

Employment Branding

There is little doubt that employment branding is one of the hottest topics in recruiting these days. Unfortunately, what a lot of firms implement in the name of branding really has nothing to do with employment branding.

Defining Employment Branding

Employment branding is unique in that it is the only long-term recruiting strategy. The viral-based perception management program designed to attract top-quality applicants is based on the premise that the organisation is well-managed in the eyes of the target candidate population.

It has many critical elements, only one of which pertains to getting the message out through awards programs, editorial content in target publications, presentations at conferences, and through viral marketing driven via the employee referral program. It is not the same as recruitment marketing, although recruitment marketing should be aligned with the employment branding effort.

Advertising is Not Employment Branding

Unfortunately, a number of organisations have built employment branding programs that are little more than recruitment marketing programs redressed in a different name. Supporting this is a vendor community that sells a multitude of recruitment marketing-related services under the name of employment branding.

If you are thinking of going down the advertising road, here are some reasons to pause:

- **Advertising is expensive** An employment branding campaign should be based more on a PR model than traditional advertising. While PR is relatively cheap, placing full-page glossy ads requires a huge cash outlay. Responding to reporters' and writers' questions requires no cash. The same is true for speaking at conferences, where the travel expenses come from a budget outside of HR, and writing articles in professional journals, where manager or employee time is the only major cost.
- **Believability counts** The basic premise of building your brand is that your brand must be built "virally" by others. In this case, viral means that your great people management practices need to be "talked up" by others in order to be credible and believable. Because advertising is paid, it just doesn't have the credibility that comes from others praising the way you manage your firm. For example, the premise is the same with restaurants as it is with firms. A great restaurant review or a friend telling you about a

great restaurant carries 10 times more weight than any ad placed by the restaurant. If you want to attract serious diners, rely on word of mouth.

- **It's a distraction** Advertising sends the message to your employees and managers that they don't need to take an active part in employment branding because the advertising will suffice. Any advertising emphasis might reduce the number of employer referrals and the willingness of managers to speak at conferences and to respond to reporters' calls.
- **Ads appear desperate** Paid advertising might send a message that your firm is desperate. Some might see advertising as neutral or harmless, but the fact is that if you want a great employment brand, you need to avoid it like the plague. Tooting your own horn through any "paid channel" may actually hurt your employment brand.
- **Articles are widely read** Most top performers don't read ads, yet they are almost always interested in learning about best practices. This means that they will read and pay attention to articles and case studies written by neutral professionals in their field. The same premise holds for presentations at conferences where attendees assume that presenters are closely screened, so that only factual information about industry-leading practices is presented.
- **Advertising can't tell a story** Anyone who knows anything about product branding already knows that the best product brands are built through powerful stories based on "personal experience," usually spread from one product user to another. The same is true of employment branding. Nothing is more likely to be listened to, believed, and passed along to others than a great story that illustrates what it's like to work at a particular firm. Stories can best be spread in articles, in person, and during presentations. Unfortunately, ads are one of the weakest mechanisms for spreading great and credible stories.
- **Advertising is not interactive** Because of the high costs, almost all advertising must be brief. Thus, its limited amount of information minimises the ability to tell a company's "story" in-depth. Instead, customise the story with the necessary details to meet the needs of each individual. Employees can best spread the word by answering questions, going into more or less depth as necessary, and giving specific information to each individual. Have employees spread this detailed information at conferences, via e-mail, and through the most powerful tool, the employee referral program.
- **Slogans aren't enough** Many advertising-oriented firms push to develop a cute slogan to sell the company. Unfortunately, top performers are not impressed with slogans. Instead, they need real, detailed information that differentiates the management practices of your firm from the others. It might require compelling stories, real examples, and hard data to prove that your firm is superior. What doesn't work is simply declaring yourself as an "employer of choice" or espousing that you have "work-life balance" in an ad or on your website.

Well-Branded Firms Don't Rely on Advertising

If the above points don't shift your thinking away from relying on advertising, you should look at some of the best employment brands to see how they were built.

Let's start with Google, the world's strongest employment brand. Google has built both its product and its employment brand in a few brief years, almost entirely through viral marketing. You won't find a Google "ad" because the firm has understood from the very beginning the value of viral marketing.

However, Google is talked about and quoted in literally every major business and functional publication. If you haven't noticed, they earned the top spot on *Fortune's* list of the 100 best companies to work for in America. The net result is that they get over 3,000 applications a day from the best and brightest all around the world. Yes, great employment branding turns recruiting into a "sorting problem."

IBM, GE, Walt Disney, and HP have taken similar "viral" marketing efforts. Their managers are sought-after speakers, their management practices are written up in business and professional journals, and they all have at least one best-selling book written about their management practices.

It's no accident that you are aware of the now famous "boundary-less" or "managing by walking around" practices. Even firms with a less-than-glamorous product, such as The Container Store, Wegman's Food Market, and Starbucks have become frequently talked about because of their award-winning manager practices.

These firms identify what it takes to become a desired employer and secure perception of that by communicating with target populations via a variety of channels that are effective at altering opinion.

While once in a great while a good advertisement reaches cult appeal, for the most part, advertising is an annoyance that is actively avoided by top and average talent, and coveted by the desperate. Advertising can be used to brag about brand status, but it cannot be used to develop it.

Because this topic is on the minds of nearly every leading professional, it is important that some time be spent on clarifying what is and is not employment branding, and on introducing what it takes to deliver an employment branding program capable of impacting corporate performance and shareholder return.

Taken from ERE Daily January 2007