

Richard Bistrong: Put your faith in the brand, not the bribe

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By [Richard Bistrong](#) | Monday, March 26, 2018 at 7:28AM

I conspired to bribe a Dutch police officer to win a pepper spray contract. Yet the formula of spray I was selling was world class, with an exemplary health and safety record.

I wasn't selling a commodity item or a generic brand. My product stood out for all the right reasons. But that's not what I thought about during the sales process.

What I thought about instead was, "What if one of my competitors pays a bribe to win the contract?"

And from that thought came this one: "If I don't pay a bribe, someone else will."

And that's part of how I rationalized paying bribes.

I'm not making any excuses for what I did. There are none. I'm describing the reality of my state of mind.

But it's a reality I often see today at the core of FCPA and UKBA enforcement actions. And I know many salespeople, particularly those in the field, in high-risk environments, are struggling with this reality every day.

Again, the products I was selling for my then employer were typically best in class. In some product categories, our brand faced little competition with state-of-the-art technology. And yet somehow I never grasped the importance of that market position. Instead of having confidence that the products would produce successful outcomes during the bidding and sales process, I let my own fear of losing seep into my thoughts and decisions.

"If I don't bribe, someone else will."

This month in the *Harvard Business Review*, Denise Lee Yohn **wrote** a great article about "employee brand engagement."

"The goal is to make sure employees know what the brand stands for and are committed to reinforcing it with their actions," she said. It's about helping employees "feel an emotional connection with the brand and act as brand ambassadors."

According to Yohn, employee brand engagement is more than training a commercial workforce about products and marketing strategies. It's about "informing, inspiring and involving employees so that they want to support and advance the brand."



Yohn's ideas might seem obvious. But having spent twenty years attending and leading sales meetings, I know her concept of employee brand engagement is often missing. She cites research that confirms it. "Only 28 percent of employees strongly agree that they know their company's brand values," she says.

And yet, if we want a workforce confident enough to reject bribery in all circumstances, isn't employee brand engagement the best way forward? Belief in the brand produces confidence. And confidence keeps us from acting out of fear -- fear that if I don't pay a bribe, someone else will.

Here's how Yohn describes the outcome of employee brand engagement:

Employee brand engagement doesn't produce just happy, engaged employees; it develops happy, engaged employees who produce the right results. The company isn't recognized just as a great place to work; the work itself becomes great. And the company doesn't establish itself just as a great employer; it lays the foundation for great customer relationships.

Some pharmas and medical device companies bring in patients whose lives have been transformed, or even saved, by their products. The patients talk about their experiences to the sales force. It's hard not to be moved to tears during those sessions. Those are times that create a deep and lasting employee brand engagement.

But you don't have to have a lifesaving product. Every company should have its own unique qualities and reasons for existing. Find that uniqueness and use it to build employee brand engagement. There can be no better protection against illegal or unethical behavior than faith in the brand instead of the bribe.

Richard Bistrong, pictured above, is a contributing editor of the FCPA Blog and CEO of Front-Line Anti-Bribery LLC. In 2010 he pleaded guilty to a conspiracy to violate the FCPA and served fourteen and a half months at a U.S. federal prison camp. He was named to Compliance Week's list of Top Minds in 2017 and was one of Ethisphere's 100 Most Influential in Business Ethics in 2015.

His popular real-life compliance training video, Behind the Bribe, produced in cooperation with Mastercard, was released in 2017.

To request a demo of the full eleven-minute video or a licensing fee schedule, please [**click here**](#).