Have you signed-up for employer branding?

Category: Branding
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Wouldn’t you like to be the employer of choice? And, wouldn’t you like to be in control of your own destiny when it comes to attracting, recruiting and retaining the right calibre of staff? Perhaps then, it’s time to embrace employer branding.

If staff recruitment is big business, then standout is the big challenge faced by many organisations as they grapple with ways to attract and retain their ideal employees. Faced with this challenge, businesses are becoming more familiar with the persuasive powers of employer branding. What is employer branding? Put simply, it’s the process of activity promoting an organisation as the employer of choice, to a specific group or niche audience. It’s about targeting your recruitment campaigns so they resonate with the people you most want to employ. And that has to be an exciting prospect for businesses wishing to embark upon their ambitious business expansion plans.

Gone are the days when all it took to get the phone ringing off the hook was a job ad in the recruitment pages of the regional, national and trade press. Nowadays, it’s as common for prospective employers to be courting prospective employees, as it is vice versa. Little wonder, then, that brand managers and HR directors across the globe are seeking innovative ways to attract top talent through employer branding programmes and campaigns. This does, of course, provide opportunities for organisations to underline their own credentials, from brand values to corporate social responsibility and philanthropy. Qualities like these speak volumes about the progressive nature of an organisation. But, there’s no denying, it’s a seismic role reversal. A reversal

that sees prospective employees thinking long and hard about the type of organisations they would ‘choose’ to work for. An organisations employment terms, location, financial performance, environmental policy and business plan are just some considerations. These factors are persuasive in determining and employees decision making. In much the same way that a standout CV is important to an employer.

Little wonder, then, that as competition hots up, more organisations are jumping on the employer branding band wagon. That’s not to diminish or undermine the important role of employer branding. It’s far from a quick fix or sticking plaster for organisational mismanagement or chronic understaffing. It needs to be viewed as a long-term process that will, given time and patience, place forward-thinking employers front-of-mind with top talent. While that might sound like a considerable undertaking, it’s an achievable objective, given the tools and media channels at the disposal of most recruiters and marketers. Creating an effective employer brand identity does, however, require an understanding of your organisation at a deep level. For example, what makes it distinctive? What makes it credible and relevant in today’s interconnected world? And, what are its aspirations? If you’re struggling to describe what the future holds, any recruitment might be short-term recruitment. Making the case for ground work and detailed planning, because employer branding will only resonate if your communications are authentic and delivered consistently. Anything less will be seen as a halfhearted gesture at best, and lacking in integrity at worst. And no company wants that on their CV.

It would seem, however, that the benefits of employer branding are not being harvested by all. With many businesses struggling to showcase their benefits and personality successfully. Perhaps there’s an underlying fear of cannibalising or duplicating an organisations marketing efforts in other areas. Perhaps there’s reluctance to

apportion the necessary resources when budgets are being reigned in. Or, perhaps it's a simple case of prejudice. That shiny new ad campaign is always going to be higher up the priority list than a low-key staff recruitment campaign. Whatever, businesses failing to develop an employer brand – applied consistently across every touch-point – are missing a trick. Businesses understand the power of conventional branding to convey excellence, value, friendliness and other qualities. So, how about fine-tuning that language so its applies equally to your prospective employees?

The other great thing about employee branding is that it's not just a prerequisite for staff recruitment. It extends to existing staff too. After all, if staff retention levels are high, there's less emphasis on recruiting in the first place. Smart organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of internal communications and staff training programmes. Some companies (especially the larger ones) have gone as far a creating in-house learning programmes, more akin to part-time study. Making this investment in your people pays dividends in the long run. An interested and informed workforce is a motivated workforce. And that has a direct impact on your bottom line – not that it's just about image and numbers, of course. These are, however, very good reasons for any business to reappraise the effectiveness of its internal communications programme.

Once you've found a central proposition, apply it to everything you do. Your employee brand identity might mirror your corporate branding closely, or it might not. Whatever you decide, stick with it and always follow the identity guidelines. Get the tone right and don't place distance between the organisation and employee.

Refer to 'our company' rather 'the company'. Highlight incentives, like opportunities for continuous learning, away days, social events and makes sure staff know important dates, such as your annual conference and appraisals. Keep your tone

positive and upbeat and avoid predictable industry phrases. Jargon merely reinforces the top / down barrier, clouds meaning and shuts people out. Precisely the opposite of what you're trying to achieve!

So how do you go about creating an employee brand if you don't have one, or improving an underperforming employee brand? The important thing is not to do it alone. Employee branding requires interdisciplinary skills, and a process that's accepted at a senior level (assuming the initiative hasn't originated at that level). Commissioning a strategically-focused creative agency, with experience of the issues you're facing, is often a first step in the right direction. The best employee brands build on brand essence and a big idea. Capturing that internally, however, is as difficult as looking at the back of your own head. But get the idea and the results can be truly astonishing. People will be more likely to embrace your employee brand, making them keen to take the conversation further. An unforgettable employee brand identity makes the process for the two-way dialogue you crave that bit easier.

Of course, your employee branding needs to be more than just a name, logo and campaign. For it to connect, you need to work from the outside in, putting yourself in the shoes of potential employees and existing staff. Think about ways to move your thinking forward, that will create a new language and a compelling story that people will want to hear and care about. If you can do this, your employee brand is more likely to live and last.



The process for employer branding…

An unforgettable employer brand identity doesn't just happen, or turn up out of the blue. Brilliant as that sounds. It comes about through a clearly defined, and sometimes complex, way of working that looks something like this…

Research: Gain a thorough understanding of your market, competitors and points of difference as this is essential to the employer branding process. It's possible that much of this information is readily available, so you might be able to hit the ground running.

Consultancy: Define your objectives through workshops, focus groups, key stakeholder interviews and one-on-one sessions with staff. Make the outcomes transparent, unless they're sensitive. And remember, a strong employer brand is made from the sum of its parts.

Positioning: Examine how closely aligned your employee branding should be to your branding in other areas. And use

outcomes from the positioning stage to inform positioning within your own sector.

Endorsement: Determine what level of endorsement (if any) your communications should carry. Your marketing and sales advertising will carry different messaging to your staff recruitment campaigns. But how about ‘look & feel’ and verbal identity? How much of this will feed into your employer brand identity? This relationship requires careful consideration.

Naming: Decide whether to retain an existing name or come up with something entirely new. Creating a unique name for your employer brand will give it a tangible personality, but this might also increase timelines and budget.

Branding: Developing or evolving an existing logotype and visual language to accurately convey the initiative is one approach. While at the other end of the spectrum, organisations can chose to create a standalone employer brand identity.

Tone of Voice: Ensuring your brand personality is expressed consistently through language is important. Although the tone you adopt to target a desired group might differ considerably.

Implementation: Audit your current communications programme to gauge best value for money which will give you a good pointer for which channels have been performing best. This will help to you to make the right decisions when implementing your employer branding identity.

Guardianship: Create a strong set of visual and verbal guidelines to make sure your employer brand identity is consistently used and applied across all communications. This can be a standalone document, or it can plug-into your master guidelines manual.

Website review: Examine whether you are making the most of your website and online communication channels. Should your

employer brand have a dedicated area on your corporate website? Or, would a standalone micro-site do an even better job?

It’s been said that the war for talent is over, because talent won. That’s a somewhat catastrophic scenario, but think about it this way. With 24/7 access to the job market, no employee is going to willingly approach a generic employer with non-specific goals, fuzzy targets and zero ambition. Rather, promising career seekers will choose to apply their skills with like-minded souls, who personify their own thinking and have a proven track record in up-skilling and retention. Offset your corporate mindset with a beating heart, because brain-power and passion are a wining combination. At the end of the day, employees and employers share many of the same objectives. And, in most instances, both are seeking a long, not short-term relationship.