

Positive Candidate Communication

The Best Employment Branding Is Free, if you earn it!

Many a column on ERE and other staffing forums advise companies on how to increase their presence in the employment market space. Companies spend mega-pounds on advertising agencies and public relations consultants in the name of employment branding to increase name recognition, position themselves as employers of choice, and develop glossy detail pieces that help differentiate their companies from others.

The aim of this article is to highlight the hands-down greatest source of employment branding, a source so powerful it can reach millions of people worldwide, without a single print advertisement, brochure, radio ad, or pound spent. That's right, it's free. It requires minimal human resources and zero capital resources, and in some instances, you may not even realise your organisation is using it.

Although an effective source, it also comes with a big "handle with care" label that you'd be remiss not to heed. In fact, the source is no secret. It is none other than the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of candidates your company comes into contact with each year. These are individuals who apply to your company, are interviewed by your company, and/or are made offers to join your company.

Even though many candidates are not qualified, are not the right fit, or simply don't mesh with your corporate culture, they may be one of your company's greatest sources of employment branding.

Some of you may remember the old Clairol Herbal Essences shampoo commercials that ran in the late 1970s. A young woman was so excited about the effect the shampoo had on her hair that she told two friends. And they told two friends, and so on, and so on. Before long, there was a litany of women extolling the virtues of this shampoo.

This "tell two friends" quasi-game of telephone is alive and well, and perhaps working right now against your organisation. How?

Any time an individual has a bad experience, he or she usually vents about it to someone. Candidates are people, too, so if they have a bad recruiting experience, they will likely tell someone. There are many situations that might invoke candidates to spread a not-so-flattering word or two about your organisation, such as not getting a response to a job posting, hearing a vague response when inquiring about an application or interview, or getting blown off by a hiring manager who forgot about the interview.

Chances are, candidates have had one or more of these experiences, and have told at least two people. And so on, and so on.

For example, assume Company Z fills about 5,000 positions annually, with over 100,000 candidates applying for these positions. That means that only 5% of candidates will be successful in their quest to work for Company Z, and 95% of candidates will walk away with only their experience to talk about. If each one of those 95,000 candidates tells just two friends about their experience, Company Z has gained exposure to nearly 200,000 people (and perhaps potential candidates) without spending a single penny of the advertising budget!

These individuals are a force to be reckoned with when it comes to employer branding, or employer bashing, for your organisation.

For companies the size of Johnson & Johnson, the potential impact of this network is staggering. Over one million candidates per year apply to their positions. They fill about 12,000 positions globally per year, which means that only 1% of candidates who apply are hired and 99% are not. Johnson & Johnson has a potential network of nearly two million candidates who know about them simply through word-of-mouth advertising.

If these individuals have a negative perception of our company because of what they may have heard from others who have been through the recruiting process, the ramifications are astronomical. These individuals are not only potential candidates themselves but perhaps consumers of your products. Think about the impact this could have on sales, let alone hiring!

While the prospect of having to worry about messaging to hundreds or even hundreds of thousands of candidates is daunting, a variety of tools exist to help. Today's applicant tracking systems have communication tools that make it quick and easy for recruiters to acknowledge and respond to candidates throughout the various stages of the recruiting process.

However, the technologies are only as good as the processes that enable them and diligent recruiters who are committed to timely follow up.

To ensure your organisation is doing all it can to effectively manage volumes of candidates, particularly the ones who will walk away only with an experience but not a job (and tell the proverbial two friends), these are some tried-and-true best practices:

1. Ensure you have a mechanism for acknowledging a candidate's resume or bid. Most recruiting technology systems available today have this capability; ensure yours is turned on, your recruiters use it, and that the message a candidate receives upon bidding or submitting a resume clearly outlines what to expect from the recruiting process.
2. For candidates who are not a fit and will not progress to the next phase of the process, advise them promptly so they can move on and focus on the next opportunity. Whether this is via email, hard-copy letter, or a personal phone call from a recruiter, the key is clear and timely communication.
3. For candidates who will be moving on to the next phase of the process, communicate with them quickly and let them know what to expect and when to expect it. (Chances are, these individuals are engaged in the recruiting process with other organisations, too, so don't let others beat you to the punch.) Many candidates appreciate the high response rates that advertisements and postings yield, but may not fully appreciate the amount of time it takes to prepare the slate, discuss with the hiring manager, and manage all the logistics involved in interviewing. Even if a recruiter lets a candidate know

that he or she will be moving forward but the schedules are still being worked through, that's enough to keep a candidate engaged.

4. Often times there are "B" candidates who may not be on the initial slate of candidates but remain possibilities down the road. These candidates are an important group because they are not immediately ruled out or in, meaning the door is open for a potential opportunity. (At Johnson & Johnson, they keep these candidates engaged by ensuring they receive a follow-up communication on their status from recruiters every 30 days).
5. When you tell a candidate you will follow up, do it when you say you will. There is nothing more undermining to a recruiter's credibility than an unfulfilled promise.
6. Once a candidate has completed an interview, follow up with a thank you and then discuss the next steps. For those moving forward, outline the timeframe. Even though it may be several weeks until all candidates are interviewed and the hiring team debriefs, the candidate will understand why there will be a "quiet period" with no news.
7. If a candidate who has interviewed will not be moving forward, a personal communication of his or her status is always your best bet. I recommend these communications happen live via phone or in person between the recruiter and candidate. While these conversations may be difficult, by engaging in open, honest, and timely communication you are being fair and true to the candidate and the recruiting process. The candidate may not like the message, but at least he or she will know where the process stands.
8. As soon as a candidate accepts an offer, contact the non-successful candidates and let them know. Thank them for interviewing, and keep them excited about future possibilities with your organisation.

The tips outlined require no print campaigns, brochures, or lavish promotional spending. Good old-fashioned common courtesy and honest communication are cheap (free!) and easy means of ensuring that your company's "serendipitous networks" are perpetuating a positive employment branding that yield immeasurable return on investment when it comes to creating goodwill about your organisation.

Spread the word about candidate communication to your recruiting friends. And they will tell two friends. And so on, and so on.

Taken from ERE Daily January 2007