Implementing a new Core Banking System by Building a Project Brand and Leveraging the Power of Storytelling

By

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Introduction

Background

The National Bank of Abu Dhabi is in the midst of an ambitious growth strategy to achieve its 2018 vision. Part of the strategic plan is to embed a new operating model to ensure the bank is agile enough to compete in an ever-changing market place and become the World’s number 1 Arab Bank. This is the first time that we pushed the boundaries with communications; the bank is known for being conservative and not always at the forefront of the latest communication trends.

The National Bank of Abu Dhabi (NBAD) was founded in 1968 by the decree of His Highness the Late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, then the Ruler of Abu Dhabi.

Ranked as one of the top 50 safest banks in the world and the safest bank in the Middle East, NBAD currently operates across 17 countries on five continents.

The Core Banking Project was launched to streamline and standardize existing core banking technology and processes around the world. One goal of the transformation was to create a consistent look and feel for our customers regardless of where they do their banking. This project was designed to ensure the supporting technology and processes were in place and then to build a more collaborative and customer-centric culture.

Study Objective

The objective of this report is to demonstrate the communications and branding we embedded as part of our overall change management approach when rolling out the new core banking system and associated processes. We built a brand for the project, and embedded stories in our communications messages to increase engagement and educate employees about the upcoming changes.

Summary of Topics

This case study will demonstrate and highlight how branding, storytelling and leadership alignment activities supported implementing a new core banking system and influencing existing culture.

Topics to be covered include:

- Project Branding
- Leveraging the Power of Stories
- Leadership Alignment

The First Challenge: Push Through the Resistance

The bank was losing retail market share and corporate market share was also stagnating. Competitors were outperforming us and offering ever more innovative banking solutions to their clients. As one of the largest banks in the United Arab Emirates we needed to make some transformational changes to be able to better serve our customers and increase market share in the years ahead.

We were part of the change team responsible for implementing a new core banking system across multiple countries; it was a one of the
largest implementations of the decade. The change would automate many manual processes using new technology and create new supporting processes and new job roles. The announcement caused significant resistance from employees working at branches and within the operations team. The existing core banking system was familiar to them and a daily basis to process transactions. Additionally people feared that the new system would require fewer employees due to process automation. Our challenge was to maintain engagement and momentum, while educating employees about the upcoming transformation.

**Second Challenge: Communicate More Effectively**

The existing culture was siloed, fragmented and very transactional. We needed to improve customer service, embed collaboration and teamwork in the culture, and encourage more cross selling of our products. In addition, internal communications has been very weak on previous projects and not much attention has been paid to ensuring a smooth transition to the future state for both the employees and middle managers. Previous implementations had left a bad taste because they lacked formal communications and offered little training.

**Solution**

**Creating a Project Brand**

The purpose of building a project brand was to help leadership and the project team to clearly convey the project’s expected benefits, to build a tribe of supporters amongst stakeholders, and to ensure the change vision became a reality. Creating a brand for a change project was a great way to generate a buzz, increase awareness, ensure consistency in our communications and stand out among a multitude of other initiatives. It was also important for the leadership team and project sponsors to recognize the value of creating a project brand, as they had a huge part to play in launching and growing the brand.

This project focused on improving efficiency, reducing manual processes, and allowing agents to spend more time interacting with customers. When developing our brand we took the following steps:

**Selected project name**

We called the project Oxygen (to signify that we would be breathing new life into the organization). We ran a competition among a group of stakeholders to generate ideas for a name, then cast a public poll on our intranet.

**Selected graphics**

We created a campaign background that was distinctive in design, making it easy to see at a glance. This formed part of the branding for all our newsletters, roll ups, intranet content, PowerPoint slides etc. An important consideration was that the graphics stood out across a range of channels.

*Graphics design selected.*
Created tagline

Our new core banking system is designed to remove the majority of our manual processes so that we can focus more on serving our customers. Thus the tagline used was:

“The only manual process left is the customer handshake.”

Created a project mascot design

We designed Neo to be our mascot and change ambassador. Neo was used in all campaign materials and became an e-learning avatar for our online training courses. The mascot essentially became another voice of change and a member of the team. It generated more excitement when the message contained a picture of Neo rather than standard text-based communications. In addition, Neo is fictional and therefore perceived as neutral. This was useful in delivering messages about the change because people were not distracted by the persona of a real person.

Explained the Importance of the Project Branding to Sponsors

This was an important step because ultimately the sponsor had to be involved with launching and growing the project brand. The sponsor needed to understand the benefits of branding the project. We also had a branding expert from a top agency provide an overview of the importance of branding along with case studies of how project branding has worked in comparable organizations and projects.

Gathered Feedback

We needed to ensure that we understood what was working in terms of branding. We aimed to find out through surveys if employees had paid attention to the key messages and if they liked the style of the messages; and we also assessed whether the messages had increased engagement and helped to prepare employees for the change. But we wanted to do more.

Leveraging the Power of Stories

“A fact is interesting, an idea is important, but only a good story, a good argument, a well-crafted narrative is amazing, never to be forgotten.” - Kevin Kelly
We know that conventional communication methods often fail when we want to engage, teach and inspire our stakeholders about change. The age-old technique of storytelling is powerful because it addresses emotions and persuades with knowledge and ideas rather than with data or statistics.

Therefore, storytelling aligned to our project brand was selected as a communication tool to help us to turn factual, data-driven information about implementing the new IT system into a powerful story that the target audience would remember.

Storytelling has been around since we lived in tribes and gathered around a fire at night to share stories of our experiences, teach others about the past and learn lessons. Our human consciousness is embedded and enacted in story. Research conducted by Professor Allan Fels, AO, Dean of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government has found that 70% of what we learn is through stories. Therefore, we decided that stories would be a great way to engage, excite and teach people about where we were going as an organization and to support the core banking project.

We made sure that each of our stories had six attributes: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional and action-oriented. Finally, certain stories are more effective because of how they are delivered.

When building our story around the upcoming changes, we used our mascot Neo as the main character and he became the hero for driving change. He had been working for the National Bank of Neolite and had been awarded Employee of the Year. As a reward, he was sent to The National Bank of Abu Dhabi to share his knowledge and help others to go through similar to those he had faced.

Neo came from the future; a society that was very advanced that was very efficient and could adapt to new changes quickly. Neo was sent to be a change ambassador to support the roll-out of a new core banking system which would revolutionize the way the bank interacted and served both its retail and corporate customers.

Neo became an additional member of the change management team and was an additional messenger to help build awareness and knowledge around the upcoming changes.

We found that telling stories through visuals and graphics made oral stories and written text more concrete and memorable. We sent a number of e-postcards and info graphics to our stakeholders to provide key messages and start to educate our employees.

We also developed a Know How e-learning library to store all our project documentation and training materials, and Neo was used as an avatar to guide employees though the information.

**Developing the campaign**

We made sure that our story had a clear theme, a plot, at least one character and a progression of events that would lead to celebrating milestones, highlighting individual achievements and sharing important information.

We also ensured that it illustrated the reason for change and what the future would look like. We used Neo from the future to explain how things could be different and more efficient.

We wanted to create a realistic picture of the future state for the audience. For example we used “Day in the Life” scenarios of Neo working at The National Bank of Neolite serving happy customers. We personalized it by showing Neo as a bank employee so he could empathize with what people would be feeling. . All of these
tactics helped employees to better visualize the change for themselves.

When planning the campaign messages we considered the following:

1. Create the Context
   - Explain why previous solutions or projects have failed
   - What are the risks of not changing?
   - Why are we doing this now?

2. Explain the Concept
   - What is the idea for change?
   - How does this link to our overall brand and story?
   - What is the call to action?
   - What expectations do you have for your people?

3. Explain the Vision
   - What is the opportunity?
   - How will we get there?
   - How much commitment will you demonstrate as a leader of change?

4. Deal with Conflict
   - How will you address resistance?
   - How will you deal with a negative reaction?

5. Recognize existing Conventions
   - Which myths need challenging?
   - What are the conventions held within our organization that will hinder the project?

6. Envision a New Consciousness
   - How will we reach a new way of thinking and acting?

7. Build Connection
   - Discuss the proposed change and related issues in real human terms
   - Why do we need to do this?

8. Explain the Impact
   - What will the new world look like?
   - How will we behave in the future state?
   - What’s in it for us, our community and the world?

Leadership Alignment

A successful implementation requires fully engaged and aligned leaders. It was essential to identify the core team of change leaders for this change effort, ensure they were fully aligned behind the vision, and made accountable for the implementation of change.

When there are inconsistent messages about a change, employees will fill the void with rumors and speculation. In practice it takes 10 times the effort to correct misinformation than it does to deliver the correct information first time. Most communications plans do not add contingency to re-deliver messages 10 times.

We dedicated extra time to ensure leadership was well prepared to deliver messages in an effective way. Additionally, we prepared middle management to help them cascade these messages without diluting them or missing key pieces of information.

Our aim was to prepare our leaders to be aligned to our project brand and communications strategy and be able to effectively cascade messages throughout the organization. We wanted them to tell powerful
stories while conveying the key facts that needed to be shared.

We ran training sessions to provide an overview of the brand and the communications campaign and where they needed to be involved in creating and delivering content.

We focused on explaining that employees would have questions in the following 5 areas:

**Key Information:** Employees want to know what will be involved; they need to know the facts and the rationale behind a change. As a leader of change it is a common mistake to assume that employees will see the change rationale as clearly as leaders do. Leaders should spend time ensuring employees start to see the change the way they see it. Employees will want to know the details so they can understand when and how they will be impacted.

**Personal:** Employees are always going to be thinking “What’s in it for me?” (WIIFM). Leaders need to think carefully about how to ease employees’ minds in this regard, even if they don’t have all the answers; it needs to be made clear that employees will be essential to the success of the project. Leaders should be aware that employees will have concerns about how a change might affect them personally. There is great truth in the following quote: “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” John C. Maxwell

**Purpose:** What is the purpose of the change and will it make a difference to the organization? Essentially, leaders need to highlight the benefits and desired outcomes, such as how will this change improve things internally, make the organization more competitive, increase revenue, and so on?

**Implementation:** Common questions employees can include: How will this be delivered? When will it be implemented? Who will deliver this? How much involvement is required from employees before and during the implementation stage? How will we be kept up to date with progress? These questions might not have detailed answers up front, but the leadership team should be ready to start answering these questions in more detail as the project progresses.

**Collaboration:** How will leadership, the project team and employees collaborate and work together during the change initiative? What tools will be used to share, collect information and broadcast key messages? Leadership and management cannot be available 24/7 to answer queries and ensuring that information is available to staff at all times will increase engagement and reduce anxiety that results when people are not well informed.

We organized a series of project road shows for employees across the branch network and head office as a mix of live in-person events and web conferences with leaders. This enabled us to reach a large number of employees and to allow them to ask questions of their leaders in real time.

We also created a monthly leadership blog post with accompanying short videos, which made the project more personal and allowed the senior leaders to share progress, showcase success and recognize employees for their efforts. We created Project Oscars to award employees for great contributions throughout the change journey where employees could nominate and vote for each other. This was a great way to share stories of success and publicly recognize employees.

**Conclusion**

The first phase of the project has been successfully completed and the core banking system is currently being rolled out to a selection of countries outside the UAE. We hope that this project will instill
leaders the importance of investing time up front to carefully craft a campaign which allows everyone to view a transformation not as something difficult, but as an exciting journey of discovery for all.

Building trust was key, and using Neo as a neutral member of the team helped us to build that trust and to show employees that we did understand their concerns and were here to support them and prepare them for the future. So far the project is going smoothly and we have a critical mass of employees with awareness and desire to make this change a reality.