

BRAND PAPERS

Brand's bedfellow

Jeff Smith and Kristiane Hansted Blomqvist explain how the human resources department could become branding's new best friend

Increasingly, companies are realising that if they are to align their business and brand strategies, the brand can no longer be operated solely by the marketing department. This has led to a heightened focus on getting employees to live the brand. However this is not without its challenges. In most companies, the marketing department has had limited influence on the general employee. Marketing must think differently about the brand and its internal partners and turn to an unexpected ally: the human resources department.

The notion of marketing and HR becoming bedfellows is not so strange when the mutual benefits are considered. HR can help expand a brand's influence beyond the marketing department as its work is cross functional and company wide. By the same token, marketing, by making its target audience, positioning, and strategies available, can bolster HR's ability to attract and retain employees. A successful partnership between the two departments can create a new kind of company with a culture that is more effective at delivering business results.

Integrated environment

One of the strongest impediments to converting employees into brand ambassadors is the way they are compensated. Integrated services were a key part for one of our financial services clients, but employees were not incentivised to act like this. Instead they were motivated to achieve the best results for their individual business unit. The company realised that before making a promise to stakeholders, they needed to change their compensation schemes. They also realised that they needed to encourage employees to operate in an integrated



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environment. HR became a key partner in achieving both objectives and as a result, executives across multiple functions got involved.

HR is also discovering how marketing can help achieve its goals. As always, employers are involved in a war for talent. Our research shows that the best candidates say there are many factors why they are attracted to a career; many of equal or greater importance than money. They want to work for a company that reflects their own ideals and aspirations. This has elevated the importance of branding and HR's reliance on the marketing function.

Culture club

At Goldman Sachs, for example, the brand is the culture. This sets the company apart and underlines its industry leadership. It is the result of a conscious effort to integrate brand and HR from strategy development to implementation. Internally, marketing employees talk about cultural practices rather than branding. Recasting branding in this light is a far more effective way of engaging employees. Externally, marketing highlights the elements of culture that are most important to the customer. Continuous employee research and roundtables with senior management are conducted to ensure that initiatives always meet expectations.

The biggest challenge that companies face in replicating Goldman Sach's success is that integration isn't natural. Instead, they view their vision, culture and brand as distinct elements to be handled separately by different departments. So the vision resides with the management committee, the culture within HR, and the brand within marketing. This puts the company at risk of strategic misalignment, and is a source of tremendous confusion. To avoid this, General Motors spent time during a brand strategy development project figuring out how the brand directly impacts its vision. The result was a strategic document that illustrated how

At Goldman Sachs the brand is the culture



the vision, the brand identity, and positioning were born of the same cloth.

Strategic alignment is the most critical prerequisite for success in bridging the gap. It is not enough that marketing requests HR's assistance in implementing brand values across the firm or that HR requests marketing's help in adapting tools for HR purposes. If the goal is to deliver greater business value, the two departments need to work together. The first step is to develop respect for each other's expertise. The best way to come to a mutual understanding is to arrange a meeting where strategies can be exchanged, synergies can be discussed, and overlaps in responsibilities can be resolved.

Organising objectives

Once the two groups are philosophically aligned, specific strategies need to be discussed and agreed upon. The trick is to focus on what's most important. The company's business strategy and the key objectives that each department has developed to support it, should serve as the starting point. This should lead to identification and prioritisation of the key areas where the two departments can collaborate. A shared objective, for example, might be to turn the company into a technology leader. On the HR side, this would involve evaluating employee characteristics, rewards and compensation, management systems, and cultural values. Marketing's task is to specify the traits that are critical from a brand perspective (such as employees need to be creative), because the proof lies in the execution not just in the promise.

Once aligned philosophically, it comes down to implementation.

Are rewards and compensation systems, training curriculums, brand and recruitment communications aligned with HR and marketing strategies? If so, a plan should be created that details how the brand is reflected cross all key initiatives.

Brand alignment is critical for implementation to be effective internally. A key principle in a joint plan is that marketing must stop talking about the 'brand'. Brand is merely a buzzword to many in the organisation and discussions often generate indifference. Better to relate brand directly to employee benefits using language like: "If you act in this way, you will achieve these results." Marketing must also be proactive in sharing the promises they intend to communicate externally before the market actually hears them. BMW, for example, has had great success cultivating enthusiasm and motivating employees by sharing their advertising campaigns with employees before they hit the general market.

Monitoring progress

Finally, HR and marketing should co-ordinate to monitor progress and update each other on relevant information. While HR monitors the pulse of employees, marketing stays focused on how best to deliver against the needs of the company's stakeholders, primarily customers. The results should be reported

back to the leadership team in tandem to ensure that they correctly influence business strategy. HR and marketing departments might not be natural bedfellows, but experience shows that when they do co-operate, impressive results follow.

