

Seven vital facts you need to know about branding your workplace, but don't

By Penny Burke

A recent survey of 1,000 CEOs in Australia asked them to list their major concerns for the immediate future. The number one concern for Australian CEOs was not their ability to meet financial forecasts, nor was it terrorism, nor uncertainty in international markets. It wasn't change of Federal government, implications of greater legislation and market control, or even fiscal policy.

Australian CEOs are most concerned about attraction and retention of the best talent.

From my extensive research, particularly amongst the infamous Gen Y, I think they are right to be worried. Despite the ongoing debate of whether or not Australia is in the midst of a skills shortage, there is enough evidence to suggest that the labour market is changing globally, and the impact on the future workplace will be considerable. Call it what you will, but the workplace is about to undergo the greatest seismic shift since the industrial revolution.

Attraction and retention is foremost in the minds of insightful CEOs because employers are facing turnover figures higher than ever before. Australia is enjoying the lowest level of unemployment in three decades, encouraging employees of all ages to reconsider their options. Add to that the restless energy of Generation Y and you have a workforce that no longer finds it inspiring to put in the hard yards at the once company in order to achieve the gold watch at the thirty year mark.

So what can employers do to improve their chances of attracting and retaining the best talent in a market that is actively working against that? They can improve their workplace brand. For years, many companies have spent a lot of money ensuring that their external brand is well polished and that they engage their target customer as strongly as possible in order to build loyalty to their product over a competitors. Yet few employers maintain the same focus on their internal brand and their internal customer, the employee. Whereas the marketing department spends considerable time and money fine-tuning the external brand in minute detail, the representation of the internal brand isn't afforded the same luxury.

Similarly (some would say consequently), from the internal 'customer' perspective, it appears employees are not as connected to, or as engaged with, their employment brand as they are with the goods and services they are able to purchase as a direct result of that employment. The workplace is where many of us spend at least five days every week (often more time than we spend with our life partner), the place to which our aspirations and ability to progress in life are inextricably linked, and where for many, our self-esteem and sense of self is determined. Should we not be as emotionally attached to that place as we are to our Nikes?

If we think about the skills shortage and the inevitable effect this will have on organisational ability to attract and retain the best talent, then it stands to reason that a more engaged workforce will have a positive effect on turnover levels. Traditional marketers know that the value of a brand lies in the development of a loyal audience – one that isn't just attracted to a product for the functional benefits it offers. As legendary social researcher Hugh Mackay says, 'A good brand is not one that makes consumers feel good about the brand. A good brand makes consumers feel good about themselves.' A brand that delivers on both functional attributes and emotional benefits stands to gain a long term loyal audience.

Why is a workplace any different? Shouldn't employers *want* staff to be every bit as involved and engaged as their most loyal customers? Do employers really believe that merely applying a poster with the company mission statement in the foyer of the office is the most powerful way to achieve that engagement?

There's no reason why a workplace shouldn't be considered as a brand. It is in markets that have undergone dramatic change, where choice has exploded, that brands fight for engagement like seagulls over a potato chip. But it's easier said than done. So here are the seven vital facts you need to know about building a more engaging workplace brand.

1. Jobs are dead. Understand that your workplace is not offering a job, you are offering an *experience*. And the best workplace brands reflect that experience. Google just won the coveted best employer award in the US. Apart from the functional benefits one gets working at Google employees celebrate an environment that allows people to pursue success on their own terms. This environment is underscored by free on site washers, dryers and detergent, the annual free ski trip, unlimited sick days, lap pool, volleyball courts, free snack stations, subsidised massages, climbing wall and 11 free cafes. It is not just the functional benefits that makes the employer brand strong - it is the emotional bonding employees feel as a result that enhances the workplace brand experience at Google.
2. Put people in charge of internal branding who know how to build engaging brands. Many companies have the marketing department in charge of the all important external brand and have the Human Resources department manage the internal brand. If you are a human resources person and you are in charge of developing the employer brand, that's excellent and exciting. But get some training on how to do it if you haven't done it before. It is possible your accomplished skill set has greater core competency in areas such as policy and process which is very different to a way of thinking to build an engaging workplace brand.
3. Don't try and please all of the people all of the time. If you go for the lowest common denominator and try to build a brand that will appeal to everyone you will run the risk of being bland and uninspiring. It is better to stand for something than nothing at all.
4. The new loyalty is the people, not the company. One of the number one aspects that Generation Y for example are looking for are great leaders and inspiring leadership. So actively hire leaders and good people throughout your organisation. Sure, they have to be proficient at their functional role - but are they inspiring leaders that others will really want to work for? A great leader is an excellent retention tool.
5. Consider the under-employed in an attraction strategy. The grey generation, people with disabilities, non English speaking people, young mums. There are opportunities to attract solid talent in a typically underutilised demographic.

6. Shorten the distance between the external and internal brand. There's no point presenting a sexy and inspiring external face but being regarded by employees as shallow and uncaring to your internal audience. This merely dramatises that they are being thought of as an expendable bottom line cost, whilst external customers are seen as investments. Think of your employees as an investment and see how it changes your perspective.
7. Force yourself to focus. People generally don't like to change unless they are forced to, and that includes CEO's. If you want to attract and retain the best people in the midst of a skills shortage, you have to focus on it as much as you would any other major organisational initiative. Force yourself and your senior management to focus on building a more engaging employer brand, or it will never happen.

These tips are drawn from the best selling book *Forced Focus – the Essence of Attracting and Retaining the Best People*. Released in March 2007, it is the first in a series of Forced Focus books by author Penny Burke, and provides a step by step guide to building an employer brand. You can purchase Forced Focus at all good bookstores, or by visiting www.essencecomms.com.au.

Penny Burke also runs a series of workshop seminars on building a more engaging employer brand. This one day workshop is designed to give HR professionals, senior management, business owners and marketers the tools you need to create an inspiring workplace brand.

And her best selling book is included in the workshop price. You will learn:

- Why an employer brand is important
- The impact of mixed generations in the workplace
- The 5 steps to develop an effective workplace brand
- How to really 'live' your employer brand