

Employer's Attraction Magnet: Branding



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Introduction

Employer branding is still an emerging concept in our part of the world though it has gained acceptance & recognition within the last decade particularly amongst the practicing HR professionals. As same as corporate branding plays a significant role in marketing to augment and sustain its market share, employer branding will facilitate an organization to be on top of the mind recall of its customers in the employment market. They are the potential candidates who will augment the net worth of a company through their individual value creation if they join and retain in the organization. If an organization to win over the potential candidates in the employment market, one should differentiate themselves from its competitors who are competing for the same competencies, especially in areas where the competencies are scarce and rare. Having a well articulated employer brand architecture, will facilitate an organization in its journey towards success.

In October 2012 LinkedIn released the results of a global survey of more than 3000 recruiting professionals confirming that the ‘Corporations are increasing investment in their talent brand, even at a time when doing more with less is the norm, because they recognize that it is a critical foundation for attracting top talent’. It further revealed that 91% companies are spending more or the same on employer brand in 2012 compared to 2011’.

Armstrong (2009) defines employer branding as ‘the creation of a brand image of the organization for prospective employees. It will be influenced by the reputation of the organization as a business or provider of services as well as its reputation as an employer’ he further express the employee value proposition as an employer brand through the definition of Walker (2007) as a ‘set of attributes and qualities – often intangible – that make an organization distinctive, promise a particular kind of employment experience and appeal to people who will thrive and perform their best in its culture’

When assessing the above with the definition of a brand by Kotler and Keller (2012) ‘a brand is thus a product or service whose dimensions differentiate it in some way from other products or services designed to satisfy the same need. These differences may be functional, rational, or tangible—related to product performance of the brand. They may also be more symbolic, emotional, or intangible—related to what the brand represents or means in a more abstract sense’. Whereas The American Marketing Association defines a brand as ‘a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors.’ The shared string in both is *differentiation*, both emphasize on differentiating their offerings or rather the consumer experience, whether its experiencing a company product or a service or employment experience.

How can an organization ensure such differentiation in the employment market to make them distinctive and attractive so their potential consumers rather the intended employees will choose them over their competitors thus becoming an ‘Employer of Choice’?

Essentials of Employer Branding

Employer brand architecture has to be modeled thoughtfully to harmonize your organization culture which is built around its embedded value system and leadership. It is not something to be adopted by replicating another company's brand attributes, elements or concepts as a strong brand has its own identity accustomed to each organization.

Designing and Conceptualizing the Brand

It has to be carefully articulated considering both what the organization has to offer and the expectations of the target audience which might help the organizations to devise the HR Agenda as well. Once you conceptualized the employer brand you have to formulate the brand elements, execute the brand communication and instill the brand initiatives to the employee lifecycle.

Brand Elements

Aptness and effectiveness of brand elements plays a vital role in making your brand communication effective and amplifying the brand awareness. Hence it is imperative to deploy a well integrated set of brand elements be it a logo, slogan symbol, signage etc. The success of it will largely depend on its relevance and meaningfulness to your organization, how attractive and distinct they are from your competitors, which will give the organization the brand leverage.

When determining your brand elements one might always consider 2 factors one at the corporate level second at the employment level. Firstly the organization's personality; what it stands for, and the corporate or product brand attributes should be considered. Then the organization should reflect on the employment promise; what is the unique employment experience, proposition that you offer to your prospective candidate to be considered in making the brand elements more meaningful.

Employee Value Proposition

Just like a customer value proposition becomes an integral part of a corporate brand an employee value proposition (EVP) is a fundamental element in the employer brand. An EVP is a statement of what the total employment experience which is on offer for your existing and potential employees at your organization.

Armstrong (2009) defines an EVP as '... what an organization has to offer that prospective or existing employees would value and which would help to persuade them to join or remain with the business. It will include remuneration – which is important but can be over-emphasized compared with other elements. These non-financial factors may be crucial in attracting and retaining people and include the attractiveness of the organization, the degree to which it acts responsibly, respect – diversity and inclusion, work–life balance and opportunities for personal and professional growth.'

An organization should study what they offer to an employee which can make that organization unique in that offering. What is your work culture? Is it a performance driven, fun filled, homely, or an empowering culture that you instill within your organization? What do you offer to your employees; is it performance based rewards, rewards over and above the market rates; career development opportunities or a combination? Is it appealing to your target audience? If so how do you communicate and create awareness? If not, is your organization ready to make that change to cater to the respective audience? Do you have the

required resources for such investments? The brand engineer has to deliberate on all such aspects when developing the EVP.

Once you determine the EVP you can develop the rest of the brand elements such as your employer brand slogan, logo, symbol etc. which will strengthen the brand communication and awareness among your existing and potential employees.

Building the Employer Brand in to the Employee Lifecycle

The brand promise will only be delivered if the company lives the brand in every possible way. It is important the organization to review the entire lifecycle of an employee which starts prior to an employee joins the organization and continues even after an employee leaves the organization, though organizations mostly focus on an employee whilst he's in service. Hence a holistic approach to employer branding will consider all stages of employee lifecycle including pre and post employment.

The employee's attitude towards the organization starts with the moment of truth probably with your employer brand or/and corporate brand communication, or with his interaction as a customer or a business partner of the organization prior to joining the company. This stance might develop after being recruited and change overtime with his/ her employment experience and will even continue to grow after leaving the organization.

Pre Employment

HR practitioners must focus on all its resourcing initiatives and communications to align it with the true employer brand of the organization. Every encounter of the prospective candidate should carry the same message and bring into line with your brand attributes let it be your career portal, face book page, vacancy advert, etc. Organizations should never over sell its brand. If pre-existing perceptions were found to be far from reality the employee might continue unhappily or move out. In both ways the company will lose.

To strengthen the employers proposition organizations can highlight the unique attributes other than the technical job requirements such as career advancement opportunities, attractive rewarding mechanisms, accolades such as being enlisted as a employer of choice, employees' endorsements etc.

Furthermore each candidate suitable or otherwise should be treated with respect. During the recruitment process candidates must be felt comfortable which will help to encourage the presence during latter part of the selection process and to reduce offer rejects. The entire process should be handled professionally until completion as they too could be converted as brand advocates even if not being selected.

Employment

On-boarding process is often taken for granted. The first impression will count heavily until the employee settles down in the new environment. Organizations do adopt initiatives such as buddy programs to help new employee familiarize smoother and faster. Such systems really payoff the organization well by reducing the new recruit turnover and fast tracking their progress.

Thereafter it is to ensure the brand promise is being met in every aspect of employment, every event of the lifecycle, every encounter during his/her stay in that organization. Be it the organizational values, its culture or leadership, and other HR aspects such as rewards &

recognition, performance management mechanisms, competency development initiatives, career opportunities, etc. All HR initiatives have to complement the perception created through pre brand communication initiatives. Employees need to experience a fair, transparent and a structural approach wherever possible.

A crucial factor here is the leadership and the co-workers who will make or break the employment brand promise. Finally they are the soul mates who will help the organization to live and inculcate the brand attributes. The employer brand custodian should work closely with the HR colleagues and the line to ensure every employee immaterial of its status lives the brand promise.

Post Employment

An employee who parts from an organization will continue to be a brand ambassador provided the cessation of an employee is well managed. Ex-employees will mostly continue to be a stakeholder of the organization may be as a peer in another corporate, as a customer, or even as an employee in a competing firm. Still we can make them to continue to speak well for the organization if their stay and departure is harmonious and delightful.

Some line managers presume an employee moving out from a team as a personal drawback and handle the whole process very emotionally and abruptly. This approach will further disappoint the employee making him completely detached from the organization which might work contrary to the employer brand in the long run

An organization which manages a strong relationship with the employees during and after their stay at the workplace can sustain the brand over a long period and reap its benefits.

Brand Communication

Nowhere you can create a strong brand without making an effort to take it to your target audience. Once you design & conceptualize your brand it is a necessity to communicate your brand message to your intended audience.

Today organizations are blessed with countless options of communication due to the advance technology and other social and cultural dynamics that have taken place. It could be print media such as newspapers and magazines or broadcast media like radio and television, online media such as web pages, social media and display media such as billboards, posters etc. You can utilize any of these options as long as it is relevant to your audience and fits your budget. The more noise an organization makes, the more it will be talked about, get highlighted and gain attention. But for it to become effective one must select the media having its target audience in mind; if your target audience is IT savvy people surrounded with youngness, social media could be an ideal platform, or if you are looking for employees with a particular technical competence you can select a business school, institute or an university which offers such disciplines as your communication channel to communicate your employer brand.

Another strategy could be obtaining public recognition by getting themselves enlisted as a ‘great place to work’ or ‘employer of choice’ or competing for best HR practices awards. When doing so organizations can try to highlight them in general as great employer as well as in a particular aspect which your organization is offering as a unique capability such as the best performance management systems, best rewards and recognition mechanisms, etc. There’s no doubt that this exposure will facilitate an organization to leverage the brand image as a top-notch employer in your respective industry. Further you will become a benchmark in your industry which sets standards and lead your way gaining the respect of society.

You can also carry success stories of employees who have excel in their careers at your establishment. This will create awareness among the public or within your target group on career opportunities you provide for your team, the leadership and the work culture in your organization and other capability development mechanisms in your organization. These can be published as featured articles on the corporate web site, face book fan page, professional magazines, etc.

Amongst all the most influential and the strongest medium of communication are your own employees as brand ambassadors and no one else can understand it better provided they live and breathe your brand. When your employees are advocating your brand it leaves a strong impression. They are the first form of reference to your employer brand, as they experience it day in and day out provided the organization delivers its brand promise in reality. No one is going to distrust or disbelieve their message. What is the story they carry to the outside world about your organization, its culture, leadership, work practices, and the impact it has made on their career and their life as a whole? This is an in-person marketing approach which is effective than any other medium just like an inbound sales lead covert at a higher rate than a cold call. Organizations can embrace this at no cost as the most cost effective channel of communicating its brand.

Important thing is your brand should remain consistent across all your channels and monitor the progress to analyze what works for your brand and what is not. If your brand message is correctly articulated and communicated through the appropriate channel, the ROI will be much greater.

Brand Credibility – Living the Brand

Living a brand is even more important than creating your brand. Kotler and Keller (2012) says ‘a credible brand signals a certain level of quality so that satisfied buyers can easily choose the product again. Brand loyalty provides predictability and security of demand for the firm, and it creates barriers to entry that make it difficult for other firms to enter the market’.

Same applies for employer branding;

Mostly organizations make the mistake of attributing branding only for advertising. But one should not forget that the communication points are multiple. We can carry fancy adverts to communicate our brand, but if the reality is far from the impression that we have created in the minds of our customers then the loyalty, retention and the corporate image can be at stake. When building an employer brand the most important fact is to find out whether the brand promise you’re trying create is in line with the reality? Is it the story that your existing employees are carrying to the outside world? Is it a realistic promise that you make on the employment experience that you offer.

Living the employer brand is even more critical than living your product or corporate brand. Your employees either can be your strongest brand ambassadors or the biggest critics. Because your existing employees and potential candidates out there in the market will be directly communicating with each other once they join the company as they will be working in the same organization even in the same location. The information flow among your employees is enormous. Whereas your customers are very unlikely to have a direct communication link with each other. Unless you have build your own consumer community, social media platform or any other communication platform which brings your consumers together. Hence the information flow will have.

Employer Brand vs Product Brand

Corporate and employer brand are two sides of the same coin, If a company has successful product or corporate brands, there's a greater tendency the prospective candidates know more about such firms and have a liking towards the same. At the same time there's no guaranteeing that simply because you enjoy and respect a product or a brand of a company that you will enjoy working there. Love for the product/corporate brand does not essentially mean you love a career in the same company. Everyone who loves to shop at Odel might not be a perfect employee at Odel. Also one might like the colorful images created by a Canon printer or the comfort it gives driving a BMW, but that doesn't guarantee his career in any of these companies will be colorful or comfy as the product.

But it is obvious that the corporate brand and the employer brand have to have some alignment and coalition. The employer brand should reinforce your corporate brand without weakening the same, but highlighting your EVP attributes which also can be integrated with the value proposition for your consumer base. When there is synergy between the corporate and the employer brand it is effortless to align employees to the corporate goals and values as they already embrace the employer brand. Emotional attributes such as passion, care, trust, etc in the corporate brand or value system should be embedded to the employer brand which will fortify the same through the employees.

When aligning the employer brand to the corporate brand, brand attributes, the aesthetic impressions such as logos, color palettes, styling, typeface etc should also be synergized for you to leverage on the corporate brand and vis-à-vis.

Brand and Economic Performance

Is there a correlation between your brand and the economic performance of an organization? It is quite apparent that a consumer is willing to pay a premium price for a compelling brand than its competitor brands. Same is true for the employer brand;

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and the World Federation of People Management Associations (WFPMA) published a joint report titling 'from Capability to Profitability: Realizing the Value of People Management' on account of a survey done in August 2012 of more than 4,200 HR and non-HR managers in more than 100 countries worldwide . The report compares the practices of high-performing companies against those of lower-performing ones, in 22 key people- management spheres. Studying the correlation between economic performance and capability in these 22 HR areas, six contexts were particularly highlighted, that is: recruiting, on-boarding of new hires, employee retention, talent management, employer branding, performance management and rewards, and leadership development. The study revealed 'Companies that are highly skilled in core HR practices experience up to 3.5 times the revenue growth and as much as 2.1 times the profit margins of less capable companies'. It is important to note that employer branding is among the six key perspectives among the 22 HR elements which intensify the organization profitability.

The biggest nightmare for an organization in today's context is talent acquisition. An organization with a strong employer brand will have a stable talent pipeline hence will not have to keep the line waiting for candidate's responses to a job posting. This will reduce your organizations 'Time to fill' which in turn will assure the minimum or no loss of productivity due to the unavailability or under availability of human resources.

Furthermore it will help the organization to keep the ‘Cost per hire’ (CPH) to a minimum; an undeniable employer brand has to pay a lesser premium to hire the best from the industry oppose to those organization which do not make an effort to develop & communicate their brand. If you have a strong internal brand employee referrals can be a great source in resourcing which again can come to you at a no cost or at a manageable cost. According to the Corporate Leadership Council EVPs that are viewed as unattractive require a 21% premium to hire employees, while attractive EVPs require only an 11% premium.

If your employer brand is build on reality and if the organization has been very honest about its brand attributes it will pay off well for the organization. Even before a new recruit step in to your organization he/she knows what to expect within your organization, how the workplace is going to be, what the organization culture would be. In the same manner if an employee decides not to apply for a particular firm comprehending the employment experience that he/she’s expecting is not the same; still its better as it saves time of the resourcing team, reduces unhealthy turnover and the opportunity of losing a good candidate instead.

If you have a robust talent pipeline chances are that you can get the best from the industry and keep your ‘Quality of hire’ at a higher level. As per the October 2012 LinkedIn survey 83% agree that employer brand has a significant impact on its ability to hire great talent. This will have a strong correlation to your organization’s productivity as well as your resourcing reams productivity. If the QOH is high, higher the probability that the new recruits will excel in their new roles with minimum supervision within a short span of time. This in turn will have a direct positive impact on the organizational revenue growth if other factors remain constant.

Conclusion

It is quite evident that Employer brand has become an essential element in the HR agenda. It will only gain more recognition and acceptance in time to come, locally as well as globally. If an organization adopts a holistic approach in conceptualizing, designing, communicating and sustaining its employer brand, it can acquire the benefits from its brand by creating a positive impact on increasing the shareholder value.

Aligning your corporate and product brand attributes to the employer brand in all possible ways will allow organization to leverage on the strengths of each brand to the other. Employer brand attributes should be ingrained to the employee life cycle, ensuring the brand values are lived and cultivated within the organization. Your employer brand will only become a reality when every employee of your organization enjoys living the brand enthusiastically. Once the brand is conceptualized, designed and launched, the brand custodian must continuously review its attributes, to see it is not being superseded with the dynamics of the environment and ensure its relevance at all times.

There’s no doubt that a strong employer brand is a tool that all HR practitioners should utilize to enhance HR value creation and facilitating the organization to augment the shareholder value.

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