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Route to:

Leading brand, or me-too product?

HOW WELL DO YOU STAND OUT IN THE EMPLOYMENT MARKETPLACE, AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO BUILD YOUR EMPLOYER BRAND?

AS THIS NEWSLETTER NOTED several years ago, some jobs have sex appeal – but the vast majority do not. They may be important contributors to an organization’s success, but they lack inherent glamour. It’s just not easy to write a rhapsody about cost accounting, process engineering or data mining, for example.

Yet people take unglamorous jobs all the time.

Whenever there’s a choice (including the opportunity to stay put), what makes prospective employees decide to favor one situation over another? Certainly responsibilities, authority, compensation and opportunity for advancement all play a role. But equally important, as good search consultants know, is the reputation of the company and the enthusiasm of its employees.

“I have a job opportunity at NetApp” would be a pretty easy sale these days to a software engineer, as the data management company vaulted to first place on *Fortune’s* “100 Best Companies to Work For.” It is so attractive that almost 46,000 people applied for just 55 job openings last year. Would you like to be that popular?

The outfit, plain and simple, is a pretty cool place to work. Its entire corporate travel policy: “We are a frugal company. But don’t show up dog-tired to save a few bucks. Use your common sense.” Wow. That’s great branding.

Businesses think all the time about branding their products and services. Branding, in marketing terms, means creating a unique image and emotional appeal based upon a product’s distinctive performance attributes. The best brands not only become synonymous with superior performance, taste or whatnot – but also bring a

sense of satisfaction to their users, perhaps even a smile to their faces. Hence, a Big Mac becomes a reward for days of careful eating. Drinking a Coke, for many years, was the Pause That Refreshes.

As Procter & Gamble first realized in the late 1930’s, few if any products can be all things to all people. From that realization came the concept of brand management – with dedicated managers responsible for their product’s distinctive performance, packaging, personality and advertising strategy. Today’s marketers pay great attention to the multitude of online communities that influence purchasing decisions in countless ways.

Corporations too are brands – and prospective employees make decisions every day as to whether they should “buy” the jobs those companies have to offer. Here again, no employer can be all things to all people, so it is important to develop a consistent brand image that accurately reflects your organization and appeals to the kinds of people you hope to attract.

ï I Saw It in the Blogosphereï

IN AGES PAST, employers could craft the message they wanted to convey about their company as a place to work and, almost literally, put that message into the mouths of loyal employees – who would sing the company’s praises in corporate brochures, videos and ads.

That carefully controlled form of speech has been altered forever by the rapidly expanding blogosphere – an online galaxy of uncensored, often anonymous and sometimes unchallenged opinion and commentary posted on personal or hosted

websites known as *blogs* (for “web logs”). According to Universal McCann Marketing, over 180 million people worldwide have started a blog (about one-sixth of that total in the U.S.), although many blogs have been discontinued as others spring up. Because there are so many online opinions of roughly equal weight, the blogosphere is a fairly reliable gauge of public opinion.

Bloggers write about any subject they want, but one popular form of commentary concerns employers for which they work – or interviewed for work. And if you don’t want to track down opinions about your company, Vault.com can do it for you. Here is a sampling of comments on its site about one well-known company:

- **Marketing Director:** This company is very white-male driven...
- **Project Manager:** When I started here in 2000, it was a great place to work. Then the layoffs started...
- **Senior Staff Engineer:** Quality of work depends on the group and business unit...
- **IT Project Manager:** No diversity! No ethics!
- **Team Leader:** ____ is a good company. But right now is not looking great...
- **System Administrator:** Corporate culture is very resistant to change ...

Might those opinions give you pause if you were considering employment there? Contrast them with comments on the same site about NetApp, currently *Fortune*’s favorite place to work:

Sales Operations Intern: The intern program was top-notch. We had guest speakers every week...

Engineer: Culture is awesome, people are kind, I love my actual work ...

Member of Technical Staff: It’s a great place to work. Good ideas win on projects ...

Sr. Marketing Manager: NetApp is a great company to work for. Not perfect (who is?), but generally well-managed...

Trainer/Developer: NetApp has an excellent corporate culture. It’s a great place to work.

Turning Employees into Brand Ambassadors

WHEN YOU GET RIGHT DOWN TO IT, employees are your best champions – or worst enemies. Whether on the Web or in the company cafeteria, their opinion of your workplace influences others’ opinions as well.

A competent Human Resources Department should be in touch with employee opinion and proactive in its efforts to remove those burrs under the saddle that, over time, grow from minor irritant to major issue. Equally important, employers should identify those programs and benefits that make their company a great place to work – and build employee awareness of them.

When they are proud of their jobs and proud of their organization, employees can become your best brand ambassadors: in the community, in the blogosphere and at work – hosting and interviewing job candidates. With regard to candidates, it should be remembered that not all are contending for entry-level jobs, so the brand message to a mid-level or senior candidate might emphasize different work-life attributes than are communicated to the fledgling millennial fresh out of college.

The aging population in the U.S., Europe and parts of Asia means that companies increasingly will have to compete for the limited supply of highly qualified managers and professionals. And while there may be a momentary surfeit of available workers as the world emerges from recession, the number who are able to take their next employer to new levels of greatness is but a small percentage of the total. It’s still necessary to identify and attract those who are currently employed.

Thus, in bad times as well as good, the search for truly top talent never ceases. Nothing beats the enthusiasm of your current workforce in convincing those rare individuals to join the team.

—George Snider

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