

You Are What They Remember

Marketers call it “brand equity.” Although entire books have been written about it, the idea is simple enough. People establish an image of a product or service in their mind, and that image, once set, will cause them to remember the product or service rather than its competitors. That’s why companies spend so much time and money endlessly repeating an advertising slogan. They want you humming that ditty in the shower and seeing it in your dreams. They want you to hear it at work, at play, and—most importantly—when you’re shopping.

Take the case of a brand of coffee called Brim. Thanks to an ubiquitous advertising campaign from 1961 to the mid-1990s, 92% of the U.S. population are now familiar the phrase, “Fill it to the rim—with Brim!”. It’s a crummy branding statement—the tag line says nothing about the distinctive characteristics of the product or the benefits it conveys—but hey, who cares if better than nine-out-of-ten Americans know that Brim will be there for them in the morning (and any other time of day). The Pavlovian repetition of a simple jingle creates the necessary familiarity and positive association—the memory- that sell a lot of coffee.

And that’s the point. Our colleagues in product and service branding know that people buy what they remember ... as long as the memories are positive. The inverse of that truism is also true, however. Your product or service is what your prospective (as well as your current and past) customers remember. In other words, if people have no memory of a product or service or the memory they have is negative or (almost as bad) dull, there is almost no chance of a sale.

What does that have to do with recruiting? As you think about your organization’s employment brand, your goal should be to create a statement that people will remember and recall positively. To do that, you have only two options:

- You can craft a branding statement that will positively differentiate your organization and then invest the money necessary to advertise that imaging phrase so pervasively that people will remember it whenever they decide to make an employment move. Achieving such a level of familiarity was hard enough in the 20th Century when there weren’t a lot of competing information distribution channels. It’s even more difficult (and far more expensive) today as distribution channels have multiplied both online and off. As with Brim, you must not only advertise continuously, but now, you must also do so in a wide array of media and outlets.
- You can create an experience in your recruiting process that is so positively compelling and differentiating that it actually acts as an advertising message. To do that, you must move your entire organization (that means your hiring managers, employees and senior leaders as well as your fellow recruiters) from the transactional, supply chain mentality that dominates recruiting today to a relationship-based community development perspective. If you then trigger viral behavior on the part of candidates—if you formally and respectfully ask them to pass the memory along to their friends and colleagues—you can probably reach as many prospective candidates as you would with more traditional brand advertising.

The largest employers will often exercise both of these options. Even good memories can fade so these organizations will continuously reinforce their brand equity so that the best talent never forgets them or their value proposition as a place to work. For the vast majority of employers, however, such an ongoing

and robust branding initiative is beyond both their budget and the capacity of their staff. If that's the reality facing your organization, the best option is the second: take the steps necessary to create a startlingly memorable impression of your organization in its recruiting process and then get those who have that experience to tell others about it for you.

How can you do that? Here are a number of suggestions that will get you started:

Preparation

- Redefine internal participation in your recruiting process as an organization-wide campaign. Create a theme for the campaign—for example, “Building Memories to Last With the XYZ Construction Company” or “Creating Healthy Memories at the XYZ Hospital System” and get everyone—from the CEO to the receptionist—involved. Make participation in the campaign a priority in your culture and reward those who best exemplify the positively memorable behaviors you want to convey to candidates.
- Train everyone in the organization on how impressions are created among candidates. Sensitize them to the importance of both saying and doing the right things and saying and doing those things in the right way. An interviewer's tone of voice and facial expression and the caliber of a receptionist's greeting often have as great an impact (or greater) on a candidate's image of an employer as a spiffy four color recruitment brochure or artfully framed mission statement.

Implementation

- Differentiate what happens in your recruiting process by tailoring it to your organization's values and culture. Most processes look and feel the same—in other words, they create the same impression—because they've been designed to accomplish a generic set of tasks—receive resumes, distribute and evaluate resumes, set up and conduct interviews, coordinate the results of interviews and make employment offers. The way these activities are performed, however, can and should illustrate how work gets done in your organization and the way employees interact with one another. For example, if teamwork is a core value of your employer, find a way to engage an interviewee in a teamwork experience as a part of their evaluation. That exercise will tell you whether or not they will fit in with your culture, and it will leave the candidate with an indelible impression of what to expect if they are hired by your employer.
- Strut your champions. Average candidates join organizations; the best candidates go to work with peers. They look for coworkers who are as good as or better than they in their field so they can be assured that employment will deliver continued development and success as well as a better paycheck. To achieve that kind of impression, however, you can't simply go through the motions during candidate interviews. Instead of having a candidate meet with every member of the group where they will work, organize the process so they spend an extended period of time with the group's two or three top performers. Similarly, instead of giving candidates generic recruitment collateral, offer them white papers or conference presentations from your leading employees in their field.
- Be straight and humble with candidates. Acknowledge that your organization may not be right for them or may not be right for them right now. Then, remind them of how you've tried to give them a special experience in your recruiting process and ask for their help. Encourage them to pass their impression of your employer along to others they know in the workplace. If your sourcing efforts have been successful in attracting high caliber candidates, then the people they know are likely to be just as well qualified. In effect, you're expanding your employee referral program to include your candidate population, and the image of your organization they use in

their referral is the positive memory you've given them while they were in your recruitment process.

Brands and brand advertising remain important weapons in the War for the Best Talent. The memories you create among the candidates in your recruitment process, however, can be just as powerful sources of brand equity, and for many organizations they are a far more realistic goal to pursue, especially in a difficult economic environment.

Thanks for reading,
Peter

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