

Forget marketing - leadership is the key to killer branding

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The most effective and critical activity in an employer branding program has nothing to do with marketing, and everything to do with developing capable managers, according to a wide-ranging new survey from the Employer Brand Institute.

The Employer Branding Global Research Study surveyed more than 2,000 organisations worldwide. Some 15% of respondents said they believed the most effective branding activity a company could undertake was "building a leadership development program to equip leaders with the capabilities to better manage the employment experience". This was followed by 14% who cited defining an employee value proposition as a key branding activity, and 13% who cited developing an effective careers website.

Employer Brand Institute chairman and CEO Brett Minchington said the research underscored how important it was for an employer brand to reflect the actual employment experience lived by employees. "Leadership behaviours and actions are the key to building a strong employer brand. No amount of investment will optimise the benefits of a strong employer brand unless leaders themselves can deliver the employer brand promise and cascade it throughout the organisation."

There is also a further trickle down effect to managers, who generally underestimate the impact their daily interactions - communication and behaviour - can have on an employee's employment experience. "This is not their fault," added David Kent, managing director of The Right Group. "Buy-in of the employer brand concept at senior leadership level first is most critical if middle/line managers are going to impact on brand equity."

The survey also showed that companies were relying on a range of metrics to measure the success of their employer branding projects, with 42% tracking retention rates. Some 35% of respondents were tracking quality of hire, 30% recorded the number of applicants and 29% measure the cost per hire.

The survey also found developing a unique and authentic employer brand was the single most challenging step in the branding process. This was ranked as the most difficult aspect of employer branding projects, even ahead of obtaining funding and engaging senior leaders. Employer branding is receiving a higher resource allocation with 46% of companies planning to increase the amount invested in employer branding initiatives in 2009.

Whilst the survey found employer branding is now high on the leadership agenda many organisations lack the capability to leverage their employer brand due to the absence of a clearly defined strategy. The survey found only 16% of companies has developed a clear strategy for their employer brand. Interestingly, respondents also said having a clearly defined strategy is the key to achieving their employer brand strategy.

"The biggest hurdle is moving employer branding out of the 'recruitment tool' space and beyond just communication messages to gaining more traction across the whole organisation. More manager accountability for the employer brand is needed," said Kent.

Other key findings of the global survey include:

- Career website development is the main activity (63% of respondents) being undertaken by companies to enhance their employer brand. Recruitment advertising/employer marketing (61%), recruitment branding (55%), induction programs (52%), leadership development programs (46%) and current employee research (46%) are also popular initiatives.
- Recognition as an employer of choice (32%), ease in attracting candidates (28%), decrease in staff turnover (25%) and reduced recruitment costs (25%) are the main benefits companies have gained from their employer brand program.
- A company's corporate reputation and culture (average 6.1 on a scale of 1-7) is the most important attribute in attracting new talent to a company along with the work environment (6.07), career development (6.0) and the company's leadership capability (5.99).