



Company: IBM  
Headquarters: Armonk, New York  
Founding Year: 1911  
Ideal: To build a smarter planet

A \$100 billion behemoth with more than 400,000 employees worldwide, IBM proves that a large multinational corporation can be united by an aspirational, growth-inspiring ideal.

For IBM that ideal is “building a smarter planet.” From its founding in 1911, IBM has been about making the world work better, from its first tabulating machines to the IBM 360 mainframe and the industrial breakthroughs it enabled, from the IBM PC’s opening the floodgates of personal computing to integrated services for the world’s most complex and sensitive systems.

IBM brings its ideal of building a smarter planet to life for all 400,000-plus IBMers by expecting each and every one of them to have a work plan for furthering that goal within their areas of responsibility.

Through its “Smarter Planet” campaign, IBM also engages its customers in its ideal. In a long interview for my book, John Kennedy, IBM’s vice president for corporate marketing, told me, “What ‘building a smarter planet’ does is it enables us to engage all (our) audiences at the level of deeply held beliefs about the world. The conversations we have with our customers, for example, they start with a shared way of looking at the world, a common belief in how technology can improve the world.”

One of my favorite elements of IBM’s campaign is the “Smarter Cities Challenge.” As part of a three-year, \$50 million grant program, IBM asked mayors of various cities how a team of seasoned IBM executives could serve them. Those executive teams helped solve problems ranging from asthma mitigation in Louisville, Kentucky to transportation strategies in Cheongui, Korea.

In 2012 IBM logged its 10th consecutive year of double-digit earnings-per-share growth. Over that same period, my research partners at Millward-Brown calculate that “brand contribution”—the percentage of revenue attributable to customers’ emotional connection to the brand—grew from 34% to 44%. By any standard, these are remarkable results – driven by the power of an ideal.

IBM shows us how to leverage an ideal inside and out – by making it integral to the daily work of every employee and by engaging customers and stakeholders in a shared journey of purpose.