple tool for analyzing why things went wrong and understanding why things went right across any division of your business. Understanding how to lead a values-based organization sets you distinctly apart from your competition and provides a roadmap for creating a unique value proposition: How do you do business, compared to industry competitors? What does your business promise its clients?

Values are:

- Actionable statements that direct behavior
- The essence of how everyone in your organization does things
- Simple decision-making filters or tools

Values are not:

- Descriptions of the work you do
- Strategies you employ to accomplish the mission
- Competencies, technical or otherwise

There are two types of values, core and shared:

- Core values are individual values developed from your own personal strengths. True core values start with the strengths of the corporate visionary—you! While there are many exercises on the internet that claim to assist you in defining your values, there really is no good shortcut here. You do not want to choose from what other people consider to be values; you want to uncover your existing, authentic values.
- Shared values are created by transforming your core values into business-oriented values or blending the core values of the top-level leadership.

True values-based organizations are also concerned about the value each individual person contributes. The age-old saying is true, one bad apple spoils the whole bunch. It is easy to forget in the craziness of our daily lives how it is the sum of the parts, together, that ensures the company runs smoothly. When leadership achieves cohesion and unity among all employees, the business gains waves of cascading momentum to achieve rapid revenue growth and exponential impact. This is how people become excited to come to work every day—they feel safe, valued, and deeply invested in accomplishing the defined mission. As a result, they become more productive, more engaged, and synchronized in greater unison toward your organization's compelling vision.

To give you an example, the shared values at Fran's company, Advantages, are:

- Be Tenacious
- Earn Trust
- Be Process Oriented

- Be the Sherpa
- Aspire Higher

You can view a graphic interpretation that hangs on the conference room wall in Figure 1.1.

Shared values done right should be at the forefront of everything your company does: as soon as a client walks in the door, and at the beginning of every presentation. This is what shared values look like: when every single employee is able to clearly explain how they are guided to do things in the business, because your shared values translate into direct decision-making and behavior. Values inspire and empower employees and clearly compel or repel clients. When you truly explain and demonstrate values, everyone in the company becomes aligned, and clients learn to know what to always expect from your business. Values guide the business by clarifying, internally and externally, who you are and what you stand for. They will also attract good “fits”—employees, customers, vendors—and repel those who do not share the same values.

Once you have these values, repeat them constantly—live and breathe them, day in and day out, 24/7, 365. When you commit to



Figure 1.1 Advantages' values on display.

doing that, a values-based culture emerges, creating a predictable and trustworthy culture as well as complete control of the business's brand narrative.

One of Don's Values for Investis Digital

Embrace Clarity

For Investis Digital, this value is demonstrated internally and externally by using plain language to communicate clearly how we solve problems and by taking the time to explain in simple terms what we do and how we do it—that's how we build trust.

At Fran's suggestion, we identified a famous quote that brings it together:

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”

—*Leonardo da Vinci*

Shared values are actionable and most stem from the organic ethos and nature of the company itself. Investis Digital was started twenty years ago in the investor relations space. The investor relations audience wants clear and to-the-point communication; tell it like it is and nothing more. As the company grows and expanded its offerings, that characteristic permeated everything we do. Embrace Clarity is a value that has held true since our beginnings, but it is articulated more clearly today.

When a business scales quickly or encounters missteps, most leaders stop thinking about their brand foundation as the cornerstone. At one point, they decided to write their vision and mission statements to communicate their purpose, identified and named their values, and then they went back to business as usual believing the work was complete. Values are not written; they are lived. After you have determined your Why and uncovered and articulated your values, we turn to the

third key: Story. Story provides the visualization for values that creates emotion and develops deep connection, collaboration, and communication with your internal and external customers.

Story: The Third Key

Storytelling is the fundamental tool of human experience-sharing. Stories resonate with people much more than ice-cold data or bland XY graphs. Good stories create emotional connections between the reader and the subject. They strategically support your message when marketing and selling your company to potential employees and clients. When written in an engaging format, stories are magnets that attract people like you and—the bonus—repel bad fits. See the trend? Every aspect of the Three Keys creates a fundamental magnet that breeds communication, collaboration, and; connection while simultaneously attracting the right people, partners, and profits—and repelling the rest.

Your brand reputation has never been so important, and story is how you develop, institutionalize, and maintain it. In this age of fake news, where the public is plagued by untruths, overburdened with information, and remains skeptical of what they hear and read, leaders must own and protect the stories of their company. The fact is, in the 21st century, if your business isn't telling and owning its own story, someone else will take control of the narrative. Think about that for a minute.

What's more, with all the static being spewed out by countless media outlets, businesses compete for the public's overwhelmed and limited attention span. Your purpose and values differentiate your firm from others, and your story is the opportunity to weave your Three Keys together in a compelling manner that creates the emotional connections with the people who align with you. A successful story informs others who you are, what you believe in, and why what you are doing is important to like-minded believers. The story controls the brand narrative and provides relevance and connection. As Maya Angelou once said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,



Figure 1.2 A piece of Advantages’ origin story.

but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Storytelling is organic; it directly connects to what Fran calls “story-doing,” defined as authentically living the brand’s purpose through its actionable values. Done right, this leads to “story-sharing,” when others retell your stories, thereby amplifying your authentic brand. Storytelling becomes story-doing, which becomes story-sharing, a true tribal megaphone by a ministry who believes what you believe. Your story can be told in words and images. In Figure 1.2, you can see a piece of the Advantages’ origin story that hangs on the wall in the office.

The Investis Digital Origin Story

In the process of rebranding the merged companies Investis and ZOG Digital to become Investis Digital, the story told to the market had to be crafted. Investis Digital wasn’t either of the predecessor companies; it was something different, something better. Better because of the combination. Better because the core values of the individual leaders evolved into the shared values of the

new entity. Whereas Investis previously serviced the corporate sector by delivering investor relations information to shareholders, the new company creates, optimizes, and amplifies meaningful communication to audiences across all digital channels. In today's hyper-connected, always-on world, honest communication has never been more important or reputation more fragile. Purpose and narrative matter: what companies say about themselves and what others say about them matters more than ever before. At the same time, businesses often struggle to create a compelling brand narrative and share it consistently across multiple digital platforms. We help corporations build relationships with their stakeholders across boundaries, cultures, and borders. The new company offered the unique value proposition of both digital performance marketing and investor communications. This platform served as the basis for creating a fast-growing business offering, a service previously unavailable to the global market and a new company.

Apply the Three Keys to Your Business

You know what you do, whether it is building widgets or offering consulting services. You know how you do it and you may even believe that how you build your widget or the consulting method you use differentiates you from the competition. The truth is, *why* you do what you do—your cause, purpose, and belief living at the center of how and what you do—is the differentiator. To be effective, you must clearly articulate the purpose, values, and story behind your company and weave them into everything you and your employees do internally and externally.

When speaking to employees, clients, customers, or stakeholders, the conventional wisdom is to discuss everything “from the outside in,” talking first about the product or service you sell, yet there are dozens, if not hundreds of other businesses doing the same. What if, instead, you align around a common goal and use it as a direct way to connect with anyone

associated with your business? Outcome: you begin to create a long-term relationship built, first and foremost, on trust. An added benefit of leading a values-based firm is the ability to pivot as clients or the market demand other offerings, all while standing steadfast in your values and purpose. A values-based firm is more agile because it has trusted relationships with clients rather than transactions. There is a sense of conviction of quality. With deep relationships, it doesn't matter what you are selling today or tomorrow; clients stay with you because they trust you and are convinced you will always have their back, no matter what you do.

Are You a Values-Based, Purpose-Driven Firm?

If you don't know your purpose, values, and story, it's time to figure them out—right now. If they are just lifeless words on a conference room wall, it is time to stop paying them lip service. Start intentionally designing the way forward for your business and all its stakeholders.

Truth be told, it is not easy to articulate the world you want to see. To boil it down into a succinct, beautiful purpose statement takes many reflective hours of investment. Clearly identifying your values is absolutely a slog, and writing your story is certainly challenging. Yet these Three Keys are the most critical linchpin to the success of your business, in a world of saturated markets. Clients and employees thirst for an engaged relationship based on shared beliefs more than on a low price or a high salary.

Every individual company and leader lives and breathes their values differently, and it is those values that inform organizational culture. Understand that this process is about finding your own rhythm and activating the values that matter most. You need to make an investment in your people and their connectedness by becoming consistently clear and available. Regardless of your communication style, an interesting thing happens when everyone in the organization understands where the company's going and what it stands for—employees

and clients become enthusiastic fans who share your story, allowing you to scale your firm faster and with more agility as you outpace your competition. You are also going to sleep better at night!

What Can You Do Now?

While you want to consider your purpose, values, and story comprehensively, you might not have the time or budget for an immediate, full-stack overhaul. There are some quick, short-term changes you can implement in the meantime:

- Revisit your tagline. In five words or fewer, distinctively tell the world why you do what you do—and make those words actionable.
- Rethink your business card. While many believe business cards are obsolete, in the professional services arena we still rely on that little card to remind people who we are and what we do; make sure yours reflect your purpose and showcase your memorable brand personality. If your business card doesn't stand out from the pack, you will end up in the pile that has rubber bands around it in a desk drawer. (You know the ones I'm talking about—the old ones from last year's networking event. The rubber band breaks, you sift through the cards, and discard 90 percent of them because you can't remember who the person is.) Make sure yours stands out!
- Make your digital footprint reinforce your brand. The brand foundation should reveal itself in each and every communication you exchange with your clients and employees—from your email signature to LinkedIn profiles—and it costs next to nothing. Make sure the same template is shared with anyone who signs their name with your domain.
- Lead with your three Keys. Greet with your brand first. For example, state your purposeful tagline when you answer the phone at work.
- Infuse your Three Keys into everything you do. The remaining chapters of the book show you how to ensure that the Three Keys drive the decisions you make and the actions you take as the leader of a professional services firm.

As you'll see in the next chapter, culture is the essence of any organization and cannot be left to run itself.

Like your brand—to which it is so closely tied—either you define the culture, or it defines you. Either it grows with you or constricts you. If you've founded a start-up, you have a blank slate to work with and don't have obstacles in your way to set the tone. If you are a leader of an established organization, you already have a defined culture. Either way, with the proper time investment and resources, you have the opportunity to either define or redefine your culture. If you don't like what you have, step up and make the changes needed to reshape your culture—remember the great results Don saw after going through the slog?

The Three Keys are the tools to make transformational change happen, although establishing your Three Keys will not happen overnight, and it will take more than just you and your own brain. To achieve long-term sustainable success, you will need to lead this effort by continuing to motivate and educate the next generation of leadership, so they can build upon it. Our purpose is to help you better lead the service organization you are a part of today by taking advantage of all Three Keys. Because once you do, greater people, partners, and profits will inevitably follow. We know because we are living examples of the process and have been reaping its rewards for years.

Now that we have aligned the beginning of your brand foundation, it is time to move up a level, starting with your company culture. Here we will begin to look at how to incorporate your purpose, values, and story into every aspect of your business in order to unlock powerful purpose and unrealized profit.

Notes

1. [https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-the-business-case-for-purpose/\\$FILE/ey-the-business-case-for-purpose.pdf](https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-the-business-case-for-purpose/$FILE/ey-the-business-case-for-purpose.pdf)