

# EMPLOYER BRANDING IN A RECESSION

*“Employer branding is a journey - and not one which should be abandoned at a time when budgets are under pressure”*

Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development 2009

Building and maintaining your employer brand – how you are seen as an employer - is a challenge at the best of times. Translate this into a recession, where budgets are at best minimal, and the potential to lose presence is suddenly a big risk. Most organisations have been focused more on survival and downsizing, than on managing talent and enhancing their employer brand.

It is widely acknowledged that investment in your employer brand can reap benefits through the spirit of your brand being reflected in working practices, leadership styles and a progressive culture. Happily, it can also result in more engaged employees, who will act as advocates externally, driving up organisational value and helping to deliver your recruitment marketing. Overall, if implemented effectively, it can reduce the cost per hire and reduce employee attrition rates.

So what can organisations do in a recession to maintain and boost their employer brand?

First of all, adopt an ‘inside-out’ approach. In other words, make sure you are looking after the people who already work for you. In times of change and restructure, employees are easily disengaged through a lack of communication and ineffective change management. The nature of change may be unpalatable to employees, but they will be more supportive if they can understand the rationale behind it, feel involved, and can see that it is being managed effectively. Increased employee engagement, can result in increased productivity, so make sure you understand what is driving employee engagement in your organisation (and aim to act on this knowledge wherever possible). In engaging employees, there is a pivotal role for inspirational leaders and competent line managers, so ensure that your management development programmes are up to speed in equipping your people with the right skills for these challenging times.

Remember that employees who leave your organisation, whether voluntarily or otherwise, are going forth as brand ambassadors, with the potential to add or to drive down value in your organisation simply by word of mouth. Ipsos MORI research has shown that one of the most powerful influences over the external image of an organisation is knowing someone who works, or has worked there. So try to ensure they leave with a positive view of your organisation as a place to work.

Unless you are fortunate enough to be able to offer ‘The Best Job in the World’ (caretaker of Hamilton Island, Queensland), or to have a prominent corporate figurehead such as Alan Sugar to publicise your organisation as a place to work, you need to adopt clever strategies to retain and secure the best talent.

For employer branding, it generally follows that familiarity drives favourability, unless you have hit the headlines for poor corporate social responsibility (CSR) or bad employee relations. Many organisations are still not ‘getting out there’ among their key target groups. A large proportion of workers, job seekers and students we encounter in our research remain virtually oblivious to all but the most well known employers. There is additional pressure on larger brand families to communicate their overarching employer brand identity, in conjunction with their better known individual ‘high street’ brands.

These strategies need not be costly or time-consuming. Many students we talk to in our recruitment research have had little exposure to relevant corporate recruitment materials and regret that certain employers remain absent from their careers fairs. There remains a huge opportunity to increase 'share of voice' by raising your employer profile at such forums, from the traditional to the modern, including the use of social networking sites and virtual communities and channels for specific, harder-to-reach groups.

*"If I'd known they did work in all these areas, I'd have applied to join them years ago."*

Post-graduate student

Many employees have been inspired towards a particular career or employer through exposure to relevant recruitment materials or press articles. As an employer, you can secure a distinct advantage by engaging with the academic world through sharing case studies, delivering guest lectures and providing focused learning opportunities for students (e.g. field trips, site visits etc). The same applies to the media, by publicising your innovations and achievements.

Research, of course, has a valuable role to play in measuring and tracking your progress, evaluating image perceptions, testing employer value propositions (EVPs), piloting recruitment materials and testing recruitment websites. Once you know how you are seen there is much that you as an employer can do, at minimal cost, to differentiate your position and to secure your advantage. It will be those who invest this effort now, who stand to reap the returns with the eventual onset of recovery.

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