

Branding Your Employees

By Kristine Kirby Webster

Marketing. When most people hear the word, they think of marketing to prospective customers, or to existing ones. Essentially, they think of marketing as an externally-focused business function. But what about marketing to your internal customers – your employees? Employees are walking, talking advocates for your brand. However, most companies spend little time, attention, or money on internal marketing and branding, such as making sure employees understand the brand and communicate it well. Do your employees know and live the brand? Are they brand champions?

In many ways, more important than selling the brand on the outside is selling the brand on the inside. There is no shortage of reasons why companies should embrace the concept of internal branding: it leads to increased corporate loyalty and job longevity; employees are better able to serve customers because they understand the brand promise; employees who believe in the brand work harder, and better. But most importantly, when employees are brand champions, they create brand differentiation for your customers; something hard for your competition to replicate. This differentiation becomes part of your brand's edge on the competition, and employees add the edge. Employees should – must – be brand champions.

Kevin Thomas, President of MCA Communicates, argues that employees as part of the brand differentiation are critical on the brand battlefields of the future. "The 4 P's (product, price, promotion, and placement) are all replicable by competitors; the only thing not replicable is the fifth P, the personality of the organization, or its people."

Granted, finding and keeping employees that are brand champions is more difficult than just finding an employee. Brand champion employees must either be systematically found, or created from people with promise. Andy Milligan, co-editor of the forthcoming book *Uncommon Practice* cites the example of the UK sandwich chain, Pret A Manger. The recruitment process at Pret requires prospective employees that have made it through the interview process to work for one day in a Pret store. The employees of that store then make the final decision as to whether or not the prospective employee is hired or not. Why? Pret thinks this process not only ensures that employees have the "Pret" attitude, but also empowers existing employees. In the end, only about 20 percent of prospective employees make the cut. But the employees Pret has are indeed walking, talking brand ambassadors, part of the "Pret experience" that their customers have come to expect, and what gives them the edge over other High Street sandwich chains.

The Pret example may be a bit extreme, and not even viable for more traditional businesses. However, at a minimum a company must ensure that the customer and employee's (or prospective employee's) perception of the brand are in sync. In this era of increasing competitiveness, it is crucial that the entire company be brand focused – from shipping and receiving to the COO. The employees make the difference between the brand being an idea instead of a reality for your customers.

But make no mistake; internal branding is not a one-way street. To truly get the greatest benefit, internal branding must be a dialogue. After all, employees are a great resource of information on

the brand. You can use their perceptions, their experiences, their interactions with customers to research and hone the brand message. The brand message can be refined and improved when it is reflective of employees' attitudes and experiences. After all, the employees are the very heart of the company, who better to offer valuable input into the brand and the resultant experiences? External marketing should not be different than internal marketing; the message should be the same. However, just as organizations listen to external market forces when creating and maintaining a brand, so should organizations listen to internal marketing, and for the same reasons. Employees need to hear the same messages you tell the general public, and must not only understand them, but be empowered to uphold them.

Ah, empowerment. A 90s buzzword if ever there was one! But the overuse of the word should not overshadow the importance of the concept. Employees who like their jobs usually have a strong opinion and knowledge of the brand, and they communicate this to customers. In light of this, many companies are realizing the importance of employee empowerment. Rather than telling the employee what the brand is, use dialogue with employees and allow the employee to feel ownership towards the brand, to be part of the defining vision and action of the brand, and interpret it as it applies to their job function. This creates a win-win scenario for a company. Employees feel they "own" problems, and the customers feel like someone is really listening to them and helping them find a solution to the problem, rather than just giving them lip service. This empathy and empowerment an employee can offer goes a long way towards creating a stronger brand with the customer. If you have successfully branded internally, and truly conveyed the brand promise to your employees, they will consider whether or not every action they take supports the brand, or erodes it.

When a company has an internal branding plan, the employees relate better with the brand, with the customers, and with each other. They are more likely to experience the brand in a way that is consistent with the public face of the brand, and the customers' experience. Soon you will have your employees saying "I'm with the brand!"