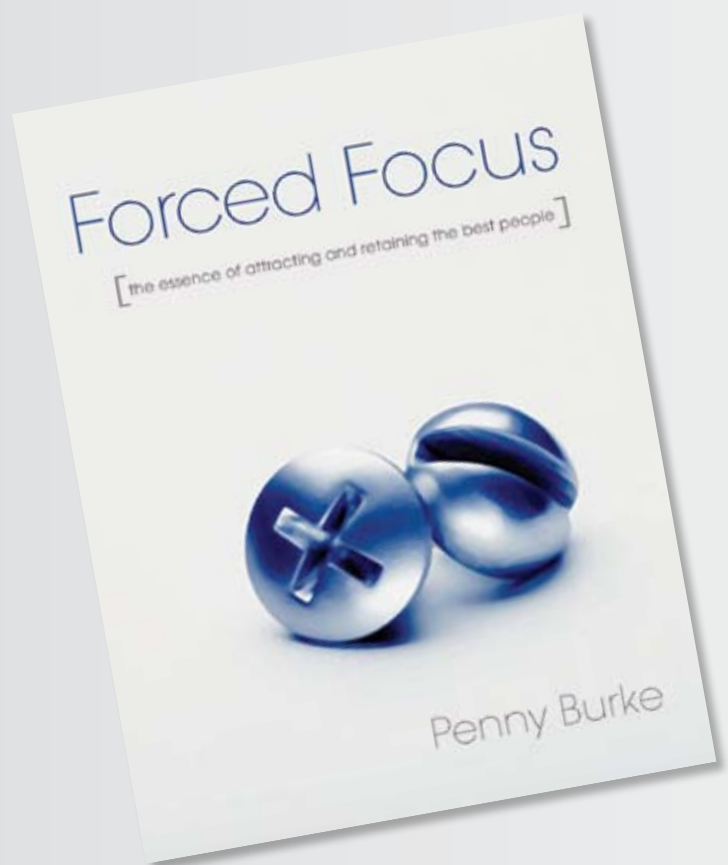


HOW TO FIND THE **HEART** OF YOUR EMPLOYER BRAND

In this excerpt from her book, *Forced Focus*, **Penny Burke** outlines how to implement an engaging workplace brand that takes the best of an organisation's external brand and applies it to an internal employer brand





There is plenty of talk about Employer Branding – what it is and how it can be used to attract and retain the best people. However, there’s not a lot of talk about exactly how to do this. Assuming we understand the benefits of building a more engaging workplace brand, how exactly do we go about developing and implementing a brand that will enhance commitment throughout the organisation?

I spent over 20 years in the marketing world working with brands that have very large budgets attached to them. My focus was on developing the strategic direction of the brand and then overseeing the implementation of that direction. And do you know one of the key things I learned? After working on hundreds of different brands across government services, traditional packaged goods, retail and corporates, the actual process of developing a brand is identical. And it is identical whether the subject of your focus is for internal or external reasons. The best possible brand identity a company can have is one that is exactly the same in an internal sense as it is in an external sense. There are far too many Australian companies who spend a significant amount on making their external brand relationship engage with their external customers – but put in precious little resource for building

the same sort of engagement with their internal brand.

The process of developing a brand and the Brand Essence – be it internal or external – is a marriage between what it is we want to say about ourselves and what our main target audience wants to hear. Somewhere between these two points of view is the strategic focus of the brand. And that strategic focus must simultaneously reflect the absolute truth and core of the company while resonating strongly with the greater portion of employees. As such, it requires input first from management, in terms of agreeing to what the company has to offer. And then input from employees, as to which parts of that offer are the most compelling. The bridge between them is the employer brand marketing effort.

I have found it is useful to have a structure to help senior management articulate their brand essence and one such example is a brand pyramid. A brand pyramid looks like this:



I usually conduct a half or full day session to work through each level of the brand pyramid with the key senior management team, by the end of the day agreeing the core brand essence for the employer brand. Before I explain each level of the pyramid, there are four fundamentals to making a session productive:

1 I only allow three words in each level of the pyramid (except Attributes. If you happen to have a brand that is rich in attributes, more power to you). The ensuing debate by your management team in order to agree on the three most relevant aspects is one of the most valuable parts of the brand pyramid process.

2 The brand pyramid should be completed in the sense of the desired outcome of your brand, not what it is now. Workshops like this are one of precious few times when management gets to spend time ‘on the business’ rather than ‘in the business’. Once you know where you are going you can determine what you need to do to get there – and that becomes your internal marketing plan.

3 Every key stakeholder should participate. If you give your key people a chance to comment and be involved, they will have ownership of the outcome. If you leave them



Penny Burke

out, you give them a reason not to adopt the outcome and in some cases actively agitate against it.

4 Apply some strict timing constraints in which to complete your pyramid. It is simply not productive to have your senior management team navel gazing about the minutiae of expression. If debate centres on whether or not the company can be true to a particular essence then that is a good use of time. If the team is bogged down in the preference for 'competent' over 'capable' then they have clearly lost their way. Set yourself a maximum half day, get some forced focus happening and off you go.

The pyramid levels

So what is each level of the pyramid about and how do you fill it out?

Attributes

The Attributes are the tangible aspects of your brand that you can see or touch. They do not have meaning in and of themselves – they are just attributes that the brand possesses. In an employment sense, attributes could include everything from a well known logo, a well known CEO, or a visible location to attributes such as the type of employment or job best known for and average age of the work force. That is, the physical aspects of the employer brand the company has in their possession.

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Functional benefits

The Functional Benefits are the consequences of the attributes you possess. Possession of certain attributes gives you a functional ability to provide a certain set of benefits to your people. For example, if one of your attributes is that you are government owned, one of your functional benefits may be that you offer above average stability. Or if your company has the largest and most dominant customer or tender in the category as an attribute, then a functional benefit of that would be a high profile client or business problem to work with, train on or learn from.

Emotional rewards

How do you want employees to feel as a result of working with your company? Do they feel proud? Smart? Technically proficient? Valued? Confident? What is the outcome you hope every employee feels? It is an interesting aside that what you think your employees will see as rewarding may not line up with yours, so remember to seek counsel on this.

Values of the employee

Values are defined in the *Oxford* dictionary as being 'one's principles or standards, one's judgment of what is valuable or important in life.' So this is the part of the pyramid where your employees' values are captured. We concentrate on understanding our employees' values because our brand essence must engage with our employees. Thus if we portray in our brand the same values that our employees hold to be dear and true, then we are going to maximise our opportunity for engagement.

The opportunity with Values is to avoid the banal platitudes and try and get to the real heart not of what you think would be good to say, but what really drives your people. Do they hold dear the value of harmony? Would they say they value

passion? Do they crave belonging? Is status a key driver?

Personality

The last step in the pyramid before we brainstorm the all-important brand essence is the personality of the employee brand. This is usually a very fun section as we seek to assign the personality traits to the company. I ask the participants to imagine the employer brand as a person that has just come into the room, or that you might meet at a party. Now how would you describe that person? Are they fun, dynamic, conservative or sincere? Extroverted or responsible? Self assured or optimistic?

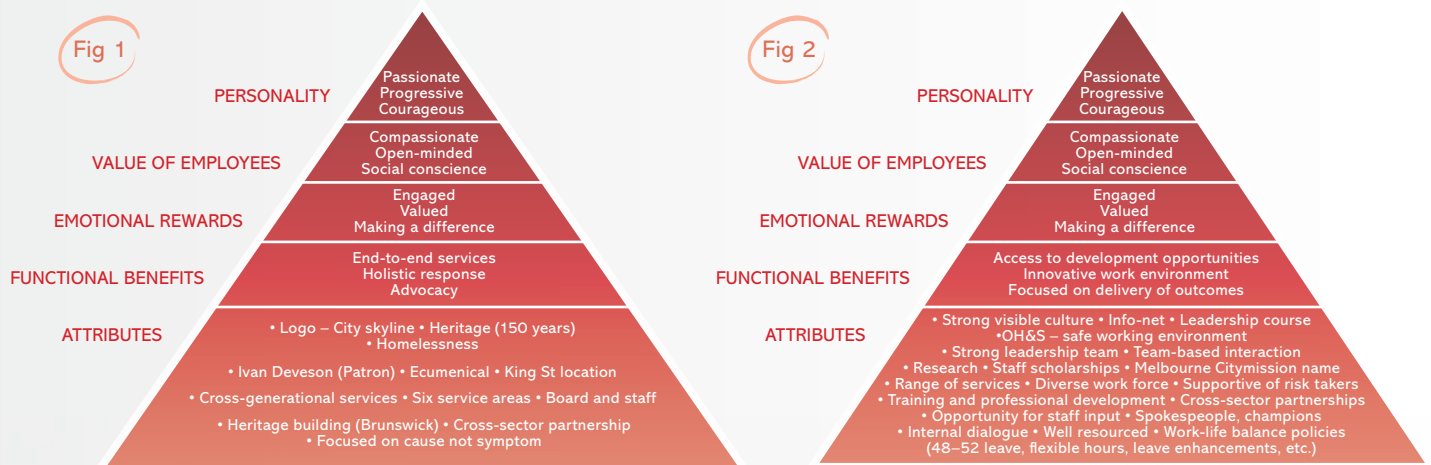
The pyramid process

I usually ask to facilitate the group to brainstorm each level of the pyramid in as many words as required, and then cull at each level down to the most relevant three. That is, an entire list of attributes distilled to the three most relevant, then the three most relevant functional benefits, and likewise for emotional rewards, values of employees and personality.

We then conduct the red flag test. When you run your eye down the pyramid does it innately make sense to you? Is it reflective of where you want your company brand to go? Does it adequately reflect your dreams and aspirations? Is it gutsy? Will it set you a future course that is able to be daringly navigated? Does it all 'match'? By that I mean are there any red flags that stand out to indicate that something is conflicting or ill fitted? Go back and address if so.

Brand essence

The Brand Essence is the most important part of the process because it contains the employee value proposition. It embodies the heart and soul of the brand. It is the DNA of the company if you will.



BRAND ESSENCE: COURAGEOUS SOCIAL CHANGE-AGENT

Importantly, it is not a slogan. Sometimes people find an irresistible urge to make their Brand Essence into something they can later print on the coffee cup, mousepad or t-shirt. The Brand Essence is not supposed to be a sexy statement, nor is it a slogan. It is the place to sum up all that you have established in your brand pyramid into the embodiment of the company spirit.

The final point to bear in mind is that the brand essence should potentially try to use some words that do not appear in the pyramid. The idea is not just to choose your three most common words throughout the session and put them together as the brand essence. A true brand essence summarises the intent of the brand, the embodiment of what the company is about.

A case study

Melbourne Citymission was established as a non-denominational organisation to provide assistance to thousands of Victorians of many faiths and cultures who are disadvantaged, isolated and vulnerable. The focus of Melbourne Citymission’s work is providing a hand up not a hand out, supporting people to take charge of their own lives and to participate fully in community life. When first we met to refine the external core values of the Melbourne Citymission brand, Fig 1 shows the brand pyramid we developed.

After the brand pyramid process, the CEO said: “This process has been crucial in Melbourne Citymission finding a way

to articulate the values we apply to our service practice in a way that corresponds to our external marketplace.” Probably the greatest single use of the tool for them was an internal prioritisation of activities they found themselves involved in. But the board also wanted us to turn our attention to the internal brand. We gathered the HR and marketing people and, using the external brand as a road map, identified the employer brand pyramid, shown in Fig 2.

The process demonstrated two key aspects. First, the internal group was in agreement with the executive that fashioned the external representation of the brand. This was no mean feat, as two entirely different groups of people coming to the same outcome is testament to the process generally, and the strength of the brand direction. Second, the internal group changed only the parts of the brand pyramid they thought irrelevant, which was actually only within Attributes and the Functional Benefits.

The Attributes were changed to reflect the attributes that an employee sees Melbourne Citymission offering. The Functional Benefits were changed accordingly to demonstrate functionally what the internal audience believes to be the result of those attributes. What was most profound was that the internal group was in agreement in all other areas of the pyramid. So despite the internal and external brand being functionally aimed at different audiences, both groups want the brand emotionally to stand for the same thing.

This demonstrates the value to be had in closing the distance between the external and internal brand values.

It is Melbourne Citymission’s goal to develop an engaged work force that is every bit as connected to the brand as external counterparts, and the Brand Pyramid process gave them a framework in which to lay the internal plans to achieve that. Of the overall process, communications manager Eloise Hinckley said: “We hadn’t thought of applying our external brand pyramid to our internal culture before.

“The process highlights for us the systems and changes required to ensure our workplace and staff feel aligned with our external image.”

Clearly tools like the Brand Pyramid offer us a framework and process in which we can develop an employer brand. But the pyramid is just that – a tool.

The real litmus test is not in our ability to develop a great-looking pyramid – it is in our ability to translate it into meaningful benefits, and a management team who really live the Brand Essence and make it real. That is the true test of an engaging employer brand. **HC**

Penny Burke is author of Forced Focus – the essence of attracting and retaining the best people, a new book on Employer Branding. Forced Focus is available at all good bookstores or via the website at www.essencecomms.com.au

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