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Promoting Brand Allegiance Within

by - Edwin Colyer

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Companies may say they understand the power of branding and they may even translate brands into dollars on a balance sheet, but many are clueless about a large part of brand management. It seems obvious, but unless employees act consistently with the brands they represent, any other branding activity can suffer.

"Employees bring a brand to life; they are its ultimate custodians." says Ian Buckingham, head of Interbrand Inside.

Yet the process of creating and maintaining a brand culture in the workplace -- internal brand alignment -- is a difficult and delicate process. It needs more than a manual and a slide presentation. Alignment is about encouraging employees to behave in certain ways. And that means dabbling in psychology.

"You can't just say to people, 'Here's the external brand, here's the internal, and here's how it plays out in everyday behavior,' " says Salway. "You've got to be careful because people are individuals; you can make this a false thing. If you keep staff happy and still let them bring their personality to work then you're more likely to succeed."

The Securities Institute is in the middle of an internal brand alignment exercise. "We have recently done some research on our brand values and discovered that we had a strong brand among our customers, but we didn't have a culture of 'Here is what our brand is.' We found it absolutely necessary to consider the internal aspects of the brand too. We recognized that behaviors of our staff needed to fit with the values that our customers wanted to see in us. People are our business," says Robert Swinton, head of marketing at the Securities Institute. "We made sure that what we say about our brand resonated with employees. What we came up with had to be livable, feasible and acceptable. We conducted workshops with focus groups of employees to work through what our brand values mean, and define how this would translate into the work of different types of jobs."

"If you impose a brand culture it will fail. If you expect to change behavior without asking if it's a good idea you will fail," states Allan Steinmetz, CEO of Inward Strategic Consulting.

Wal-mart even uses the mass media in its internal branding. Its television adverts featuring greeters in store are as much about demonstrating appropriate behavior to the company's own employees as they are about promoting the store to the general public.

Perhaps the best form of communication is leadership by example. Staff need role models and will be more likely to adopt brand values if they see their superiors living up to what they say.

"Marketing is the custodian of the physical brand, but who are the custodians of behavior?" asks Ian Buckingham. "If it is just HR, you've perhaps got a problem because often HR departments have lost their punch at board level. The best sponsor for an internal culture is the CEO.

Naturally rewards and remuneration can provide incentives for certain behaviors, and the incorporation of the brand values with HR policies and processes is essential. BP, for instance, runs its Helios Award scheme, which honors projects and work that embody the company's brand values (green, innovation, performance and progressive). Now in its third year, the number of nominations for the award far surpasses expectations. Employees take it seriously.

Human resource departments must also consider how their recruitment will uphold brand values. If you can pick the people whose natural behavior and values fit closely with the company brand then you automatically create a culture. You won't be trying to squeeze new employees until they fit -- or are fit to burst.

Buckingham recommends interview guides that specifically address the issue of branding. "How does the interview process provide opportunities to see how a candidate fits in with the brand?" he asks. "Will they fit in with the business culture? Or you could get employees to do the recruitment process. They usually have a good feel for whether someone would fit in. And if you're not engaged in the process then either leave or rebel. Your voice needs to be heard."

Henry Lester & Associates, LTD, is a Wisconsin-based marketing, branding, training and creative services company. For more information regarding our services, please visit www.henrylester.com , or call toll free 877-787-0900.