Your Company Culture Shouldn't Just Be Great—It Should Be Distinctive

Just as brand differentiation helps attract customers, culture differentiation helps attract the right employees. But while it's popular to focus on corporate culture, not many companies have a truly *distinctive* culture. This is the equivalent to a marketing department saying, "We need to have a strong brand"—without articulating what that strength will rest on.

So many corporate values statements include the same words: respect, trust, fun, integrity. Maybe also diversity, work-life balance, and community service. Free snacks and pick-up games are expected at every technology company; nursing mother's rooms and on-site gyms are increasingly common perks on corporate campuses. This is all great, but if every company seems the same, how are prospective employees to know which companies are really the best fit for them?

Leaders and HR managers can borrow the principles of good marketing to create a culture that's more distinctive— one that will attract and retain the right people. Leaders should start by identifying the specific cultural dynamics that will produce the results they desire, and then clearly articulate and actively cultivate them. By doing so, they create a powerful edge in the war for talent—one that's often more powerful than pay, and one that directly drives performance. People thrive in a culture that fits them, creating a self-reinforcing upward cycle.

Companies with clearly defined cultures are also good for customers, because they allow employees to create distinctive customer experiences. For instance, the number one "Family Core Value" at Zappos is "Deliver WOW Through Service." The company says "We seek to WOW our customers, our co-workers, our vendors, our partners, and in the long run, our investors." In pursuit of this goal, Zappos recognizes the need to be "a little unconventional

and innovative." Its unique internal practices, including publishing an annual culture book that employees write and allowing employees to decorate their offices however they like, produce a differentiated culture. This culture has, in turn, informed its unique customer experience design—examples include providing surprise shipping upgrades and not tracking the call times of its customer service reps so they can spend as much as needed with customers.

Vanguard has taken a very different approach. The company was able to produce consistent results for its clients through the Internet bubble and the Great Recession because its culture preaches caution. Vanguard operates from a belief and loyalty to the small investor and trains its advisors to forsake short-term gains if they sacrifice long-term stability.

Or consider Amazon, whose culture has been raked over the coals in the media in recent weeks. The culture at Amazon may be ruthless and exacting—even "callous," despite CEO Jeff Bezos's denial. But the company's hard-driving performance culture may be one reason it has consistently produced breakthrough innovations and consistent growth and continues to attract brilliant, mission-oriented employees.

The disciplines that inform brand differentiation in marketing can apply to culture differentiation as well:

- Conduct competitive analysis to determine potential advantages and differentiating attributes—or better yet, identify white space where no one is playing.
- Use segmentation to identify the types of people who share the company's values and their distinguishing characteristics that can be used to target them.
- Clearly articulate the value proposition—explain not just what the company does, but why it matters.
- Don't be afraid to use personality and take risks to stand out.

An unusual culture—even one that outsiders might criticize— is nothing to apologize for. In fact, it's an advantage in attracting the right people.