

## How to Build a Compelling Employer Brand

By David Lee, reprinted from *ERExchange.com's ERDaily*

When you make the effort to create a compelling employer brand, you save yourself the work of trying to convince candidates that you are an employer of choice. With a compelling employer brand, your reputation acts like a huge talent magnet, drawing the best, most talented people to your organization. To enjoy the benefits of a compelling employer brand, you need to deliver a unique and attractive work experience - that is, a branded work experience - that sets you apart in the labor market.

In my article, "The True Power of a Magnetic Employer Brand," we discussed the "why" of employer branding. In this three-part series, we'll discuss the "how" - how to build a compelling employer brand. This first part will focus on the foundation and assessment phase of an effective employer branding process. The next two articles in the series will focus on the process of building a compelling employer brand.

### Putting Together a Team

Developing a powerful employer brand requires that you involve all constituencies who influence your employer brand in the branding process.

This cannot be overemphasized. Creating a compelling employer brand isn't about your HR department getting together with an ad agency and coming up with the ultimate ad campaign. It isn't simply making sure all your collateral material has a consistent image. Creating a compelling employer brand requires rigorously examining all facets of the work experience your organization delivers and making sure you create an experience that leads to an employer-of-choice reputation.

To address all the various factors that impact your employer brand, you need to involve people who represent these varied perspectives. You want to include one or more individuals representing human resources, management from all levels, public relations, sales and marketing, customer service, and frontline workers. Group size permitting, you would ideally have someone from each of the major divisions or departments represented. Because a strong brand is one that gives consistent messages and provides consistent experiences, you can't afford to have pockets of discontent and areas of poor work experience that contradict - and therefore weaken - your employer brand.

Effective employer branding also involves expertise from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. You will want your team to possess expertise in the areas of advertising and marketing, market research, customer service, public relations, human resources management, psychology, organizational development, and management.

### Involve Employees In Every Facet of the Process

Because employees directly experience whether or not you deliver on your employer brand promise, they play an essential role in the employer branding process. Without their input on how to make your organization a better place to work and their ongoing feedback about how well you're delivering the work experience you promise, you are likely to do what many organizations do. You are likely to end up "advertising your fantasy," to use the words of Alan Brewer, vice president of creative services at Burgess Advertising Associates.

To paraphrase advertising legend David Ogilvy, nothing will kill your reputation in the labor market faster than doing a great job advertising a work experience you don't deliver. Organizations that promote themselves as an employer of choice, when they're anything but, end up with an angry, cynical workforce that is only too happy to counteract their employer's paid advertising with more credible word-of-mouth advertising.

Frontline workers possess critical workplace quality intelligence that senior managers huddled

*(Continued on page 2)*

## How to Build a Compelling Employer Brand, cont'd

around a conference table can never provide. If you truly want to develop a compelling employer brand, employee involvement is nonnegotiable.

How do you involve your employees? First, make sure frontline workers are represented on your employer branding team. Second, conduct employee focus groups and surveys both in the beginning and on an annual or biannual basis, to find out organizational and managerial practices that are weakening your employer brand. These focus groups and surveys can also provide you with internal best practices that you will want to spread throughout your organization. Third, create an Employee Advisory Council that will give you critical "voice of the (internal) customer" feedback in all phases of the employer branding process.

If your management team has a reputation for soliciting employee input that only ends up in the La Brea Tar Pits of inaction, it will take time to build enough credibility and trust for employees to care enough to give their input. To restore damaged credibility, honestly acknowledge your less-than-stellar performance in this area and then demonstrate as quickly as possible what you are doing with their input. For input that can't or won't be implemented, explain why.

Share information on best practices regarding employee input and involvement with your employer branding team and all of management. There are numerous books, articles, and white papers on this topic. You might want to start with The Society for Human Resource Management's website.

### **Become an Expert on Your Target Market**

As any marketing expert will tell you, the most successful brands are built upon an intimate knowledge of their customers. The stronger the brand, the more the brand manager understands the hearts and minds of their ideal customer. In employer branding, this means understanding what:

- Today's employees want
- The most talented employees want
- Employees in your particular industry want
- Employees from the demographics you hire want
- Employees from the various fields and job positions you hire want

Although this may seem obvious, we have plenty of evidence that many - if not most - organizations don't understand or don't know how to deliver the kind of work experience that employees want.

Knowing what employees value most highly not only allows you to build an employer brand that is relevant and compelling, but it also provides a framework for ongoing monitoring of whether you are delivering the kind of work experience you think you are.

Where do you find out what your target market wants? For today's "typical" employee, you'll want to draw on the plethora of research identifying what matters most to employees and what impacts both satisfaction and productivity. Good places to start include Gallup's research, published in *First Break All the Rules*; David Maister's work, published in *Practice What You Preach*; and Watson Wyatt's research, published in their report *WorkUSA 2002*.

To discover what workers in your specific industry value, contact your industry association. For information on what the most talented employees are looking for, interview your star performers to find out what is most important to them. Interview star performers who've left. Find out what important factors they found elsewhere.

## How to Build a Compelling Employer Brand, cont'd

Regardless of what industry you're in, you hire people that represent a variety of professions. You'll want to understand their unique need and value hierarchies. This amount of precision allows you not only to create a compelling employer brand to the general labor market, but also to fine-tune your message and the work experience you deliver to your various sub-markets.

For instance, your accountants' value hierarchy will likely be very different from that of your sales force or your customer service representatives. You might be delivering the kind of work experience that accountants want, but not what sales or customer service professionals want. Thus, your employer brand would not be consistently strong across the board. To learn more about the value hierarchies of the various professions and demographics you hire, contact the various trade associations that represent the profession in questions or The Society for Human Resource Management.

If you draw heavily from a particular demographic, become an expert on that demographic. For instance, when Deb Franklin, HR Manager at Designer Blinds of Omaha, Nebraska, wanted to hire from two different ethnic groups, she brought in experts and studied the cultures of these ethnic groups so that Designer Blinds could more accurately address their needs. The result? They have a waiting list for their second shift and a turnover rate of 7.5% - one tenth the average rate for manufacturers in their region.

You will also want to understand the different work-experience value hierarchies of different generations. To learn about these generational differences, start with the classic "Generations At Work," by Ron Zemke et al.

The values and needs that are unique to today's employees and to the various demographics lie upon a bedrock of timeless, fundamental human needs. Regardless of one's profession or age group, or changes in societal norms, human beings have fundamental, hard-wired needs and drives that impact employee satisfaction. These include the need:

- ◆ For meaning and purpose (i.e. to matter and to be part of something that matters)
- ◆ For community and connection
- ◆ To learn and grow
- ◆ To feel a sense of control and autonomy
- ◆ To experience mastery and self-efficacy (e.g. to feel the "thrill of victory" rather than "the agony of defeat" at work each day)

When your work experience taps into these fundamental human needs, you unleash a gusher of enthusiasm, pride, and appreciation - and an impassioned word-of-mouth PR campaign that positions you credibly as an employer of choice. To make sure you do tap into this powerful source of employee satisfaction and inspiration, have someone on your team with a strong psychological background who understands what fundamental human needs drive employee motivation and satisfaction.

### Find Out If You Deliver What Employees Want

Once you know what your target market wants, the next step is to find out how well you're delivering that. Conduct individual interviews, focus groups, and employee surveys to find out whether or not you are delivering the kind of work experience the most desirable employees are seeking. For this to work, you will need to make it clear what you plan to do with this information - and that in fact you will do something with it.

As mentioned previously, if your management team has a history of not doing anything with employee input, credibility building will be an important first step.

## How to Build a Compelling Employer Brand, cont'd

### Think "Experience"

To provide your employer branding team with precise, actionable intelligence from employees, break down employees' total work experience into process experiences or moments of truth.

For instance, what is the new hire experience like in your organization? Does this critical moment of truth feel like sink or swim, or "We're glad you're here. You've joined the best, and here's why"? How would they describe their "interaction with senior management" moment of truth? What about their "the organization is going through change" experience?

Asking employees how they experience each moment of truth will provide you with valuable information about how to create an exceptional overall work experience. Companies known for providing unique, stand-out customer service - companies such as Ritz Carlton or Southwest Airlines - do this with their customers. They pay close attention to each facet of their customers' experience to make sure it reflects and strengthens their brand. By carefully managing each customer service "moment of truth," they differentiate themselves in the marketplace with what the Forum Corporation calls a "Branded Customer Experience."

You can use this same principle to create a branded "work" experience. By using this same attention to detail in making sure each facet of your employees' work experience reflects and strengthens your employer brand, you create a branded work experience that establishes you as an employer of choice. The first step in this process is to identify and analyze these moments of truth and how well you are doing in each.

### Get Ready For the Next Step

At this point in the process, you have:

- ◆ An employer branding team in place
- ◆ Active employee involvement
- ◆ A clear understanding of what your employees of choice want in an employer
- ◆ A clear, honest, ongoing feedback loop with employees that enable you to continuously gather information about organizational strengths and weaknesses
- ◆ A clear understanding of what needs you address well, and what ones you don't
- ◆ A list of organizational practices and policies that weaken your employer brand and those that strengthen it
- ◆ A list of "moment of truth" experiences that help shape employees' overall work experience, and a clear picture of how well you do in each area

### About the Author

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