

HBR Feature: It's Brand Engagement, Not Just Employee Engagement, That Counts

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In a recent Harvard Business Review article, 'Engaging Employees Starts With Remembering What You're Your Company Stands For,' brand consultant and author Denise Lee Yohn argues that engagement has little value unless it connects employees to the brand. Her article adds to the growing number of experts arguing for a need to connect employee and customer engagement and contains an excellent case study for what she calls Brand Engagement - what the EEA calls Enterprise Engagement.

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As ESM readers know, the fundamental premise of Enterprise Engagement is to connect the organization's brand to all stakeholders, not just customers, and align all activities toward the needs of the customers, communities, employees, distribution partners, vendors and all those who can contribute to organizational success. Yet, arguably only a small percentage of organizations make the connection. Denise Lee Yohn's recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* adds to the increasing chorus of voices in the C-suite saying it's time to understand the pivotal benefits of having a strategic and tactical engagement plan.

In the **HBR article**, Yohn asserts that "The reason why most engagement efforts fall short is that they're designed to cultivate employees' commitment in generic, general ways. They attempt to make people feel that they're working for a responsible company or that the company's leaders care about them. A more precise, robust approach is employee brand engagement, which establishes a critical link between employees and customers."

Employee brand engagement, she says, "is achieved when employees are aligned and involved with the organization's brand. It requires the company to have a clearly articulated brand identity and its leaders to cultivate a positive, multidimensional connection between employees and that brand identity. The goal is to make sure employees know what the brand stands for and are committed to reinforcing it with their actions." These ideas are familiar to ESM readers.



It's Not Just About Internal Marketing

In the article, Yohn drives home the point that, "Employee brand engagement differs from employer branding 'or employment branding,' terms that refer to an organization's efforts to enhance its image to attract and retain talented employees." She says "it's also more than 'internal marketing' or 'invertising,' which describe when an organization promotes its brand to

employees as it would to customers and expects them to ‘buy’ the message it’s trying to ‘sell’ to them. It isn’t about selling anything, or even telling employees what they should do; it’s about informing, inspiring and involving employees so that they want to support and advance the brand.”

Yohn shares the views so often expressed on ESM: “Only when employees are engaged with the brand will they think and act in the specific ways that produce the specific results the company is seeking. Employees must internalize the organization’s purpose and values so they make decisions that clearly support those priorities. Ultimately, they design and deliver on brand customer experiences that strengthen the brand’s competitive position and build equity in the brand.”

In the *HBR* article, Yohn explains that employee brand engagement boils down to:

Personal and emotional commitment. Employees feel an emotional connection with the brand and act as brand ambassadors, actively sharing positive information about the brand with their friends, families and communities and recommending it to them.

Understanding the brand strategy. Employees understand who the brand’s target customers are, how the brand is positioned relative to competitors and what makes the brand unique and valuable from a customer perspective.

Day-to-day involvement with the brand. Employees have appropriate access to tools and data about how the brand is perceived by customers and they actively nurture and reinforce the brand on a daily basis, at every touchpoint. Even those employees who don’t have direct customer contact understand and embrace their role in delivering on-brand customer experiences.”

To back up her case, she cites a *Journal of Brand Management* paper showing that 40% of employees “struggle to describe their organization’s brand or how they think customers feel their organization is different”; a Tenet Partners “estimate that only 28% of employees strongly agree that they know their company’s brand values; and that only one in five employees strongly agrees that company leaders communicate how employees should out the brand values in their jobs.”

A Case Study of an MGM Resort Engagement Initiative

Yohn believes there are practical steps organizations can take to cultivate employee brand engagement. Consider, she says, the “multidimensional approach used by Lilian Tomovich, chief experience officer and CMO of MGM Resorts, and her team. MGM wanted to reposition itself from merely a casino company to a worldwide resort and entertainment company. It wanted to be known for entertainment venues and hotels that were not gaming-centric — such as the Bellagio and MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Tomovich and her fellow executives knew that they couldn’t direct their transformation efforts only externally. MGM employees needed to be engaged with the company’s aspiration so they would deliver on it. So they initiated an internal

engagement effort that they called ‘We Are the Show.’ This not only reinforced the company’s desired identity as an entertainment brand but also helped seed the “SHOW” acronym that summarized its desired brand-led culture:

- S for “smile” and greet the guest
- H for “hear” their story
- O or “own” the experience
- W for “wow” the guest



Sound familiar? See [ESM: Shefit Exec Joins March to Merger of Employee and Customer Engagement](#), and [ESM: Adobe Paves the Way for Leadership of HR in Enterprise Engagement Management](#)

A Clear Strategic and Tactical Plan

For details on the program, read Yohn’s excellent article in HBR. For the purposes of this article, the case study exemplifies a strategic Enterprise Engagement strategy and tactical plan with a clear scorecard, including:

- The clear brand definition.
- A kickoff summit of the company’s top leaders explaining the vision and providing a complete training platform to support getting the message to all 77,000 employees so they could understand the specific attitudes and behaviors that achieve the brand promise.
- An ongoing training calendar to continue emphasizing the messages across the organization on a planned basis, providing practical tips and how to enhance the customer experience.
- A multimedia communications campaign that “surrounded employees with messages about the brand so they wouldn’t be overlooked.”
- Measurement: The company reported “positive feedback in employee and customer surveys as well as higher revenues and that during the period of the campaign domestic resorts net revenues increased 17%, up 2% on a same-store basis) and that revenue per room increased 3% (1% on a same store basis) and that EBIDTA increased 14%.

Yohn’s article makes the critical point that employee engagement isn’t enough. “Of course it’s important for employees to be excited about and satisfied by their work and to feel emotionally connected to their companies; leaders must continue to work on these foundations. But given how quickly management, strategies and market conditions change, general employee engagement is not enough to keep everyone on track and building the right customer relationships the right way. Companies need stronger and more focused engagement.”

Employee brand engagement, she concludes, “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.”

Editor’s note: This ESM article is based on Yohn’s HBR report. We do not know if the program also included other critical tactical steps for brand engagement, including innovation strategies that encourage employees to become more involved in the effort as well as rewards and recognition, to highlight people, teams, or casinos whose actions demonstrate their commitment to delivering the brand promise.

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[\[return to top\]](#)