

Internal branding

how human resources makes it work

Best practices in the HR areas of recruitment and recognition

Strong employer, or internal, brands reflect an organization's culture by providing a brand promise that goes beyond the image to shape the entire organization. For internal branding to be a successful investment, a company must begin with a strong strategy that drives the brand through operating principles in every area of the organization, especially human resources.

Internal branding emphasizes the overarching message that defines the company culture and solidifies the brand promise. The result is a brand that signifies the purpose, the people, and the values of the organization. Research has shown that marketing and the executive team generally share the development of internal branding strategies. Yet, the lack of alignment between employees' values and company values emerged as a challenge from research, which suggests that HR may be the missing link. HR has access to all levels of staff within the organization and thus has the capability and organization to coordinate internal branding practices. Managing feedback and measuring success can reinforce this strategy. This makes internal branding a particularly powerful tool for HR departments that can find ways to motivate employees, while at the same time strengthening the brand in the eyes of consumers and external stakeholders.

HR can utilize internal branding techniques and programs to optimize its basic initiatives by streamlining processes along one main goal – delivering the brand promise. HR can provide the link between employees and external operations through a variety of methods. Internal branding is about leadership and following examples, as well as about following through on the brand promise and working with employee and customer feedback to recognize gaps. Regular meetings with top managers, organized and moderated by the HR department with significant input from the top executives can ensure everyone is on the right track.

With the shifting demographics of the Canadian workforce and new recruits at a premium, an organization's culture and image as viewed through the eyes of consumers in terms of corporate social responsibility, environmental responsibility, and employee turnover will be increasingly important. These areas will increasingly affect the HR department's tasks of recruitment and selection.

Start branding process early

Internal branding can start as early in the relationship between organization and employees as the recruitment process. The cooperation of HR with marketing to create recruitment advertising that portrays the brand, including print, online and viral mediums can ensure that the message of the brand is clearly developed and understood. In this way, the potential employees can recognize the organization's culture and assess how they will fit in before even applying for the position. This will help HR to prioritize, assess and select the candidates for positions. If hired, new employees will already have a feeling of what it means to be a part of the organization and the expectations regarding the brand promise.

The popularity of "personal branding" and the "elevator speech" (a very brief method of describing 'what business you are in') suggests that those in the workforce are doing their research and tailoring their strengths to meet employer needs, so it makes sense for



Images courtesy Starbucks Company

employers to do the same. The challenge is how to adapt the brand to different positions within the organization to attract the desired employees without altering the basic principles and characteristics of the brand. Once the specific desired "brand behaviours" are identified, HR can team up with marketing to determine what these behaviours mean to each "target market" and how best to portray them.

Best practice suggests that the internal branding strategy must ensure that the brand promise is delivered through each and every communication with employees and potential candidates. Embed the brand message in voicemail messages, emails, newsletters, annual reports, websites, and in one-on-one informal communications. Engage current employees as ambassadors for the brand.

Internal branding can also assist HR in the interview process by providing a guideline for interview techniques and selection criteria based on brand behaviours. Situational and behavioural questions can be developed around the brand behaviours to assess how candidates have dealt with applicable expectations and commitments in the past. This process can also be ongoing as a way to obtain feedback in terms of how well the brand behaviours were developed, recognized, and communicated. By tying internal branding to the earliest stages of recruitment and selection, HR builds the foundation for employee buy-in to the brand promise for other key departments to carry forward. New recruits' initial perception of the brand is the crucial first impression that will be developed through employee engagement initiatives instigated by marketing and customer service, for example. Keep in mind, though, that defining brand behaviours is only the first step; employees have to be able to recognize how established employees in the organization at all levels "walk the talk." The brand has to be believed and accepted.

Employee loyalty to an organization is often characterized by respect and trust. These factors can also characterize an organization's relationship with its customers. This suggests that a brand can represent a similar image in the minds of both customers and employees. Therefore, the connection between employee performance and customer satisfaction can be used as the basis for developing HR programs for employee rec-

ognition and rewards. Such programs would require interdepartmental and cross-functional collaboration in order for HR to learn about customer experience, gain insight to marketing research, and establish measurements of employee performance, to name just a few possible requirements. While my experience suggests that monetary rewards and incentives are generally at the top of the list when employees are asked how they would like to be recognized, appreciation and respect for a job well done can go a long way. Quantitative research shows that employees also want to see how their work adds to the success of the company, which can be one of the outcomes of internal branding.

Internal branding is more than organizational culture; it is how employees are engaged in the organization. Employees can be thought of as "internal customers" giving their time, commitment and expertise to the company in return for remuneration of course, but also in varying degrees, for respect, appreciation and a sense of belonging. HR can design recognition programs that reward employees for exemplifying brand behaviours both internally (i.e., among staff at all levels) and externally (i.e., with clients, customers and prospects). These behaviours can be measured systematically and rewarded when exhibited, as well as measured for how they have an affect on the organization. Keep the message simple so as not to overwhelm employees with too many messages. Strive for one big, pure, simple idea that is consistent, yet passionate. When aiming for internal understanding, it is important to be clear and not use 'marketing speak', so HR people are just right to communicate the specific day-to-day experiences of employees in a way that is real and relevant to them.

HR can develop standardized methods for employee feedback and ongoing input to the internal branding program. A challenge is to maintain a relevant and motivating program to recognize and reward employees, which may entail continuous tweaking to newly recognized needs in terms of employee satisfaction and performance. With focus on publications that rate the "best places to work", and advertising that depicts

employees who are proud of their work, it is evident that employees appreciate and even strive for cohesive, collaborative work environments with strong, recognizable brands.

Starbucks has a particularly effective recognition program that can serve as a valuable model. Starbucks' brand proposition is about impassioned employees and about having a passion to improve our world. Their Green Apron recognition program serves as both a brand behaviours guide and a non-monetary recognition program. Every employee – known as a 'partner' – receives a Green Apron book, which is a passport-like book that lays out company values and desired on-brand behaviours. The book also contains peer recognition cards, which are used by all from top management down to recognize the smallest behaviour on-the-spot. This connects to an internal branding best practice identified through research of the importance of a sense of ownership of the brand established throughout departments and felt by all employees. Again, this enables employees in general and departments in terms of "team contribution" to recognize where their contributions and performance make a difference that matters to the organization overall.

A main key for success in HR-driven internal branding is to be consistent, yet adaptable, and persistent, but not overbearing. Fortunately, these are areas where HR has a lot of experience and likely where its characteristic skills and talents will help to ensure the successful implementation of an internal branding strategy. Through HR, the trend of internal branding may obtain permanent status in organizations. **WPN**

Patricia McQuillan is the president of Brand Matters Inc., a brand consulting firm based in Toronto with a specialization in strategic planning, market research, and internal branding (employee alignment). Brand Matters was recently recognized by the City of Toronto as a Business Leader. Contact Patricia and Brand Matters at 416-923-7476 or by e-mail at contact@brand-matters.com. Visit the website at www.brand-matters.com.

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