TALENT BRANDING
DRIVES SUSTAINABLE RESULTS

By Jeffrey K. Cordes

The subject of employment branding is hardly new. Many of my colleagues are doing employment branding in one form or another, although their research in this area seems to differ from mine. Yet as I talk with recruiters and leaders in talent acquisition, human resources, business, and marketing, I am honestly a bit surprised at their lack of knowledge and understanding. Maybe it's because em-ployee branding is soft. It has always been one of those areas of mystery that only a handful of people really understand and can measure in very specific terms.

Well, if you are investing the time to delve into this paper, you are more than likely still struggling with some aspect of your employment brand strategy.

Employment or Talent Branding?

As a consultant and leader, I like to focus on results. However, let's lay the groundwork before we jump to results. The first construct is this: Employment branding is not the newest thinking—Talent Branding® is. Why? If you think about the extreme similarities (other then budgets) between consumer branding and employment branding, the consumer is the target, not the company. Other-wise, we would call it company branding.

Talent Branding is not just a play on words. It puts the emphasis where is should be: on talent. Talent Branding is the systemic, integrated process of messaging to prospective, critical candidates—in other words the talent—about the value proposition of an organization that makes it the employer of choice in the candi-date's eyes. Talent Branding's unique differentiator is the integration and align-ment of three brands:
• Consumer (external)
• Employee (internal)
• Candidate (talent)
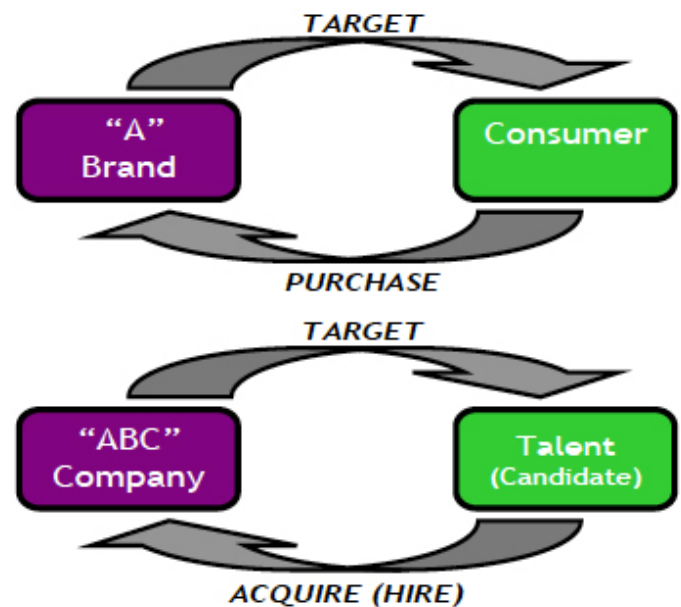
Talent Branding is about targeting talent both inside and outside the company. If the end customer is the target of the brand, then the job seeker or "candidate" is the target of a talent brand. Every-thing we do in developing the talent brand must start and end with our tar-get, the candidate.

Sustainable results cannot be achieved if the talent branding initiative is not integrated, and siloed structures and organizations inhibit collaboration. Inte-gration of a talent brand means con-necting and aligning the talent-brand strategy in every part of the recruit-ment process while coupling the core messages and values to the external and internal brand initiatives.

Talent Brand Awareness

The talent brand influences candidates long before they are involved in the re-cruiting process. Its success needs to be measured on results from talent aware-ness, engagement, acquisition, development, and retention. Talent-brand awareness creates an external perception of company and tone that influences a potential candidate's decision to work

there. This awareness can also be meas-ured by a brand's corporate reputation. Engagement and acquisition rely on the brand to be targeted and specific to the perceived needs of the candidate. The message or value proposition is critical in these stages, an area that we will ex-plore a bit later.

It is also key to determine the most successful delivery mechanism for the mes-sage. There needs to be synergy between all the branding efforts, messages, and tactics, presenting one common face to all audiences. It cannot be left to each group within the company—marketing for external branding, corporate communications for internal branding, and human resources for talent branding—to develop its own brand. From print to online, many organizations are not effec-tively or efficiently allocating brand budgets in the right area.

Alignment from the Inside Out

This is not the first time that someone has suggested that alignment is critical to the success of an employment-brand strategy. It is, however, the first time you will hear that alignment needs to be inside out. Inside out creates alignment from the three strategic brand areas mentioned above: external or consumer, internal or employee, and employment or talent/candidate.

EMC views inside out with an intense focus on both its master or B2B brand as well as its employment or B2C brand. Polly Pearson, Vice President of Employee Branding at EMC, recently told me that:

Our B2B brand sends a very strong message to the market around our corporate values: trust, assets, confidence, reliability, and of course safety. The employ-ment or B2C brand is completely candidate focused and the message focus is different; we emphasize that EMC is an organization for innovators, with oppor-tunities for career development, personal, and professional growth. We emphas-ize that EMC is a cool place that is on fire and ready for candidates who can thrive in our environment.

Branding is most effective when literally turned "inside out." Current employees must communicate internally

about the components of their job that make it and their employer the best in the business. Core values, communications, and mes-saging all come together to create an internal brand that exudes confidence (especially in turbulent times of change), excitement, growth, passion, and a sense of individual pride. This alignment will result in positive behavioral change, greater productivity, and best-place-to-work metrics. Its impact is con-tagious, positively affecting morale, productivity, and organizational growth.

This internal brand must also be linked to the talent brand to send a strong and consistent message to the prospective candidate. Recently, I worked with a large retail financial institution that was (and still is) losing top diversity talent as soon as it came in through the door. The company realized that, from a diversity pers-pective, its message around the organization did not match the internal opera-tion. Such disconnect can damage both the talent brand and the reputation of a company.

Ford is another company that recently went through an internal branding cam-paign that was driven by employee feedback. Unfortunately, the internal brand-ing message of "one Ford" did not successfully transition to the company's talent brand, leaving a confusing website message that was not aligned with either internal or external brand.

At Hyatt Select Hotels Group, Vice President of Human Resources Monique Pinney believes that:

In order to grow, we needed to do something different. We started with the in-ternal messaging and branding to develop an incredible sense of pride in the Hyatt name. We then were able to leverage that message to our future em-ployees in creating the candidate

Consumer Brand	Internal Brand	Talent Brand
• Raised awareness and increased product purchases • Improved loyalty repeat sales •Market share increases • Differentiation • Perceived value •Competitive differentiation	• Increased engagement • Loyalty/commitment • Improved morale • Camaraderie • Innovation • Productivity/revenue • Knowledge sharing • Shared values •Changed behavior	• Increased applicant flow of top talent • Reduced time to hire • Improved quality of hire • Reduced overall recruiting expense • Reduced turnover • Increased employee referrals

Brand alignment is critical

experience that generates top talent into Hyatt Select Hotels.

The strength of the internal brand can be measured directly by the number of employee referrals, and more importantly, their quality. The number-one source of top talent, according to all research, is employee referrals. They are also a direct indicator of internal morale and productivity. So the inside-out impor-tance of the internal and talent brand cannot be emphasized enough—and it can be measured in very specific terms that prove return on investment in talent branding.

Talent Branding Stakeholders

Developing a successful talent-brand strategy requires key stakeholder involve-ment. This is another one of those areas where organizations tend to be all talk and no action. On the surface, they suggest to outsiders that talent branding is simply common sense. Well, if is, why do I find that in 100 percent of the talent brands that fail, one of the key failure points is the lack of stakeholder involvement?

At EMC, Polly Pearson had a distinct advantage in helping drive employment brand success: she came from the marketing organization, an obvious yet some-times challenging stakeholder. Polly is enthusiastic about the success of EMC's branding efforts, which "came from not just stakeholder involvement, but stake-holder commitment. Utilizing key stakeholders drives innovation and messaging that is real and compelling to future employees." EMC had Marketing, Employee Communications, Human Resources, Recruiting, International (EMEA, India & China), Diversity & Inclusion, University Relations,

and EMC.com all working in unison to build a unified value proposition.

In my work with organizations around stakeholder commitment, I emphasize in-volving some additional groups such as recent candidates, alumni, and rejected candidates. Knowing what works and doesn't work is just as important in talent branding as it is in consumer branding—what better stakeholder than a candidate who turned down an offer, or a candidate who bought into the message and is a happy and satisfied new employee?

A unique, often overlooked stakeholder is the community. The "community" is defined as those who have a "stake" in the company either financial (via stock) or physical (residents from the company's headquarters or regional-office geo-graphic area). The community stakeholders are almost never measured in a traditional employment-branding initiative. Remembering that the talent brand is designed to attract all levels in the company, it is imperative that the talent branding initiative solicit feedback from the community.

We routinely survey the community to gain insights and perceptions into the company down the street. At a manufacturing company in Houston, our survey found critical components of the brand message that were missing or clearly misaligned. While the company took extreme pride in being the safest possible place to work, the community's perception was that the company had a high incident rate for serious accidents. This disconnect was eliminating prime candidates.

A large Midwest fast-food organization initially failed to "message" to candidates that career growth and

development was paramount and that more than 30 per-cent of the management team started as hourly workers. As a result, the community was receiving the message that this was a dead-end job with no career opportunities. Changing the employment brand has dramatically changed the volume and quality of candidates now flooding into the recruiting organization.

Driving Top Talent

The current challenges in the economy are having a dramatic impact on recruiting. The challenges are complex, but they give us a great opportunity to refine and optimize the business of identifying, targeting, attracting, acquiring, and assimilating talent—specifically, top talent. Recruitment and talent-acquisition organizations will be lured into a false sense of euphoria over an enormous influx of candidates into their pools. The caution is that while the overall pool is larger, the selection of top talent remains virtually the same.

Top Talent Increases Productivity and Drives Revenues
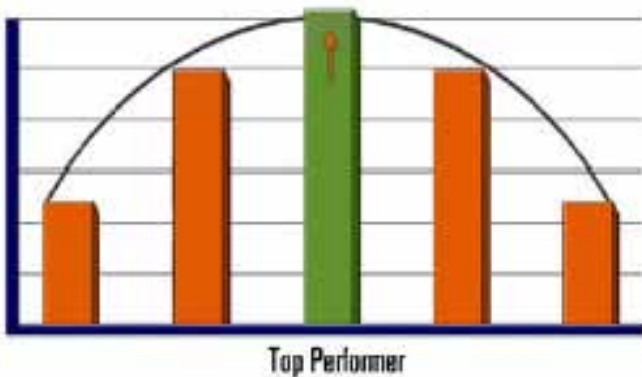
Top Performer

67% variance in productivity between top performers and below average performance rapidly generates increased revenues, increases moral of other staff and productivity levels increase.
Source: "The Incredible Cost of a Bad Hire" by Wendell Williams

So is finding top talent that much more difficult? Optimizing the recruitment process just became more critical. Many organizations that I talk to are restruc-turing their recruitment teams, asking recruiters to do more with less. But now is the time to invest in an effective talent-branding strategy and campaign. Suc-cessful branding, messaging, and value propositions will create an improved flow of higher quality, top talent.

Developing and Launching a Talent Brand

We have already touched on some of the key components of developing a talent brand. The complete prescription follows:

1) Align with the business strategy, consumer, and internal brands: this is critical.
2) Involve key stakeholders—beyond just feedback to commitment and sustaina-bility.
3) Develop a talent branding strategy that focuses on the core values that are a part of the organization's culture.
4) Build a talent brand or employment brand "office." According to Polly Pearson of EMC, "the employment brand office is made up of a brigade of key volunteers (champions) who can guide the strategy and support the development of the brand architecture."
5) Develop a current, compelling, and flexible talent messaging to attract the con-sumers of the talent brand—the candidates. At EMC, the message architecture is developed using a scientific approach of research, focus groups, and interviews with key executive-committee members and stakeholder groups.
6) Implement an integrated internal/external media plan using a mixed-media ap-proach that supports your target audience, from job postings to podcasts to intra-company social-media networks.
7) Research, test, get feedback, and adapt quickly and with great flexibility as the campaign is planned, maintained, and sustained over time. Use research to keep the talent brand fresh and up to date.
8) Develop a set of metrics that allows accurate measurement and communication of specific results. Organizations of all sizes continue to struggle in measuring their employment-brand results. They employ a variety of metrics including web traffic, number of applicants, number of hires, quality of hires, brand image, candidate experience, and recognition and rewards (employer of choice and diversity employer of choice, for example).

Targeting Talent

Targeting top talent is critical to driving positive and sustainable business re-sults. Targeting begins with talent or workforce planning, both internally and externally.

We have had the opportunity to work with such amazing organizations as Google and IBM. Their targeting challenge lies in improved screening or filtering of candidates. When an organi-zation receives a thousand resumes a day, its challenge is clearly not in quantity but in quality. To achieve the desired quality, targeting the message is critical.

But what about midsize companies that don't have the global resources and reputation of IBM and Google? Midsize companies use employment or Tal-ent Branding far less than their larger counterparts. Why? In a recent survey of about 450 midsize companies, I found that the number-one reason that employment or talent branding was not a priority was because they felt the investment far outweighed the return. This worrisome misconcep-tion is the furthest thing from the truth. Talent branding, when done in unison with external and internal branding, is not expen-sive. Granted, it is time consuming and difficult, but the returns do show on the balance sheet in 30 to 90 days.

> *"Employees are seeing [social networking] as a way of enlarging their sphere and interacting with colleagues."*
>
> *"Companies may start with the idea of helping employees feel more connected, but that's just the beginning. With easier and faster connections among people, sud-denly cross-division collaboration happens more naturally, leading to greater innovation. "People don't just chat; they connect with people and end up talking about things that have an impact on the business."*
> *Amy Shuen, author of Web 2.0: A Strategy Guide*

The caution is to not to niche your message so tightly that you alienate other key talent. As the Chief People Officer for Xpedior Inc., my focus was on acquiring twenty-something information-technology consultants. Our targeted messaging was spot on. However, the lesson for me was that the message was too spot on, alienating other key candidates that we were looking for, particularly in mid- to senior-level management positions.

Web 2.0, Social Networking and Talent Branding

The advent of intra-company social networking and communications is already having a profound impact on corporate reputation management. But what, if any, impact will it have on employment or talent branding? The answer lies in the integration and alignment of corporate branding, internal branding, and talent branding. Facts, background, and knowledge are now so much easier to gather about a company, a potential boss, an industry meltdown, or rumors about a merger. As the intra-social network bleeds externally, recruiters, candi-dates, and bad hires lurk just beyond the boundaries of sacred electronic water-cooler knowledge.

Web 2.0 and social networks are again changing the game for talent acquisition leaders. It may have been the buzz to say that linking an internal and a talent brand was important; now it is a strategic imperative, especially if

> *"In the aftermath of the Enron collapse, a company's employ-ment brand is a very important consideration for an employee wanting to make a long term commitment to a company. We believe that honesty and integrity are of utmost importance in our messaging when dealing with our customers and our employees. At the HCR Companies we value our employees and treat each of them with the same respect as any of us would ex-pect. We truly do care about them and the work that they perform each day and I believe this does make a difference."*

you are looking to drive top talent and sustainable business results. As John Lee, the Founder of Digital Growth Strategy in Dallas, explained, "The pressure on brands to be authentic is absolute. If employment-brand communications try to paint a picture of something the company is not, potential candidates [targeted top tal-ent] can instantly determine whether or not the company is being disingenuous."

From a pure talent-acquisition perspective, the single biggest impact beyond the link between the internal and talent brands will be dramatic improvements in on-boarding employees. Web 2.0 technology and intra-company social networks will allow companies to expand from simple mentor programs to extensive net-worked communities of similar interests, generations, and skills. Embracing this community will give companies a head start in quickly and successfully assimilating employees into the organization.

Liam Cleaver, the Program Director for Collaborative Innovation at IBM, believes that:

Beehive [IBM's internal social network] is an experiment in our own version of an internal 'Facebook.' Beehive helps to address relationship-building challenges in the workplace; for example, new employees struggling with making connections that are important for their current project and professional growth, or remote workers having difficulties with team building and staying in touch with their team members or employees."

Other Applications of Talent Branding

In our next series of white papers, we will explore best practices in talent branding and leveraging the talent brand into initiatives such as Ambassador Talent Development Programs, Diversity Talent Branding®, and branding as a retention strategy. We will also discuss in more detail the importance of developing the value proposition and using consumer-branding techniques to measure the voice of the candidate/employee. Instead of the net promoters' score where we measure if and why someone would recommend a product, we measure the net talent score® and answer the question: "Would you recommend my company?"

Summary: Align Your Brand

Establishing a powerful and integrated talent brand on its own is difficult enough. However, trying to establish one without alignment with external and internal brands is a huge mistake that distorts the intended company image on all fronts. Branding and messaging must be aligned. For example, the message to an external stakeholder around the emphasis on safety in a manufacturing plant must mirror what employees are saying about safety on the plant floor—as well as what recruiters are saying to prospective candidates.

Image, tone, message, and strategic alignment can only come from the success-ful integration of all three branding disciplines. Once marketing, human resources, and recruiting organizations are working together in partnership, the talent-branding initiative will drive positive and sustainable business results.

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