Branding from the inside out

One seldom thinks of the human resource function as a base for marketing, but Nader Tavassoli makes a persuasive case for starting your branding strategy with your own employees.

Most managers, when they think of their company’s branding, view it as the image of the company as it faces the marketplace and the general public. Very few think of the importance of branding inside the organization. If brands are to be an integral part of a company’s strategy, they need to have traction internally. The reality, however, is that a majority of people do not know or understand their company’s strategy, of which branding needs to be a critical component.

Stepping out of the silo

A recent study by The Brand Inside (www.thebrandinside.com) indicated that, for 60 per cent of sampled organizations, it was unclear who is responsible for building the internal brand in order to support the external promise. HR must take the lead in this process, and it should be a process that involves taking people along the 6-A’s journey: from attention to awareness, acceptance, advocacy, action and adherence. Each stage has different drivers and requires different interventions.

Unfortunately, instead of championing the brand for those inside the company, HR often treats their company’s products and services as if they were commodities, leaving employees with only a broad, fuzzy image of what the company is, at heart, all about. Recruitment ads, thus, are more bland than on-brand. They are largely generic with different logos adorning the same tired copy next to near-identical images of dynamic and diverse young adults. Job descriptions, key performance indicators, development programmes, incentives and rewards tend to look similar across many of the competitors in any industry. In addition, many people have similar educational and social backgrounds and (often) have already worked for one or more competitors. Currently, there’s a buzz among HR chiefs about “employer branding”; sadly, this trend (if one can call it that) misses the point. It is typically associated with generically...
creating a great place to work, but it is not about creating a differentiated organization in a strategic sense. This begs the question: if not through its own employees, at what point can an organization create a differentiated brand?

HR as brand champion

The clearer the brand can be communicated, the easier it is to gain alignment within the business and clarity within the marketplace. Internal branding starts at the top of the HR agenda; the posted company values need to be revised to be less generic, editing out the hackneyed phrases trust, innovation, quality or partnership. HR should strive to promote mission-vision-values documents that express the brand with both precision and enthusiasm, thereby beginning to execute a differentiated strategy from the inside of the company out.

Engaging people in this process cannot start too early. HR should recruit people with the right attitude, who are naturally inclined to live the brand. Having differentiated recruiting ads can begin to attract on-brand applicants through self-selection. But HR’s job doesn’t stop there. The selection process should assess the candidate in terms of whether the prospective employee fits the company’s brand. Many organizations use the same hiring criteria as competitors, and hiring might even be outsourced. Once on the ground, making the induction process a showcase for the brand immediately engages people in the strategy.

Then, going forward, it is essential to communicate the brand across all the points where the company communicates with the workforce: training, development, performance reviews and incentive schemes. Successful companies are learning that reviewing and rewarding people for on-brand behaviours, rather than only meeting numerical goals, sets them apart from the competition.

Don’t forget current employees

All of this effort should not be reserved only for new recruits. What can be done to promote branding to current employees? A one-size-fits-all approach will not work when trying to win over a large and diversified workforce. Segmenting people based on their various mindsets is the starting point for taking the organization to the next level of branding enthusiasm. Are employees in each part of your company brand advocates, agnostics or antagonists?

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Identifying and stimulating brand champions - opinion leaders within their functions - is a powerful tool for winning over others less involved with (or cynical about) the brand.

Building brands from the inside out is a grassroots exercise that needs to penetrate every functional silo, from information technology to research and development, from accounting to sales and service. It is also one that requires top-level sponsorship and long-term attention. It must be sustained and adapted to changing market conditions. It must be constantly monitored through employee polls and against the programme’s key progress indicators to make sure that the planned efforts are on track. Otherwise, be assured that internal branding traction will be lost.

How can HR justify the added cost of such an aggressive internal branding programme? To be sure, these efforts have to lead to measurable results and tangible savings. One way to position the “ROI” of this work is to create a set of measures that ties cost savings to key HR metrics. For example, well-crafted, on-brand ads can save recruiting costs through attracting the right kind of new employee, reducing offer rejections and saving costs on handling the “wrong” applicants, those who may be a bad fit for your company but who tie up many people in the interview and selection process. On-brand selection processes further result in a higher yield rate in job offers accepted. Moreover, it should be no surprise that people like to work at organizations where there is an attitudinal and cultural fit. This translates into higher retention – reducing costly turnover – and even lower absenteeism. There are already accepted ways of monetizing these returns and, when added up, they will more than cover the budget required for the programme. This will be music to the finance director’s ears; in-house branding does compute.

Communicating and living the brand through HR also results in higher pride, a greater sense of common purpose and higher motivation levels. Motivated people who fully support the brand and understand their individual role in delivering the right customer experience are also likely to be more productive. Needless to say, recruiting and developing people on-brand will also affect the customer experience. People will know how to behave in order to deliver the advertised brand promise, thereby enriching the top line. Ultimately, brands that are created from the inside out are the foundation for a difficult-to-imitate competitive advantage.

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