

Making sense of employer brand

To continue to stay relevant employers are increasingly focusing on benchmarking, enhancing or recalibrating their employer brands. But how do you know when you've got it right? And who is ultimately responsible for your employer brand? These can be difficult questions to answer.

We believe in keeping it simple, and here are 6 of our top tips for getting it right:

- 1. Start at the beginning**
- 2. United you stand**
- 3. Create your own lexicon. Build your own model**
- 4. Make it don't fake it**
- 5. Be relevant**
- 6. You'll never be a perfect 10**



1. Start at the beginning

This one may sound obvious but, when developing your employer brand, you need to ensure you're starting in the right place. All too often it's being driven by a desire to become a 'destination employer' or to tackle an immediate problem such as 'stemming attrition'. But it needs to be deeper and more profound than that. You need to start with your business plan. What are we setting out to achieve? What are the potential challenges to us getting there and what are the opportunities? How are we going to get there? And alongside that you need to be thinking about your brand. Who do we want to be? What kind of an organisation? And then, with both of those as foundations you can sensibly think about your employer brand. What kind of culture and behaviour do we need to have in place to achieve our goals? What kind of people are we going to need to get us there?

For your employer brand to be credible to those inside and out it has to be joined up to the overarching business and brand strategy. If there's no connection, it'll be confusing for everyone. And if you can't link the benefits of doing it back to the demands of the business plan, getting buy-in from the top may be difficult.



2. United you stand

For anyone who's been involved in developing their employer brand, this will be an all too familiar issue. Who owns it and who's responsible for defining it and ensuring you deliver on it? Is it the brand and marketing team or is it HR? Well, it's about your brand, how you're perceived and your reputation, so it should sit with the marketing and brand team, right? But it's about your people, it's about attracting and retaining the best talent, so it should sit with HR, right?

All too often the mistake people make is thinking that it needs to be owned by one or other camp. And this can lead to all sorts of problems – both in practical terms and managing different workstreams effectively, but more importantly by compromising the quality of the outputs and by negatively impacting on engagement because there's a disconnect and confusion internally.

For us, it's simple – brand professionals are experts in brand, HR professionals are experts in people – and they need to work together to develop strong employer brands. And we believe that's about more than just sensible collaboration whilst on an 'employer brand project'. It's about understanding and benefitting from what each party can bring to the mix along the way. For example, conducting joint interviews with HR when hiring marketers, if you believe the HR team are adept at finding brand advocates that have an affinity for the company.

By having marketing and HR work closely together, your employer brand will be better informed, clearly aligned with your core brand and attractive to the talent you want to attract and retain.



3. Create your own lexicon. Build your own model.

We'll let you into a secret. We hate the term 'employer brand'. You don't have a 'customer brand' or a 'shareholder brand', you have one brand and your brand needs to be multi-dimensional and work for all your audiences. Your employees are just one, albeit very important, audience. However, we use the term because it's much used, attracts attention and, broadly, people understand what's meant by it.

Whatever you call it, when developing yours and trying to identify what 'shape' it should be, don't fall into the mistake of creating something that fits a theoretical branding model. Make sure it's authentic, built around what you need to say and not a foregone template. Avoid the 'brand onion' or 'employer brand pyramid' at all costs! Create the components you need to explain what your brand means for employees, and don't try to fit them into a model or framework that might not be right for you.

But when it comes to capturing whatever you want to call your employer brand:

- *If you want your people to understand, then don't use acronyms or jargon*
- *If you want your message to resonate, then tell them exactly what you mean*
- *If you want your people to approve, then also tell them why it matters*

We don't really mind what you call the different parts of your brand - but whatever you call them, be clear. Should it be 'employer brand' or 'what it's like to work with us'? Should it be your 'employee value proposition' or 'how we reward our people'? Do we want to talk about our 'values' or 'what we believe in and what it means for what we expect of our people'?



4. Make it don't fake it

So, once you've found your own lexicon – however you decide to talk about what you offer as an employer – it has to be true to you. And it'll all be for nought unless you deliver on it – it has to be more than words on a page. Of course, you need a proposition that's going to attract the people you'll need in the future to deliver on your business strategy. But you need to be able to deliver against that promise. It's about getting the balance right and being clear about where you may need to up your game, or the investment currently being made, to attract those people.

Try focusing on one or two things you can do really well. Look for ways to do things that are uniquely you. For example, when putting together your benefits package. As well as the standard perks you'd expect, are there small things you can build in that will stand out from your competitors and say something about the kind of company you are? For example, Brewdog, the Scottish brewery, offers 'Pawternity leave' (as well as parental leave), so if one of their people takes on a new dog they can have a week off work to get the new member of the family settled in. (They also allow dogs in their offices, so once back at work your dog is never far away.)

And, if you need any convincing of the need to make it real, look no further than Glassdoor, where disgruntled employees are more than happy to spill the beans!



5. Be relevant

There is nothing worse than being at a big launch of the thing referred to as employer brand, to find groups in the audience scratching their heads, thinking it's not really for them, or even worse, sniggering. What made sense in the Boardroom might not translate to the shop floor and it might even sound risible.

So work hard to ensure you make your employer brand relevant to everyone in your organisation. Create overarching principles, but nuance how these principles play out in practice, by segmenting your workforce. This doesn't mean an over complex matrix aligned to your doubtless myriad of job grades. It means grouping job types in logical clusters. There are many ways of doing this, for example; front office, back office and management. This will provide sufficient gearing to ensure the employer brand is meaningful to different job types, but not so much that you over complicate it. Once you've got your segmentation, shadow staff to engage them and determine how your principles translate and what good looks like. Make sure an explanation of your narrative and principles is accompanied by a picture of how they unfold in the day-to-day lives of your people, rich with relevant examples and clear empathy. But making things relevant doesn't mean overcomplicating.



6. You'll never be a perfect 10

'Doing' your employer brand, isn't something you 'do' once, then simply measure: it's a continual endeavour. Your markets, operating conditions, executive team, strategic direction will all continue to shift, evolve and change. So should your employer brand. In developing your employer brand, you should set the bar high. It will be hard getting up there, but even harder staying up there. Achieving 'Investors in People' or the 'Sunday Times 100 Most Admired' takes commitment, drive, graft and a lot more than lip service. Are you sure you are up for that?

As your horizons change, you may need to help your people reshape or motivate themselves. It's a journey and a life's work. Start at the beginning, know what and where your goal is, have a roadmap to get there, as well as a plan to change direction, when you need to.



Conclusion

Making sense of employer branding doesn't involve relentlessly consistent models, one hit wonders, one size fits all or something so complex not even you will understand, let alone your workforce. It's about understanding where your business needs to go. It's about knowing how you need to behave, reward and be in order to deliver on that. It's about realising it's never 'job done'. Ultimately, it's about a brand that speaks to everyone in your business and those you want to entice, but one that still speaks with a single voice.

Michael Coleman

D +44 (0) 20 7833 6444

M +44 (0)7968 902 310

m.coleman@frankbrightabel.com

Frank, Bright & Abel

326 City Road

London EC1V 2PT

T +44 (0)20 7833 6430

www.frankbrightabel.com

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