



the starr conspiracy



Time to make your move

**GREAT BRANDS
ARE BUILT DURING
DOWN MARKETS**



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**DILIGENTLY
CRAFTED**

By Nancy Crabb, Racheal Bates, and Aaron Delgaty
With Erin Sanders, Scott Lucas, and Steve Smith



Down market?

INVEST IN YOUR BRAND NOW.



One immutable marketing truth is that companies that invest in brand outperform companies that don't. It's also an immutable truth that most growing tech companies say, "I can't afford to invest in my brand." And that was during good times. Now that the going is tougher, it's easier than ever to put off brand investment. That conclusion is simple, obvious, and absolutely wrong.



Recent research from **Boston Consulting Group** and **Google** confirms this. They found that only 10% of B2B companies are at the highest level of brand marketing maturity, but 64% were at the two lowest levels. Despite the fact that **strong brands show a 74% higher return on their brand marketing investment**, and hold a **46% larger market share** than weaker brands.



We know this is a tough year and investment is hard to come by. But we also know **great brands are built in tough times.**



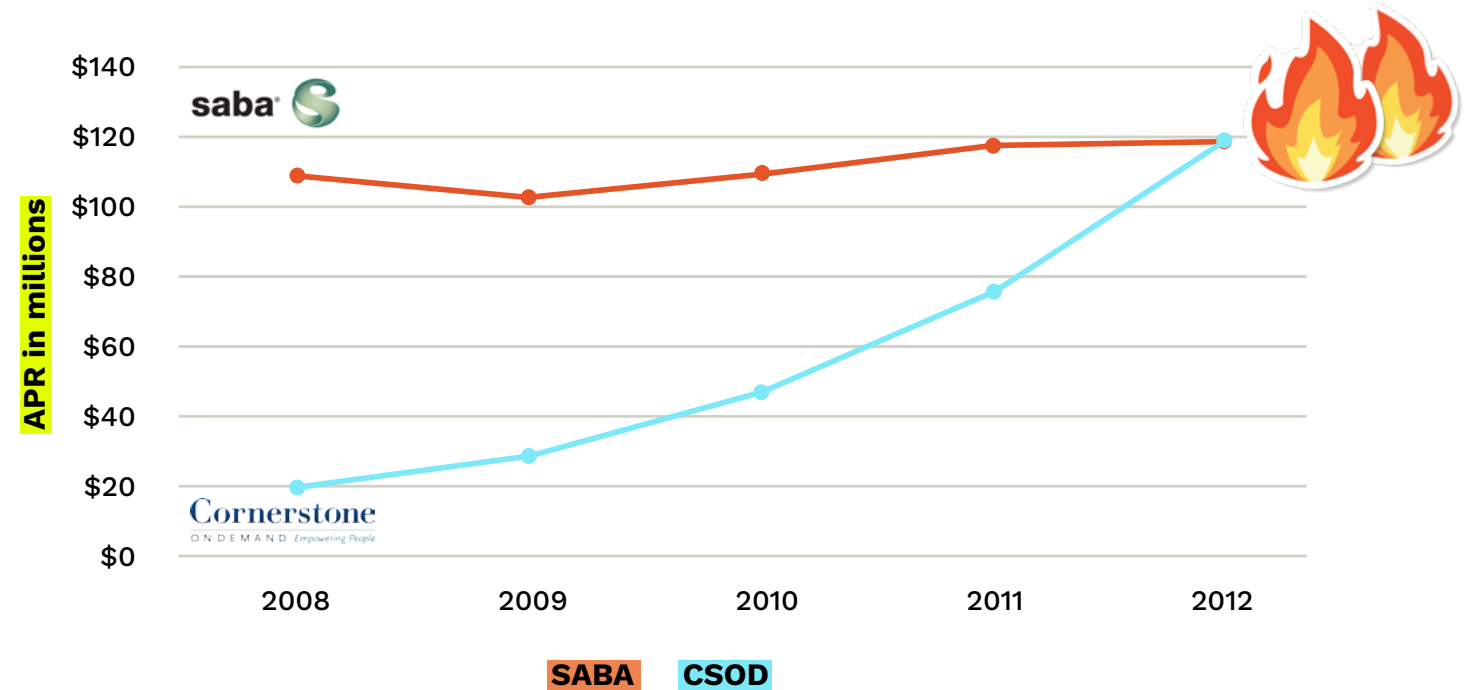
Proof: Cornerstone built the foundation for a multi-billion dollar brand during the Great Financial Crisis.

In 2008, Saba was the leader in corporate learning. Cornerstone OnDemand was an upstart learning brand that was generating only a fraction of Saba's revenue. However, coming out of the Great Financial Crisis, Cornerstone invested heavily in sales and marketing. By 2012, it had reached revenue parity with Saba. By 2020, it bought Saba.

If you can make it happen, now is exactly the right time to invest in your brand.

CASE STUDY

Cornerstone and the great financial crisis



FACT

Branding delivers ROI

When competition is tight and prospects scarce, you scrutinize budgets and justify expenses. Hard metrics are the gold standard. **So let's talk about the hard metrics of brand.**

If you measure success by signing new logos, shortening sales cycles, and growing current accounts, then you need to invest in your brand. BCG and Google found that "B2B companies that have reached the amplifying level of maturity perform far better, generating returns on their brand marketing investments that were **46 percentage points higher** than those of companies at the nascent level."

If your clients and prospects aren't buying now, don't be fooled into thinking they're not shopping. When they're ready, they'll be buying from brands they trust.

Brand trust is critical to 81% of buyers. A lack of trust is considered the deciding factor in the buying decision — often the deal breaker. Building brand trust may be playing the long game, but it becomes a shortcut to closing deals. So relegating the care and nurturing of your brand to next year's budget because this year kind of sucks doesn't necessarily save costs.



Building and maintaining strong brands — ones that customers recognize and trust — remains one of the best ways to reduce business risk.

Harvard Business Review



SURVEY SAYS

Y'all already believe in branding

The Starr Conspiracy conducted a brand study in February and March 2023, and nearly 1,400 Work Tech professionals responded. The results were unambiguous. 80% of responding companies, regardless of size, understood that **brand experience impacts every way businesses measure ROI.**



BUSINESS GROWTH



TALENT ACQUISITION AND RETENTION



EMPLOYER BRAND



SALES CONVERSATIONS



SHARE OF VOICE



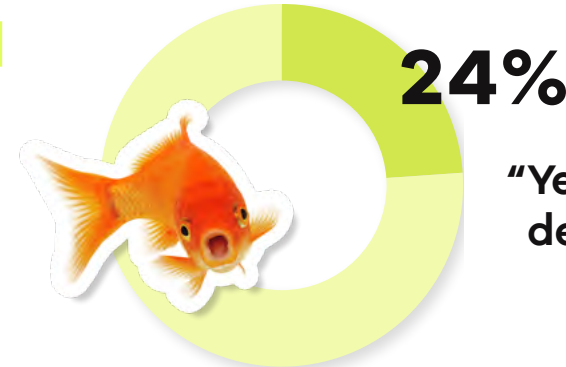
BRAND AFFINITY

SALES SUCCESS



Despite these beliefs, a serious brand gap exists. **Only 24%** of responding companies with 1,000+ employees were definite that their brand resonated with their market.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the time to address this is now — while the market is uncertain, headlines are scary, and budgets are challenging. Because your prospects are still shopping, and your competitors have probably gone quiet.

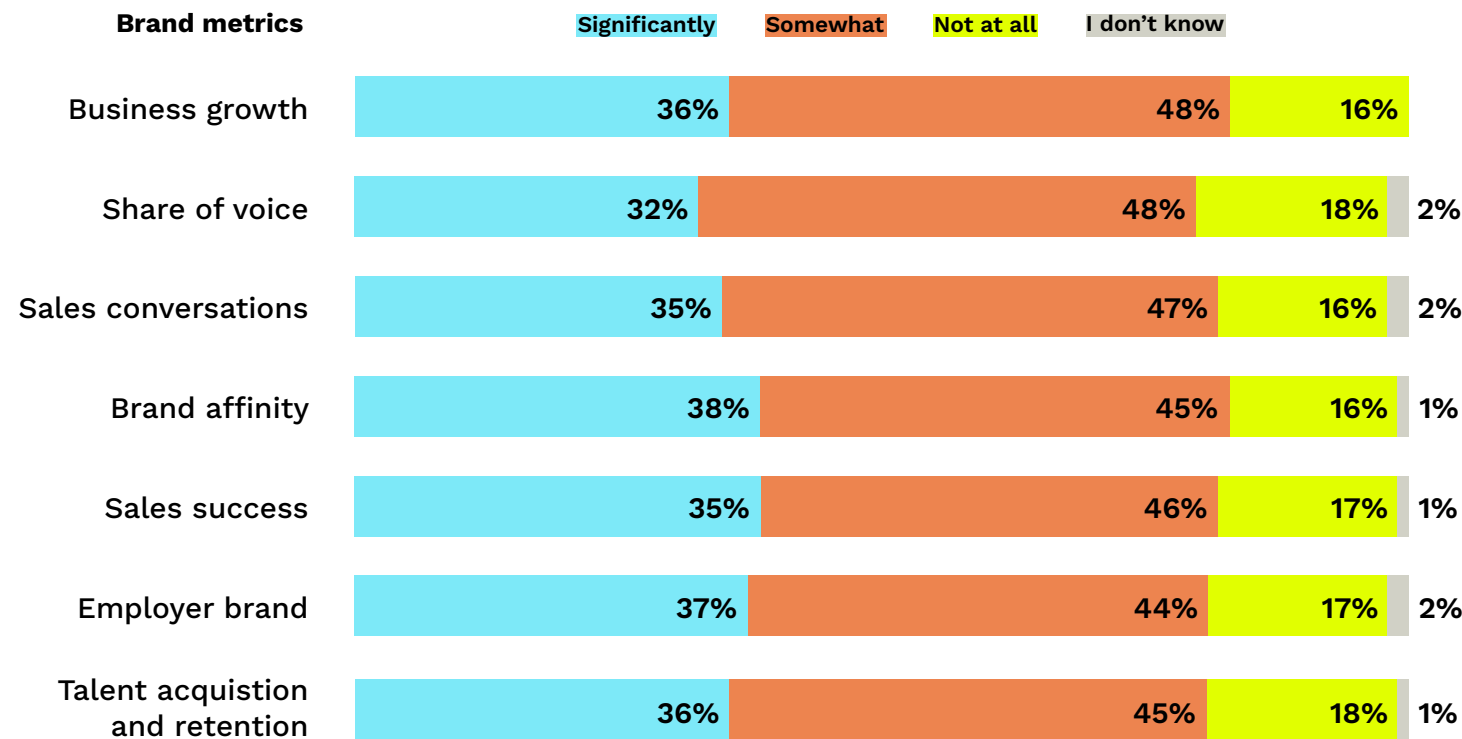


“Yes! Our brand definitely resonates”

SNAPSHOT

To what extent does your brand contribute to the following?

(1,340 respondents)



KEY TAKEAWAY

Most companies understand the impact of their brand on business success, but high-performing companies make brand investment a priority. **Even before merging to become UKG, Ultimate Software and Kronos both consistently invested in brand.** Marketing goals don't change in tough markets, only expectations and tactics. Brands bold enough to zig when everyone else zags outpace the competition.



Brand

Know the difference.



ing

Yes, we put a giant space in our favorite word for a reason; so that we can talk about the difference between your **brand** and your **branding**.



Brand is how others perceive your business — the experience you create that attracts a loyal following.



Branding is how you shape that perception — the tactical execution of your brand promise.

This nuance may seem fussy, but understanding how branding influences your brand is crucial to diagnosing what's on-brand or off. Like every initiative at The Starr Conspiracy, we start with strategy.



Brand strategy

Brand strategy is the “big picture” plan that builds brand equity and crushes the competition in a differentiated, relevant, and sustainable way. Just like the North Star, it keeps your brand on course.

Purpose, vision, target audience(s), brand positioning, and brand feel are foundational elements of brand strategy. Think you’re taking a risk with a new campaign message? Validate it against your brand strategy.

Brands with clear brand strategies and powerful value propositions generate a **74% higher return** on their brand marketing investments and own **46% larger market shares**, than weaker brands.

DOLLARS



74%

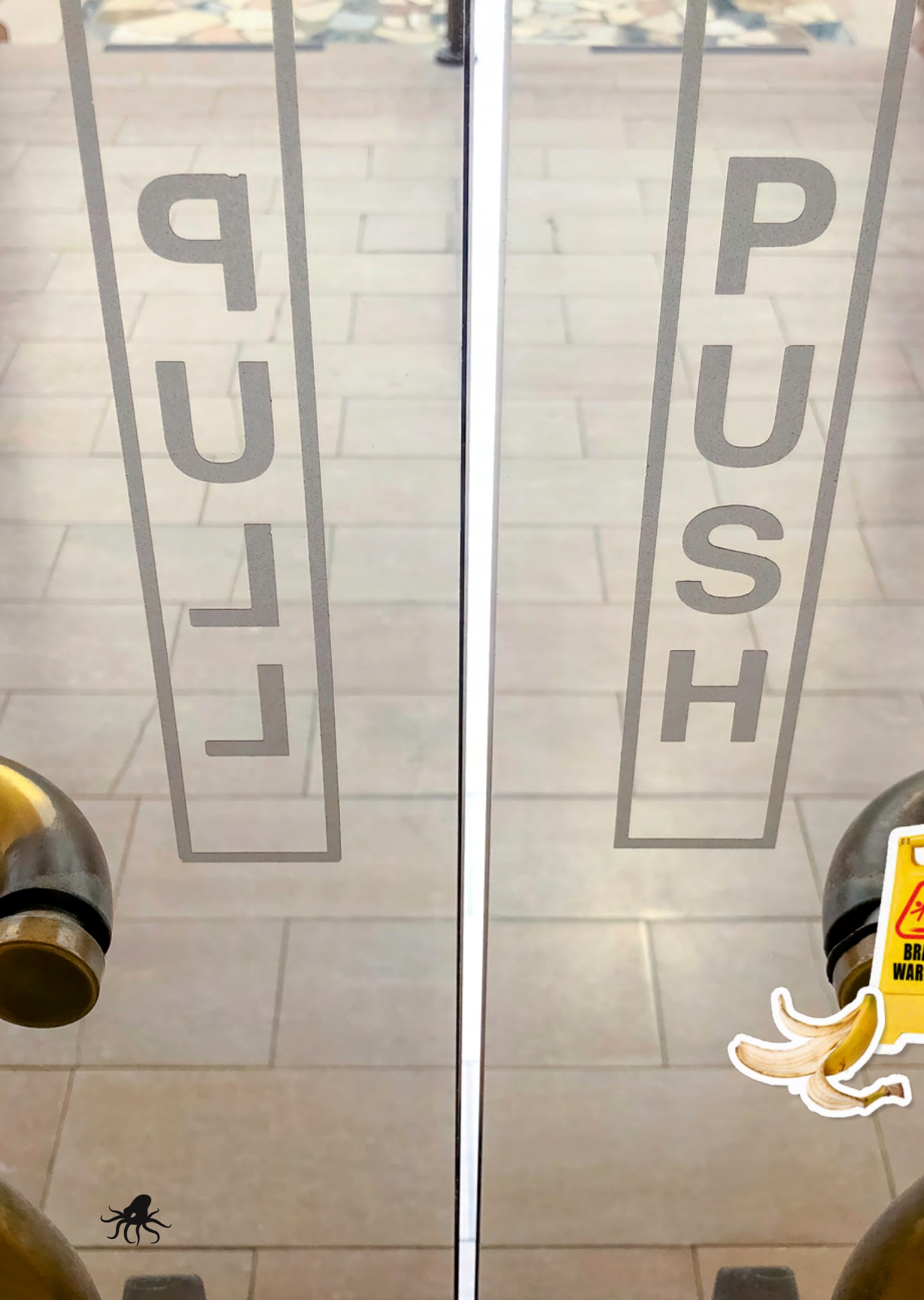
Brands with clear brand strategies and powerful value propositions generate **74% higher returns** on their brand marketing investments

YAY!!!



Fun fact about brands and the North Star

Polaris has not always been the North Star. Earth’s axis of rotation wobbles like a spinning top, completing one full rotation about every 26,000 years. As a result, the celestial pole passes to different stars over time. Your brand’s north star will change over time, too. Major innovations, acquisitions, and shifts in the market are cues for you to see if you are still pointing to the right North Star.

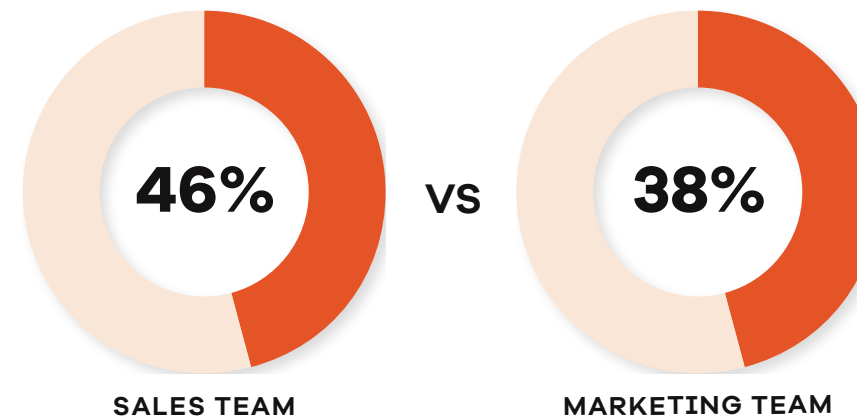


Brand voice

Brand voice is both what you say and how you say it.

Your voice is expressed in public-facing mediums like your brand and product messages, website, public relations, and social media. It is also expressed through your employees — in every one of their interactions with customers, partners, prospects, or future employees. Research shows that consumer trust strengthens after they have seen your **message repeated across three different channels**. Maintaining a consistent brand voice across all channels of communication matters builds trust.

Confidence in brand messaging varies across teams.



From our recent brand study, almost half of the respondents in sales roles are highly confident their brand messaging is unified across all channels. Those respondents who work in marketing (who ultimately create that messaging) are less certain. **How confident are you?**



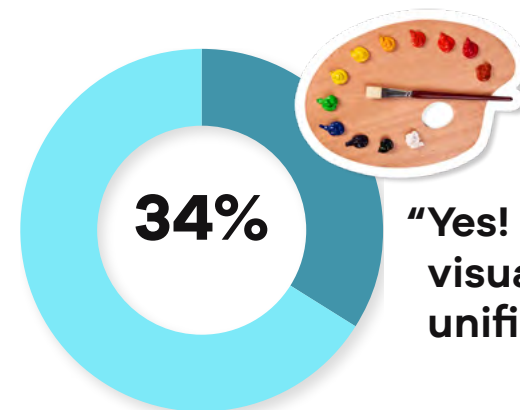
Brand identity

Brand identity includes **every visible part of your brand** — logo, color, graphic elements, patterns, textures, and images — and how you use them.

Most brands rely on free typefaces and a mix of custom and stock imagery. These choices (or necessities) place extra weight on how you combine your visual elements to create an authentic brand experience. Both authenticity and experience are key to your brand identity.

Your objective should be a highly flexible system aligned with your brand strategy. Not only will flexibility be critical to achieving differentiation against your competitors, but it will allow you to push your brand — scale across channels in a way that is aligned with your brand strategy and move with more agility and certainty. And if we've learned anything from the past three years, the ability to pivot is part of what defines who sinks and who swims.

Only 34% of respondents in creative roles were highly confident that their brand visuals were unified across their website, sales materials, and other internal and external assets.



“Yes! Our brand visuals are unified.”



KEY TAKEAWAY

Branding ≠ brand. Your brand strategy, brand voice, and brand identity equal your brand. **Officevibe is a great example of a Work Tech brand that strategically uses each element of its design system to amplify the overall brand.** Its visual language is robust and full of personality, allowing the product, marketing, and website to create a seamless experience.

Experience matters

Consumers are human beings, and humans typically make **decisions based on emotions**, then backfill them with reasons.

The real power of brand is creating an emotional connection with buyers. People buy from brands they trust — and trust comes from positive experiences. Attracting buyers can be expensive and time-consuming, which makes it even more important to keep the ones you've got. Your ROI will thank you.

WHAT'S YOUR BRAND EXPERIENCE (BX)?

Brand experience isn't a new idea. But who crafts those experiences and how? That's what has shifted. The 20th-century love affair with highly orchestrated, live events for shareholders and business associates has faded. The digital domain became the fertile ground for corporate communications, personal outreach, influencers, and employee brand advocates. Buyers who have been wooed for decades by consumer brands now expect more sophistication in B2B marketing — they expect an experience.

Today, **Brand Experience (BX)** is a major component of **Customer Experience (CX)**.



We're living in a remarkable age. For the first time ever as a species, branding has become democratized. It is no longer just about a profit and loss statement or shareholder value. **Branding has become a profound manifestation of the human spirit, the human condition. It's about belonging to a tribe, to a religion, to a family.** Our ability to brand our beliefs gives us that sense of belonging.

[Debbie Millman](#), branding author, educator, and strategist



BX is the critical first step

If **Brand Experience** is the consumer's perception of your company as a result of direct or indirect exposure, then **Customer Experience** is the perception of the quality of time spent with your company.

First impressions are critical. Most prospects' first exposure to your brand is through your website, social campaigns, or sales outreach — not your product or demo.

No matter how groundbreaking your product is, you have to create a memorable first impression. The average viewer spends **54 seconds** — less than a minute — on a web page. But hey, no pressure.

Customer Experience is swirling in the enterprise software zeitgeist for a reason. **Salesforce** research shows that **80% of customers consider the experience a company provides as important as its products and services**. That's a big reason that **The Starr Conspiracy** has expanded its focus to CX. That starts with Brand Experience but includes Marketing, Sales, Product, and Customer Success Experiences. BX is the first touchstone, building the awareness and trust that leads to higher conversions and **better customers**.

BX is where you attract your ideal customers — what we call your **radical buyers**, your ride-or-die customers.



0:54
and counting



In 2021 we found that only **28% of leaders in marketing, brand, or CX** have processes in place to ensure that brand strategy feeds into CX design and delivery

Qualtrics

Trust is the impact of BX on CX

We think only one metric truly matters: trust. Trust encourages fast decisions, honest communication, meaningful connections, optimism, and community. Trust is hard to gain and easy to lose. It's also the foundation of any successful customer relationship.

Trust means you'll have:

- 1 More positive sales experiences
- 2 Deeper and greater employee satisfaction
- 3 Better overall customer experiences
- 4 More honest and useful feedback
- 5 Authentic engagement
- 6 Greater brand affinity and longevity

Trust allows your brand to work for you, not the other way around.



To put it simply: Your brand is how your customers perceive you, and branding is the strategy you use to create that perception. BX ensures that the brand stays true to its purpose.

Forbes

KEY TAKEAWAY

Your brand is nothing without branding — and neither will work for you without creating an experience. High performing brands make this connection and see the opportunity of using BX and CX together. A great example is **Headspace for Work**, which has created a seamless BX to CX connection that builds a solid foundation for everything that follows.



The power of defining moments



We believe that experiences are big blocks of related moments — **defining moments** — that exist on a spectrum of good to bad, positive to negative. Only brands willing to commit to value in every interaction — at all stages of the customer journey — create the defining moments that transition a memorable brand experience into an unshakeable customer experience.

Here's why defining moments matter. As our founder Bret Starr explained in **Defining Moments: A Strategic Framework for Employee Experience That Creates Social Good and Purpose for Employees and Companies**, "the closer in time we are to any specific moment, the more these moments drive our perception of life quality. But the further we get from the moment, the more our perception of an overall experience is driven by our reflection on the most significant moments comprising the overall experience — moments that define the experience. Defining moments."



TL;DR Defining moments build brand confidence.



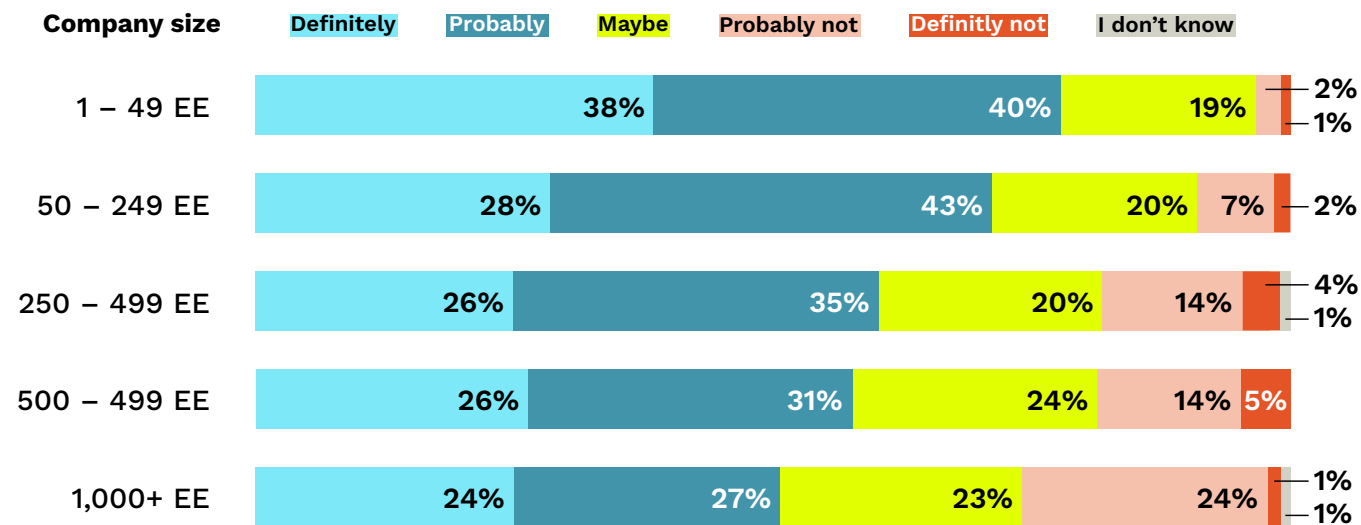
Our brand study revealed that **brand confidence isn't consistent across the Work Tech spectrum.**

We found that **brand confidence was significantly higher among smaller companies** (1-499 FTEs), particularly among representatives of the smallest organizations (1-49 FTEs). Conversely, larger companies, particularly **the largest companies** (1,000+ FTE) **feel the least confident** about many aspects of their branding. This downward shift seems to start around 250-499 FTEs.

SNAPSHOT

Overall, do you feel your brand resonates with your market?

(1,386 respondents)



WHAT'S GOING ON?

It's possible that smaller companies find it easier to maintain brand vision and consistency because of their scale and age.

Fewer and more-aligned internal stakeholders allow smaller brands to be more daring and agile with their branding, creating more distinction. Larger companies are more complex and often are wrangling merged brands due to acquisitions.

There is no limit to how you create meaningful interactions through your brand experience but for the sake of 100 fewer pages in this ebook, we'll limit our recommendations to three buckets: **branding, marketing, and human interactions.**



1 Branding

Remember, branding is how you shape the perception of your brand. It's the tangible expression of your company's identity. Brand and product messaging, visual hierarchy, color, texture, and imagery are your primary tools. It's not enough to differentiate from your competitors. Standing out is important, but only if how you choose to stand out resonates with your brand's purpose, vision, and brand attributes.

The effectiveness of your branding can be measured by tracking:

- ✓ Emotional connection
- ✓ Brand affinity
- ✓ Recall and recognition
- ✓ Share of voice
- ✓ Functional associations
- ✓ Win/loss analysis



2 Marketing

It's not the goal of marketing to promise what the customer experience will be; it's the goal of marketing to deliver it. Whether that could mean delivering an on-brand unique experience to those interacting with your brand for the first time. Or delivering on promises made through the company's vision and values — the defining moments need to be there, and marketing needs to help deliver them.

The effectiveness of your marketing can be measured by tracking:

- ✓ Desired actions
- ✓ Engagement
- ✓ Brand awareness
- ✓ MQLs
- ✓ Social media followers

3 Human interactions

If you create a Venn diagram from customer, brand, and employee experiences, actual human beings occupy the center. Most people are hard-wired for relationships and eager for experiences rooted in empathy, expectation, and engagement. Brand advocates live within your employee and customer base. All they need is encouragement and a platform.

The effectiveness of your outreach can provide:

- ✓ Customer insights
- ✓ Employee insights
- ✓ Real-time feedback and measurement

And what do you do with those insights? Build a better brand. Build better relationships. Build materials to help your employees build a better brand and better relationships. You get what we're sayin'?



KEY TAKEAWAY

High performing brands create with intention, and consistency in that intention allows them to cut through the noise. You can't create an experience without defining moments. And those experiences need to be connected, from the first touch to the last.

A great Work Tech example is MasterClass. It has capitalized on the brand equity of its B2C work to customize its messaging to key B2B audiences while maintaining consistency in branding and building value in the learning experience.



Evolution or revolution?



Brand work is hard and if your audience is engaged, you'll find that everyone has an opinion — employees, advisory boards, partners, customers, influencers, and the market.

That's to be expected, but it can be especially tricky when you are considering a rebrand. The key is knowing how to navigate those opinions, and what steps to take to get you from where you're at to where you need to be.

When do you need to rebrand? Does your brand need an evolution or a revolution? How far do you need to take it? These are tough questions for many brands. The biggest factors are understanding how long your brand has sat stagnant, whether or not your brand aligns with who you are, and what business shifts you've made or are making. Some considerations from our considerate experts:



Here are some key indicators you may need a **brand evolution**:

- ✓ Your brand is scattered and lacks alignment across your full experience
- ✓ Acquisitions have taken place
- ✓ Expansion of product or service that shifts your market category or go-to-market approach
- ✓ You've fallen far out of pace with competitors
- ✓ Negative sentiment from employees, customers, and prospects
- ✓ You're on track to IPO or be acquired
- ✓ You haven't updated your brand in the last five years



Sometimes, a brand evolution just isn't enough. Here are some key indicators you may need a **full rebrand:**

- ✓ Name change
- ✓ A merger has taken place
- ✓ Your brand has a negative connotation with your target audience
- ✓ Your brand doesn't reflect the vision, values, and purpose of your company
- ✓ You haven't undergone a full rebrand in the last decade



Rebrands will be stressful. There's a lot at stake and many opinions to juggle. That doesn't mean you shouldn't rebrand. In fact, the more nervous you are, the more likely that rebranding was the right choice. If you're making small updates or overhauling your brand, communication is key. Don't expect your choices to please everyone, but you can create a rally point by rolling out your brand in a thoughtful and inclusive way.

Spend as much time on change management as on the brand work itself.

The idea is to go "inside-out." Start with your own employees, educate them, and empower them to carry the excitement forward. Then take the rebrand out to customers, then analysts and influencers, then the broader market.

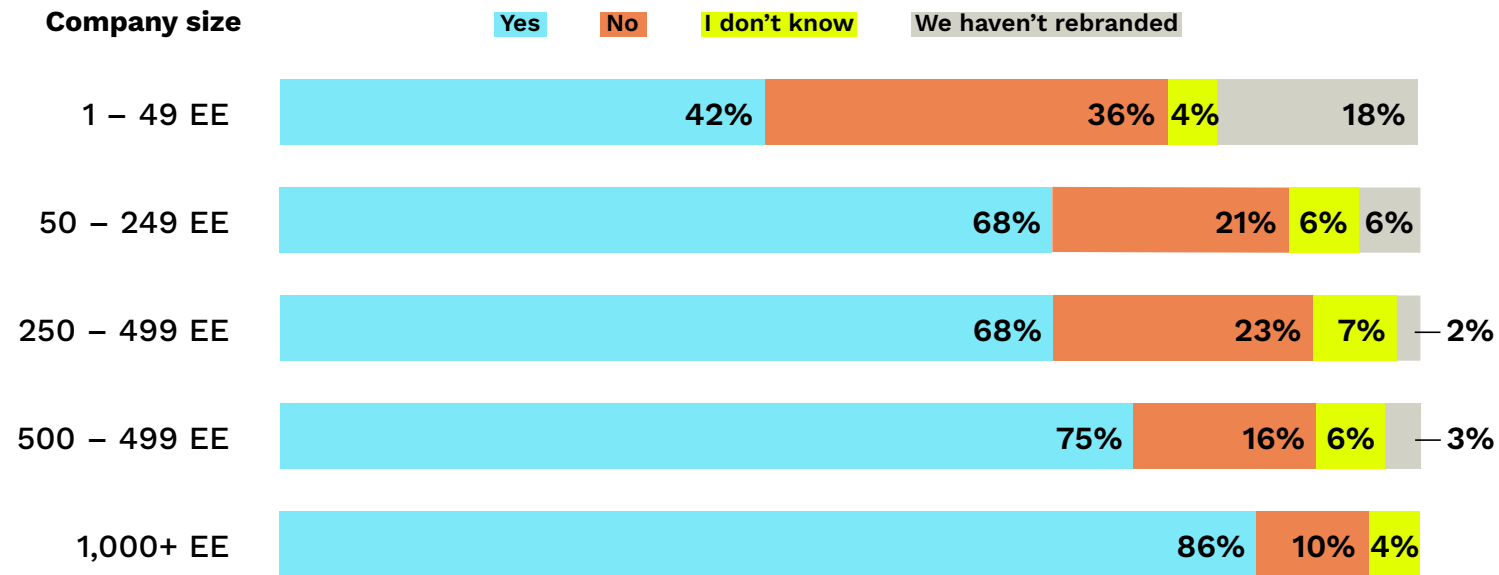


Larger brands are significantly more likely to experience significant pushback from internal stakeholders, but it's also worth noting that larger companies are significantly more likely to have rebranded.

SNAPSHOT

The last time you rebranded, did you experience significant pushback?

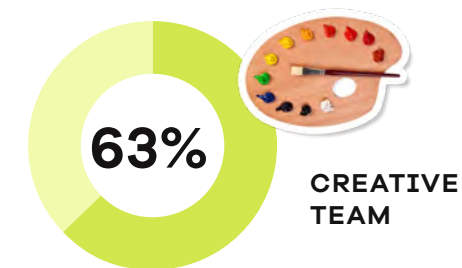
(1,386 respondents)



KEY TAKEAWAY

Pushback is always a risk, but brands that outperform their competition have always had to take leaps. Identify your key stakeholders early and don't crowdsource opinions unless you're a masochist. Remember: **Great branding will make you feel uncomfortable.** Some people will love it, and some will hate it. That's OK. Consensus is the enemy of quality.

Marketing, sales, and creative professionals experience **similar levels of pushback** to rebrands



Act sooner, not later

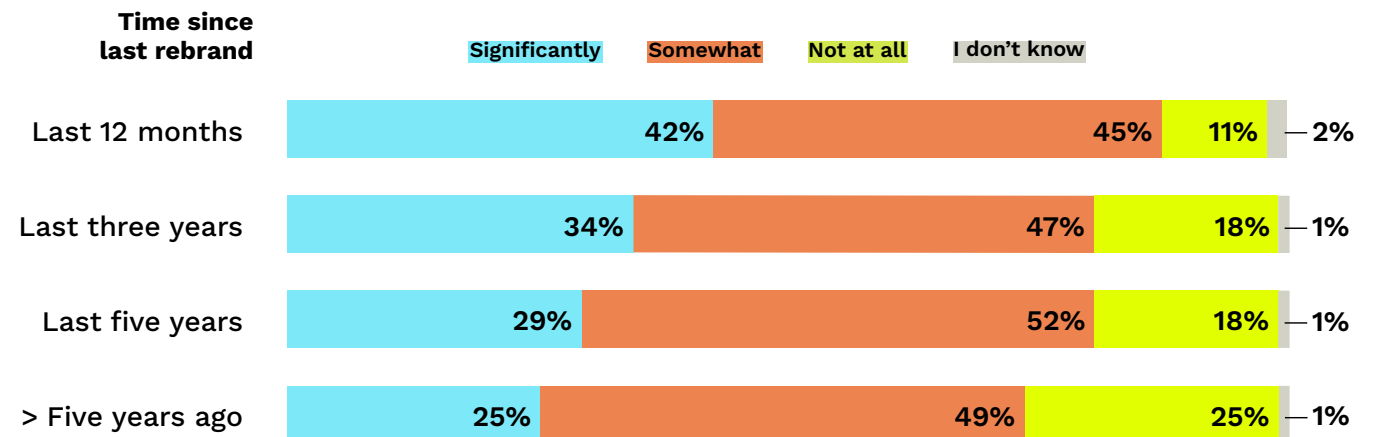


Brands are hungry animals and feeding them will be expensive. Whether you're building, rebuilding, or grimly hanging on, brands require a healthy mix of budget, people, and creativity. And the 12-18 months you spent planning, strategizing, creating, and introducing the latest iteration of your brand will need to be repeated faster than you might expect.

The conventional wisdom is that companies should rebrand every 7-10 years with frequent updates along the way. **Yet our study shows that the effectiveness of brand diminishes over time — significantly so after 5 years.** The older a brand gets, the less impactful it is perceived to be.

Since your last rebranding, how has brand impacted your business growth?

(1,340 respondents)



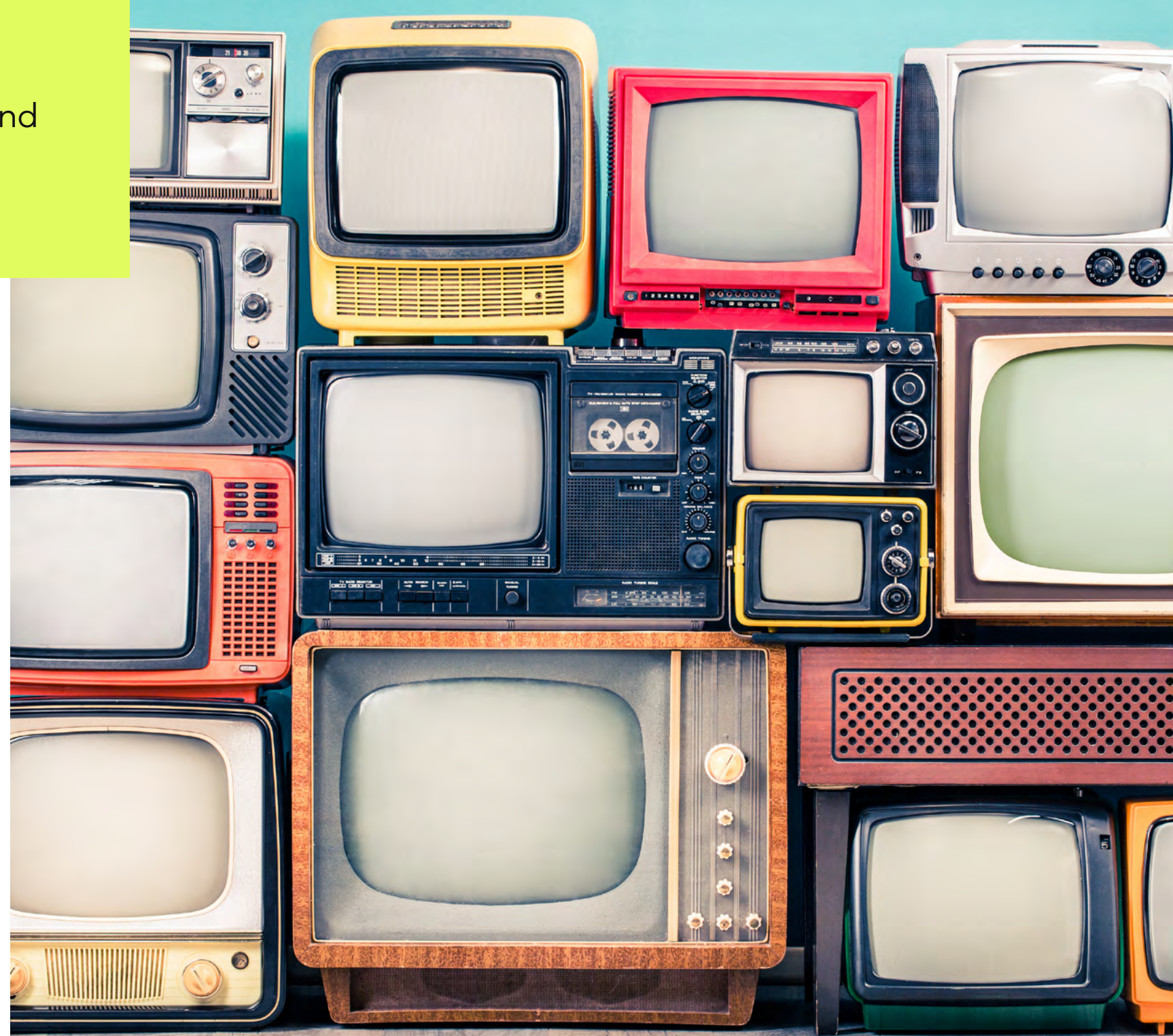
If you want to maintain the effectiveness of your brand over time, **consider these steps** for its proper care and maintenance.

1 SUPPORT YOUR BRANDING WITH A ROBUST AND FLEXIBLE VISUAL LANGUAGE.

Spend the time upfront to explore how your brand elements will be used. Make sure your design system scales to cover all the use cases you know, and most you can imagine. This means for every hour of love you put into the design of your logo, put five into thinking about color, typography, patterns, textures, layout grids, photography and illustration styles, user experience, and UI elements.

As designers and marketers, we used to believe the logo was the most important branding element. And that used to be true — probably. But then the internet happened. Now **every brand has the opportunity and the expectation to create memorable brand experiences.**

Is your logo still important? Hell yeah. Is it your brand? That's a hard no.



2 CREATE, TEST, MEASURE, AND ITERATE.

Maintaining your brand is a never-ending cycle. At a minimum, take a snapshot of share of voice, social engagement, MQLs, and internal brand sentiment before you make a major update. Then measure again every 3-6 months.

Fast-growing brands will need to test and iterate at quicker intervals. If company growth is driven by expanding product and service lines, then outpacing the competition often means you're also outpacing your own brand strategy. This is especially true if expansion is accomplished through acquisition.

Annual **brand and competitive audits** provide a detailed snapshot of how your brand competes in the marketplace. Identifying your strengths and weaknesses is invaluable, taking the guesswork out of strategic decisions.

Evaluating your brand's visual identity for **differentiation and relevance** can reveal opportunities to create space in a competitive marketplace and increase brand awareness and recognition.

The insights you gain can save you time and money. **Consistent branding is simply more efficient and cost-effective.** Brand alignment allows for finer control of marketing campaigns, creating better engagement that moves customers through the buyer's journey faster.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Evolving your brand doesn't have to mean blowing the whole thing up. To stay relevant, and have a high-performing brand, you need to address what needs addressing, and bring along who needs to be brought along. Don't let your brand sit on the sidelines and wither away. **Just look at Axonify. It brought new life to its brand through the build-out of a dynamic brand system.** They amplified what was already successful — and the results are stunning.



Conclusion

HERE'S ONE FINAL BRAND STORY FROM THE TECH'S LAST BIG DOWNTURN.

There was a founder who scooped up the remnants of a few failed startups from the dot-com bust. He had an idea to take what was previously thought of as a tactical back-office people function (performance management) and turn it into strategic value driver for businesses. That founder was **Lars Dalgaard**. The company was **SuccessFactors**. At the end of 2011, **SAP** bought **SuccessFactors** for \$3.5 billion.

Brand built SuccessFactors. It wasn't built by splashing cash everywhere from the get-go — although that came later. The SuccessFactors brand was built by executing its brand strategy consistently over time. **The right brand, built on a polarizing idea, executed consistently over time with the right amount of hustle can turn a spare-parts bin of product into a multi-billion dollar enterprise. THAT** is the ROI of brand investment.

Risk vs. reward is huge right now. If you are looking for the right time to invest in brand, you'll never find it. If you look for the right moment? Well, you'll see that the moment is now.

Good luck! And, if we can help, drop us a line.



When the going gets tough, we know it's tough to invest in brand. Right now, the tech industry is facing its biggest gut-check moment since 2001. Everybody is nervous. Brands are scared to spend money when the end doesn't seem to be in sight. However, **now is *precisely the right time* to find the courage to make brand moves.** It's rarely the best product that wins big. It's almost always the best brand.

Contact us today



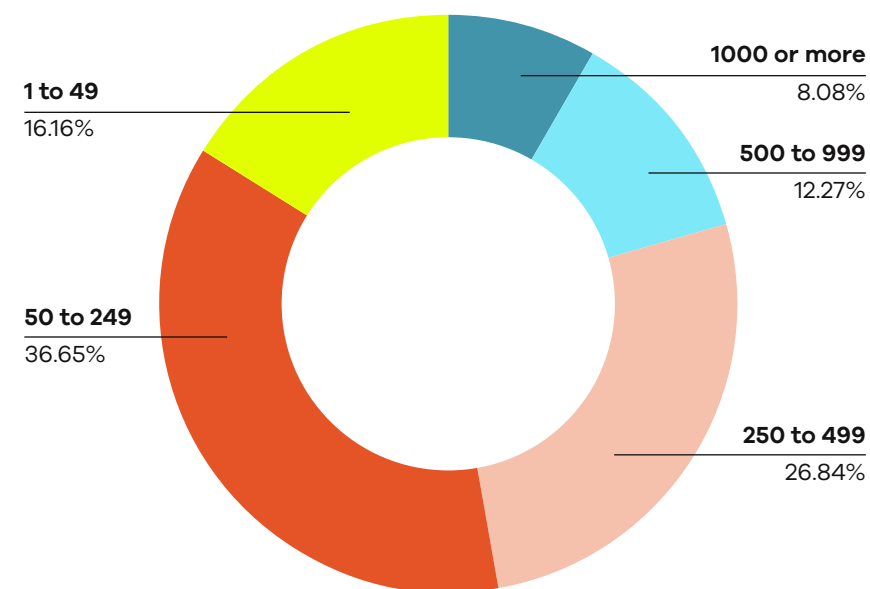
Methodology and demographics



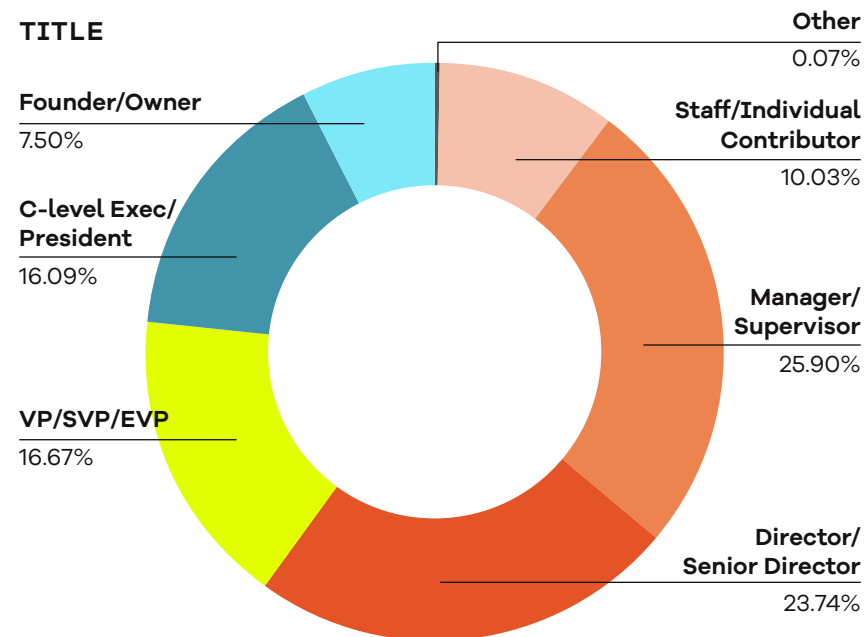
This report is based on a brand research survey to Work Tech professionals across a range of job roles fielded in February and March 2023. We received 1,386 responses from participants in the United States.



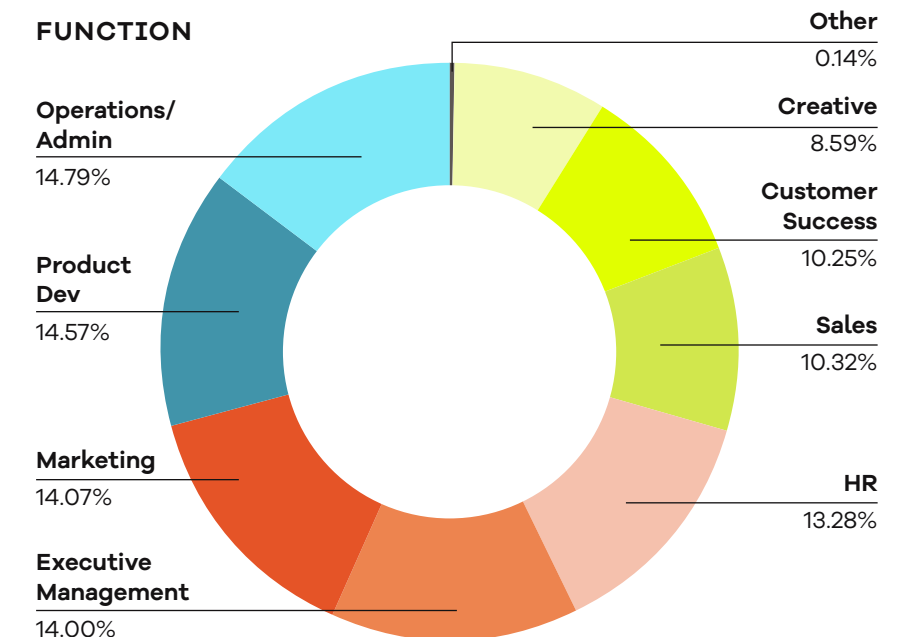
COMPANY SIZE



TITLE



FUNCTION



About the Starr Conspiracy

The Starr Conspiracy is an Experience Agency that creates defining moments across the CX spectrum, including brand, marketing, sales, product, and customer success. We are Work Tech industry experts, and when you work with us, you see the value faster as we co-create better experiences for employees, customers, and shareholders.

Strategy

- Brand strategy
- Positioning
- Brand & product naming
- Go-to-market strategy
- Growth strategy
- CX and EX strategies
- Integrated marketing strategy

Message

- Competitive evaluation
- Persona development
- Applied messaging
- Enablement
- Testing and validation

Brand

- Logo & visual identity
- Brand & style guidelines
- Brand & competitive audits
- Collateral development
- Event experience

Research

- Brand/buyer research
- Customer analysis
- CX and EX research
- Competitor analysis
- Conjoint pricing analysis
- Buyer journey mapping

Development

- Website design
- Wireframe development
- User interface (UI)
- User experience (UX)

Content

- Content strategy
- Editorial Calendar
- Thought leadership
- Content marketing
- Video storytelling
- Sales enablement
- Promotional copy

Design

- Campaign development
- Outdoor
- Broadcast & video
- Packaging
- Custom photography
- Custom illustration

Digital

- Media planning & strategy
- Reporting & analytics
- Media management
- Vendor relations
- SEO strategy & execution
- Comprehensive audits

Public Relations/Analyst Relations

- Pitching
- Product & company launches
- Speaker placements
- Awards and sponsorships
- Contributed articles
- Pitch deck development
- PR audits & strategy recos
- Media monitoring
- Media training
- Media list development
- Topic research

