



Employer brand research shows key trends

PROFILE

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BRETT MICHINGTON SHARES WITH ALAN HOSKING KEY OUTCOMES FROM A YEAR-LONG EMPLOYER BRANDING GLOBAL RESEARCH PROJECT.

the past two following the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) where employer branding became a key priority of the leadership agenda. During times of economic growth, the focus of employer branding was on talent acquisition strategies. However, with the reduction in recruitment and headcount as a result of the GFC, companies shifted their focus to engagement and retention of the talent they already had. The economic downturn has actually been positive for the field of employer branding as companies are now seeing the benefits of applying a holistic approach to employer branding as a talent attraction, engagement and retention strategy.

WHAT WERE THE KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH?

The key objectives of the research study were to understand the relationships and key linkages between the employer brand, corporate brand and consumer brand, and to develop a framework to guide best practice

in leveraging the brand portfolio to optimise the value of your intangible assets

As part of the research project, we conducted face-face research forums in South Africa USA, Denmark and Australia with eight to 15 senior executive leaders from top companies from the regions. We also conducted one-on-one interviews with industry and corporate leaders around the world.

WHAT DID YOU FIND IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EMPLOYER BRAND, CORPORATE BRAND AND CONSUMER BRAND?

The relationship between the employer brand, corporate brand and consumer brand has been described as The Bermuda Triangle! I describe it as a relationship built upon focus, leadership and influence.

Firstly, it is important to understand your company only has one brand and the corporate, consumer and employer brands are

subsets which make up the brand portfolio. The total portfolio needs to be considered in organisational strategy as each subset can (and usually does) have an impact on the other. For example, a company which manages redundancies poorly and gains negative media attention will likely see an impact on their consumer brand as a groundswell builds for consumers to boycott their products as a result of the negative publicity. With today's online communication tools and networks such as Twitter and Facebook, negative publicity can be circulated globally instantly! The damage to your reputation can take years to restore.

Most companies have a different strategy for each subset of the brand. The marketing function is usually responsible for managing the corporate and consumer brand and HR is usually responsible for the employer brand, though this is changing (our global research published in 2009 found that 43% of HR departments are responsible for the employer brand vs 70% + two years previously). The HR, Marketing and Communication functions need to work closely on the employer brand strategy to ensure they capitalise and leverage the capabilities of the 'sum of the capabilities of different functions.'

The essence of your corporate and consumer brands should be reflected in the essence of your employer brand. The Ritz Carlton brand is about quality and service, and this must be reflected in both the customer and employee experience. If the hotel promises a superior customer experience and employees do not 'buy in' to the vision, the company will likely fall short on delivering the customer promise.

Leaders need to inspire staff to deliver on the corporate and consumer brand promise. Sir Richard Branson, founder of Virgin does this best. It is clear when you interact with a Virgin

brand that the people who work there are aligned to the company's brand values. Conceived in 1970, the Virgin Group has gone on to grow very successful businesses in sectors ranging from mobile telephony to transportation, travel, financial services, media, music and fitness by empowering employees to deliver on their brand values of value for money, quality, innovation, fun and a sense of competitive challenge. Branson's trademark is outlandish publicity stunts. He will do almost anything to promote the Virgin brand: drive a tank down Fifth Avenue in New York to introduce Virgin Cola to the United States, risk his life in high-profile hot-air balloon adventures or abseil down the side of a hotel whilst throwing out free airline tickets to watchers below. Whilst you may not see the CEO of Goldman Sachs abseiling down the side of a hotel, Branson gets away with it as he is merely bringing to life its brand values.

The employer brand can influence the corporate and consumer brands. Sodexo, a global food services group has received enormous media exposure over the past couple of years as a result of its effective use of social media recruiting. As a result, the Sodexo corporate brand has achieved a much higher level of awareness that would have been possible through a paid advertising campaign. Sodexo are the world's best-in-class at sharing stories about the employment experience as seen through the eyes of their employees and has engaged and built global communities and relationships with potential candidates and raised awareness of their products and services amongst consumers around the world.

Customers are often prospective employees or may be a referral source for talent, so there needs to be consistency in messaging across the brand portfolio. Sometimes a different message is required for your corporate

brand vs your employer brand. For example, a bank may not want to project to clients that it is a funky, cool and a fun place to work. However, it may wish to project itself as a friendly and fun place to work to passive and active candidates, especially if it wants to recruit a diverse workforce and younger generation.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR HR MANAGERS IN ADDING VALUE TO THE BRAND PORTFOLIO?

The key challenges include:

- ❖ The ability for HR managers to break down the tradition of marketing being responsible for managing the corporate and consumer brands and HR being responsible for the employer brand. I suggest HR initiate the conversations with Marketing/ Communications to get started;
- ❖ An inability to demonstrate a viable business case which results in a lack of resources available to invest in aligning the brand portfolio with corporate objectives. There may also be a lack of expertise and influence in HR/ Marketing and Communication functions to drive the alignment. This is where executives need to step in and support the agenda;
- ❖ Establishing if the company's leadership has an employer brand mindset or if they only see employees as functional 'human capital' in the same way as other tangible assets such as plant and equipment; and
- ❖ Clarifying who owns the strategy and how it aligns with the corporate strategy, objectives and values. It actually doesn't matter who owns the strategy. The key is to ensure collaboration, communication and commitment between the functions responsible for managing the strategy. *(HR)*

(h) HOW DO COMPANIES VIEW EMPLOYER BRANDING CURRENTLY? The uptake in employer branding research, theory and practice has grown significantly over the past five years including