What will make us
TRUST
BUSINESSES?

In moments of crisis, businesses need to seem empathetic and human; this is why employees must always be put first. **Rebecca Pardon** reports

Big businesses are being watched with ever-greater scrutiny. As Ben and Jerry's publicly feuds with parent company Unilever, and with the collapse of Credit Suisse following years of successive scandals, social media serves as a stage upon which big players' misfortunes unfold like a tragic play.

Contrary to received wisdom, transparency doesn't seem to be making businesses behave better. Before today's increasingly inquisitive and sceptical audience, loyalty to big companies has long disappeared from the script.

Leading voice in employer branding, Simon Barrow, says being trustworthy is about sticking to strong values. "Basic company culture should be based on a level of integrity which shouldn't stop them from making mistakes, but when they do make a mistake, they shouldn't fudge it and should stick to their strong values," Barrow says.

A 'fudging' often occurs when business leaders spend too long enjoying the generous legroom of the say-do gap, while their hypocrisy spreads as disenchantment among employees. Andrew Baird, director at Blackbridge Communications, says that internal communication is critical if a company wants

to win back employee trust. Indeed, it is rare that businesses are honest enough to admit to being largely driven by personal gain, with most corporations falsely claiming to be "all about community, when they're not." However, headlines forecasting a 'post-Covid organisational culture crisis' suggest that, in the remote landscape, loyalty to companies is dwindling inevitably as people prioritise quality time spent with their children or tending to neglected flowerbeds.

Baird believes that this alone is decreasing any sense of shared values. "By removing the physical collaboration of the office environment, any sense of collective endeavour, or of shared behaviour or belief, is diminished," he says. "The 'water cooler moment', or what the smokers are talking about outside on the patio, is gone."
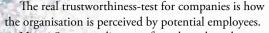
Despite efforts to extend an embracing arm into employees' home lives by organisations like Goldman Sachs, which ran virtual storytelling sessions for children of staff during lockdowns, the dispersion and subsequent depletion of corporate culture makes businesses far more prone to a fudge-up. Sinéad Bell, associate director at Hanover Communications, believes being trustworthy is as simple as being a good listener.

"The only way to tell if you are truly connecting with your employees is by listening. Employees should have multiple opportunities to share their thoughts and feedback, in different formats," Bell says. "Over the past two years, managers have come to the fore as one of the best sources of capturing accurate and authentic feedback from employees, and this should be continued post-Covid."

The outward movement of office culture alone has resulted in the breakdown of the formal hierarchical company structures that are familiar. In a now-famous letter to Tesla employees in 2017, Elon Musk argues that the most effective communications flow freely within a company.

Yet what seemed quirky and experimental six years ago is now the reality companies are grappling with, as remote working has produced a more democratic work culture. This is proving to be too much freedom for the Tesla CEO however, who last year demanded that staff return to the office and tweeted a meme suggesting that home workers were 'lazy dogs.' Remote working means internal communications is facing an unprecedented challenge.

Chris Hewitt, CEO of Berkeley Communications, advises that companies adopt a 'North Star' approach to guide their staff through periods of uncertainty or disenchantment, focusing on what they want people to feel rather than hear. "Businesses have always been a fluid mixture of people and employees have high expectations of their role," he says. "You do not control what is said: you have to offer your story and narrative in a way that is empathetic to your audiences. Trying to control the situation doesn't help." ▸

The real trustworthiness-test for companies is how the organisation is perceived by potential employees.

Nimai Swaroop, director of employer brand at Philip Morris, explains how companies need to approach talent in a conversational way, and put employees' stories at the forefront of employer branding. "Employer brand binds together everything you represent as an employer: what you stand for and what the 'lived experience' at your company is," Swaroop says.

"The truth behind a company culture is in the stories of employees. At Philip Morris, our employee brand activation focuses on employees telling their stories and sees them living the brand."

While Philip Morris may well be winning hearts and minds through the stories of its employees, elsewhere the general concept of blind loyalty to an employer brand has long gone up in tobacco smoke.

Trust is no longer placed in businesses and brands, but in people. Swaroop reiterates the importance of a consistent value system but believes the flexibility and adaptability of how a company communicates is more important: "The truth of a company lies in the 'deal' you offer to potential employees. This is what will tell people how you are managing to adapt to meet people's needs."

Today, 'watercooler moments' have been replaced by chat pop-ups in the welcome Zoom meeting intermission as someone's Wi-Fi re-boots. Employers are attending interviews nervous for the final 'any questions?' round, in which 20-somethings grill companies on their social responsibility commitments.

Businesses need to embrace the chaos and motley of the increasingly democratic, modern work culture and the opportunities that it brings. Instead of trying to win people's trust, they need to instead learn how to become trustworthy and, when faced with the spotlight of media scrutiny, prioritise communicating with their workforce first.

"We as employees have high expectations now of our role. We want a more purposeful job. We want to be recognised. We want to feel part of something," says Hewitt. "We want to feel there's a future." ∎