

Do you know your Employer Brand?

As the war for talent intensifies most companies have put in some system of exit interviews to find out why people leave them. Surprisingly, only a few ask their employees why they stay. Fewer still, fully leverage the reasons why people stay.

In a recent example we formed a project team in an Organisation to implement the Great Place to Work® Institute's Employee Survey. The project team members came from over 30 locations across the country. In the first meeting we examined exit interview data which showed that there were a few reasons which repeatedly came up as reasons for leaving. We asked the Group to individually give us the reasons why they continue to stay in this Organisation. The answers were revealing in two respects- the reasons were similar across the Group, and collectively they were not aware of reasons why people stay till this exercise. Amongst the reasons for staying were powerful reasons like freedom and empowerment which was apparently lacking in some of their talent competitors.

This Organisation which is facing increasing attrition was itself not aware about the strengths in its culture which makes people stay, leave alone communicating these reasons to its employees. It is possible that many employees left without fully appreciating what this Organisation has to offer, which might not be easily available in some other Organisations.

Traditional employee surveys seeks employee feedback on a wide range of factors – but these factors are same for all Organisations since the basic framework of research based models in employee engagement cannot be changed for individual Organisations. Yet, our experience shows that when you ask employees why they stay the reasons are similar and there are few factors that make them stay, just as there are few factors that make most employees leave.

Thus, an Organisation may do an employee survey and yet not realize which are the key reasons why people stay.

Organisations which are able to understand and clearly communicate to potential employees why they should join, and to existing employees why they should stay are said to have a strong employer brand.

However, communication is counter- productive if it is used merely as an inducement to make people join and stay, and is not backed up by real experience of employees.

Thus, employer brand can be defined as the sum of all experiences (positive and negative) that people have with your Organisation before they join, during their stay and after they leave the Organisation. The Employer brand is what the Organisation stands for as an Employer. It is, therefore, an extension of its core values.

Like product and service branding employer branding becomes relevant when there is intense competition – in this case competition for talent. Consider some statistics.

- 73 million factory workers would be required by 2015, which is 50% more than current number
- 500,000 Knowledge workers would short of requirement by 2010
- 500,000 more jobs will be created directly or indirectly by the Retail sector in 2006. Over 250 new malls in the next three years, the retail sector will add 2.5 million jobs by 2010
- By 2010, the IT/ITES sector will need a work force of 2.3 million to maintain the current market share. Last year direct employment was 700,000 people in this sector.

In this scenario to gain the talent advantage, organisations are striving to create differentiation in the minds of employees. One thing we have noticed amongst employees at Great Places to Work® is the feeling that “We are different.”

Communicating to employees about the Employer Brand is important because if employees connect emotionally with the Organisation and what it stands for they are more likely to passionately believe in its products and services.

Organisations are employing various means to communicate their Employer brand. The Employer brand in Cadbury is reinforced through their anthem based on the *Lagaan* song “*Chale Chalo*”. The anthem video features employees from all functions and levels senior management and operations in factories – working and enjoying together. The anthem is developed by an in-house and cross-functional team of employees and is refreshed every year to include new members of the team Cadbury. The anthem is played at the end of all conferences and meeting to reinforce the beliefs.

Mindtree is conscious of what its Employer brand has to offer and care is taken at the recruitment stage to ensure fit between a potential employee and the brand.

In employee meetings at RMSI employees are invited to share their experiences in RMSI that reflect upon the extent to which RMSI is living its Employer brand. Employer brand is also built through stories, for example, stories about their CEO (an IIT & Stanford graduate), his wanting to return to India to prove himself in his country, his starting out of a basement, his unwillingness to pay the bribe in the pre-liberalization era of Indian economy are known to everyone in the Organisation.

Adobe has created a desk cube displaying the Brand Beliefs. This becomes a part of the new employee kit. During their first few days employees go through the company orientation program about Adobe’s history, vision, values, culture and business. Welcome to Adobe video is shown in which the employees talk about the brand beliefs of Adobe.

In successful case studies on Employer branding Organisations have been able to ensure the following:

1. Brand Promise & Brand Positioning:

This is about what the Employer Brand stands for. When employees join Adobe, Texas Instruments or ST Micro Electronics they know that they have a chance to do cutting edge work. Texas Instrument's site on "Living Legends" talk about the Nobel Laureates the Company has produced. Employees join and stay in these Organisations because they feel there is a connect between their deepest aspirations and what the organisation has to offer. What each Organisation has to offer would differ depending on their strengths and the needs of the talent pool it wants to attract. While Fedex would offer "Guaranteed Fair Treatment", Honeywell Technology Solutions would be attractive for its Diversity and Work Life policies.

What is important is how the Brand Promise leverages your Organisation's unique strengths / Beliefs to appeal to the kind of talent pool you seek to recruit & retain. In practice this can be more complicated because Organisations are trying to attract different type of talent. This is why Employer brand attributes are often expressed as core values rather than technical or functional attributes which might appeal to a limited set of people.

Brand positioning is about overall reputation, goodwill and perception of your organization in the talent market and how your Brand is viewed by potential employees (and existing employees) vis-à-vis other Employer brands. Brand positioning is created through advertising, participating in career fairs and campus recruitments, eRecruitment, open days, internet website & market perceptions

Brand promise or the employee value proposition is communicated on a continuous basis to existing employees and through job advertisements, interviewing style, recruitment offers, career fairs, pre-placement talks etc to potential employees.

2. Delivery of Brand Promise:

It is about the way you do things in your Organisation. We all know nothing kills a bad product faster than good advertising. How is the Employer Brand being reinforced in actual experience of employees in your Organisation? Cadburys has a "People Care Index" that measures employee experience of key aspects of their Employer brand. In South West Airlines, one of the most successful examples of Employer Branding, the CEO and other executives have luncheons with new employees to monitor whether their work-related expectations have been met. When this is not the case, corrective action is taken to the fullest extent possible. In those instances where corporate messages have created unrealistic expectations, efforts are made to identify the source of the miscommunication and adjust the messages accordingly.

Delivering the Brand promise starts with creating ownership in people right from the time the Employer brand is developed. Organisations with consistent Employer brands train employees for values and behaviours, not just skills. J W Marriott takes care to assess a candidate's fit with the Employer brand right at the time of recruitment. Build rewards and recognition processes around the brand. Once a quarter Sapiient announces its "Core Values Award" to recognize people who have lived its core values. The 360-degree appraisal seeks feedback on how people are living the brand. This is supplemented by a 360 Leadership feedback which seeks similar feedback about the Leadership team. Organisations like Marriott and Sapiient take care to ensure that all HR processes like Recruitment, Induction, Training, rewards & Recognition, Performance Management etc promote employee behaviours which build the Employer brand.

Employer brand, on the other hand, is closely aligned to the Customer or Corporate brand. For example, when ICICI Bank's advertisement to existing and potential customers talks about Dependability ("Hum hai na"), votaries of Employer branding would claim that this external Brand promise would work only if employees feel that in turn they can depend on each other and on management of the Bank. Thus, the Employer brand would need to be aligned with the Customer brand for the customer brand to become a reality.

Strong Employer brands have a number of advantages for the Organisation. Even ex-employees talk well about these Organisations. For example, they have strong Alumni clubs. Apart from being able to attract better quality talent, the employee turnover in these Organisations are less than industry average. A large proportion of their recruitment is through internal referrals. For example, Honeywell Technology Solutions has employee attrition in single digit and over 50 percent employees are recruited through internal referrals.

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The views expressed in this article are personal.*