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Packing a punch

Think like a marketer and learn to make your employer brand stand out from the rest of the field

My friend once rejected a company that offered him 46% higher salary for a company that only offered him 32% higher salary because of its stronger employer brand. That's the power of good employer branding – 14% savings in salary cost.

Most organisations create diluted brands when they try to be everything to everyone by copying "best HR practices" from leading companies. They end up having a set of policies that send an inconsistent message to employees. It's better to develop attributes that are dynamic in the sense that they're about a journey, such as "We won't rest until everyone in the business has 15 days' training a year" and not merely "We believe in training".

The challenge for HR is finding a strong message that speaks clearly to the kind of people it wants to attract and retain. Employer brands should have a strong identity that isn't afraid to say: "We're a company that would appeal to people like you - but not everyone will fit in here."

Defining your employer brand

Most employer brands are based either on the branding for a company's product or service, or its core values. If the hallmark of the company's product brand is "innovation", you can develop an employment brand that encourages innovation among employees and promotes a healthy, active work environment. Basing your employer brand on the business brand makes conceptual sense because you want your image to match the branding for your product or service. This approach, however, is not built to last because brands are at the whims of the market. Employer brands have more staying power if they are based on the corporate core values.

If your company is not in a glamorous industry, it can build a reputation for being inclusive and hiring people of all ages. Or it can create the image of being a respectful employer where everyone is treated equally. Generally, companies can focus on four types of employer branding messages:

- **Focus on offers:** "At our company, you get more than what you get elsewhere. (E.g. benefits, culture, and career opportunities)"
- **Focus on personality:** "You can find people who are similar to you in our company."
 - **Focus on values:** "Values are important to us. If you share the same values, you can live according to what's important to you here."
 - **Focus on tasks:** "At our company, you will get the chance to do what excites you and you will love it here."

Market your employer brand

Organisational storytelling: Have stories that capture the essence of who you are and what you are like as an employer. It is far more believable than simply saying "We value our employees". Unlike most of the corporate propaganda provided to

employees, stories can play a prominent role in building a firm's employment brand because they don't sound like sales pitches, are interesting, easily remembered, and can increase employees' pride in the firm.

Companies should make stories available to employees through a story inventory or include them in newsletters, speeches, website, meetings, and as part of employee-referral programme materials.

Brand ambassadors: Train your workforce to talk in a consistent and catchy way about how great your company is to potential employees. You'll know if you've succeeded in creating brand ambassadors when everyone in the organisation thinks and acts on the idea that "I am the brand".

For example, train hiring managers to project the right image and talk about how great your company is during the interviews. Even if the candidate didn't get the job, the person would have been so impressed that they would spread by word of mouth about the pleasant interview experience, the great company culture, the training opportunities your company offers, and the interesting organisation stories you told them.

Orientation programme: Companies spend a lot of money and time hiring replacements when they could just utilise the power of orientation programmes for retention, employee performance and employer branding. Remember employees don't just tell their friends how great your company's orientation programme is. Employees also tell their friends about how lousy the company's orientation programme is!

Brand your HR department: It's a matter of walking the talk. There is no better way to establish credibility as a player in the branding game than creating and fulfilling your own brand promise. Ask yourself what your HR department's reputation is among the employees. Do managers picture you as savvy strategists, backward bureaucrats, or pleasant people-pleasers? HR must educate the organisation about its capabilities and contributions so others will know you do much more than simply processing papers.

Enhance your employer brand visibility: Tap on opportunities to increase your company's public exposure by attracting media coverage about your HR practices or speaking at HR conferences. Heighten this visibility by including employees in the interviews or on the conference podium with you. Professionals love hearing from "real people" and they will spread the good word for you.

While marketing managers request for marketing budgets, HR managers should request for employer branding budget. Rather than copying one another and come up with a homogenised approach, build a unique set of practices and policies which will create a meaningful employer brand that everybody talks about and your employees can be proud of. **H**

