

Employees Are the Brand

by William Arruda

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Web 2.0 has changed the way companies look at their brand – ceding more and more responsibility to their brand communities - the people who surround the brand. The ubiquity of social media has created awareness of the role customers play in building (or destroying) brands. That awareness of the human impact on branding has rubbed off on the people who build the brand from the inside out.

The New Landscape of Brand Communications

Many companies are harnessing the brand-building value of their employees. They are giving employees the permission (and in some cases, the mandate) to communicate about the corporate brand via the social media. They understand that they have as many brand assets as they have employees. The recent spate of TV commercials focusing on employees shows that this is not just a Web 2.0 phenomenon. Take a look at the new Intel [ad](#) featuring Ajay V Bhatt or GE's 'Pass the Wrench' highlighting employees from around the globe or IBM's ad which has employees explaining why they are 'an IBMer'. Interestingly, all three of these companies show up in the latest list of the strongest global brands (from BusinessWeek and Interbrand).

Companies are developing a greater understanding of how their employees can contribute to the corporate brand and are getting much more comfortable with their employees' increased visibility and responsibility for expressing the brand. Sure, the marketing department is the most connected to brand mission and has the responsibility to increase brand value. But others in the organization, further removed from the branding strategy, need, at the very least, a general awareness of the corporate brand and what it stands for. If brands are to be built by the consistent expression of the brand promise through every action and interaction – branding executives must look at the impact of employee actions and communications on the value of the brand.

Harnessing the Power of the Individual

When we watch the employees of Sterling Cooper on AMC's Mad Men, we see that conformity is the word that best describes employee behavior in the 1960s. That conformity - that was core to how companies worked back then - has been replaced by individuality. Today, with the blurred line between work and life, employees want to bring who they are to what they do.

Forward-thinking organizations understand the value that individuality can deliver – and are equally aware of how it complicates the consistency of message which is critical to effective branding. So how do you encourage individuality while ensuring one clear and consistent brand message?

The Intersection of Corporate and Personal Branding

Branding executives need to engage each employee – asking them to build the brand of the company in a way that is authentic to them. This is where corporate branding meets personal branding. When all employees understand the corporate brand and are given the task of building the brand in their own way, they are empowered, engaged and activated.

To make this happen, marketing and branding executives need a greater connection to their colleagues in HR (and in particular with talent development professionals) to ensure employees understand the brand and are able to communicate it in a way that is authentic to them (consistent with their personal branding). Focusing some of your marketing efforts on your human brand assets enables you to augment your marketing resources and create experiences that build that all-important

emotional connection with members of your brand community. It multiplies your brand building actions by the number of employees you engage in the brand's mission. "In the professional services industry, where our people are our product, conscious personal branding is particularly relevant and important. Every interaction a client has with one of our professionals says something about that individual's personal brand and therefore, about the brand of the firm." Says, Kathy Kavanagh, Managing Director, Leadership Development PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Branding During an Economic Downturn

During lean times, talent is often viewed as a liability, not as an asset. But with the current down business cycle, the opposite seems to be true. Sure, unemployment figures are soaring and companies are rightsizing or downsizing or rescaling or whatever they call it; but at the same time, companies are investing in their people. I see this in my own business. Most of my work is focused on personal branding for leadership development in the enterprise, and almost all of my clients are continuing their commitment to their people; many have increased their efforts.

Even as companies cut costs across the board, savvy organizations are investing in their talent – understanding the impact it will have on the corporate brand. According to the 2008 Bersin and Associates Leadership Development Survey, 40% of organizations polled said their spending on leadership development has remained the same and 36% said their budgets were slated to increase this year.

It's no wonder when you look at the benefit of engaged employees who understand the brand. Committed employees stay at your company longer, work harder and deliver on-brand work every day. So with reduced marketing and branding budgets, harnessing the power of your employees to build the brand is a cost-effective strategy for bolstering the brand. Once your brand is clear in the minds and hearts of these important assets, they become your brand ambassadors and go off steadfastly in support of your mission.

Branding in the Web 2.0 world is truly about making the most of the people who surround your brand. The companies that engage their employees in building the brand will surely be out in front.

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