

C&A

DEFYING RETAIL ENGAGEMENT NORMS

Lessons from C&A's *Inspiring World* employee engagement campaign

Imagine you're the head of global marketing for a major apparel brand. You're charged with interrupting the hectic workday of more than 33,000 retail employees and convincing them to participate in an "employee engagement" campaign.



A step inside their on-the-job reality reveals a deeper challenge. They are primarily women ages 18-25, and you'll have exactly 15 minutes to catch their attention amidst breakroom chatter and the distractions of phones, friends, and coworkers. Do they balk at the intrusion, or embrace the opportunity to make a positive difference?

C&A's 2018 engagement campaign, *Inspiring World*, accomplished the latter, earning a 65% participation rate from its workforce and a 2018 EE Employee Engagement Award. In the fast-paced retail industry, in which annual employee turnover can top 60%, this level of engagement is unprecedented. The success of the campaign offers powerful lessons for companies aspiring to strengthen workplace loyalty and trust.

Stand for something (and employees will follow)

"Purpose" can be a significant market differentiator. The reality is that if you can't deliver it, you won't stand out and you won't earn an engaged audience. Yet it's tricky. "Purpose" has also become jargon that now glosses over the business world; it can mean a lot or nothing at all. To successfully earn buy-in to your purpose and the sustained trust of your workforce, your track record needs to reflect your vision.

C&A gets this. When the brand launches an employee engagement campaign, it's not a one-off effort, but rather part of an ongoing expression of its purpose-driven values. The world's largest purchaser of organic cotton, C&A has built an unparalleled reputation for environmental activism and humane employment practices—*Fashion for Good*,

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which it co-founded, is a global leader in responsible apparel practices, and its Instituto C&A partners with nonprofits to address child labor, immigrant rights, and domestic violence.

Look for the threads that bind

In 2018, when C&A shifted the focus of its annual campaign from women’s empowerment to environmental sustainability, finding a common thread among

employees across 27 countries and 12 languages was challenging. Few employees could argue with the benefit of sustainable fashion, but this storyline can get dauntingly technical in a hurry.

Context Partners spent time with C&A employees to understand their relationship to the company, their feelings on environmental issues, and the role they thought C&A should play in addressing them. This discovery process gave C&A the insights needed to personalize the meaning of sustainability for a diverse, time-strapped workforce. The common perception—that qualitative insights are expensive and time-intensive to obtain—can cause many brands to skip this discovery step altogether.

65%

PARTICIPATION RATE ACROSS

27 COUNTRIES
12 LANGUAGES

€1 MILLION
DONATED TO
45 CHARITIES

BENEFITING
250,000 PEOPLE



Traditionally, employee engagement is a strictly top-down effort. A brand department or corporate responsibility team builds a campaign tied to an issue or cause that the company deems important. Then they push their message at employees—an approach we and others call “command and control.” There’s a reason command and control campaigns struggle to surpass a 20% participation rate.

Design with employees, not for them

C&A and Context Partners flipped the script, actively involving employees at every step to design a campaign built around employee participation preferences. Context Partners worked with C&A managers across several markets to test and adapt prototypes with their teams and local languages. This community-centered approach not only earned team trust, it revealed the threads of value that unite C&A, informing the final campaign design.

The campaign asked employees a single question: “What’s your dream for a better world?” For each story, photo, or video they submitted, employees got to vote for one global and two local charities to receive funding from the C&A Foundation. This feature empowered workers to effect positive change in their backyard

while linking their action to a global purpose. Ultimately the campaign generated over a million euros for 45 charities, benefiting more than 250,000 people.

Translating a complex idea into a universally appealing campaign that mobilizes 65% of one’s global workforce is remarkable. C&A invested time and resources to discover what matters to its employees, what they aspire to, and what changes they’d like to see in the world—and designed from there.

IN PRACTICE

Context Partners has been an insights and strategy partner of C&A and the C&A Foundation since 2017, with emphasis on aligning their purpose-driven work and the day-to-day relationship they cultivate with their global workforce.

WHAT WE DID

- Qualitative research
- Employee engagement campaign design
- Campaign testing and iteration

OUTCOMES

The *Inspiring World* campaign, designed in partnership with Context Partners, received a 65% participation rate and was the 2018 winner of the UK and Europe Employee Engagement Social Responsibility Award.



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