# OTHER TOMORROWS

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Purpose & Perception

Purpose & Perception is part one of a four part series from Other Tomorrows on how organizations can leverage purpose to meaningfully impact the world. Part two will unpack what makes a great purpose. Parts three and four will explore the power of purpose-centric storytelling to communicate ideas and increase impact.

Purpose & Perception

The past few years have accelerated many trends in our society. One clear trend is how customers and employees perceive organizations through their stated purpose. As we struggle through COVID fears, economic uncertainty, and social disruption, we have become acutely aware that customers and employees care about the purpose. Some purpose-driven organizations are seizing the moment to build strong bonds with their employees and customers. We also see situations where organizations appear flat-footed in response to this rapid change—triggering negative perceptions and protest.

While it may seem obvious that an organization's purpose impacts how they are perceived, we've learned that there is a complex interplay between purpose and perception. Understanding how they relate and connect allows organizations to deploy tools and strategies that ensure everything lives in harmony.

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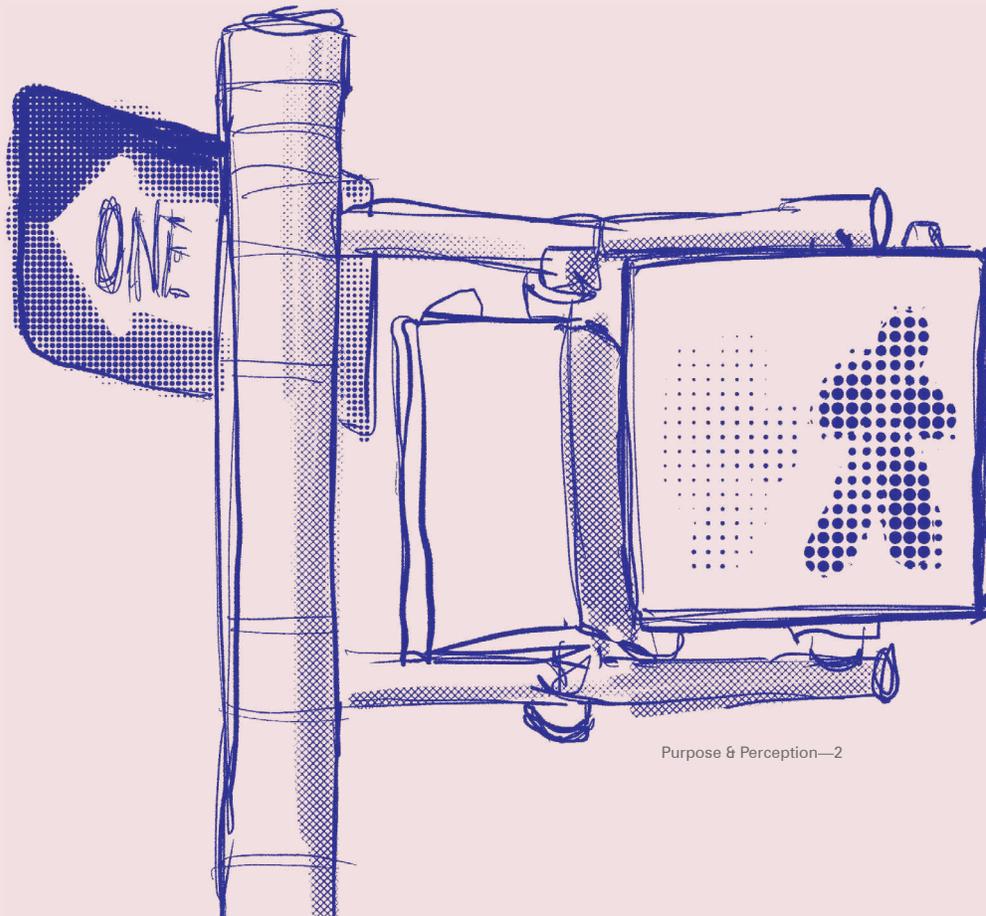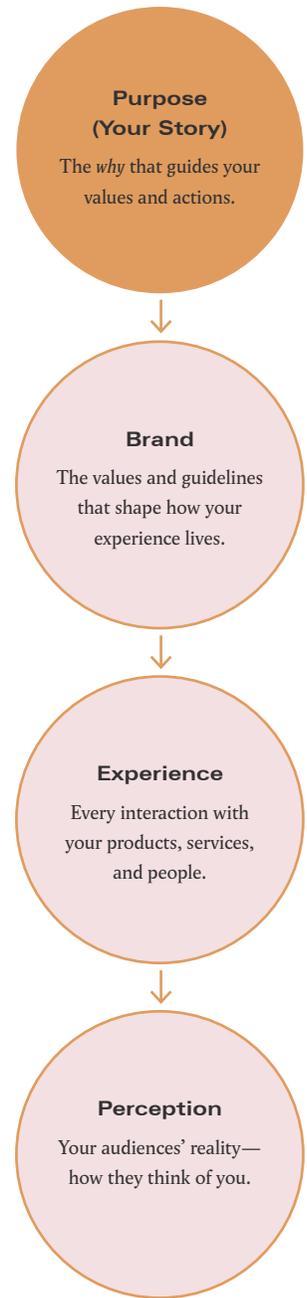
Purpose Drives Perception

Almost every project our team has ever worked on eventually circles around a fundamental question—how can we impact the way people perceive an organization? We are all concerned about how the world perceives us. How others perceive us helps construct the reality of who we are. There is a reason why, for all its flaws[1], so many businesses obsess over customer and employee net promoter scores[2]. It is commonly understood that happy customers will lead to higher profits and that happy employees are more engaged and productive. There are decades of research that prove these common-sense notions.

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So, how do organizations impact how they are perceived? They do this by intentionally designing the experience they have with you. Your perception of an organization is based on the totality of every human interaction, product, and service. For a customer, that means everything from how your service works to the experience on a support line. For employees, that means everything from your welcome booklet and compensation package to how your boss responds when you face a challenge. When every aspect of an organization's experience reinforces the same values and tells the same story, they can shape perception over time.

Purpose (Your Story)
The *why* that guides your values and actions.

Brand
The values and guidelines that shape how your experience lives.

Experience
Every interaction with your products, services, and people.

Perception
Your audiences' reality— how they think of you.

*a robust brand toolkit

Developing a robust brand toolkit is critical to ensuring a cohesive experience. Below are the tools all organizations need in their toolkit.

Mission
A statement articulating what the organization is trying to acheive.

Vision
A statement describing what the organization strives to become in the future.

Values
Three to five attributes or beliefs that the organization stands for.

Visual Guidelines
Guidelines that document how the brand looks across touchpoints (analog, spacial, digial).

Verbal Guidelines
Guidelines that express the tone used in written and spoken communications.

Experience Principles
Objective benchmarks that an organization uses to evalute current and future products and services.

Design Criteria
Objective criteria used to evalute the execution of individual touchpoints.

Large organizations may require additional tools such as segmentation, personas, archetypes, or documented reasons to believe. However, there is a risk of having too many tools. Asking employees to remember and apply a huge number of frameworks or work within overly restrictive guidlines stiffles change and growth.

How do organizations make sure every experience reinforces the same story? Well-crafted brands with a robust* strategy, brand guidelines, experience principles, and design criteria make this possible. When executed well, a brand defines the values and criteria that control how experiences come to life. A well-defined mission, vision, and values help organizations make strategic, aligned decisions. Robust visual and verbal guidelines ensure every touchpoint and story reinforces those values. Experience principles and design criteria provide objective rules that help teams translate those guidelines into everyday interactions.
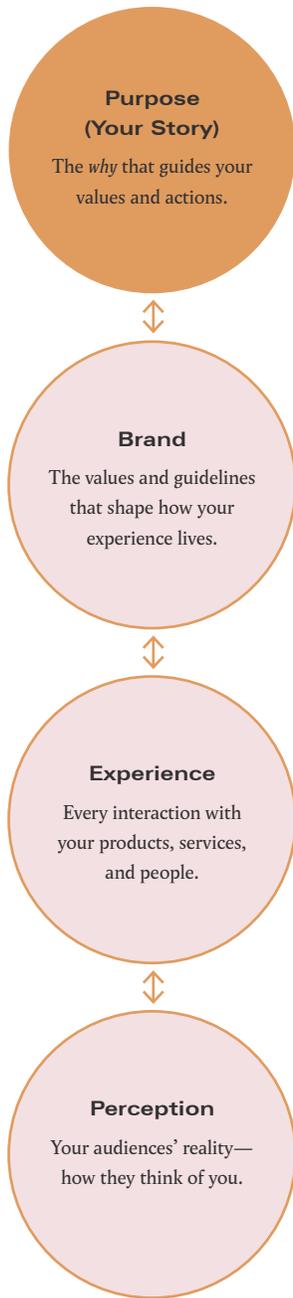
What is the foundation of a strategic brand? Purpose. A purpose is the story organizations tell about why they exist and should be the foundation of everything they do[3] (thanks Simon Sinek!). It should inform the mission, vision, values, voice, and visuals. Design an experience around a strong brand, grounded in a meaningful purpose, and every employee and customer interaction will reinforce the same perceptions over time.

The most impactful organizations out there have supercharged this framework. You can see this in the rise of Chief Experience Officers[4] and the decline of brands that struggle to deliver a compelling customer and employee experience.

We have seen this dynamic play out over and over. At Other Tomorrows, we start every engagement with a problem from a client. If that problem centers around customers or employees, we look at their experience first. This almost always involves in-context qualitative research, living and working alongside users to understand their functional and emotional needs. If there are problems with the experience we attempt to go deeper to understand the root cause. Was the experience just poorly executed? Is there a lack of brand strategy and guardrails to design within? Is there a purpose that helps guide us?

Sometimes this leads to hard conversations where we need to reframe our challenge. We lean into these conversations because we believe sustainable change is grounded in purpose—otherwise, the brand, experience, and perception will drift over time.

Perception Drives Purpose

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Organizations used to have an easier time bringing their purpose to life. They could broadcast their story with marketing and advertising. The more they spent, the more people believed it. If an organization flooded the airwaves about their trustworthiness, that is what people perceived. If one customer or employee had a bad experience, other customers and employees would rarely hear about it. In many ways, organizations were what they said they were—whether accurate or not.

Today, organizations are not the only ones that tell their story. Every customer and employee has the tools and platforms to add their voices to the conversation through reviews, influencers, and social-media supercharged word-of-mouth. This means organizations are what their customers and employees say they are, based on their experiences.

These same constituents are also actively working to shape their experiences with organizations. They are pushing organizations to reconsider their brands and pressuring companies to be more intentional about their purpose. If employees and customers don't feel like they are part of the story, they will push for change—or go elsewhere.

Recently Disney decided not to speak out about controversial laws in Florida—a stance that impacted how Disney's employees perceived their workplace. Employees didn't accept the cognitive dissonance between their values and their employer's actions. They pushed back with protests and walkouts[5], forcing Disney to change its stance and re-evaluate how it expressed its purpose. This same dynamic shows up with customers more and more frequently[6]. When there is friction between customers' and employees' values and how they perceive organizations—they will push hard for change.
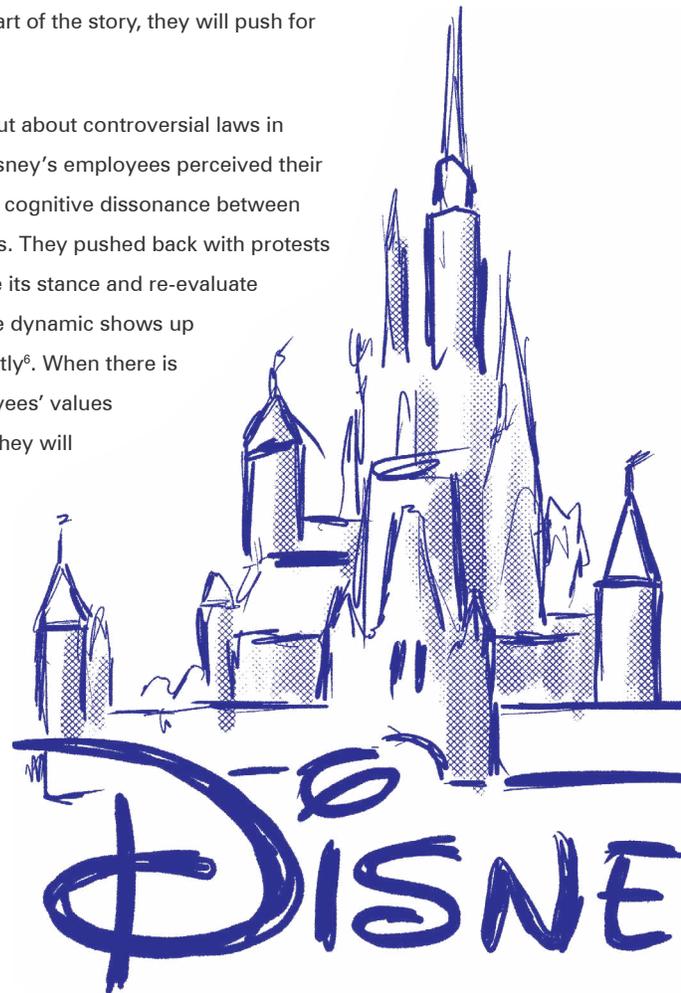
A Story You Tell Together

Understanding the complicated interplay between purpose and perception allows organizations to be intentional about the design and expression of their products, services, and people. Some organizations do this extremely well, and they tend to structure their teams and leadership roles to support this dynamic. They have empowered purpose and brand leadership at the top, holistic customer and employee listening programs, and incentive structures that reinforce behaviors that align with their purpose. They have robust brand strategies and guidelines with clear criteria used to make daily decisions. Every aspect of their experiences is designed intentionally. They focus on the employee experience because they know that it ultimately drives the customer experience.

Organizations that manage this interplay well have empowered brand leadership at the top and robust customer and employee listening on the ground.

Today, if a company has a perception problem, it is critical to zoom all the way out to purpose and then make sure the right brand and experience tools are built in-between. When everything works harmoniously, purpose becomes a story of organizational togetherness that is rooted in perceptions shared by all employees and customers.

References

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Other Tomorrows is an independent strategy and design studio that helps organizations imagine new experiences, products, and services. We believe when human insights drive visions of the future, meaningful transformation is possible.

Need help crafting a shared purpose with your customers and employees? Have a purpose but need to translate it into a strategic brand and experience? Get in touch.

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