



The fascination factor

Brilliant brands can help us fall back in love with work

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Behind every successful brand is a living, breathing company with all sorts of fascinating idiosyncrasies. From Google to JP Morgan, ExxonMobil to Disney, these companies are more than the sum of their

products, their taglines, or the numbers on a quarterly report. They are ecosystems of ambition, aspiration, competition and innovation, each with its own unwritten rules, defining moments, iconic leaders and beautiful imperfections. It is a combination of all these things that, when seen clearly by employees, makes work feel less like a 'job' and more like an ongoing narrative, in which they are the protagonists.

Yet that spark is increasingly rare. Gallup data shows that US employee engagement sank to just 31% in 2024 – the lowest level in a decade. More than two-thirds of American workers are either not engaged or actively disengaged. Globally, engagement is even lower: just 21%. That has a real impact on the bottom line: Gallup calculates that disengagement cost the world economy \$9.6 trillion in lost productivity last year.

What if the antidote to this crisis of commitment is not another office ping-pong



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table, perks program, or the empty promise of a greater cause – but something more human and evergreen? Enter the fascination factor. In our upcoming book, we explore a simple but profound idea, fascination – a spellbinding, magnetic attraction to the ever-evolving idea of a company – and how it can be cultivated to reignite employee engagement, performance and loyalty.

When employees are fascinated by the place they work, amazing things happen. They go from autopilot to fully switched on, turn ordinary moments into meaningful contributions, and commit completely to the work at hand.

The power of fascination

For centuries, “fascination” referred to a literal spell that arrested the senses. Today, neuroscience reveals it as the potent cocktail of novelty, intrigue and attraction that pulls us toward an idea and keeps us there. From infancy, we’re drawn to that

which surprises us, challenges us, and makes us feel connected. That pull never diminishes.

Fascination is fundamental to great advertising. Breakthrough ads make familiar brands and everyday products feel special and attention-grabbing again. In the workplace, fascination translates to a measurable performance edge. Gallup shows that highly engaged teams outperform their peers by 23% on profitability, and companies with strong employee engagement see significantly lower turnover.

But fascination goes beyond engagement. It becomes a magnet for sustained energy, effort and innovation. When we are engaged, we care. When we are fascinated, we are captivated. Work becomes one giant cliffhanger, where we leave each day anticipating what tomorrow will bring.

We believe that fascination is fueled by four deep psychological needs: curiosity – the desire to explore; connection – the need to belong; complexity – the challenge that holds our attention; and continuity – the sense that the story keeps evolving, and we’re part of it.

When all four elements are present, fascination becomes self-sustaining. Remove any one element, and fascination dissipates. No curiosity = a lack of intrigue. No connection = indifference. No complexity = boredom. No continuity = exhaustion from the ups and downs.

So how do we create fascination? We studied some of the world’s most iconic companies – organizations so steeped in narrative and culture that they’re almost mythical. Amazon, Coca-Cola and Nike offer a powerful introduction to what iconic companies can teach us about falling back in love with work.

Amazon: the church of relentless

The Amazon story begins with ambition fueled by a single astounding data point: the 2,300% growth rate in internet usage at the time of Amazon’s founding. A hedge-fund guy named Jeff Bezos developed a plan to sell books – not because he loved them, but because they were a good test case for what he really wanted to build: the ‘everything store’. Bezos named his company after the world’s largest river, but the more telling name was his second choice, which is still an active link: click on Relentless.com and you will be redirected to Amazon.

Relentless is the right word. Amazon didn’t turn a profit for nine years. They’re not obsessed with ads or brand love; they’re obsessed with customer experience and operational excellence. Like saying grace before meals, the six-page narrative – the written component required in any business proposal – is required reading at the start of meetings. ►

Bezos's famous 'Day 1' idea isn't a slogan – it's a belief system. And Amazon's leadership principles, more akin to brand slogans, are holy writ: "customer obsession," "have backbone," and "leaders are right, a lot," are recited like a catechism. Non-believers are paid to quit. To work at Amazon HQ is to become a congregant in the church of optimization and market opportunism.

Coca-Cola: selling happiness

Here's a fact: the second most-recognized word on Earth is Coca-Cola. And here's another: there's a soda fountain inside Coke's Atlanta HQ considered to have the most perfectly blended syrup-to-sparkling-water ratio in the world. Tasting it may be a small thing – but like all great rituals, it means everything.

The Coca-Cola Company doesn't just sell beverages. It sells a story. The jewels of the business aren't just the secret formula or the distribution system, but the brand itself. Coca-Cola's cultural gravity comes from myth, memory and mastery. The World War II soldier clutching a bottle in the Pacific. The 'Hilltop' ad that promised to buy the world a Coke. Santa. The polar bears.

Inside the company, there's reverence – for the vault holding the formula, or the corporate art collection, from Warhol to Rockwell. But then there are the misses: New Coke, or the cola wars. Here's the twist: Coke doesn't hide its stumbles, it celebrates them. Because the brand isn't perfect, it's enduring. The mistakes only feed the legend that fuels employees' fascination.



Above & below Nike appeals to competitors with a creative streak. The Coca-Cola Company doesn't just sell drinks – it sells a story

Nike: built by athletes, run by artists

Nike didn't just invent the sports apparel category – it invented the image of sport itself. What started as a side hustle for a college runner and his coach grew into the world's biggest athletic brand.

Step onto Nike's Beaverton campus and you'll see the archetypal employee in full display: attractive, athletic, creative professionals in head-to-toe Swoosh, hustling between buildings named after Serena, Jordan and LeBron. Yet there's tension here, between the jock and the art kid. Between ruthless competition and brilliant design. Nike worships athletes, but it also reveres its creatives. Mark Parker went from designer to CEO. Marketing isn't a department – it's the heartbeat.

There are rituals: Swoosh tattoos, internal competitions, and lore about Nike's first sneaker sole, made with a borrowed waffle iron. And the company takes risks: Nike doesn't test ads, it just launches them. At Nike, brand is feeling, not focus group.

Rethinking career paths

When we start to illuminate what makes these companies so fascinating, we begin to uncover how each can be the right place for a very different type of employee.

Amazon attracts those with thick skin, ambition in their bloodstream, and a bias for action. Coca-Cola draws global citizens, historians and lovers



of lineage, who join a legend, not just a company. Nike appeals to competitors with a creative streak, and designers who love a game of pick-up basketball over lunch.

When employees find a company that fascinates them, they are likely to find their people – others whose personal values, working style, and passions align with that company's culture. Find your fascination and you'll find your tribe.

That supports a powerful counterargument to the recent conventional wisdom that employees need to job-hop to advance. Many employees would stay if given the right environment. It's not that millennials are inherently disloyal; many leave because they don't feel a compelling reason to stay. But sustained fascination at work creates a positive feedback loop, like compounding interest.

Indeed, a long, engaging tenure at a company is much like investing: the longer you stay, the more your 'career capital' compounds. An employee who spends a decade growing inside a company they love can achieve things that a serial job-hopper never will, as certain innovations, trust, and mastery take time to cultivate.

Five ways to cultivate fascination

Fascination isn't a happy accident – it's something leaders can intentionally design and nurture. Every organization has unique stories, quirks, ways of working, a brand essence and icons. People don't fall in love with generic companies; they fall in love with genuine, one-of-a-kind places that spark their curiosity and wonder. And that builds the kind of loyalty that money can't buy.

1 Put quirks, eccentricities, and oddities on display Every company has weird stories or imperfect histories. Embrace them! In marketing, brands too often try to be exactly what consumers say they want – which turns them into the mirror image of their competitors, who have the same research. It's the quirks no focus group could come up with that make a brand stand out – that make it human and authentic. So, celebrate the garage where the company was founded, the legendary product failures, or the team's eccentric traditions. By sharing your organization's quirks, you show personality and confidence.

2 Be honest about how work gets done (and highlight your brand of crazy) Every workplace has its own brand of crazy – the unwritten rules or cultural peculiarities that outsiders might find strange. Don't sweep these under the rug; spell them out and own them. If your company thrives on late-night brainstorming, or if the most important leadership meetings only happen on nature walks, be upfront about it.

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Dr André Martin and Mark Fitzloff are co-authors of the forthcoming book, *The Fascination Factor: How America's Iconic Companies Can Help Us Fall Back In Love With Work*

By giving newcomers a heads-up, you attract the right-fit people and create pride internally. Honesty enables people to opt in wholeheartedly – or opt out.

3 Celebrate long-tenured employees as icons Make longevity aspirational again. Rather than only spotlighting the hotshot new hires, honor those who have dedicated years to the company. Tell their stories: "Meet Jane, who started here as an intern 20 years ago and now leads product development." Better yet, let those lifers tell their own stories, bridging the gap between current employees and their OG predecessors. By elevating long-tenured team members, you signal that building a career here is valued and rewarded, countering the narrative that you have to leave to advance.

4 Be clear about who will be a fan and therefore fascinated Fascination flourishes when the right people are in the right environment. Help employees self-identify with your culture by clearly describing what kinds of personalities and values thrive at your company. If your culture rewards creativity amid chaos, say so: "The people who succeed here love fast pivots and aren't afraid to fail twice before winning." Cultural clarity attracts devotees.

5 Remind yourself (and your team) what you love about the company A common marketing challenge is to "make the familiar unfamiliar." How do you make a consumer's relationship with a brand they've known for years feel exciting and new again? As a leader, you should apply this challenge to yourself: your enthusiasm (or lack thereof) is contagious. Take time to reflect on why you fell in love with the organization. Share those stories with your team: "I still remember my first week here, when I saw how our product changed a customer's life – I knew I was in the right place." When you express what you adore about the company, it gives others permission to do the same.

Fall in love all over again

By implementing these steps, leaders can begin to turn fatigue into intrigue. Building a culture of fascination is not about flashy perks or slogans – it's about authentic connection. It's about showing your people what makes your company uniquely worth caring about.

Do this well, and you won't just have employees – you'll have fans, advocates, and enthusiasts. That is the fascination factor in action – and it might just make all of us fall back in love with the very idea of work itself. ♦