

The People Side of the Brand

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Organizations work hard to create a brand that distinguishes them from the competition. Whether the brand is 'quality' (e.g., Holt Renfrew), 'exceptional individual service', (e.g., Four Seasons Hotels), 'consistency and convenience' (e.g., McDonalds") or 'innovation' (e.g., Microsoft), the brand promise creates an expectation in customers' minds that is difficult to replicate by other organizations. While responsibility for brand development and promotion traditionally lies with Marketing professionals, Human Resource professionals also have an important responsibility to ensure the brand lives up to its promise.

Human Resources supports the brand promise by ensuring the internal capability and commitment of the company's employees is aligned with the brand that is promoted externally. By building better bridges between HR and marketing, pro-active employee communication, recruitment, training, reward and recognition programs, HR has the tool kit that determines whether the brand promise is affirmed in the hearts and minds of the company's customers, or repudiated by a disconnect between the promise and the product or service delivery. In essence, HR helps create brand ambassadors.

Marketing and HR need to work together

One way to create brand ambassadors is to build stronger bridges between the Marketing and HR functions. We recently held a series of focus groups that invited HR and Marketing professionals to dialogue about how their functions could work more closely to leverage their brand. As one participant, a marketing executive, suggested "HR and Marketing working together is wishful thinking" expressing the view that they have different agendas, speak different languages, have different processes and generally have a limited appreciation of each others' role and capabilities in aligning the external and internal brand.

Yet, increasingly organizations are pulling together cross-functional teams that include Marketing and HR professionals, as is the case in a financial services company that

also participated in our round tables, HR is at the table to ensure that the organization is ready to deliver on the brand promise once the brand is launched. By working with Marketing, HR can anticipate the components that are needed to support the brand, such as recruiting people with the right competencies, aligning performance management with the brand promise, structuring reward programs to drive desired behaviours and training employees on how to deliver on the brand promise. There is a growing recognition that a lag between the launch of the brand and employees' ability to deliver on the brand promise erodes customer trust and loyalty.

In most organizations, HR and Marketing need to collaborate more. HR needs to go beyond supporting the brand through HR programs to influencing the brand by sharing information on employee opinion and organizational readiness that can be considered along with external marketing information on consumer needs. This merging of HR and Marketing information allows the organization to create a stronger and more sustainable brand because it is influenced by employee attitudes, behaviours and capabilities.

Define the behaviours for successful brand delivery

Marketing and HR need to work closer to infuse a distinct culture in the organization. This culture is expressed in the words and actions of all its employees irrespective of their role in the organization, and influenced by customer needs and expectations.

While Marketing conducts a great deal of research on customer needs and expectations, many employees are not familiar with the findings, nor do they make the connection between customer opinion and their own behaviours. Without a sound knowledge of the customer, employees make assumptions about what drives customer satisfaction. False assumptions lead to the demonstration of behaviours that are less than effective in building customer loyalty.

For example, one leading Canadian retailer asked its employees to list what they believed was important to its customers. Employees listed factors such as 'price' and other factors that were out of their control. When customer research was presented that showed that what mattered most to customers were factors that were in the direct control of employees such as 'trust' and 'helpfulness of staff', employees had an opportunity to explore how their own actions could influence customer satisfaction. In this example, brand behaviours were reinforced with training on customer service and rewarded through variable compensation.

Customer research can be combined with other considerations to define the desired knowledge, skills and behaviours that employees should demonstrate to deliver on the brand promise. It is important to define behaviours in concrete terms so that there is a shared understanding within the organization of how behaviours are linked to the brand experience. For example, if the brand is 'quality', what are the behaviours that drive 'quality' for a sales manager, for a call centre rep, or for an HR advisor. Behaviours should resonate throughout the organization and become a key part of the culture.

These key behaviours should also be communicated broadly as best practices so that employees have a roadmap for success, and embedded in HR processes such as performance management so that they can be reinforced and assessed by each employee's manager.

Reward and Recognize Behaviours that Deliver on the Brand Promise

While there is sufficient debate about the link between rewards and motivation, it is safe to say that rewarding the right behaviours sends a message to employees about what behaviours the organization values, and believes are an integral part of its success.

Compensation design needs to be aligned to the brand promise. By building brand behaviours into performance and bonus plans of all employees, managers have the framework to coach employees on the desired behaviours and reward them on how well they demonstrate these behaviours.

For example, call centres that define their brand as 'attentive service' but base the rewards of customer service reps heavily on units per hour cannot expect to deliver on their brand promise. Instead, finding other measures, e.g., decrease in the number of callers having to call back because their issue wasn't resolved, would be more aligned to the brand promise.

Recognition programs are also being used effectively to build a shared understanding of the best practices that support the brand promise. One retailer used mystery shopping scores to recognize people. The behaviours captured by the mystery shoppers were communicated to the rest of the organization through featured stories in the company newsletter, and used to promote best practices throughout the organization. By communicating these behaviours, others in the company could emulate these internal best practices.

Starbucks is a good example of how to align rewards and recognition to the brand. In building their brand, Starbucks recognized that their employees help to create the coffee house environment that is the essence of their brand. Rather than investing heavily in advertising, they channelled money into rewards (stock options and recognition), training and career development.

Conclusion:

HR has an increasingly important role to play in delivering on the brand promise. While HR and Marketing have often worked in silos in the past, a more sophisticated customer market calls for greater collaboration, sharing of information and ideas, and alignment between the external brand promise and internal capability. Given the significant investment in brand development and promotion, a substantial investment also needs to be made in the employees who deliver on the brand promise. If you need to build a

business case for brand-linked rewards to help retain customers, ask your marketing department how much it costs the company to acquire each new customer.

As employees play an important role in delivering on the brand promise, some questions HR professionals should ask themselves are listed below.

Are Your Employees Living the Brand Promise?

Can all your employees easily describe your brand promise or desired customer experience?

Do your employees understand customer needs and expectations? Is customer research shared with them?

Do employees understand how their own behaviours support (or detract from) the brand promise, whether they have direct contact with the end customer, or not?

Do HR processes, such as performance management, integrate key behaviours for brand delivery to ensure the behaviours can be reinforced by managers?

Are rewards and recognition linked to delivery of the brand promise?

Is there consistency between the external brand and the internal culture? Is the promise made to external customers similar to the rewards of working for the company?

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