

# Why employment branding doesn't work -- and what you should do instead

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The U.S. unemployment rate is at an 18-year low. There are more job openings than there are eligible workers to fill them. Employers face rising labor costs amid stagnant productivity. It's no wonder that many companies have prioritized employment branding as a critical talent strategy.

Employment or employer branding -- efforts to promote a company as desirable employer -- has grown as a means for attracting employees and competing in the current war for talent that rages in many sectors. Many companies have developed elaborate positioning strategies and communications campaigns to recruit prospective employees. But many employers also struggle to determine the most effective employment branding approaches, and many of their efforts fail to attract the type and quantity of candidates they seek.

Most employment branding approaches don't work because they aren't aligned and integrated with the company's customer brand strategy. Companies usually assign HR executives to develop the organization's employment brand and, not surprisingly, these managers take a narrow talent-centric approach.

Typically, they try to discern the messages that would appeal most to desired candidates and develop recruitment campaigns to promote them. These efforts often try to woo recruits with promises of an uplifting workplace culture, attractive perks and benefits, and lots of career potential. But these appeals turn out to be ineffective because they have nothing to do with core brand identity the company uses to engage customers.

An employment brand that is disconnected from a company's "customer brand" produces challenges and consequences, not the least of which is confusion and skepticism among its audience. That's because, in many cases, a company's customers and prospective employees are one and the same. This is true not only for retail companies, whose best employees are often customers first, but also for: a technology firm whose user base is people with the specific skills and interests the company needs to develop its products; an agency or professional services firm that recruits industry insiders; and other companies that operate in partner ecosystems.

If an organization is promoting values and experiences for employees that are out of sync with what customers know about it, people will doubt the company's focus, authenticity and integrity.

Developing an employment brand solely through the lens of talent attraction also usually leads to a gap between what prospective employees experience during the recruiting process and what they eventually experience as employees. This experience gap leads to high levels of employee disappointment and dissatisfaction, which, in turn, leads to high turnover and poor reviews on employment sites like Glassdoor.

When recruitment efforts aren't grounded in the cultural foundations, competitive aspirations and business priorities that drive the majority of the company's efforts -- in other words, its brand strategy -- they're misleading and wasteful.

These efforts also end up promoting the wrong aspects and painting an incomplete picture of the company and workplace. HR managers try to devise perks and offer benefits that they believe will motivate prospective employees and then make them the focus of their recruiting efforts. Or, employment branding campaigns promote the company's philanthropic activities and employees' involvement in its corporate social responsibility efforts.

But employees generally judge the former as nice-to-haves. And, while the latter might make people feel good about the company, both fail to convey what most people care about: the reality of their day-to-day work and how that connects to the core mission of the company.

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Ultimately, the problem with employment branding is the concept itself. It suggests a separate standalone effort. Instead of developing a disconnected employment brand, you should have a sole brand identity that you interpret into different but related value propositions and experiences for customers, recruits, employees, and other stakeholder groups and audiences.

For example, when I headed up brand and strategy at Sony Electronics' US business, we articulated that the core of our brand was about "creating technologies that inspire people to dream and find joy." We then interpreted that core identity in our marketing efforts to show how our products inspired customers, and HR applied that same identity in its recruitment efforts for employees by relaying opportunities to do inspiring work and to pursue their dreams.

We did the same with our brand values, which included, "We do what others don't," helping customers see the uniqueness of our products and helping employees see the opportunity to do unique work in a unique style. By integrating and aligning our employee and customer efforts with a single core brand identity, we appealed to the desires of both groups to be a part of something with a higher purpose and ideals.

Once you ground your talent attraction efforts in the core of your brand, use talent strategies and approaches similar to those you use to engage customers with it. Ensure your outreach is focused on those you are recruiting and their needs and wants, not on your company.

Too often, employment branding takes on a form of corporate chest-pounding, with companies running campaigns that showcase their awards and achievements and promote how terrific they are. But just as customers are attracted with appeals that put them at the center and make them feel like smart and savvy shoppers, employees are more likely to respond to messages that highlight the importance of their skills and contributions and make them feel like heroes. Now more than ever, employees judge potential employers through the filter of WIFM - what's in it for me.

Also instead of or in addition targeting prospective employees by job or function, consider a more consumer-like segmentation. By grouping them into segments based on their values,

aspirations, needs, and lifestages and lifestyles, you will be able to develop your appeals to resonate more deeply and target your tactics more efficiently.

Perhaps the best way to ensure your recruiting efforts are on-brand is to forge a tight integration between your HR and marketing groups. HR managers would learn how your company's brand identity can be used to attract employees by showing how different jobs and work contribute to the value that customers receive. HR can also learn from marketers' experience in developing targeted, emotionally resonant and differentiating campaigns and messages.

Plus, both groups can benefit from enrolling existing employees to advocate for the company to prospective employees and customers -- and coordinate their efforts to do so.

Prospective employees bring a certain consumerism to their job searches these days. You need to be strategic and savvy about how to attract top talent, but employment branding is not the answer. Your core brand identity and on-brand strategies and approaches are.

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