

## **Brand and Talent: Branding Best to Attract the Best**

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### **– Uniting around the need for talent**

As I sat at the conference table, I wondered if the meeting participants had ever before shared a room together. They all worked for the same enterprise – a Fortune 500 energy company – but in very different capacities. After all, what did the Director of Brand have to do with the HR Director, and what did either of them have to do with the Senior Manager at the head of the table? The answer, as we soon found out, had little to do with their places on the organization chart, and everything to do with an increasingly elusive person who didn't even work for the company (yet) – a person we'll call the Talented Recruit.

### **– Branding's expanding role**

Businesses are still finding new and interesting answers to the question: How can we put our brand to work? Once limited to the practice of crafting corporate logos, branding has grown into a force for creating desire among consumers and motivation among employees. Target audiences have expanded to encompass investors, media, opinion leaders and others. Once the purview of graphic designers, brand has become a resource for managers of all stripes. And, increasingly, companies are looking at their brands as tools for recruitment.

We have grown used to the notion that stakeholders use their perceptions of brands to inform their decisions. But, as many businesses are discovering, this doesn't just mean the customer swiping and clicking for purchases. It includes job candidates in the employment marketplace. Not for nothing do we call it "shopping around" for a new job.

### **– A force of attraction for talent**

Consider all the elements that job candidates find important. Salary and benefits surely remain near the top of the list; but, today they compete with location, flexibility and virtual commuting, perks like gym memberships and healthy cafeteria options, and – increasingly – intangibles such as corporate social responsibility, stature and recognition, and a general feeling that one is "doing good work." To wit: Google's slogan and rallying cry, "Don't be evil."

Especially among Millennials and Gen Z, recruits don't just want a great job, they want to work for a Great Company. This criterion goes well beyond the traditional job description. And, in many cases, it's a determination that takes place at the gut level, formed well before the first interview. So, how does a company telegraph its status as an employer? The same way it conveys its intentions to the marketplace at large: through its brand.

Add this point to the list of definitions for brand: It's the headline that attracts the best talent in the marketplace, the talent you need to compete successfully.

### **– Creating the right chemistry**

Earlier in my career, I worked for the General Manager of an advertising company during a period of rapid expansion. At the beginning of the year, the agency employed fifty people. By year's end the GM had hired three times that number. After each interview, one question emerged as both most intangible and most important: "Does he or she 'get it'?"

We spent that year seeking a quality both elusive and exhilarating – chemistry. Before we could fit anyone into a particular job, we had to make sure that they were the right fit for the company as a whole. Did they share our values, our priorities? Did their professional goals map onto the company's vision for the future?

As we searched for ways to ensure this "fit," we found that what mattered was not just what the job candidates brought to the table, but what we did to get them there in the first place. We began to pay more attention to the way we wrote job descriptions, to the instructions we gave the head-hunters we worked with, to the ads we placed. What we began to do was more accurately represent the company's identity, vision, persona – in short, its brand.

After all, we weren't just making hires. We were creating work culture and community – finding the best possible pairings between company and recruits. And, the fundamental power of attraction was our brand.

### **– Meeting the expectations of job seekers**

As companies have become savvier about developing their brand persona and putting it into play in the job marketplace, they realize new challenges and benefits: One of the biggies – being prepared to be who they say they are.

Anyone who consumes your brand expects you to be true to your stated priorities. This includes job seekers. The brand they know in the broader marketplace, is the brand they expect to find when they read the job description, take the interview, or negotiate a contract. The question for companies in hiring mode: How do we position our brand for maximum impact among the talented recruits we wish to attract? How do we make sure that we embody the brand persona they expect, so that we're sure to hire the people who are right for our company?

### **– The Persona, the Promise and the Practice**

Every job seeker must make the fundamental case: Here's who I am, and here's why you should hire me. Today, companies must make a reciprocal case: Here's who we are, and here's why you should work for us. Brands are important tools for making this case.

Returning to that conference room I mentioned at the outset: It didn't take long for the Branding person and the HR person and the Senior Manager to realize how much they needed each other. Nor did it take any of us long to realize how much we needed the brand itself – and how great a challenge it posed at the same time. From the ideas we developed to the recruitment website we crafted, to the materials we wrote, the brand became both a common thread and a standard to be met.

The persona the company had created in the marketplace had to be tailored to address the specific context of recruiting talented professionals. The promise the brand made to consumers had to be translated into a pledge to the future employees who would devote their talents to the enterprise. And, both had to be put into practice in authentic ways.

In short, as many companies are discovering today, we found that we had to promote the right brand in the right way to attract the right recruits.

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